



# The Lebrecht Weekly

La Scena Musicale by Norman Lebrecht

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## Beware music's healing power



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*By Norman Lebrecht* / August 9, 2001

I HAVE been listening to a disc of music that is supposed to help cure cancer. Members of the Sulis ensemble have been working with in-patients at the Bristol Cancer Help Centre, performing specially composed contemplative pieces and inviting the audience to attempt improvisations on a variety of percussive instruments.

In a controlled survey of 29 mostly female patients aged 21 to 68, researchers noticed significantly increased levels of salivary immunoglobulin A and lower levels of cortisol after the concerts. This would appear to indicate an improvement in the patients' immune status, as well as an enhanced state of wellbeing.

The results, published in *Alternative Therapies* journal, mark a modest breakthrough in the unsung field of music therapy. Music from the study can be purchased on a CD entitled *Sitting on the Windowsill of Heaven* - which is how one patient described the therapeutic exposure to these sounds. The music is composed, in medieval-meditative vein, by the harpist Celia Harper, who found that strumming simple themes helped ease the pain of a frozen shoulder that forced her temporarily to give up playing the harp.

Well that's a shot of good news, isn't it? Up to a point. The first casualty of any collusion between art and science is the command of coherent thought. The Bristol report is studded with pompous restatements of the blindingly obvious. I hope no one wins a Nobel prize for discovering that "listening to music in a relaxed state improves one's mood" - or, as Dr Leslie Blunt, the survey leader, puts it, that music "can help people to reach deeper levels of rest and explore a wide range of feelings".

Such tosh adds fuel to an on-going campaign which aims to prove that music is invariably good for you. The Performing Right Society has published a survey of the benefits that music can bring in every walk of life. It reveals the positive impact of playing music on the milk yield of Holstein cows, on a ward of newborn babies, on asthmatic Japanese children and on pensioners stricken with dementia.

Every day, someone is bursting to tell you how music changed their lives. Mikhail Gorbachev says Mahler's Fifth Symphony saved him from depression

during Russia's darkest hours. A British no-hoper relates how he got into Wimbledon by focusing on a Liverpool football hymn. Swedish mothers report giving birth more easily when listening to Mozart's 21st Piano Concerto, K467. All relentlessly upbeat, like being trapped in a lift with a hyperactive evangelist.

But to view music solely as a force for good misses half the point. Music can manipulate people in many ways. On delayed flights, a soothing tape tranquillises angry passengers. In supermarkets, a hint of Debussy is designed to make you choose French wine over Australian. In football stadia a blast of music is designed to arouse tribal loyalty, in Nuremburg something worse.

The mercy is that no one has yet worked out how to apply music with any degree of accuracy and efficiency. Stalin, the first politician to impose state control on compositional style, imagined that socialist realism would raise morale and productivity. In reality, it promoted mediocrity and provoked derision. Hitler encouraged a sanitised romanticism that, with the exception of Carmina Burana, missed the mark by many a mile. Even Carl Orff's demagogic rant proved better at selling aftershave than promoting German power.

The process, however, is being continuously refined, in the twin interests of science and public order. There are signs in shops and clinics that behaviour can be conditioned by the use of music. Each advance takes us closer to an Orwellian control of mass activity.

Much as I would love music to cure cancer, foot and mouth, senile dementia and car accidents, I dread the day when it does - for that will be the day music loses its spiritual mystery and becomes a functional power tool in the hands of the ever more intrusive masters of the universe.

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