



# How do people listen to music?

---

By Heather Maitland, 7/10/13, [heather@heathermaitland.co.uk](mailto:heather@heathermaitland.co.uk)

Music is so easy to get hold of now. That means that people no longer use it as a commodity but as a resource to:

- create an external image to others
- to reinforce their identity
- to strengthen their ties to a group
- to exclude other people from the group
- to change the way they feel
- to change how strongly they feel – to give themselves a boost or to calm themselves down<sup>i</sup>

It is about sex and drugs and rock ‘n’ roll! The brain releases the feel-good hormone dopamine when we have sex, take drugs or win a bet – and when we listen to pleasurable music. Music also changes the levels of other chemicals in the brain including adrenaline.<sup>ii</sup>

“It’s music you feel”

People use music to regulate their emotions in the same way as caffeine and alcohol. This emotional response to music is real. Neuroscientists have measured the changes in the brain when people listen to music – they cause the tingle factor that so many people experience when they listen to pleasurable music.<sup>i</sup> Even people who are tone deaf and can’t recognise a melody are able to tell whether a piece of music is happy or sad.<sup>iii</sup>

Some of the factors that trigger emotional responses are the same in different cultures including tempo, the complexity of melody and rhythm and pitch range.<sup>iv</sup>

The brain reacts to dissonant music in a similar way to unpleasant emotions. Even people with no musical training react like this as long as they have heard Western style music before. Emotional responses, particularly negative ones, spark off the areas of the brain involved in memory and attention – making them even more powerful.<sup>iii</sup>

People in a state of unpleasantly high arousal tend to prefer quiet, relaxing music and people in a state of pleasantly high arousal will prefer loud, energising music.<sup>i</sup> Many people know how to choose the sort of music that will have the effect they need simply because they have listened to a lot of music. Less experienced listeners need more help<sup>v</sup> so how we describe our gigs becomes even more important:

*“I hate it when I’m coming to jazz and I feel like talking to the people with me and chilling and it’s one of those ones when you can hear a pin drop. I need to know what I’m buying into so my mood’s right before I go.”<sup>vi</sup>*

Our research showed that people say they find some music challenging because the way their brains process music means they can’t easily respond to it in an emotional way.<sup>v</sup>

### **“Appreciating isn’t always the same as enjoying”**

Much of our audience doesn’t even listen to music in the same way as us. Inexperienced listeners seem to experience musical form as a whole using the right side of their brain. Experienced listeners have learned to experience melody through the intervals between notes using the left side of their brain.<sup>vii</sup>

Brain scans show them using different parts of their brain, depending on their personality and the way they think.<sup>i</sup> Playing a musical instrument, even for just three years, changes the structure of the brain. The brains of adults who had music lessons as children respond more strongly to music. The more recent the training, the greater the response.<sup>viii</sup>

Talking to audiences also reveals two different types of response to music: analytical and emotional.<sup>vi</sup> This is backed up by brain scans, with these different types of listening happening in different parts of the brain.<sup>iii</sup>

Analytical listeners say things like:

“I’m listening to a lot of Polish jazz at the moment and it seems to be quite influenced by Scandinavian bands. It’s mostly regarded as jazz but it’s mixed in with DJ stuff and kind of synths and new sounds ... and elements of rock.”

They concentrate on the music, analysing their perceptions. They are motivated by:

- Discovering unfamiliar music

- • Seeing a favourite musician
- • Musical/historical context
- • Technical excellence
- • Specific instruments or a combination

In contrast, emotional listeners say things like:

“I wouldn’t say I know much about jazz, I know popular jazz musicians, but I’ve got an ear for music and a lot appeals to me and really gets me”

They don’t want to know about the musical or historical context. Instead, they are motivated by:

- • feeling the music
- • the whole experience of the gig, not just the music
- • atmosphere
- • the people they are with

Emotional listeners are just as likely to be frequent jazz attenders as analytical listeners. But they have very different levels of knowledge and so they are often put off by the way jazz is described in publicity material:

“I wouldn’t go if you gave me a free ticket because it doesn’t explain itself enough to me. I’ve no idea what sort of music it would be.”

How can we attract Emotional Listeners

Produce publicity material that:

- • elicits responses rather than give information
- • describes what the music is like
- • uses vivid verbal imagery
- • talks about influences
- • talks about the musicians as people
- • offers recommendations from people they can connect with

---

i

Chamorro-Premuzic, T and Furnham, A., 'Personality and music: Can traits explain how people use music in everyday life?', *British Journal of Psychology*, 2007, 98, 175–185

ii

Levitin, D.J. (2007), 'Life Soundtracks: the uses of music in everyday life' consulted at [levitin.mcgill.ca/pdf/LifeSoundtracks.pdf](http://levitin.mcgill.ca/pdf/LifeSoundtracks.pdf) 24/3/2009

iii

Blood, A.J., Zatorre, R.J., Bermudez, p., Evans, A.C., 'Emotional responses to pleasant and unpleasant music correlate with activity in paralimbic brain regions', *Nature Neuroscience* , 1999, 2, 4, pp. 382-387

iv

McDermott, J. and Hauser, M., 'The Origins of Music: innateness, uniqueness, and evolution', *Music Perception*, 2005, 23(1), pp. 29-59, p. 46

v

Salamon, E, Bernstein, S.R., Kim, S., Kim, M. and Stefano, G.B., 'The effects of auditory perception and musical preference on anxiety in naive human subjects', *Med Sci Monit*, 2003; 9, 9, pp. 396-399

vi

Maitland, H., *The Jazz Services Guide to Getting Bigger Audiences for Jazz*, Jazz Services, 2011

vii

Bever, T.G. and Chiarello, R.J., 'Cerebral Dominance in Musicians and Nonmusicians', *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 2009; 21, pp. 94–97

Skoe, E and Kraus, N. 'A Little Goes a Long Way: How the Adult Brain Is Shaped by Musical Training in Childhood', *The Journal of Neuroscience*, 2012, 32(34), pp. 11507–11510