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## Strong Experiences with Music: Music is Much More than Just Music A Review Essay

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### Abstract

The objects of Alf Gabrielsson's study *Strong experiences with music* are experiences and insights that exceed by far what is normally included in music experiences. To a great extent, the many (over 500) experiences related in this book are so intense that a reader often cannot avoid comparing them to her or his own experiences with music. The multi-variety of character in music experiences is viewed in relation to their dependence on a large number of both musical, personal, and situational variables. With its rare combination of the richness of accounts of extraordinary experiences, the sympathetic understanding and interpretation that characterizes the reflective commentary, and its thoughtful and cautious scientific

analysis, this book provides a most powerful illustration of the profundity of the question what music may do to us.

The objects of Alf Gabrielsson's study *Strong experiences with music* are experiences and insights that by far exceed what is normally included in music experiences. To a great extent, the many (over 500) experiences related in this book are so intense that a reader often cannot avoid comparing them to her or his own experiences with music. In addition to his careful reflective analysis of this huge body of rich accounts, the author himself, who is not only a researcher of music psychology but an experienced musician and music listener as well, presents such personal reflections in his concluding words.

One of Gabrielsson's points of departure is the view that the character of experiences with music is dependent not only on the music itself but on the listener and the situational context as well. This interplay between musical, personal, and situational factors is amply illustrated throughout the study. In addition to the multivariety of accounts, the reflective scope of the commentary renders the book cross-disciplinary; through his focus on narrative, Gabrielsson manages to build bridges between music psychology and several other disciplines.

Gabrielsson relates the theme of strong experiences with music (SEM) to the notion of peak experiences – which, according to Maslow (1968), could be most easily attained through sex and music (including dancing) – as well as to Panzarella's (1980) distinction between different dimensions of intense music listening experiences. On the whole, however, this study is permeated by theoretical perspectives to a very little extent; the voices of the informants, systematized by the thorough work of the researcher, are in focus. On the whole, the contribution of the study is twofold: (i) an enormous body of experiential data, presented in the often very colourful words of the informants, is clarified and supplemented by (ii) a thoughtful and complex system of categorization which has been developed in the process of systematizing these data.

While the task of collecting over 1300 SEM stories has been a process of nearly two decades, the resulting body of narratives concerns experiences that span almost a century. In exceptional cases, very old relations may come forward as slightly dubious, as when an elderly woman relates her recollections of her warm feelings when listening "in the 1910s" to a recording that was, in fact, not issued until 1929 (4.3A).

### **Absorption, Intoxication, and Identification**

Many different aspects add to the urgency of the experiences. Childhood memories stand out as particularly pregnant and influential. Already in the childhood narratives, a great deal of the multi-varied experiences of the study come forward. The dark of night (in bed, or around a

camp fire) may intensify and focus attention. Other mental states that occur in connection with strong experiences with music include the feeling of security in the company of trusted elders, the feeling of having been chosen and privileged, the feeling of being a very small part of cosmic totality, or of entering a different state of being. Such experiences of total absorption may awaken feelings hitherto unknown, as well as a wish to work with music.

Reactions are described as physical (tears, shivers), quasi-physical (floating, expanding), strong, mixed, and changing. Reactions may also be described as transcendent, cathartic, and as falling in love. A particular physical reaction is the feeling, when playing a musical instrument, that the fingers move by themselves and that you are one with the instrument and the music.

Adolescents' experiences include intense feelings of presence in the moment. They often prove very influential, sometimes in the long run. The study presents examples of what might be viewed as short-term intoxication with music, as in this story (5.3H):

I have had many strong experiences with music over the years, for example in the 1940s when I heard the trumpeter Bunny Berigan play 'I can't get started' for the first time. After playing the 78 record twice, I followed my dad's summons to mow the lawns. With the music still ringing in my ears, I drove right through borders, the strawberry patch, etc. without being aware of the havoc. The experience with the music was still so total that everything else was wiped out of my consciousness for hours afterwards.

There is a 17-year-old experiencing the urge to write a letter to Sibelius after hearing his 2nd Symphony on the radio in 1949; and a lower secondary school pupil experiencing the 'truth' and 'wholeness' of traditional African music at a school concert in the 1970s, which he describes as a 'total', 'non-cognitive' experience (5.3S). The energy and complexity of African drumming may provide overwhelming, climactic experiences, leaving you exhausted and happy (24G).

Typically, SEM exclude everything else; our attention is solely with the music. The surrounding world disappears; time stands still. Even though you may experience the music among other people, the absorption may entail an experience of being completely alone with the music. Nothing else exists. Many types of experiences may follow when the music suddenly takes over: shivers, a pounding heart, difficulties to breathe, tears, a feeling of peace, harmony, beauty, pleasure, hope, thoughts about life and existence.

One informant employs the notion of analphabetism when describing his relation to music: while he cannot read or write the letters of music, he can "grasp the words of the music", the meaning inherent in what the music says.

Listeners may identify with the music itself or with its performers. A man listening to a 1940s record of a black tenor saxophonist describes in great detail his strong experience of 'being' this musician: his smell, the tactile sensations of his clothes; at the same time, he describes his awareness of social, cultural, and personal differences (7.4C).

Feelings of weightlessness may be experienced when listening to Lumbye's Champagne Galop, Bob Marley's Exodus, or Bach's St. Matthew Passion (8.1). The collection of narratives includes a number of out-of-the-body experiences and near-death experiences. Notably, these all concerned live music experiences together with other people – never alone. Composers' experiences of inner music come forward as instances of creative intoxication or euphoria, including a combination of strong concentration and relaxation, typical of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). They are typically followed by a phase of crafting, documenting the vision. On the whole, however, stories including inner images are not very common (c. 10 per cent) in the study.

### **Experience, Memory, and Narrative**

Clearly, the most suitable and, indeed, unavoidable way to investigate experiences with music is a qualitative approach such as Gabrielsson's. Among the most fascinating aspects of his huge project is the informants' ability to recall and mediate in vivid detail their experiences. To attempt to describe in words the character of experiences with music is no easy task. Like every art form, music has its intrinsic, unique qualities that cannot be transferred to any other medium. Such reservations are important when reviewing the informants' use of images, comparisons, and analogies.

Gabrielsson discusses the reliability of these memories. Do they depict what 'actually' happened? Probably, he states, many 'autobiographical memories' are a mixture of a 'true copy' and a reconstruction; but, arguably, they are accurate in the sense that they represent the significance of the experience to this person.

Metaphors employed by the informants include snowflakes (Bach), stone pillars (Mozart), an incense holder (Beethoven), and a red-hot toaster (Wagner) (28). Listening experiences are compared to having lemonade in one's legs, being cut by a piercing laser beam, going on a rollercoaster, or being nailed to the bench (28.3).

Low activity feelings such as peace, harmony, or security can be contrasted with high activity feelings such as excitement, euphoria, intoxication, or fear. Other kinds of feelings include satisfaction, gratitude, perfection, love, solemnity, humility, admiration, patriotism, and sex. A woman (11.5J) describes her systematic use of 'music medicine' in carefully measured doses of arousal and relaxation. A man (12.3C) describes the enormous impact of his experience, when 13, listening to a Genesis record: "three minutes that changed my entire life".

Strong reactions to music include states of ecstasy and trance, the feeling of losing one's body, the dissolution of self, timelessness, eternity, and being transferred to another world beyond time and space. The director Ingmar Bergman once spoke on Swedish television of music as "messages telling of other realities"; in the same vein, statements by Gabrielsson's informants include religious experiences with music, such as feelings of spiritual peace, purity, and holiness.

Descriptions of experiences with musical improvisation include, among their premises: knowledge of and reliance on each other, openness, 'forgetting' oneself, and letting oneself be pulled away in collective action; and among their results: being devoured by the music, playing it as if in a state of intoxication, and the impression that everything is crystal clear. The meanings and functions of the music are experienced as 'universally true'.

Musicians' narratives include experiences of how performance anxiety may be replaced by relief and joy. The stories are distributed along this continuum. An alto violinist tells of his anguish when having to play the Adagietto of Mahler's 5th Symphony (18.5). A bouzouki player relates his experience of "being played by the dancers" and being able, under these circumstances, to play much faster than he had thought he could (18.6).

Several informants speak of the power of a symphony orchestra: for instance, the experience of being surrounded by beautiful light and sound, like a premonition of life in heaven. Similarly, experiences of choir singing include the melting of one's voice with the others'; the power, excitement, and joy when performing; achievements far beyond one's own capabilities; the absence of social barriers; the focus on the same task; feelings of increased self-esteem, and collective pride.

Music may prove important in connection with illness and death (e.g., funeral music), as well as with love. Certain pieces of music may come to be perceived as connected to the process of a love relationship. Music may prompt epiphanies that suddenly change a situation completely, through contact with one's inner thoughts and feelings.

Some aspects of the strong experiences come close to issues of music therapy and states of depression. Music may ease and remedy negative states such as worry, grief, and disease; relief from physical pain (for instance, the Champagne Galop comes forward as an effective toothache cure) as well as mental problems. Music may make you feel confirmed and reassured on several levels (including the feeling of being addressed directly by the musicians).

One description seems to indicate that the intra-musical process of tension and release in the music corresponds to a process that the informant has gone through, leading to insights, confidence, and peace (16.1H). Notably, there is no therapist in these cases; the music itself is the therapist. Music may turn critical situations into states of relaxation and calmness. A guitarist's reaction to the applause that followed after his band's rendition of a rock'n'roll tune is formulated thus (16.3G):

After the applause that followed the ecstatic performance of 'Hey, Baberiba', I saw how the cellar roof broke up and a flood of light poured in. At the same moment, I thought—in exactly these words—the following: 'This is my place in life.' The memory of that feeling lives on with such force that hardly a week has gone by during the 40 years that have passed since that experience when I haven't had it in my mind.

The narrative power can sometimes be quite overwhelming, as exemplified by this story from the 1980s of a dramatic childbirth and the father's lullaby (17.1F):

T. came into the world after a normal delivery. I had been singing '*Byssan lull*' [a traditional lullaby] for him for a couple of months before he was born, and I sang the same song for him shortly after he came out of the womb.

The next morning, the catastrophe happened. T. stopped breathing and was put on a respirator. To make a long story short, and get to the point, the reader must imagine a very dramatic situation where the reality is that life is hanging on a thread. In a room where T.'s heart movements can be followed on a monitor, you can see the struggle taking place. When the senior doctor's look confirms his previous statement that 'only a miracle' can turn this, I get an impulse to go up close and sing '*Byssan lull*' into the incubator.

Then amazing things happen. On the face of the tiny baby you can see small expressions of something other than the terrible cramp attacks, and a powerful

feeling of response and contact fills me. I see how all the people in the room start to cry silently.

Strong experiences when performing music make up about one fifth of the material. Key words in these accounts include (total) involvement, experiencing no fear, no time, no self, trance, collective touch, universal humanity – and the 'conclusion' (18.1): "It is at just such a moment you could die calmly, without worry or sorrow. Just ascend..." According to several statements, the 'kick' of performing can be like a drug. Afterwards, you experience a mixture of happiness, exhaustion, and emptiness; it is difficult to get back to 'normal'.

Strong experiences with music sometimes involve nature, e.g., the light of the Swedish summer nights, loud horns playing and loud, high-pitched herding calls ('kulning') in the vast northern landscape.

A significant amount of SEM are strongly negative (confusion, anxiety et cetera). Sadly, a number of informants also testify that music can function in exclusionist ways (or could function; hopefully, as Gabrielsson sighs, not anymore). The enormous impact of strong negative experiences with music – such as the mother's exhortation "Stop that clinking!" several decades ago – is a sad story indeed (11.3G).

### **The Complex Interplay of Music, Person, and Situation**

SEM make up a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon. In the analysis of the totality of SEM narratives, Gabrielsson discerns about 150 different aspects or reaction types. On a fundamental level, he distinguishes between seven categories, all of which contain a number of (2–8) subcategories. These categories include physiological reactions; perceptual; cognitive; emotional; existential and transcendental; personal, and social reactions. According to Gabrielsson, there exists no such thing as a 'pure' music experience; it is always situational.

The qualitative investigation does include a quantitative element, hinting at a number of interesting overall tendencies regarding the distribution of different kinds of feelings in the narratives. One fourth of the informants have experienced crying in connection with music, 10 per cent have had shivers, 5 per cent goose bumps. Nearly three fourths describe positive emotions, less than one fourth negative emotions. Feelings of peace are more common among the older informants, feelings of joy among the younger ones. Almost every second informant comments on how SEM have affected how they think and feel about music. While more women mention SEM with religious music, far more men have had them in connection with jazz.

Certain (often more 'introvert') reactions are more common with classical music: tears, feelings of immobility, hovering, peace, solemnity, gratitude, or spiritual unity. Other (often more 'extrovert') reactions are more common with popular music: laughter, movement, ecstasy, love, presence in the moment, inspiration, or catharsis.

As mentioned initially, music experiences are not 'pure'. While the book's summary does include a list of actual music involved in the experiences, it is difficult if not impossible to generalize with regard to where SEM would most probably occur. They come about as results of a complex interplay: right music, right person, right time and setting. The multi-variety of character in music experiences is easily understood when they are viewed as depending on and being a product of a large number of both musical, personal, and situational variables. Firstly, reactions may depend on various musical factors: the music's emotional character, sonority, intonation, dynamics, rhythm, harmonical modality, or its form. Apart from such isolated elements, the whole musical work and its performance (including visual impressions of the performers and the environment) come forward as important.

Secondly, personal factors of several kinds may influence experiences with music: one's psycho-physical state, expectations, previous music experiences, temperament, curiosity, et cetera.

Thirdly, situational factors may be of importance: the physical situation (including factors such as acoustics, visual impressions, time of year and time of day) as well as the social situation (experiencing music alone, together with familiar people, or with strangers). How ever extensive this investigation may be, it does have its limitations in time and space: Western culture (Sweden) of the late 20th century. Gabrielsson suggests that similar investigations in other countries, at other times, may render different kinds of music – but similar reactions. The selection of informants may also be problematized, to an extent; there might be reason to ask whether strong experiences with music would be equally common – or as strong – in a population which was to a less extent composed mainly by music lovers. Furthermore, had the material included more young informants speaking of recent years (early 21st century), I suggest that there might have been more stories of experiencing music alone, with ear-plugs.

Beside my deep appreciation for the overwhelming richness of the collected accounts, what I also find myself very much in agreement with is the wisdom and carefulness of Gabrielsson's analytical approach, his thoughtful avoidance of generalizing theoretical conclusions. He does not formulate a theory of strong experiences with music. While his study includes a quantitative element, it clearly and importantly demonstrates the vast potential of qualitative analysis and narrative approach in this field of investigation. In this respect, I suggest, it is an



example of the methodological richness of much Scandinavian research in music psychology and music education.

The subtitle of Gabrielsson's book indicates that music can mean, and be, a lot of different things to different people. Informants testify that music "is" life; it "interprets" life; it provides joy, power, and help; it functions as a constant source of strong experiences, as a time machine, and as a unique and necessary means of communication. With its rare combination of the richness of accounts of extraordinary experiences, the sympathetic understanding and interpretation that characterizes the reflective commentary, and its thoughtful and cautious scientific analysis, this book provides a most powerful illustration of the profundity of the question what music may do to us. Indeed, it might be argued that this collection of accounts may in itself provide the reader with an experience strong enough to make one want to devote one's life to music.

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