


**TAKE A SURVEY**

RESEARCH PURPOSES



## Why they call it the blues

**Listening to sad songs and making ourselves miserable may be music to more than our ears**

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**CONRAD MCCALLUMO**  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

This is your brain on sad music: Pick a genre, find a doleful melody and pull out your hanky for Freddy Fender's "Before the Next Teardrop Falls." Or feel a lump in your throat and ponder, with B.B. King, that "Nobody Loves Me But My Mother." Feel a sob in throat on the Left Banke and just "Walk Away Renée."

What a sorry state sad music puts us in, with symptoms musicologists say are not unlike an allergic reaction. We know unconsciously that lamentable listening affords a safe occasion to experience sadness, a condition that forces us to mull over our troubles, change course and become more grounded.

So says musicologist David Huron, a Canadian at Ohio State University who is working on a



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY KEITH BEATY / TORONTO STAR

November's dark, dreary days are the perfect backdrop for sad music, which researchers say helps ground us.

### Whistle an unhappy tune

Take a sad song, make it better. In Western music, sad pieces typically, but not always, use slower tempos and minor keys.

Tempo appears to influence listeners'

book entitled *How Music Makes Us Feel*. He argues we're a buoyantly optimistic species, a quality that encourages us to try new things and also to persevere. When our expectations are dashed, sorrow allows us to become more realistic. And it may be that we look to sombre music as a shortcut to this essential emotion.

Scientists and music scholars have for decades been wrestling with the "problem" of sorrowful music and its peculiar hold on us. Whereas upbeat music has an obvious benefit in being able to raise the spirit, the appeal of dreary lyrics and doleful harmonies has always been difficult to fathom. Plato, for one, objected to sorrowful or plaintive music, while giving the thumbs up to music that could raise a person's spirits, or embolden soldiers in battle.

But recent findings raise a cheer to melancholy music, recognizing its value as a tool to regulate moods, ruminate and reconnect with our deepest emotions.

Pianist Henri-Paul Sicsic, assistant professor of piano in the University of Toronto's faculty of music, says he once visited a friend whose mother was trying to remember a Frédéric Chopin piece from her youth. Sicsic, who has performed with the likes of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and the Orchestre Philharmonique de Nice, was the right person to ask: his piano teacher in France was a student of Alfred Cortot's, who was a student of Chopin's.

After he hummed a few bars of the *Nocturne Opus 9, No. 2*, for the woman, Sicsic recalled, "immediately, tears came to her eyes."

The English psychiatrist Anthony Storr argued in his book *Music and the Mind* that music can exert influence on our lives "as a permanent part of our mental furniture." Recalled sad songs – cues to poignant memories – are especially sweet since we're not, at that

arousal levels but not their mood, while key affects mood, but not arousal, say music researchers.

We're moved by some melancholic tunes and just annoyed by others, and it's hard to put our music preferences into words.

Would the Elizabethan composer William Byrd's "Come to Me, Grief, For Ever" bring you down faster than his contemporary John Dowling's "Weep You No More, Sad Fountains" or Sting's version?

Does Billie Holiday's "Don't Explain" speak to you more than Dionne Warwick's "Walk on By?"

Is the Smashing Pumpkins' album *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* more sombre than The Verve's single "The Drugs Don't Work?" British psychiatrist Anthony Storr wrote that our preferences and prejudices in music partly relate to how the personal

moment, faced with an actual sad event. The emotions evoked by music "do not need to be committed to anything in particular," says Sicsic.

When we actively listen to music, which we do best in a concert hall, we experience a full range of emotions "without the pressure of specific life situations," he adds.

Music has cathartic effects on composers in a similar way, notes Sicsic. Sergei Rachmaninoff completed his *Piano Concerto No. 2* while coming out of a deep depression, and an ailing Chopin composed his famous *Preludes (Op. 28)* during a miserable winter on the Spanish island of Mallorca.

When might we seek solace in the sorrowful? Psychology professor Glenn Schellenberg of the University of Toronto, Mississauga, has concluded that though people generally prefer happy-sounding music, which is typically in fast tempos and major keys, in some instances the slow/minor quality of sad music is just as appealing.

In the lab, Schellenberg examined the preferences for happy- and sad-sounding music. The experiment included both focused listening and incidental listening, in which participants had to listen to a story in one ear, type particular keys whenever they heard the words "and" or "but," while the music played in the other ear. This recreated the experience of overhearing music while something else commands our attention – the way most music is experienced today, Schellenberg says.

In the focused listening exercise, the more participants heard the music, the more they liked both the joyful segments (by the likes of Mozart, Beethoven, and Verdi) and the sombre ones (Chopin, Mahler and Schubert). But, eventually and at different points, they'd heard them often enough that their fondness for both

characteristics of different composers are embodied in their music.

As McGill University professor Daniel Levitin writes in *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession*, we "surrender to music when we listen to it," allowing ourselves to trust the composers and musicians "with a part of our hearts and our spirits."

*Conrad McCallum*

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## **Tale of SAD-ness**

Sometimes called "winter blues," seasonal affective disorder is a mild depression believed to be triggered by reduced hours of daylight in late autumn.

Two to 6 per cent of Canadians suffer from SAD.

Women are eight times more likely to suffer from SAD. Average age of onset is 23 years old.

types of music declined.

More intriguingly, after incidental listening, the participants' enjoyment levels for the euphoric and the sorrowful music were similar. The pleasure they felt from the music increased in a gradual fashion without reaching a point of over-familiarity, reports the study, published in August in the journal *Cognition and Emotion*.

Schellenberg says this study, which he believes is the first to demonstrate increased liking for melancholy tunes, invites one to ponder why people choose to listen to sad music.

The distracting task likely wore down the participants and "because the sad-sounding music fit their mood better, they liked it," he speculates. Fatigue or boredom may also have drawn them to the music's soothing nature, he says.

Musicologist Huron says it's common for us to prefer music that matches our current energy level. That can mean sorrowful music, the effect of which, it turns out, can be salutary. This happens when we shed "psychic" tears – generated by remembered emotion – that contain the hormone prolactin, the body's natural tranquilizer. But nothing sad has actually happened.

"So you have this warm feeling, and in effect what you have is 'a good cry,'" explains Huron, the author of *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation*.

Sad music is thus like "an artificial stimulant to put you in a saddened state in which people do ruminate," he says. That, in turn, leads people to take a more honest view of the world and become "deadly realistic in their self-appraisals." Ultimately, we use the negative feelings to realign our lives, says Huron.

The artificially induced emotion can therefore bring about concrete

Thirty minutes of light exposure (with 10,000-lux light-therapy box; sunlight measures at 32,000 lux), can lift mood and energy.

Most patients respond to light therapy within two to four days.

Treating SAD with fluorescent light boxes is effective in approximately 65 per cent of cases.

Seasonal affective disorder was first noted in 1845.

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*SOURCES: Mood Disorders Society of Canada, Canadian Medical Association, Canadian Mental Health Association*

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*Compiled by Astrid Lange / Toronto Star Library*

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changes, so it's easy to mistake it for a genuinely sad state.

Your friends may choke up from hearing a piece of music and believe they're feeling truly sad. Such reactions to music occur "as if you were an instrument that is responding to a stimulus, and vibrating through that particular emotion."

You may tell them it's only a sad-like state, "but I don't think it's going to change what they experience," notes pianist Sicsic.

A person's response to music, he says, "is really in the eye, or in the heart, of the beholder."