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# The seductive voice

Charles Darwin had no doubts about the origins of music – it was a kind of mating call, a primitive language of the emotions from an early stage of evolution. While his ideas about music and evolution have often been alluded to, Darwin never really paid much attention to music. His contemporary Herbert Spencer, who was much more conversant with music, saw it differently – music had evolved from language, in particular speech laden with emotion.

Wim van der Meer

Discussion on the origins of music and its evolutionary significance has regained momentum over the past decade and a half. Nils Wallin, Ian Cross, Steven Mithen and Björn Merker are among those who have given impetus to this field of research referred to as biomusicology. Others oppose the idea of music as important to evolution. Steven Pinker, for instance, considers music a useless, though pleasant, side-product of language that could just as well be eliminated from human existence.

A different kind of criticism comes from cultural scientists, who generally don't have any affinity with evolutionism. Classical musicologists, for instance, point out that evolutionary theories are of little or no use in explaining the development of European art music from the Middle Ages to the present era. Cultural products take on such diverse forms that it is difficult to explain their existence through evolutionary processes. It is often unclear what the 'gain' of a cultural product could be, and why it would enhance chances for survival.

## Mating calls?

Examples of the apparently inexplicable forms that musical expression can take come from tribes that have hardly been in contact with modern society like the Suyá and the Kamayurá of the Amazon, the Venda of Southern Africa and the Kaluli of Papua. The Indians of the Amazon devote much time to music, about four hours per day – approximately as much as they devote to subsistence activities. The Amazon Indians speak little, certainly compared to their music making activities. There are many types and layers of music with pivotal functions in social life; they do not use the binary opposition between music and speech, but instead have many more categories of speech-music.

One of the most interesting forms is *akia*, in which all the men of the village sing at the same time in the village square. The singing, however, is completely individual, without coherence between the individual singers – every man tries to present his own song as best he can. The evolutionist would immediately interpret this as a mating call. But the remarkable thing is that the *akia* style of singing is not meant to seduce lasses of the village but to please their sisters. What appeared to be a classical example of sexual selection turned out to have a completely different meaning. The reality of contemporary peoples living in tribal societies obviously cannot serve as evidence for evolutionary processes that took place in the past. They can, however, provide insights into the role that music plays in diverse cultures. And although the *akia* genre is not a mating call, we cannot deny the importance of music among the Amazon tribes.

## The psychology of sexuality

Crossing half the globe to India, we are again struck by the extraordinary importance of music, in particular, singing. Music pervades all layers of society and is present in innumerable settings – work, religion, entertainment, social events. We know only the names of great singers; instrumentalists accompany anonymously. In art music, instrumentalists have conquered their own space and we all know the names of Ravi Shankar and Zakir Hussain. Even so, instrumental music in India is considered a copy of singing. This is hardly surprising as singing is the most prominent form of music in numerous cultures around the world, including western culture – and certainly in popular music, where instrumentalists play a lesser role.

The icons of popular music earn more than just a living. Their genes are in demand. Of course this is not the only reason why hordes of virgins wanted to be fertilized by Elvis or the Beatles. Similarly, Madonna, Shakira, Britney and JLo may be the most desirable sex symbols of our times. But is this really due to the seductive quality of their voice? For those uninterested in pop music (including many classical musicologists) the answer is self-evident – pop music is trivial and the sensuali-



Gauhar Jan (1873-1930), the most famous courtesan-singer of India  
Sarbari Roy Choudhuri

ty of its video-clips a cheap marketing strategy. Still, switch off the sound and see what happens.

The first scientific study of the psychology of sexuality by Henry Havelock Ellis, published between 1897 and 1910, considered the visual stimuli of sexual attraction more important than the auditory. Ellis gave some importance to the voice as a secondary sexual characteristic, especially the changing male voice around the time of reaching sexual maturity. Researchers have probably underestimated the importance of the voice, in particular the singing voice. From literature and mythology we are familiar with the idea that voices can seduce, sometimes with disastrous consequences, like the sirens of ancient Greece. Recent research has shown that voices tell us a lot about the speaker. Susan Hughes, for instance, demonstrated that the waist to hip ratio (WHR – a marker of femininity) and the shoulder to hip ratio (SHR – a masculinity indicator) can be deduced from the voice.

In a group of young people, the one who picks up a guitar and sings a couple of songs can exert considerable attraction on the opposite sex. This has been construed to be a demonstration of self-confidence, as insecurity resonates in the voice. Perhaps so, but a singer with a voice trembling with nervousness can also have success. It would seem that the very idea of showing one's emotions through the voice is what matters. Otherwise we cannot explain why singing is so important.

## Indian courtesan singing

In India there used to be a professional class of women, often called courtesans, who elevated seduction to an art. Throughout India's history we come across texts that describe the art of the temptress in great detail, in which mastery of the arts and the psychology of bewitching male admirers were crucial. Courtesans were not prostitutes or call girls; they were intellectual and artistic partners. Such partnerships could last for years and were sometimes exclusive, in that a courtesan would not take on several lovers at the same time.

A process of attraction and seduction preceded the amorous relation. The courtesan maintained a salon where she received influential and affluent men. During such soirées courtesans would receive lavish gifts – golden coins, jewels and other valuables. Dance played an important role in the art of the temptress – enticing body postures, sultry glances and transparent dress were her instruments. The most famous courtesans, however, were the singers. Their repertoire was roman-

tic and the texts always had something to do with love. But their greatest asset was their voice. The best singers were (and are) capable of captivating their audience with magical magnetism.

In my personal contact with some of the great women singers of India, I have been struck by how powerful the voice can be. It is enough for them to barely utter a few sounds and one cannot escape the attraction. It is some indefinable quality of the voice, openness of the sound, and an earthy sensuality. Of course this is not limited to Indian courtesans. I also have great memories of Maria Callas (whom I have never heard live – how much more powerful that might have been) in *Norma*, but everyone may have his or her own experience of deep emotion with song. And men can do it as well as women.

For many musicologists this is almost taboo. Western musicology in the 19th century went so far as to suggest that vocal music with its powerful emotions was an inferior expression, and that 'pure' or 'absolute' music should be instrumental. The voice in western classical music has as a consequence been reduced to an instrument. It is also taboo because we are not supposed to break the magic spell. Musicologists study the broad structure of music, but rarely the 'superficial' details of presentation. As a result, little research is done on this phenomenon and we hardly have a notion about the qualities in a voice that make it so powerful.

## Rare mutations: Lata Mangeshkar and Kishori Amonkar

In the Indian context we can say something about this. First, the voice has to be open – a nasal sound won't do. Second, the voice must be tuneful. Very few singers can handle these two difficult tasks. But the most important is the most difficult: conveying emotion directly with the voice. This requires an extremely subtle interplay of timing, intonation, timbre and volume control by which some singers reach out directly to the heart and soul of the listener. In India there is no doubt that 'music without emotion is no music at all' – singers who are able to transmit emotion in the most powerful way are considered the top.

In societies such as India there is stiff competition, differing markedly from the situation among the Suyá with its 400 members. The competition is stiffer yet in popular music. As such, the phenomena of Lata Mangeshkar and Kishori Amonkar are extremely interesting in the light of evolution and music. In over half a century Lata has recorded tens of thousands of songs. She has a very high-pitched and ethereal voice that western commentators have mistakenly described as de-sexualized; her songs convey erotic meanings that the films cannot show. The expression of emotion is not just an intuitive or subconscious process; in conversation Kishori explains how every detail and subtlety is important and how full control of every movement of the voice is essential. What this is about is a stupendous musical consciousness. What is true for Kishori can also be said of Lata – that she is able to transmit emotion with extraordinary precision and stir the soul of the public.

What is the evolutionary meaning of such rare 'mutations'? That courtesans can exercise attraction on powerful men does not in itself represent an evolutionary gain as the offspring did not inherit the father's wealth. Nor is it clear whether pop musicians' special status and fame would improve the gene pool of humanity. Still, an enormous communal interest is served by the phenomenon of stardom: on the one hand, it reflects and confirms the social order in which excellence and elitism are central; on the other hand, these musicians re-orient us in the world of emotional experiences that we are all a part of. ◀

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