



D. J. Levitin, *The World in Six Songs*, Dutton/Penguin, New York 2008

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Daniel Levitin's work addresses really challenging questions about the very origin of music, about what the various music types have in common and what differentiates them; in the same way, the American scholar's intent is to discover how music interfered with our evolution, or, in his words, in what way all this music made us what we are¹. An ambitious goal, which he proposes to reach through an interdisciplinary research purposely kept in balance between an anthropological vision and a more modern neuroscientific approach.

The proposed thesis arises from the knowledge gained because of the initial perspective error that had characterized the early steps of the Levitin's study. Initially he wanted to take the *reductio ad unum* path, attempting to build up an unifying synthesis of the common features of all music types on Earth. Only later it became clear that to understand what makes us human we must go through the hodgepodge of differences that characterizes us². This revealing methodological reversal gave birth to *The world in six songs*.

The key idea is as simple to formulate as it is hard to demonstrate. If, as Levitin says, music has always played a significant role in shaping our minds; and if brain and music have co-evolved together: then music has become an *indispensable* tool for a high fitness level of the entire mankind, and not—as it is generally believed—a simple entertainment or pastime. Finally, in this everlasting adaptive process, those categories within which different musical types can be traced, are not more than six, according to the scholar: friendship, joy, comfort, knowledge, religion, love. Actually, the accuracy of this pattern is advocated even more than it would be necessary³, but the possibility that, over the years, other scholars intervene to extend Levitin's music categories or give unexpected stimuli to his prospect, do not invalidate the profound originality of his work.

Without devoting a thorough analysis to the *six songs* in which Levitin summarizes the world, it could be useful to underline that the central place, for a romance philologists, has to be reserved to *joy*, key word around which the entire poetical universe of the troubadours revolves. Recent

¹ D. J. Levitin, *The World in Six Songs*, New York 2008, chapter 1.

² *Ibid.*

³ The twenty five years old Gardner's quotation could be fruitfully reminded in this context: "Ultimately, it would certainly be desirable to have an algorithm for the selection of an intelligence, such that any trained researcher could determine whether a candidate intelligence met the appropriate criteria. At present, however, it must be admitted that the selection (or rejection) of a candidate intelligence is reminiscent more of an artistic judgment than of a scientific assessment". Cfr. H. Gardner, *Frames of Mind. The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983), New York 1985, p. 63.

researches have shown that there is a positive correlation between dopamine levels and the frequency with which an individual produces or listens to music; and if, as it seems clear, more dopamine makes us 'happier'; if, ultimately, a better feeling provides us a more careful immune response, that is how music acted throughout the human evolutionary processes. This is not to say that troubadours sang the *joi* because doing so could prevent them from contracting diseases: this kind of argument would be nothing less than a trivialization of the complex process that is adaptation. Anyway—taking due account of all the simplifications—following this direction could lead us to understand what is the explanation that Levitin provides for the existence of the songs of joy: he says that the songs of joy exist because to move, to dance and to exercise the body and the mind seems to be adaptive in the context of our evolutionary history⁴.

I carryover one last example, not contained in Levitin's book, that could be presented at the crossroads between what he defines song of knowledge and song of friendship (the latter being understood in a broad sense, i.e. music with synchronized and coordinated motion): the story of Father Paolino. On a mission in Amazonia this Italian priest observed the processions of a tribe whose members, each morning, murmured apparently meaningless chants while advancing in the jungle with a piece of wood in their hands. This wood-block was eventually turned on in the sacred fire—the only one that never extinguished—located nearby the hut of the village chief. Needless to say, the priest's first thought was to give to the community a box of matches: the result was, though, devastating. Paolino discovered that the fire lighting was only a pretext for a more important rite: people, with their chants, informed the old sage of everything that happened in the tribe, so that he could actively intervene in the preservation of the social equilibrium. Music had a unifying role: it enhanced interpersonal and knowledge ties. An interruption of the practice, unless it was immediately followed by its restoration, could easily generate turmoil or even the collapse of the harmonic order that held the whole community united.

⁴ *The World in Six Songs* cit., chapter 3.