



The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body

By Steven Mithen, Phoenix Books, 2005

Few lack convictions about why music is important. For virtually everyone, the music we love is a key shaper of our identity. It tells us where we fit in with our community and culture, with whom we love to work, learn, worship, and party, and how our deepest, most authentic feelings can be stirred. For a music teacher, the list gets much longer: music shapes and regulates our aesthetic sense, unleashes inner worlds of creativity and outer worlds of socialization and cooperation (add your own favorite items to the list here). But *why* and *how* does music do all of these things, not only in one's own culture, but also universally throughout planet earth and the long history of humankind? Because being human means being musical, does music exist for a reason bigger than even all of that (as if that wasn't big enough)? Can we go so far as to say that music was an evolutionary adaptation, crucial to our very survival? British paleo-archaeobiologist-historian (the man's erudition defies classification) Stephen Mithen, a brilliant and humorously self-deprecating guide to these questions, tours their mind-expanding realms in this memorable, innovative book.

Around the world, the question of music's origins and purpose has always been answered in ways specific to different peoples and beliefs. Yet there was a remarkable consistency: music came from (the) god(s), was encountered in dreams, natural formations, or birds, or was invented by a revered ancestor. It is a conduit, in other words, to the world of the sacred, unseen and unknown, a force bigger than us.

But in the West, science gradually intervened to seek its own kind of clear-headed solutions the problem. Philosopher-scientist Jean-Jacques Rous-

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seau wrote in his classic, *The Origins of Language*, (1792) that music predated language and was how humans communicated “the passions” at a time before we could even put words to our thoughts. Then in *The Origin of Species* Charles Darwin explained music as sexual selection or as it was formulated in a more tongue-in-cheek way recently, the “Mick Jagger effect”: the better, more charismatic musicians get more and better mates. These speculations are suggestive, but they only scratch the surface

Darwin devoted only a few scant pages to music in his work, but it wasn't until the past few decades that new generations of scholars and scientists have probed further, using the combined tools of many modern disciplines and research techniques. Mithen reviews and synthesizes all of this in a lively prose style anyone can understand. In the book's early chapters he explores

cutting-edge knowledge in neurology to tell us which regions of the brain activate and conspire to make us behave musically, emphasizing their integrated synchrony and taking care to distinguish between adaptations—capabilities evolved for a specific survival purpose and exaptations—adaptive behaviors that later developed non-survival uses. The history and function of emotion in the human past is surveyed, and shown to have been a central player in the development of our very strategies for existence. Emotion is linked to music's unsurpassable ability to encode, express, and stimulate crucial perceptions, and even heal the sick. A full chapter is dedicated to one of the most persuasive arguments for music as a survival tool—how the innate capacity for rhythmic and melodic coordination enables mothers to bond with their infants literally from birth. At an evolutionary level, this was an essential link to coordinated social activity, the development of ritual, and ultimately, human society itself.

In the second part of the book, Mithen takes us on a tour of our remote past, even as far as the world of our pre-human ancestors. Is there any link between primate vocalizations and human emotional expression? (Yes, as it turns out.) What about birdsong and human music? (You'll be surprised at the analogies.) What did learning to walk upright, when our ancestors lived on the African savannah, do for our potential musical abilities? (A great deal, as it forced us to walk in balanced, symmetrical rhythm, and run from predators in exhilarating, coordinated, pulse-pounding time.) On the savannah we also gradually learned *mimesis*—the imitation of environmental features through integrated sound and movement which ultimately spiced the stew leading to the now-distinct quali-

ties of music, dance and language.

Mithen's own theory—whimsically termed Hmmmmm (early human behavior was **H**olistic, **M**anipulative, **M**ulti-Modal, **M**usical, and **M**imetic)—brings together all of the separate researches he so lucidly summarizes. In our prehistory, there was no “music” separate from life and survival. Things have changed so much! The contemporary world of professionalism, musical consumerism, and the very idea of someone who is “not musical” seem a universe apart from how it once was, and despite humanity's many great musical achievers, a great deal seems to have been lost in the process. Thus Mithen's careful arguments end up becoming a sly critique of music in modern life. “Bring back Hmmmmm!” he writes with sweet, affecting plaintiveness. It's a lament that cannot fail to move anyone who teaches music to children. ■

Reviewed by Michael Tenzer, professor of music education at the University of British Columbia.

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