

Why Does Music Move Us?

November 22, 2011



Daniel Levitin

“There’s nothing in a sequence of notes themselves that creates the rich emotional associations we have with music,” says psychological scientist Daniel Levitin. So why does music trigger profound emotional experiences?

When we listen to music, our brains impose a structure on sounds — yet music affects us very differently than most patterns. “After all,” Levitin points out, “we don’t get all weepy-eyed when we experience other kinds of structure in our lives, such as a balanced checkbook or the orderly arrangement of first aid products in a drug store.”

According to Levitin, the brain works to arrange music and other sounds into a coherent whole based on experience and expectations. To understand the emotional effects of music, scientists are working to understand how these expectations turn sounds that originate outside of the brain into neural patterns inside of the brain.

Researchers have shown that music stimulates the cerebellum, a region of the brain crucial to motor control. Levitin says connections between the cerebellum and the limbic system (which is associated with emotion), “may explain why movement, emotion, and music are tied together.”

Levitin says that music is more than entertainment: “It is a regulating force for our moods.” Because of its strong ties to our emotions, we rely on music to wake us up, calm us down, entertain us, and motivate us — something a balanced checkbook can’t quite match.