

# *What is Music?*

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This question is inspired by one of my favorite documentaries, *What is Music?* [1]. Here is a collection of answers to that question. This document has grown to include the thoughts of musicians, acousticians, scientists, philosophers, teachers, friends, and family. Answers to this question are organized thematically.

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## 1 As a physical phenomenon

Lacking a tenable and refined philosophical or artistic position, I would define music mechanically: an intentioned replicable series of fluid vibrations.

–Aleksey Mohov

Music is the intentional creation of sound.

–John Cavalier

## 2 As a subjectively determined entity

It's so incredibly hard for me to answer what music is...My initial reaction is that music can be found in any audio, from the most beautiful opera to the most static-y TV, and it's all dependent on the observer of the music to determine its beauty. But I'm not entirely satisfied with that answer, so I'll continue to think about this and give you an update at some point!

–Kurt Eggers

And what is music? It is the sequence of sounds to produce melody with the potential for harmony, resulting in pleasure to **MY** ears. Yes, my answer is absolutely self-referential, but I've just declared myself the arbiter of this most glorious art form.

–David Brown

Any sequence of sounds that is judged to be pleasant by humans. If it is an annoying or painful sequence, it's noise.

–Steven Garrett

Music is whatever sounds good to your ears.

–Bhisham Sharma

I think this is a really complex question with a very simple answer. I believe music is any sound that humans distinguish from noise—that is, any sound that a human notices and gives thought to as more than the sound itself. Although the traditional definition of music is some element of sound with rhythmic or harmonic and melodic components, I think this leaves out a lot of desirable sounds that are classified as music. Really, anything that someone has assembled, arranged, or composed as a work greater than the sounds which it contains should be deemed “musical.” And, this doesn't have to

even be on purpose! Every time I hear an airplane fly over or even construction sounds, I think about them as more than just a passing sound and recognize the timbres and structure of the event starting, happening, and ceasing to exist. Then, one might even abstract musicality to any event with a start, a duration, and an inevitable end. That's why life can similarly be both very musical and very dull at times.

–Tanay Mannikar

### **3 As the culture of sound**

Music is a record of where we've been and where our culture is going. And unlike other forms of communication, music is not one-dimensional.

–Camden Hunt

Music is a collection of ordered sounds, temporally, spectrally, or both, that evoke an emotional response in humans and beasts, and before the invention of writing, it was a way to preserve human thought because we can easily remember words to songs and pass them along.

–Preston Wilson

I have observed that the more art and music there is in a family or a community, the more pleasant and livable it is. The creative impulse is basic to all human beings. It just needs to be recognized and nurtured to grow into something beautiful.

–Chick Corea [2]

### **4 As the aesthetics of sound**

“That which reverberates.” I think it works better in Japanese because the word for reverberate (響く) inherently carries a spiritual/emotional meaning as well (it's often used to express something leaving an emotional impact or an impact on a greater scale like the effect of a new invention). Still, I think it sort of works in English, although it could be better worded perhaps as “That which echoes,” or better yet, “That which resonates.”

–Mikey Nguyen

Music is the art of sounds.

–Sylvain Luc [3]

Music is the soundscape within which our souls blossom and unfold. As a musician, we are navigators, using the tools of perception and expression to weave an arbor for our common experience. As listeners, we inhabit the soundscape as it blossoms and unfolds, reflecting where we are.

–Michael Stocker

I would say that music is artists' expression of emotions and opinions through sounds and melodies.

–Collin Katz

Music is part of the beauty of life...A combination of the music, setting a mood, taking you to a place, and the lyrics telling a story or expressing an idea, it feels good...It feels really good to play music. And it feels even better to play music well.

–Stephen Houpt [4]

Music is delivering the pleasure of sound.

–Chick Corea

That is a very interesting question...I've been reading a book by Tolkien called *Ain-ulindale*; it's some of the lore behind the *Lord of the Rings* series. In the *LOTR* lore they create the world by singing it into existence. And they said that the sound of water is an echo of the song that the gods used to sing the world into existence...

Music is the human experience put into sound: it's a way of communicating to people, "I feel the things you feel; I think the things you think we're together in this chaotic beautiful universe"; and so many other messages, stuff that spoken or written language can't convey. That's why produced pop music that so many people listen to just doesn't seem to be musical: it seems to have lost its person-to-person aspect: it's just a manufactured sequence of sounds that's designed to produce a positive chemical reaction in a human brain. Not even a positive one: an addicting one. From experience and as a Christian I reject that materialistic view of music; Music is so much more spiritual and personal and theological and a whole host of other things too.

–Nathan Leicht

## 5 As beyond sound

To be honest, I was a bit surprised by your list of definitions of music. To me, music has never been restricted to sound. Why is a beautiful sky, the ocean, a hug from a friend, a photograph of a moment, or an act of kindness you witness not music too? Is poetry not music? What about nature in harmony? I feel as if so many things I experience give me the same feeling as your listening definitions of music. I would say music is

any sense that elevates your emotion in some way, positive or negative. I will have to think about why people restrict it to sound.

–Alena Hallveld

Music does not have to be heard. The laws are the same whether music is heard or not.

–Vangelis [5]

Today, when my alarm went off, I decided I was going to just listen to the melody. It's nothing interesting in a sense. Just a major scale...outlining a chord...but this time I just let the alarm ring...for two minutes...Usually I don't look for music where I don't think it is...It's such an eye-opener: *we can find music in everything*. I just sat still in silence, and I started thinking of all the places in times when I'm too blinded to hear the music. That has been a big part of my life. And not just for music, but for other things. Sometimes we're too focused on what we have to do in the moment that we miss the bigger picture—the true things we could be doing. Now, some of us may be looking for jobs or internships and sometimes we might be looking so hard for them that we miss some things along the way that are much more important, or at least as valuable.

–Dani Byle

## 6 As the ever-present

Beautiful music is not created; it is found. I felt this...when I was playing some melody I was trying to learn, and my hand just started “going.” I felt that I didn't make that happen. It was where my mind and fingers went naturally...The melody itself was always sort of meant to be. I just found a way to latch on to that, like a surfer riding the wave. The wave is always there! But you have to have the technical skill to balance and ride the wave.

–Mikey Nguyen

A musical piece does not need the composer's thought in order to exist in the world of forms. It constantly exists there, regardless of time and the composer. Therefore, the display of this composition in our reality of space and time does not also require thinking. If you think of a composition or, by extension, something else, then the thought of that form already exists in the past. It does not exist in the present and that is why it is unable or finds great difficulty in being displayed in the present. In order for “something” to be displayed in the present, you must not think of it, because if you do, it is immediately transferred into the past. In order to “bring” something to the present, you need to constantly remain in the present and to be available, so that creation is displayed through yourself. If you want something in the present, it is preferable not to intervene and let it be displayed freely.

–Vangelis [5]

## 7 As a personal relation

When music rejects you, it really hurts. But it makes it all the more special when we are able to find those days, those moments, when we can cleanly, smoothly ride the wave and play a beautiful melody.

–Mikey Nguyen

Music has to be played. And it has to be played by you. Because if not, who will play it?

–Dani Byle

## 8 As a meditative practice

Music is a way of living in the moment.

–Cari Reinert

Music is in its spirit, in what the person behind it is trying to communicate...Even if you can't understand the words, there is a sense of trying to hear someone's soul behind music.

–Anna Schaeffer

Music is the sound of life.

–Mother

Music is the highest art and to those who understand, is the highest worship.

–Swami Vivekananda [6]

## 9 As a sonic journey or cycle

In the mid-1970s, I mentioned that 'every human, animal and vegetable being, even the inorganic matter itself, bears the imprint of the Creation cycle. Sound always follows the frequency of changes of this cycle as the operational code of universal dimensions and, simultaneously, as progenitor. Let us try, then, to scrutinize our memory and let us remember. Only then we will manage to decipher the code of the Creation of the Universe, and, consequently, of ourselves. What a marvellous and divine key the music is!' No matter how many times you ask me after this statement, I will keep replying to you: 'Metre, rhythm and harmony equal music, which transforms upheaval into world, disorder into order, and dissonance into symphony.'

–Vangelis [5]

Music—and this is a work in progress for me—is chaos in order. Music happens anywhere: it is just noise that creates a symphony. And any instruments that we have are just tools to organize that noise that surrounds us.

–Dani Byle

What is music? I wish I knew how to succinctly describe how music thrills, emotes, cries, excites, and allures. Fundamentally though, this is true of all great art no matter what the form. Carl Jung talks about these innate archetypes and stories we ALL hold within, of which the hero's journey is one of the most poignant. From Odysseus all the way to the Avengers, we dress the same stories to our times and cherish them just the same. The hero's journey mirrors what we hope for in life! Starting as an incapable and unaware being, discovering the things that are worth losing everything for, facing tragedy yet emerging through undying pursuance, and returning from your journey with fulfillment, adoration, and contentment from having accomplished something worthy of your life and made the world a better place because of your existence. This is the hope of every person, even if the fruit of your whole life is raising and loving a child that will take your lessons forward.

Music and all great art reflects the hero's journey on two levels. Within the work or performance itself, it's almost ludicrous how closely say the Sonata form follows the hero's journey from exposition, development, glorious climax, and resolute recapitulation. If you think about it, even the humble 2-5-1 or 4-5-1 progression is a exposition, development/tension/resolution. You find these patterns in many many ways.

The second level pertains to the masters and artists themselves. When hearing those with incredible musical connection whether it be Billy Joel, Jeffry Eckels, or Phil Woods, you hear their hours. You feel that they've dedicated themselves to this craft as if it were worthy of their whole lives. Through their mastery they're able to sonically articulate struggle, resolution, emptiness, peace, pain, delight, and all of the beautiful things that we all will invariably encounter in our own hero's journey. That's music for me!

–Austin Zhang

## **10 With respect to silence**

Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent.

–Victor Hugo

After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music.

–Aldous Huxley [7]

Complete silence is louder than the loudest sound.

–Will Clark

Silence is both porous and generous enough to receive both noise and no noise, and forms the ground from which we both see through the illusion and separation from God; and are trained by the ordeals of life rooted in the mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

–Father Martin Laird [8]

What is the nature of sound? Sound is silence itself. Sound is *made out* of silence. It's like dropping a pebble into an ocean of silence, and the waves are what we call sound. If we begin to get even a glimpse of that, then the contrast between sound and silence goes away.

–Swami Atmarupananda [9]

When we switch our attention from things that exist to the *existence of things*, then music merges in silence, and duality merges in unity. Living forth in duality, we realize that the true meaning of every note was God all along, and that this world is nothing but the Divine symphony playing out in the silence which we are.

Then we shall see that this world is an illusion (*maya*), the appearance of consciousness as the gross, subtle, and causal. This world is the infinite projected through the five infinitesimal pinholes that are the senses. This world is pure bliss projected through the impure mind and heart. This world is the wreckage of the infinite on the shores of space-time causation.

We shall see that the world was one of our imagination, neither pure existence nor nonexistence. A lie arises from the truth, a dream arises from consciousness, and music arises from silence. Without truth, there is no lie; without consciousness, no dream; without silence, no music.

–Unknown

We come from silence, but we are in sound; it is through sound that we go back to God...We are in this world because the primal silence was broken by the sacred silence itself; otherwise there would be no world. But that primordial silence, which somehow always remains in the sound of its own creation, had provided for us the means of returning unto it through the Divine sound. And one of the concomitance of this, is the realization of who we are. . . that our self is the Self of all selves. And this is the metaphysical foundation for all compassion. And so no matter how a great a metaphysician one is, how great a thinker, there is no gate to Heaven without compassion; there is no blessed soul without silence.

–Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr [9]



I strongly agree with Victor Hugo's definition in your document. I wouldn't have much more to add to it, but I tend to use music as an expression of something I can't put words to and to contain memories and nostalgia and scents of the past. Otherwise, I'd end up forgetting.

–Tanay Mannikar

## 11 As the ineffable

What is music? That is a very difficult question...

–Diana Deutsch [1]

Music is weird.

–Patrick Magee

A very cool question, and one I've thought a little bit about. When I first thought about it though, I often was perplexed and frustrated by the question, because it felt like such a Western, academic question (not a knock on the question...more on me). In my music history class, for example, we listened to John Cage's 4:33, and I remember being annoyed as only in the West (and in academia) would we consider such a piece as possibly music. I studied in Ghana, West Africa the summer before and remember thinking the people I knew there would think it nonsense. But in the time since I've thought about it some and enjoyed defending my reasoning/definition.

–Matt Zeh

## 12 As a gift from God

Playing the guitar, and music, is a gift that I've gotten from God...it has to be a gift. And I have to now say, "I thank God for the gift."

–Joe Pass [10]

Perfection is not necessarily music. God gives us music, and we can play around with it. It's not meant to be perfect. It's like us! We as people are not perfect. We need to be held and saved because of our mistakes. And those mistakes also makes us special...those things truly differentiate music from just dots on a score. It is one thing to have a piece of sheet music...and play the right notes at the right time. But it's something completely different, to play the right notes at a right time with feeling. Or to play the right notes at the wrong time, or the wrong notes at the wrong time. It's all about feeling. The beauty of music, which is a language of its own, is that it allows us to express ourselves.

The smallest details make the biggest difference...That's part of what I love about music. Just how easy it is and how susceptible it is to what we want to do. We don't have to do anything crazy to change the mood. We just have to drop a finger; we just have to bend a note, and everything changes.

One of the things I love about music is how versatile it is. There's not just one part of music you can enjoy. There are thousands.

–Dani Byle

## 13 As an expression of the Divine

I think that music being an expression of the human heart or the human being itself does express just what is happening. I feel that it expresses the whole thing. The whole of a human experience at any particular time, it can express. To me it's music and this music is an expression of the highest. To me, higher ideal. So therefore brotherhood is there, and I believe with brotherhood, there would be no problems. And also with brotherhood there would be no war.

–John Coltrane [11]

The heavenly bodies are nothing but a continuous song for several voices (perceived by the intellect, not by the ear); a music which...sets landmarks in the immeasurable flow of time. It is therefore, no longer surprising that man, in imitation of his creator, has at last discovered the art of figured song, which was unknown to the ancients. Man wanted to reproduce the continuity of cosmic time...to obtain a sample test of the delight of the Divine Creator in His works, and to partake of his joy by making music in the imitation of God.

–Johannes Kepler [12]

Observe, what these snow-white peaks dazzling in the sun are doing in this lovely place, inaccessible to man and animal. They are sweetly, perpetually singing hymns to God; they do nothing else. When I say so you may be inclined to laugh at the idea. "What! Are we to imagine that this inanimate mountain, a mere heap of earth and stone, sings like a skilled musician? Who can believe it? How absurd!" But take it more seriously. The silent grandeur, the enormous extent, and the unshakable firmness of the mountain, and the divine beauty and fragrance of the flowers that fascinate even birds and beasts.....these are, in themselves, hymns to God. The music, of course, is not vocal. But the vocal music is harsh and grating, compared with the silent music of those sights around me here. Heard melodies are sweet; those unheard are sweeter! The perennial stream, Alakananda, and this waterfall, Vasudhara.....what are they doing here? They too are loudly and ceaselessly singing the glory of God.

*It is from this that all forms of streams flow.*

These streams are gratefully singing the praise of the Creator who makes them flow. These fine birds sweeping along the skies are proclaiming the matchless glory of the Lord. Look at those charming flowers, bright with many colours, blooming here on the meadow. They too proclaim nothing else. In this holy land everything seems to join in that universal harmony.

As usual I had my bath in the Vasudhara and then sat down on the plain which shown bright with fresh green grass and lovely flowers, to enjoy the gentle warmth of the sun. Gradually my ears were filled with the Divine music issuing from all sides. That lifted me to the thought of the glory of God and slowly I attained a state of meditation in which I became unconscious of the material world around me, My body grew bright and lustrous, without the formal rites of *Sankranthi*, such as the anointing of the body with sandalwood paste, or the wearing of clean linen. Without eating aught I was filled; without friends and things to gladden, my heart was filled with bliss. Intoxicated with the Divine joy, I forgot all distinction between me and the world around me. All sense of duality disappeared. I was now one with the Vasudhara, the Himalayas, the World itself. In that union I felt the fullness of Divine joy. That Oneness is the Truth, the Blissful Truth. O! Himalaya! I find no end to your spiritual greatness. May you grant me many *Sankranthis* like today! As a dweller among the Himalayas I have indeed listened with rapture to your divine song from day to day, but really, very rarely have I experienced that ecstasy which I attained today.

–Swami Tapovan Maharaj [13]

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