

## "Elevator Music": More Than It Seems

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*"The musically aware hostess no longer allows the butler, or her husband, to sling records on to the turntable in a haphazard way. She no longer risks the dangers of the soup being spilled by Haydn's 'Surprise' Symphony, or Mrs. Alias-Jones choking over the fish because an ill-timed bit of jazz trumpet has frightened her. She now supplies a ready-made background of elegant and suitable music to smooth the evening into one long feast of pleasure and unshattered nerves (1)."*

This quotation, obviously taken from a dated source as indicated by style, content and reference to a rapidly disappearing medium of musical recording, nonetheless encapsulates the assertion that "background music" has profound and to some extent compelling effects on human emotion and behavior.

Do the names Les Baxter, Frank Chacksfield, Ray Conniff, Percy Faith, Jackie Gleason (yes! the "Great One"), Andre Kostelanetz, Michel Legrand, Mantovani, George Melachrino, Nelson Riddle, Paul Weston or Hugo Winterhalter ring a bell? If not, how about Connie Cook, Constance Demby, Brian Eno, Andreas Vollenweider, George Winston, or Yanni, of a more recent and contemporary vintage.

Roughly speaking these artists, and many others, have been considered to represent, respectively, the "Beautiful Music" and the "New Age" movements in popular music. According to Joseph Lanza in his recent fascinating book "Elevator Music" (see footnote #1), these two forms have some clear differences. The former relies on familiar melodies played by full "acoustic" orchestras and "up front appealsto nostalgia". In contrast, "New Age" focuses on unfamiliar melodies with "fluid sonic landscapes", and the extensive use of synthesizers. Despite these marked differences, both types occupy the musical niche that combats the view of "... a musical establishment still wedged into nineteenth-century prejudices that equated good music with direct listening (2)." Lanza, in stark contrast to the disdain often heaped on these types of music, extols their virtues as he examines their pervasive presence in post World War II American society.

And pervasive is the watchword, not merely for "Beautiful" and "New Age" but for a music delivery system that permeates virtually all public indoor (and "in plane") spaces with "Background" or "Elevator" music. Often referred to as "Musak", background music (BGM) is actually offered by several music suppliers. BGM permeates our world. It is easier to think of places that lack BGM than to list all those where it is found. Most establishments in which we spend money, to purchase goods, services, food, or drink have BGM. So do many work places, be they factories or offices. BGM is currently being marketed for the home ... numerous channels, each with a distinctive type of music for different personal or social situations, all in digital stereo. And where there is no permanent installation, as in our cars, it is a simple matter to achieve self-supply of BGM by tuning the car radio to an appropriate type of station.

Lest one conclude that BGM is a modern invention, we need only recall that it has been in continual demand for about as long as we possess a recorded history of music. And lest we think

that this music is necessarily composed only by second rate composers, we need only be reminded that Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and other masters produced music that was intended for "background" rather than "foreground" listening, often for dinners of the aristocracy. A major difference between former times and recent times is not in the existence of BGM but in the current much greater affordability and availability of BGM.

The widespread and increasing presence of commercial BGM testifies either to a large waste of money by BGM purchasers, or to the effectiveness of BGM in modifying human behavior, to the benefit of BGM purchasers. Even by the most inefficient of market forces, BGM would long be gone were it ineffective, or at the very least, believed to be ineffective. But it is effective. For example, in one study of the effectiveness of music in a national chain of supermarkets, the use of slow music increased sales over the use of fast music. Shoppers stayed in the store longer and purchased more, a lot more. The average gain was from \$12,112.35 per store to \$16,740.23, a gain of 39.2% (3). Why might the use of music be so effective throughout society.

One very good possibility is music's powerful influence in the communication and evocation of emotions and moods. Accordingly to a renowned pioneer in psychiatric aspects of music, Dr. Peter Ostwald of the University of California, San Francisco, music is "... a form of social behavior ... a symbolic emotional experience (4)." Moreover, music may provide a form of non-verbal communication whose meaning is ineffable it cannot be captured in words. Perhaps music exists because of the need for expression, particularly of emotions, that "...can only crudely be measured or described in words... (5)". Thus, music can rapidly and powerfully set moods and do so in a way not as easily attained by other means. Even if adequate to the task, the written word cannot do so as quickly and, when used, often must convey a particular setting, content and visual imagery that itself interferes with or shifts thoughts.

Moreover, sound can permeate a space and reach all potential listeners, and do so simultaneously, something achieved only in special circumstances by visual images, as in a cinema. But here too, BGM has an important role. Although you may be only mildly aware of the effect of BGM in movies, a moment's thought will probably convince you that without music, the impact of a movie would be dramatically reduced. Moreover, researchers have shown that the remembering of filmed events is significantly better when they are accompanied by music, particularly music that which fits the mood of the visual images (6).

The emotional and mood-setting effects of BGM are to be contrasted with its lesser effectiveness in altering cognition and conscious thought processes. This seems to be true at least in the market place. For example, market researchers who advise advertising agencies and their clients, make a clear distinction between consumer purchasing situations that call for the use of high cognitive processes in purchasing decisions vs. goods in which people have a low cognitive but high affective involvement. What do jewelry, sportswear, cosmetics and beer have in common? They are rated as fitting the latter category, i.e., not much thought but plenty of feelings; music has been shown to be quite effective in increasing the purchase of these commodities. On the other hand, music seems to be much less effective when trying to sell a PC, a camera or insurance, which are "high cognitive" items (7).

One might well ask whether there is any objective evidence that music conveys emotions to listeners. There is. Moreover, it does so to children as well as to adults. For example, in 1994 Professors Robazza, Macaluso and D'Urso of the University of Padua presented fragments of instrumental pieces that had been preselected by musical experts to evoke various emotions: happiness, sadness, anger and fear. They examined the role of gender, age (9-10 years old and adults) and amount of prior musical experience -- children from a music school vs. a regular school, and musically trained vs. naive adults. The authors found good matching of all emotions with the various pieces that had been pre-selected and judged by expert musicians. There was little effect of gender and children did about as good a matching job as adults. Perhaps most importantly, the musically naive children and adults did as well as the musically trained subjects (8). This important finding shows that music conveys appropriate emotional meaning to listeners, particularly children, as a matter of course without special musical training. The results support the view of music as a natural means of emotional communication.

But music has the power to do far more than communicate emotions and set moods. It actually can alter our perceptions and unconscious interpretations of the moods of other people, based on their facial expressions. In a novel and intriguing recent study, Bouhuys, Bloem and Groothuis of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands first played either happy or sad music to a group of healthy adults. (The happy piece was from Delibes' ballet *Coppelia*; the sad piece was "The Swan of Tuonela" by Sibelius. The interested reader can do a self-experiment; I have no quarrel with the two disparate mood labels of these compositions.) Subjects were shown schematic faces of many types, bearing different expressions, some of which were clearly happy or sad, others were more neutral. After hearing the sad music, neutral faces were perceived as sadder and in general depressive (9). Thus, music can produce a depression-related negative perception of facial expressions .

In summary, the belief that music has strong effects on behavior and can do so by communicating moods and emotions is supported both by considerations of the special, non-verbal characteristics of music and by studies as disparate as market tests of the effects of music on the purchase of consumer goods and in highly controlled laboratory settings. The subject is of sufficient importance and magnitude to consider further and perhaps we will do so in the future. But for now we should maintain an awareness of the powerful effects of music in the area of human emotions, for this may prove to be a key to understanding the universal existence and appeal of music.

#### Footnotes

(1) Quoted in relation to the album cover for *Velvet* (London Records LL1443), music of Frank Chacksfield, in Lanza, J., *"Elevator Music"*, New York: Picador Press, 1994, pg. 77.

(2) *Op. cit.*, pg. 186.

(3) Milliman, R. E. (1982) Using background music to affect the behavior of supermarket shoppers. *J. Marketing*, 46, 86-91.

(4) Ostwald, P. (1966) Music and human emotions. *J. Music Therapy*, 3, 93-94.

(5) Appleton, J.H. (1993) Epilogue: Implications for contemporary music practice. in Tighe T.J. and Dowling, W.J. *Psychology and Music: The Understanding of Melody and Rhythm*. Lawrence Erlbaum: Hillsdale, New Jersey. pp. 215-219..

(6) Boltz, M. Schulkind, M. and Kantra, S. (1991) Effects of background music on the remembering of filmed events. *Memory and Cognition*, 19, 593-606.

(7) Bruner, J.C. II (1990). Music, mood and marketing. *J. Marketing*, 94-104

(8) Robazza, C. Macaluso, C., D'Urso, V. (1994) Emotional reactions to music by gender, age, and expertise. *Percept. & Motor Skills*, 79, 939-944. Also, see Terwogt, M.M. & Van Grinsven, F. (1988) Recognition of emotions in music by children and adults. *Percept & Motor Skills*, 67, 697-698.

(9) Bouhuys, A.L., Bloem, G.M., Groothuis, T.G.G. (1995). Induction of depressed and elated mood by music influences the perception of facial expressions in healthy subjects. *J. Affective Dis.*, 33, 215-226.

From: <http://www.musica.uci.edu/mrn/V2I2F95.html>