



DAVID BORGO

When the subject of music and spirituality comes up, and it inevitably does, the issue is almost always framed by our modern practices and sensibilities. People tend to take one of two positions. Either music is heard to be essentially hedonic; Steven Pinker notoriously called music "*auditory cheesecake*", a pleasant but superfluous confection on the human dinner table, nothing more than an evolutionary by-product. Or music is heard as transcendent; Friedrich Nietzsche believed that "*Without music, life would be a mistake*". Our modern sensibilities and practices just as often conflate these two. Which did Duke Ellington have in mind when he remarked, "*Music is my mistress*"?

I have tried, in recent years, to take a longer and less ethnocentric view on the subject. Although "*leisure-time*" entertainment or "*isolated*" listening tend to be the dominant modes for musical engagement in the modern West, they are aberrations when we look further a field both culturally and historically. Healing, praying, mourning, and instruction would all be higher up on a list of music's cross-cultural significance. Our children may in fact be the best place to begin looking for music's significance. Lullabies and "*Motherese*", the more musical language we all adopt around infants, are found universally in human cultures and together they promote a mutual coupling and an interactive framework that allows for the subsequent development of linguistic and cognitive flexibility. It is relatively easy to argue that music predates language, on both evolutionary and developmental timescales, originates from our need to connect with one another, and confutes common notions of mind/body and thought/feeling distinctions.

The shortest answer I know to the question of music's significance is that it "*promotes groupishness*". It promotes group identity, collective thinking, and group catharsis. It helps us to blur personal boundaries in order to merge more fully with a group, and corporations and governments have notoriously exploited this tendency for their own purposes. Music makes us more social, and, importantly, it reminds us, on some deep level, that the origins of our species and the origins of our thoughts are social. Music is not simply a way to divert us from the rigmarole of "*serious life*" or to insulate us from the "*contamination*" of the outside social world, though these are certainly valid uses for it. Music should not lead us to avoid our humanness; it is fundamental to our species and at the very heart of our shared humanity.



**DR. DAVID BORGIO, AUTHOR OF
“*SYNC OR SWARM: IMPROVISING MUSIC IN A COMPLEX AGE*”**