

Let the Music Play for Good or Evil

We all know the joy that music can bring, but what about music as a pathological irritant? I am not talking about simple musical dislikes, or music that is just badly executed, like a child scraping away at a violin lesson. Think about the insidious earworm that gnaws away at your brain. Think about Christmas songs on a loop in shopping centres. Think about music designed to inspire fear or hatred, such as the Dies Irae in Verdi's requiem, beautiful but terrifying, as the wrath of God is screamed down at you from the heavens. Or the scene in Apocalypse Now where helicopters blast out napalm and the Ride of the Valkyries in equal measure. Music is effective as a psychological torture; all the more sinister when you know that it is favoured by torturers because it leaves no physical marks. Musicians as varied as Metallica and Barney the Dinosaur have been used in this way. What music do I like? Live music, tick. Music to dance to, tick. Music constantly on (even if it's music I like) no. And there are some musicians who may be consummate professionals at the top of their game (and to be clear I would not dream of criticising any of their fans) but who, nonetheless, mystify and enrage me.

See if you identify with my list:

1. The nail on blackboard screech of the depressing Florence and the Machine.
2. The entire genre of modern jazz. I once spent a evening at Ronnie Scott's watching whey faced young men nodding, clicking their fingers and randomly applauding tuneless solos.
3. John Cage who is the Emperor's Clothes of the classical world. Why is it that the very absence of sound annoys me so?
4. Hocus Pocus by Focus. Prog rock with yodelling. Need I say more?
5. Finally, I recently saw a poster advertising an evening with an 'experimental harpist'. Two words that should never go together.

In summary, in human hands, music can be a power for evil as well as good.