

Tune In

Cellist Saskia Rao-de Haas on music being the best brain workout

I would teach children music, physics and philosophy, but most importantly music, for the patterns in music are the keys to learning

— Plato

Plato had already understood the importance of music for our overall development. But perhaps even he would have been surprised by the findings of neurologists in the last 15 years who claim that music is the 'best brain workout available to humankind'. When you read, 'this is your brain on music' by Daniel J. Levitin or 'Musicophilia' by the late Oliver Sachs, you will be amazed by what music does to our brains. Why is that? Because playing or even listening to music activates multiple areas of the brain. You might be aware that the right side of the brain is in charge of creative, social, visual skills and intuition, while the left side takes over with sequencing, language, math, and rational thoughts.



Music is unique in that it activates areas in both the left and the right side of the brain. It even activates the connecting part of the two sides, the corpus callosum. The

patterns we learn in music can easily be applied to learning languages, mathematics and science. Research in the US and UK has shown that children who participate actively in a good music education program score higher academically, are more focused, social and more disciplined. We literally build new brain muscles when we are learning music.

As a musician, I see the effect of music on people every day. People are, of course, not aware while listening to music that they are doing a brain workout, but they are enjoying the experience that makes the fine arts essential to all of us; the experience that transports you to another world, without ever leaving your chair. Music is different from other arts in that it is abstract but still conveys meaning and emotions.

Maybe you have experienced that





certain music, even without lyrics, makes you feel sad, or happy or energetic. Even by remembering this experience you might know how powerful your entire mind and body responds to music. This is because we all are musical beings. Our heart beats in rhythm and our voices sound in a melody. Try to talk without melody; you will sound like a robot.

Even children who are deaf can still experience the vibrations of music. They do this by touching the music producing instrument or be very near to it: that is how deaf musician Evelyn Glennie performs and experiences her music. She is a professional marimba player performing all over the world and is praised

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for her excellent musicianship. Her story helps us understand how we experience music even more than actually hearing it. Music helps us all to feel and to connect to our in-

ner self, each other and our cultural heritage.

Is all music equal? Different music makes you experience different emotions and gives different energy. When you get together with your friends or go to a party, you want music that resonates with a celebrating energy. When you reflect or are alone, try classical music. Research has shown, that different words, sounds and music affect all living beings differently. An experiment showed that plants could benefit most from classical music, especially Indian classical music, while certain other styles have direct negative effects on the growth. Within Indian classical music research is on about how the various Ragas affect our bodies and minds directly.

Slowly, people are starting to understand the scientific reasons that show the immense power that music has over us. These are findings that most of us would have already intuitively grasped. But it makes one sad to see that many schools still cannot offer classical music to their students. This has perhaps to do with the perception of classical music. It is often perceived as too difficult or only for the very talented children who grew up in musical environments. Others are not actively included in the experience and learning process of classical music. It doesn't have to be like that.

When we look at other parts of the world, we see that classical music can be inclusive and for all children. In Venezuela, over 300,000 children from poor backgrounds, are learning Western classical music through the El Sistema program. This effort is replicated in many countries and even in India we are making an effort to bring classical music to all children so that all children can enjoy the benefits of having music in their lives and we can share the pride in our musical heritage and enjoy all forms of music. ■