

The Power of Music

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Pan pipes, pinot noir and productivity: the hidden power of music

What song sounds like strawberries? Can the right playlist relieve pain? And why does classical music make us spend money? An interesting new show tries to answer all these questions and more
Stephen Moss

A new exhibition at Manchester's Science and Industry Museum is asking visitors to match certain types of music with tastes. Does this sound sweet, sour, bitter, salty?

At first, I don't want to make my selections. I don't want to look silly in front of curator Steven Leech. But then something magical happens: the screechy music suddenly makes me think of bitter lemons and the lush sounds make me see strawberries.

"The exhibition is about the way music affects our bodies and minds, and drives us to innovate, create and share," says Leech. "We found that most people, unless they played an instrument or could read music, felt 'unmusical'. They forgot that there is music everywhere and that it is so central in our culture." He wants to show that almost everyone is musical and has an emotional response to what they hear.

One exhibit shows how a lullaby has certain musical qualities that are felt by everyone. Co-curator Emily Scott-Dearing says cultural conditioning is important, too. "In western music, there are associations between major keys and happiness, and minor keys and sadness," she explains, "but that is not universal across all music systems."

Music's ability to relax us is well known and Turn It Up looks at ways it is used for medical purposes – for example, to treat dementia sufferers. A study of group music-therapy sessions in care homes found that music helped reduce patients' agitation and distress, so they could take fewer drugs.

Music also affects us in other ways. Playing generic French or German music in supermarket wine aisles can increase the amount of wine supermarkets sell from those countries.

Other research suggests playing classical music in shops makes people spend more money.

Playing classical music rather than muzak or pop in a café can increase sales by 20%. Another study has shown that classical music encourages shoppers to buy luxury items, whereas country music encourages more everyday, functional purchases.

Fast music, meanwhile, makes you shop more quickly. That also explains why tunes by marching bands are sometimes played at London's Waterloo station – to stop commuters lingering on the concourse. Underground stations also play soothing music to encourage calm behaviour in situations that can become stressful.

Can listening to music help you sleep well? Familiarity is important, Leech explains. "If music makes you feel more comfortable and takes you to a different place, it can help you go to sleep," he says.

Memory is another part of the show. The BBC radio programme Desert Island Discs shows that every week, playing the pieces that have become signposts in a person's life.

Turn It Up tries to answer many questions. What music, for instance, is best for a call centre to use while callers are on hold? Pleasant tunes without words that feel like they have no beginning and no end – callers don't like to be reminded of the time they have to wait. One experiment showed that they were more likely to wait if the music was an instrumental version of 'Yesterday', rather than the version with Paul McCartney singing it. His version made callers pay attention.

So does listening to music while we work help or hinder productivity? The answer depends on what you are doing: it helps with mechanical tasks but is distracting if you are carrying out complex cognitive tasks.

And what is the safest music to listen to while driving? Heavy metal. No, I'm just joking – ballads are best.



Level: B1 | B2: Upper Intermediate

Skill: Reading

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Choose the correct option to answer the questions.

What is the main focus of the exhibition at Manchester's Science and Industry Museum?

- a The emotional response to music
- b The effects of music on our bodies and minds
- c The cultural conditioning of musical preferences
- d The use of music for medical purposes

According to the text, how does music affect the behavior of supermarket shoppers?

- a It increases the sales of specific types of wine.
- b It encourages shoppers to buy luxury items.
- c It makes shoppers spend more money overall.
- d It speeds up the shopping process.

What type of music is recommended for a call centre to play while callers are on hold?

- a Instrumental versions of popular songs
- b Pleasant tunes without words
- c Upbeat songs with catchy lyrics
- d Slow ballads with emotional lyrics

According to the text, how does music impact productivity in the workplace?

- a It improves productivity for all types of tasks.
- b It enhances productivity for mechanical tasks only.
- c It hinders productivity for complex cognitive tasks.
- d It has no significant effect on productivity.

What does the text suggest about listening to music while driving?

- a It is distracting and unsafe, regardless of the genre.
- b Heavy metal music is the safest option for driving.
- c Ballads are the most suitable music for driving.
- d The text does not provide information about driving and music.

