

The Universal Language of Music

An ancient form of cultural and self-expression, music is much more than a harmonious collection of sounds. It is a cognitive experience to which humans are naturally compelled to react. Despite not being an essential survival trait, music has evolved from our early ancestors to become engrained in all cultures.¹ Hailed as the “universal language,” music transcends the barriers of language, geography, age, and more. A Harvard study analyzing the National History of Song Ethnography, a database of nearly 5,000 musical pieces from 60 human societies, found that songs that share behavioral intentions tend to have parallel musical features.² These shared structural elements show that despite cultural differences and geographic spread, the human mind still perceives music in a similar way.

At its core, music is a powerful emotional regulator for all humans. It can help recall memories, intensify emotions, and deepen shared experiences.³ When we listen to music, our brain collectively works to create connections with the sounds and transform them into lasting feelings. Furthermore, music therapy has proven itself to be a powerful healing tool. A prominent example is the usage of “music chunking,” where information is chunked into musical pieces like songs, chants, and rhymes.⁴ This allows for greater active learning and recall, making it easier for individuals to enhance memory and alertness.

In addition to this, music offers a unique experience that brings people together. One study found that performing music in a larger group compared to a smaller one yields the same increase in pain tolerance thresholds, but participants in the larger group felt more change in social closeness.⁵ This can be attributed to the release of endorphins generated by collective music-making which promotes emotional closeness between the people participating.⁶ This biochemical response explains why musical gatherings, whether a small jam session or a large festival, create lasting community engagement even after it is over.

The universal nature of music reveals the fundamentals of human nature itself. It is not just entertainment, but rather a lifetime phenomenon that shapes the way we think, interact, heal, and connect. It serves as both a tool and a reflection for our shared humanity and individual growth.

¹ Susan Gaidos and Cary Wolinsky, “More than a Feeling: Emotionally Evocative, Yes, but Music Goes Much Deeper,” *Science News* 178, no. 4 (2010): 24–29, <https://doi.org/10.1002/scin.5591780423>.

² Jed Gottlieb, “New Harvard Study Says Music Is Universal Language,” *Harvard Gazette*, November 21, 2019, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/11/new-harvard-study-establishes-music-is-universal/>.

³ Istvan Molnar-Szakacs and Katie Overy, “Music and Mirror Neurons: From Motion to ‘E’motion,” *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 1, no. 3 (2006): 235–241, <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsl029>.

⁴ Michael H. Thaut, “Neurologic Music Therapy in Cognitive Rehabilitation,” *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 27, no. 4 (2010): 281–285, <https://doi.org/10.1525/mp.2010.27.4.281>.

⁵ Daniel Weinstein, et al, “Singing and Social Bonding: Changes in Connectivity and Pain Threshold as a Function of Group Size,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 37, no. 2 (2016): 152–158, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2015.10.002>.

⁶ Weinstein, “Singing and Social Bonding,” 153.