

Life's Playlist

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By The Rev. CJ McGregor

Delivered on March 13, 2022

I'll remind you that the theme for our messages this month is Staff Picks. Our staff have chosen topics and today's message topic was chosen by Carlos Garcia, our Director of Music. I have had two images in my mind this past week that I can't shake. The first is that of a Ukrainian little girl who is living in an underground rail station with her family and many others to escape harm as her country is ravaged by Russia. This little girl stood in the middle of the crowded area and began to sing Let It Go. The second is that of an Italian man who brought his piano to the Ukrainian and Polish border to play soft and beautiful music to welcome Ukrainian refugees into Poland. He wanted to welcome them with beauty as they escaped tragedy and fear. These voices and music call on our humanity. Plato wrote. "Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind and imagination and life to everything." What kind of music feeds your soul?

I read a post on Facebook the other day that said: "All I need now is a long road trip, a bottle of wine, and music." It reminded me of an ancient Persian poem by Omar Kayyam, which goes: "Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough, A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse – and Thou Beside me singing in the Wilderness – And Wilderness is Paradise now." Breaking it down – poetry, wine and music are synonymous with peace and harmony in life, and if the wilderness were where the poet could find love, poetry and music, then that would be paradise enough for him.

But have you ever actually wondered where music comes from, or like the rest of us, simply presumed it is as natural as breathing? Actually, for some people it is, but music definitely had an origin, and it might be older than we think. It is believed that prehistoric man discovered musical instruments in the form of a flute made from the bones of a dead bear. Other theories are that people mimicked birds and picked up their tune, even saying that early humans were singing before they formed the first understandable words or language.

Made of a combination of bird bone and ivory, the oldest musical instruments that appear to be flutes of a sort, are believed to be between 42000 and 43000 years old. The flute-like instruments were discovered by archaeologists in a cave in Southern Germany that contained evidence of homo sapiens (early man), who may have been the first people to occupy Europe. Aside from early man creating musical instruments with bones, their voices were most likely also influenced and developed as a result of mimicking other animals, like the Musical Wren from Brazil, for example. Apparently, this bird is so named because it can produce perfect octaves, fifths and fourths in its notes, and studies have even shown that the bird's song sounds remarkably similar to compositions of Bach and Haydn. While Scientists who study birdsong dispute the theory that early man may have been influenced to learn singing from birds, it might well make logical sense that early humans mimicked birds in order to catch and eat them. As a source of food, copying the mating call would obviously bring the bird right to their traps. This may have evolved into an enjoyment of the sweet, melodic sounds birds emit.

All scientific things aside though, we humans have discovered that music definitely affects our mood. For example, if you are tired or stressed, soothing melodic tones can really ease your anxiety and make you feel better. The opposite is also true of loud or serious musical sounds. A sad piece of music can easily plunge you into a dark, deep depression. There is music for every taste out there, and in a time when music genres were coming into their own, with the likes of rock-and-roll and heavy metal, not to mention the blues and reggae music, Handel, Bach and Beethoven had to take a backseat and more often than not became high-end restaurant or, God forbid, elevator music.

Fortunately, nowadays, we are more open to interpreting various musical genres and learning how to use music for various purposes, like creating an emotion as you watch a movie. You get the drum roll and then the piano notes plinking slowly, rhythmically, creating a suspense-filled moment, and suddenly...boom! You're flying out of your chair – more from the effect the music has created than the actual visuals. Music is also ingrained in every culture. Every country has an anthem that instills pride and inspires patriotism, with traditional songs that tell a story, and many different traditional musical instruments, unique to individual cultures.

Music defines us as humans on so many levels that it is hard to imagine that it has not been around forever. Everyone has their 'song', right? Something that they connect with on a deep, emotional level. That song is a combination of lyrics (the spoken, poetic words in the song) and the music, created by instruments like guitars, drums, pianos, electric organs, trumpets, flutes, etc. Thinking about the famous song in recent years called the 'Fight Song' by Rachel Platten, that many people, young and old, were singing, became many people's 'identifying' song. It inspires and uplifts the mood. Yet, some songs are designed to make us laugh like 'Don't worry, be happy,' by Bobby McFerrin. These are actual vocal songs that can alter our mood, but what about the soothing sound of instrumental music, that was introduced by the likes of Bach and Beethoven?

The long, high-pitched, quivering sounds of the violin or the light, happy notes of the piano can really inspire us on a different level, and create effects deep within our brains that are only obvious over a long period of time of being exposed to the deeply resonating sounds of these musical instruments. It's true that all of these musical compositions can bring us down as much as uplift us, and depending on the composer's own mood when writing the music or the lyrics to the song, and the listener's taste, we will rise or fall with him and his ditty.

We use music for so many things in our lives. There's music to set the tone of the scene in a movie, as already mentioned – dramatic or eerie, fast-paced or mysterious. It definitely enhances our viewing experience. There is military music that speaks of patriotism and heroism in the face of conflict. There is sweet, sad, music that allows people to pour out their hearts when life has become too much to bear, and there's music for your angry mood in the form of thunderous drums and cymbals, crashing and clashing together. It's as if music is a message from our higher self.

Then, there are the love ballads people choose for their weddings, that special song that reminds you of either when you were dating, or how you envision your feeling towards your partner, and/or has significance to you as a couple. Sometimes a groom or a bride will go to the effort of learning the song in order to sing it on their special day! On a more solemn note (excuse the

pun), some also ask for a specific song or songs to be played at their funerals, instead of the usual churchy music, like The Lord is my Shepherd and Amazing Grace. In spite of death being so final, more and more people are actually adding a quirky touch to their funeral musical and asking for things like Monty Python's 'Always look on the Brighter Side of Life' to be played at a wake or at the family gathering after the service. This is a reminder and reflection of the vision they have of themselves and their life.

Let's get philosophical for a bit. If you're breathing today, you must admit that music has played an integral part of your life at some point. Admit it! You recall the music from your first dance, and I bet you can still remember the lyrics from the songs you sang or heard in preschool. Music is most definitely the dots on our life's timeline. It represents mile markers of major events, and it punctuates the most important occasions of our lives. Music elevates us, it brings us together, and it helps make life worth it. The human capacity for music can be thought of as the tendency to derive strong emotions from complex sensory patterns say sociologists. We have evolved the perceptual, cognitive, and neural apparatus to detect, appreciate, and transmit these patterns, and doing so brings us closer together.

That is how music makes us human. In all probability, music touches our souls so deeply because we humans are born poetic and life has a rhythm of its own. We are surrounded by sounds and patterns. It's only natural that music will be right there with us, enhancing the tunes of our lives, keeping us in touch with nature, beauty, harmony, and our senses in a very diverse world. Music is humanities one universal language. One can identify with others of a different cultural, social, and national background with the help of a mutually appreciated musical piece. Music can unite a country, end a war, or on the contrary, catalyze conflict. It can serve to gather the collective identity of a nation or people and act as a rallying point which can garner support for a common cause or goal. Let us let music make us human, live with the memories it carries, rise and fall, hope. ;augh, cry, and embrace all that is good.

May it be so.