

In tune with the universe: The staple food of the soul

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [February 10, 2009](#) issue

For Christians (as for religious people of various sorts), music is a basic human activity. We cannot live without worshiping, and we cannot worship without making music. Smack in the middle of the Bible are the Psalms, the blues and praise songs of the ancient Hebrews. And the earliest confessions of the New Testament may have been lifted directly from hymns that rang out in corporate worship. It may be that prayers were sung before they were spoken. Music is that basic.

But it is not so basic in everyone's view. A few years ago the linguist Steven Pinker sounded a discordant note at a gathering of musicologists. In his 660-page book *How the Mind Works*, Pinker had dedicated only 11 pages to music. He told the musicologists why the topic did not merit more attention: music was "useless" in terms of human evolution and development. He dismissed it as "auditory cheesecake," a trivial amusement that "just happens to tickle several important parts of the brain in a highly pleasurable way, as cheesecake tickles the palate."

So which is it? Is music at the very heart of humanness—the template for prayer—or is it auditory cheese cake?

Anthropologist Steven Mithen rebuts Pinker's estimate of music. In his book *The Singing Neanderthals*, Mithen explores how music functions in sexual selection (think of love songs and, for various species, mating dances) and reflects on how rhythm is essential to bipedal locomotion. He concentrates especially on music's capacity to aid in social bonding. Music is ideal for coordinating group movement (in dancing or marching, for instance) and—through vocal harmonization—for promoting a profound sense of group unity, of a common mind or heart. Mithen concludes that music-making is a "cheap and easy form of interaction that can demonstrate a willingness to cooperate" and so may have fostered communal ties that quite essentially served our primal ancestors for such survival purposes as hunting, sharing food and defending themselves from predators.

The Singing Neanderthals ranges across biology, anthropology, archaeology, psychology, musicology and linguistic studies. But some of Mithen's most convincing evidence for the significance of music lies closer to everyday human experience, in what scientists refer to as Infant-Directed Speech (IDS) and what the rest of us call baby talk. Across cultures, it seems only natural to coo and sing at babies. We know that the variance of voice tone, rhythmic repetition and melodic humming or chanting attracts and can hold the attention of infants. We sing lullabies to ease them to sleep and jaunty tunes to wake them up. We use baby talk to get our babies to eat or stop crying. In all of this, we intuit how much more effectively we can communicate with infants musically than prosaically.

Mithen cites a number of scientific studies that validate this common experience. For instance, a correlation has been found between the amount and quality of IDS a baby receives and the rate of the baby's growth. Some scientists argue that IDS evolved prelinguistically, with the musicality of baby talk communicating mood, emotion and affirmation to infants before they possess a capacity to interpret symbolic language. In fact, so important is musicality to human communication that all healthy infants may be born with perfect pitch.

The debate on the evolutionary significance of music lends a deeper resonance to the irresistible Christian impulse to worship in song. Isaiah affirmed the poetic truth that trees "clap their hands" in praise of life and their Maker. The Psalmist called for praise of the Lord with trumpet, tambourine and "loud clashing cymbals" and drew into the embrace of this musical praise not just harpists, not just humans, but sun and moon, mountains and hills, and wild animals alongside the cattle of the field.

The apostle Paul imagined all of creation groaning and sighing in hope for its liberation from "bondage to decay," and Karl Barth followed Paul's lead to envision creation's "general sighing" as a kind of incipient rhythm and harmony. "The playing of musical instruments," Barth wrote, "is a . . . conscious, skillful and intelligent human attempt to articulate before God this sound of a cosmos that is otherwise dumb. Surely the perfect musician is one who . . . is best able to hear not merely the voice of his own heart but what all creation is trying to say," and then to articulate and manifest it in song.

The Christian intuition is that the human propensity for music goes deeper than our genes—all the way to our genesis in a creator God. Theologically if not biologically, song precedes speech and dancing precedes walking. Music is not auditory cheesecake but the very staple food of the soul.