

Musical Minds

New Scientist 1762, 30 March 1991

<https://www.newscientist.com/letter/mg13017650-700-letter-music-test/>

From BRIAN JOSEPHSON and T. L. CARPENTER

John Davies appears to dislike the idea that music might be a process of communication between composer and listener ('The musical mind', 19 January). This concept originated not from scientists' ideas of 'instinct' as suggested, but from the experiences of musicians. Many composers have described how, in the act of composition, they have gone through a process perceived as searching for musical forms that will effectively express the musical idea that has formed itself in their minds.

One of the performer's tasks could then be said to be to identify, on the basis of the information provided by the composer's score, what that idea is, and then to perform the music in such a way as to make it as transparent as possible to the listener. In more objective terms, this 'musical idea' concept is substantiated also by musical analysis, through the way the latter discloses relevant relationships (often logical) in content and structure.

On the subject of musical preferences, many musicians would contend that there is more to the holding of interest over time in music than its mere complexity of form, and that good music may hold interest indefinitely by virtue of the subtlety of its meanings.

We would like to note especially that the experiments on reaction times and the like, quoted in support of the assertion that musical ideas have no absolute, culture-independent status, could just as well be seen as illustrating the fact that familiar tasks can be accomplished more rapidly and more reliably than unfamiliar ones.

We believe that to reject the concept of musical idea (as well as others in the fairly considerable philosophical literature that exists on significance in the arts) is to lead the subject on to a wrong track: seeing music simply in terms of 'basic aspects of sound such as loudness and speed interacting in ways that are less easy to predict' is almost certainly as oversimplified a view of the subject as is seeing mathematics as merely a game played with symbols.

Brian Josephson and T. L. Carpenter, University of Cambridge