

Rapture: Religious Ecstasies and “Deep Listeners”

In my book *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion and Trancing* (2004), I proposed the hypothesis that there may be an undiscovered kinship between religious ecstasies and secular “deep listeners.” I define “deep listeners” as those people who may feel chills or goosebumps, or who may cry when listening to music they find moving. In my book I proposed that both religious ecstasies and “deep listeners” experience strong emotional responses when listening to music they find deeply moving. And furthermore, that “deep listeners” are potential trancers and that in the proper time and place, without the negative attitude of most Americans concerning trancers, they might themselves trance.

Over the course of many years of fieldwork in north India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, I observed many religious ceremonies in which trancing was an integral part. In every case, trancers exhibited strong emotions during trancing, whether joy, or sadness, or rage. I was also familiar with the sometimes very strong emotional reactions to music among friends and colleagues. And I was aware that these “deep listeners” often experience their musical listening as transcendent, as a touch of the numinous. As I became older and extended fieldtrips in uncomfortable surroundings became more problematic, I decided to focus on musical trancers closer to home. There are Pentecostals everywhere, and where there are Pentecostals there are trancers. and music is a central, ubiquitous aspect of Pentecostal worship.

In my years of closeness to trancers in South and Southeast Asia, it became clear to me that my unexamined negative cultural assumptions about trancing were misplaced. Trancers are, for the most part, perfectly normal people, leading relatively ordinary lives. But, they seem to have a special “gift” that allows them to temporarily enter into a mind/body-process that is significantly different from their, or my, everyday mind/body process. Trancing is a process with a beginning, middle and end that is always fluid. Trancing usually doesn’t last long, from a few moments to some minutes, but unlike meditation, not for hours at a time.

The kind of ecstasy addressed here is very different in process from what may be experienced in meditation. While it may be that at some level the end is the same, the

feeling of transcendence, the feeling of unity and oneness, the famous “oceanic” feeling. But the process of the arousal of the lower-brain emotional systems seems to be very different from meditation. Meditation involves a quieting, a calming process. Trancing involves activating emotional impulses. Religious ecstasies tend to be active, to dance, to speak in tongues, to prophecy. Secular deep listeners often cry, even in my office with Josh and me present.

Slide 1

So, what to call this ecstatic process and those who experience it? In my book I used the terms “trancer” and “trancing.” These terms were not bad at the time, but they have the drawback of not being acceptable to one of my primary focus groups, the Pentecostals. Also, “trance” and “trancer” have a distinctly anthropological flavor. I have in the past used the term “transcendent experience” and while that is also not a bad term, it locates the experience somewhere beyond the body of the experiencer. I have also toyed with reclaiming the old nineteenth century term, the sublime, but finally rejected that term not only because its Romantic ideological baggage, but because it is too closely associated with something *in* the music, not in the listener. The term “ecstasy” for the experience is good and also traditional, but it currently has the disadvantage of association with the drug, Ecstasy.

Gilbert Rouget in his seminal book *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession* struggled with the same issue of terminology. In order to convey the transitive nature of a musical force that is a catalyst for rapture he came up with the term “musicuee” that translates into English as “musicate.”¹ One becomes “musicated” when one is enraptured by music. For obvious reasons, “musicated” never took hold in English, nor in French as far as I know.

As of today, I want to use the term “rapture” for the experience and “ecstatic” as a noun for the experiencer. I like the term “rapture” for several, what I hope, are good reasons.

1. Rapture locates the experience right where I want to locate it, in the body of the experiencer.
2. Rapture can be made into a verb, both transitive and intransitive. The OED allows both “raptured” and “enraptured” as an intransitive verb. And also

accepts “rapturize,” as a transitive verb to indicate what happens when certain persons listen to moving music. They become “rapturized.”

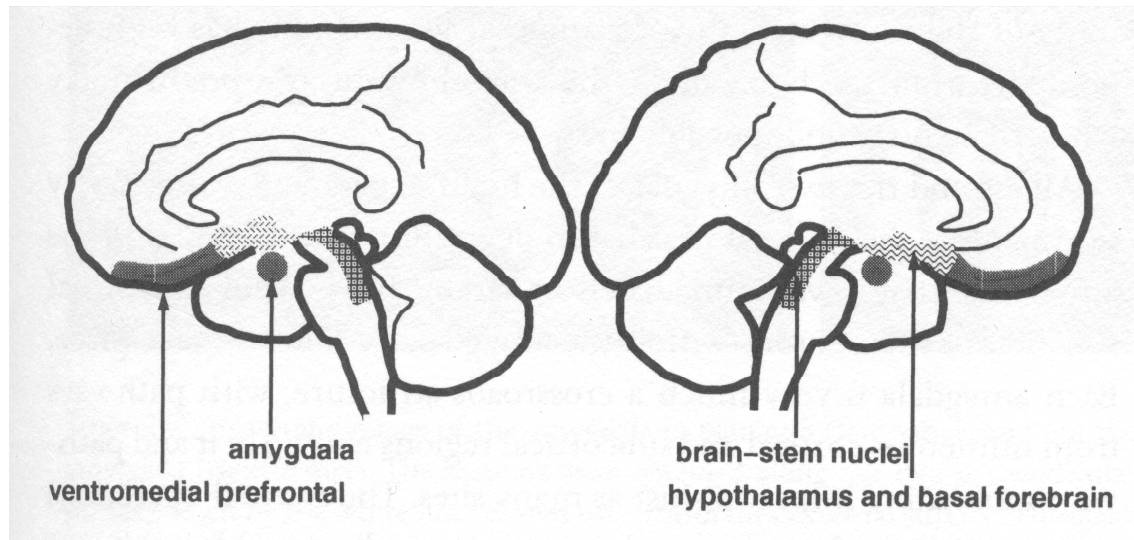
3. And one can use the delicious adjective “rapturous.”

Until I come up with a better term, I will use “rapture” in all its declensions as the term for the ecstatic process that I am investigating. Also, it resonates with another common definition of rapture, that is, the act of conveying a person from one place to another, especially heaven – the source of the Evangelical noun, The Rapture.

This rapturous mind/body process has to be based upon some kind of altered physiology as ecstasies are able to sustain physical stresses far beyond the everyday, are usually very animated, often feel the presence of a transcendent power, and may have little memory of a rapturous event after its passing. All this can, and does, happen without the presence of music. But within institutionalized religions world-wide, music is an integral part of the rapturous experience that would not be considered complete without it. Why music, and not, for example, poetry reading, oratory or light shows? All of which occur, but with nothing like the frequency of musical expressions. I suspect that part of the answer lies in the fact that music is a reliable generator of emotion, and that strong emotion is a precondition for an experience of rapture.

I believe that the physiological ability to respond to musical stimuli with strong deep-brain emotional responses is one of the determining pre-conditions for the propulsion into an ecstatic consciousness. I am talking about emotions that originate in the lower part of the brain, in the Autonomic Nervous System, the ANS, that are not generally under conscious control.

Slide 2



(Slide of lower brain)

I believe that there is a sub-set of musical listeners and performers in all musical genres for whom the concern with rapture is paramount and subsumes all other motivations for their involvement with music. These are the people who often consciously use music to help them attain a mind/ body process that temporarily removes them from their quotidian sense of self, their everyday consciousness, their everyday concerns, and propels them into a realm that can be experienced as rapture. These folks are the ecstasies of the world and they may interpret their experiences within diverse epistemologies, within different frames whether secular or religious. I want to link religious ecstasies with “deep listeners.” I want to call them both “deep listeners” and I want to call them both “ecstasies.”

For the most part, ecstasies lead ordinary lives, indistinguishable from the population as a whole, neither marked by pathologies nor by extraordinary intelligence, nor by maturity or immaturity, nor by exceptional mental or emotional gifts or the lack thereof. I am making the claim that “ecstasies” whether they are religious or not, conform to the general psychological profile of their communities. They are not wackos, nor saints, nor geniuses, nor gurus, but a subset of the general population who have learned that music helps them attain a sense of the numinous.

Slide 3

In the twenty-first century, there are technologies that allow one to actually see the changes in the brain as one experiences emotions such as joy, fear, or disgust. fMRIs

and PET scans and EEGs can represent the changing chemical conditions and electrical activity in emotional brains.

These sophisticated technologies are not available to me however. The only technology that I can afford is EDA, electrodermal activity. EDA is believed to measure impulses from the lower part of the brain shown in the earlier slide. This technology has been around for a long time in the form of lie detector tests. It is an imperfect technology. Nonetheless, it is a bona fide measure of sympathetic reactivity, easily usable, and has the great advantage of portability. We can actually take our equipment into the Pentecostal church and measure EDA responses during the service itself.

Slide 4

What is EDA or galvanic skin response? It is the measurement of a small electrical current between two electrodes attached to the fingertips of the participant. In response to ANS (autonomic nervous system) arousal, the moment-to-moment activity of the sweat glands in the hand causes changes in the relative conductance of a small electrical current between the two electrodes. These changes in the small electrical current between the electrodes is what we are recording in our graphs.

Among my fellow ethnomusicologists and humanist friends, I've encountered some resistance to incorporating scientific procedures, however minimal, into a research project that is so personal, so interior, so elusive as emotional response to musical listening. Among some of my friends, science and scientific methodology are seen as a threat to our cherished beliefs about individual agency, free will, spirituality and our inner life. I think their fears are misguided and reflect a certain misunderstanding of what science is about.

Slide 5

To paraphrase Albert Einstein:

We don't claim to know truth in science. What we claim is that we have provided the best humanly possible explanation for what we see in the world around us. Science is not about truth. Science is about making our beliefs less false.

Albert Einstein²

To quote the late anthropologist, Gregory Bateson, "Science never proves anything. . . . Science only probes."³

Our use of EDA technology is only a probe. It certainly does not reveal the inner life of the participants that we tested. It only gives us some small bits of information about a small physiological component of our emotional inner life. I like to call what we do as Science Lite.

Slide 6

Our participants were divided into five groups. The two focus groups are the deep listeners and the Pentecostal ecstasies. The deep listeners are self-identified persons who are profoundly moved by listening to music that they love. Most in our pool are from the School of Music, but not all. The Pentecostal ecstasies are those whom we have observed in church who visible display altered states of consciousness, who speak in tongues, and who prophesy. We have been attending services at one particular, multi-racial Pentecostal church since last July.³ The other three groups are 1) Pentecostals whom we have not observed entering altered states, nor heard speaking in tongues, nor prophesying in church, 2) members of another Protestant church with roughly the same demographic as the Pentecostal church,⁵ and 3) University of Michigan undergraduate students who were solicited through a flyer posted on campus. On the flyer I specifically asked for participants who were not deeply moved by music. For the most part, that's what we got, but a few students clearly lied and came in for the promised \$15. All participants were requested to bring in two examples of music they found moving.

Slide 7

Here is the protocol that we used during the testing sessions in my office:

1. Our selection, 3rd movement from Symphony in F major, J-C 38, by Sammartini
2. First selection of participant
3. Another of our selections ("Bad Habits" by Destiny's Child, or "A Thousand Year's" by Sting)
4. Second selection of participant
5. (For Pentecostals only) a selection that was recorded at their church

We chose the Sammartini because we thought that our participants would not respond much to it. Our #3 selection was an example of some other participants' favorite music. All selections were preceded and followed by one minute of silence.

Demonstration of a few of our files:

Slide 8 (illustration)

These are computer graphs as participants are listening to their selected music.

Slide 9

1. Pentecostal ecstatic (#26, R&B, Donnie McClurkin “I Love to Praise Him”)

Slide 10

2. Non-Deep Listener (#13, “Strawberry Fields Forever”)

Slide 11

3. “Deep listener” (SM1#14, Voice Squad, Holly Wood, “The Parting Glass”)

Slide 12

In our study, the EDA responses of the two groups “deep listeners” and Pentecostal ecstasies are compared with the three other control groups: 1) non-ecstatic Pentecostals, 2) members of other church groups and 3) students from the University of Michigan presumed to be non-deep listeners. Our results so far seem to support my hypothesis that secular deep listeners share with religious ecstasies certain physiological responses to musical listening. The Pentecostal ecstasies and the “deep listeners” out-responded, by a significant margin, all other groups.

It is important to say that in no case are any of these groups homogenous in terms of GSR response. There are deep listeners in all three control groups, and there are what appear to be non-deep listeners in the Pentecostal ecstatic group and the Deep Listener group as well. But the presence of these “outliers” as they are called, are not enough to change the overall profile of these five groups.

I've interviewed a few of the Pentecostal ecstasies and a few of the “deep listeners.”

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This first excerpt is from a Pentecostal ecstatic describing what the musical part of the Pentecostal services does for her. In this church, the long, initial, entirely musical part of the two-hour service is called “the worship service.”

“ . . . because it [the “worship service”] opens you up. Um, when I taught Sunday school, one of the things that . . . and I did day-care for several years in my home when I was going to school, one of the things that I learned is when a child is shut-down, or has had a rough morning, sometimes if I just put music on it seemed to open them up because their spirit was closed. When we come in [to the church] from a week of struggling, or, maybe . . . you know life is like a vapor, something happens and in an instant that changed the whole course of your life . . . you can walk in, and when that music starts playing, it's like your *spirit* opens up, it relates to it and . . . and God just *comes* in and does some. . . unexplainable . . . I don't think there's *human* words . . . you know it's like Daniel trying

to describe the vision, or Ezekiel trying to explain what he saw, in the Bible. It was almost impossible to put human vocabulary to . . . what transpires within yourself the . . . it just *opens* you up and this, its like a melting process that just . . . it's like a . . . a balm that comes over you and just . . . ahhhh . . . it's well needed. Whether you need to cry or laugh, or, you know, just allow yourself to sit amongst it.”

Slide 14

This slide is a deep listener, a music school faculty member, in response to my question concerning what it feels like when he is listening to deeply moving music.

“ . . . being open, and being opened . . . But I have to say, there are waves of *openings* of internal holding that is not *muscular*, you could say emotional energy, things get *moved around*. .. You think you're attending to something outside yourself, but really, for me it's a deep embodiment – first - getting really fully in . . . and that's where the spirit-body energy . . . I mean its . . . I don't have words for things . . . there's this infusion of when you . . . [this is *hard*] . . . when you it is just a state . . . when you . . . have that . . . experience of stillness where . . . it's almost like . . . everything is infused with light, and. . . . It's almost liked being filled with beneficence, seeing everything as being radiant . . . and beautiful . . . and filled with *love*.”

Both of these “deep listeners” reach the point where they struggle with finding the right words, of unspeakableness, where their voices begin to trail off.

It is my larger hypothesis that the ability, which may be largely involuntary, to feel intensely about things that are not life-threatening nor life-transforming is related to the ability to experience life's happenings as rapturous. Everyone feels intensely when being charged by a bear, or when one's first child is born. But I honestly don't think everyone feels rapturous about musical listening, or about the croaking of frogs, or the sound of waves, or any number of other sounds. Or even that most people do. Or even that some people do all the time. It's not always convenient to feel too strongly. But I think that there's a payoff for these individuals such that they would never trade that ability in order to be more generally on an even emotional keel. I believe that there is a subset of the population as a whole that might be called, only half-facetiously, as "deep feelers," and that these are the folks who are most likely to experience what I want to call rapture in response to music, and probably to other kinds of sensory experiences as well. And that these are also the people who are actual or potential ecstasies. Music is my way of exploring this issue.

In conclusion, I want to stress that this research is still in its initial stages.

1. We are currently in the process of testing Pentecostal ecstasies in the church setting. For the “deep listeners” the equivalent would be testing in a live performance setting as opposed to listening in my office. I don’t know if we will do this.

2. We have not begun to study the heart pulse for signs of rhythmic entrainment.

So, this is where we are at the moment. Since this work is still far from being put into some publishable form, I very much welcome comments, critiques, suggestions that can help us to improve what we are doing and to better clarify where we are going.

End Notes:

1. Rouget, Gilbert, *La Musique et la transe: esquisse d’une theorie generale des relations de la musique et de la possession*. Paris: Gallimard, p. 390

Rouget, Gilbert, *Music and Trance: A theory of the Relations between Music and Possession*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p,285.

2. From interview with S. James Gates, Jr. Professor of Physics at the University of Maryland. “Speaking of Faith,” NPR, Dec. 18, 2005.

3. Gregory Bateson, *Mind in Nature: A Necessary Unity*. Bantam Books: Toronto/ New York/London, Sydney/Auckland. 1979. pp. 29, 30.

Gregory Bateson is the son of William Bateson (1861-1926) one of the founders of the science of genetics who experimentally proved Gregor Mendel’s theory of heredity and published the first English translation of Mendel’s work.

4. The Pentecostal church is the Pine View Apostolic Church in Ypsilanti, Michigan, with a congregation of about 500 people.

5. The Vinewood Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan.