

Music, the Life Trajectory and Existential Health

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In terms of music's influence upon our daily lives, it is important to account for musical identity, and especially musical preferences. When we give music a role in the promotion of our health, it is *our* music—the music we like, that we choose ourselves—that works most effectively. In the present text then, I will introduce the concept of *musical habitus* as a means of approaching the general phenomenon of musical taste and preferences. I will examine some popular notions regarding how music is appropriated in daily life via the results of a research project conducted at the University of Gothenburg by Thomas Bossius and myself titled *Musik i Människors Liv*, or *Music in People's Lives*.¹ I will not deal explicitly with health musicking in everyday life, with a few exceptions, but by presenting narratives from everyday acts of musicking, I hope to demonstrate the importance of considering sociological and ethnographic evidence when we discuss music in relation to health. Factors such as gender, age, class, and ethnicity, that is, may all have some relevance to the discussion of music's healthful influence. I will conclude this text with a discussion of the notion of existential health and music.

When we talk about musical preferences, we often meet the following conceits:

1. The soundtrack of my life
2. Darling, they are playing our tune
3. Show me your record collection and I will tell you who you are

These three popular notions of music's relation to human life are variations on a theme— music activities, habits and taste are connected to our personal life stories.

The first notion proposes that certain pieces of music accompany episodes or events in our lives and have deep significance as memories and milestones there. The

¹ The material was published in 2011 in a book in Swedish with the title *Musiken och jag* [The music and me]. Many thanks to my friend and collaborator in the project, Thomas Bossius.

second notion proposes that a couple can have certain music in common, and/or that their love story was accompanied by ‘their song(s)’. The third notion proposes that there are connections between our musical tastes, represented by our record collections, playlists and/or favourite artists, and our personal traits, habits, psychological characters and so forth.

Whether these notions are in fact consistently viable or not, they are well established in both contemporary folklore and scholarly studies. Musicologist Even Ruud observes:

I can write the story of my life by relating the episodes where a musical experience has settled in my body. And because they are always part of a larger context—about relationships to other people, times, places and existential matters—these stories of musical experiences and ‘my music’ will always be a story of ‘who I am’ or how I wish to appear to myself and others. (Ruud, 2002, p. 53. My translation)

Elsewhere, however, Ruud cautions us not to make these connections too hastily:

‘Tell me which music you like . . .’ and I will *not* maintain that I know who you are. But tell me the story of your memories of music, and it will be more evident where you come from, where you belong, in which direction you are moving and what you hold as important in your life. (Ruud, 1997, p. 11. My translation)

Music in People’s Lives: The Project

Between 2007 and 2009, we conducted interviews with forty-two people, twenty-one women and twenty-one men, between the ages of twenty and ninety-five years—the eldest was born in 1913, the youngest in 1987. Twenty-four informants were born in the 1950s or 1960s, reflecting a certain bias in the project towards middle-aged people. All of the informants either live or have lived in the Gothenburg area, but about half of them were born elsewhere. The duration of the interviews was from twenty to ninety minutes, with the majority lasting about sixty minutes, and they took place in a variety of environments: in our offices, in the informant’s home or workplace, or in a restaurant or café—wherever the informant felt comfortable. The interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire that touched upon themes such as listening to music, playing and singing, dancing, learning music, reading about music, obtaining and collecting music, memories of music, and the meaningfulness of song lyrics. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed,

resulting in eight hundred to one thousand pages of written material. Using traditional ethnographic methods for handling interview material, we sorted the statements and stories into thematic categories and then analysed them.

This is a qualitative study, and the material is not used statistically, as the sample size is much too small, but at times we speak in terms of ‘many’, ‘none’ or ‘few’. We intend to go beyond statistics with this material to focus on the ways in which people use music in their daily lives—on how they think of and value music and on their inducements and motives for doing (or not doing) things with it.

It is important to note that the project results are based on what people told us in the interviews. There may well be things they forgot at the time of the interview and only remembered afterwards, or things they did not want to reveal because they were too personal, too intimate or too awkward. If a given interview had taken place at another time the answers might have been slightly different. It also was not possible to verify whether what the informants said was actually what they did, through participatory observation, for example. Nevertheless, we have assumed that many or most of the patterns and tendencies that we came across would have remained had we interviewed forty-two other people instead.

All of the quotations from our transcripts are translated into English for the present text. We have tried to be as sensitive and careful as possible, but there are things that were very hard to translate, as they deal with Swedish culture and references or are presented in slang or colloquial speech.

Although *Music in People's Lives* is in many ways unique, it has parallels to other studies, most apparently Tia DeNora's *Music in Everyday Life* from 2000 and Susan Crafts, Charles Keil and Daniel Cavicchi's *My Music* from 1992 (though the latter lacks a theoretical perspective and an analysis). Another parallel study (and important inspiration) is Even Ruud's book *Musikk og identitet* [Music and identity] from 1997.

Numerous sociological studies have identified different relations among, for example, musical taste and preferences, activities and habits, and the characteristics of class, gender, age and level of education.² Most of these relations derive from statistical trends, and they supply a natural sounding board for our own qualitative investigation here. The simple fact and trivial truth is that we are all products of our backgrounds, and we do not choose our parents and siblings, or the social, cultural and ethnic contexts into which we are born and within which we grow to become men or women. (Of course, we have a specific genetic heritage as well, but the scope of the present project does not permit us to explore that aspect of our individual musicality here.)

² A recent example is North & Hargreaves (2007a, b, c). See also Bonde (2009, pp. 235–259) and Lilliestam (2009, pp. 153–190) for overviews.

Our circumstances and experiences, moulded by the abovementioned factors, form what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has called a *habitus*: a set of habits, skills and ways of seeing the world. In the present study, we nuanced this notion as follows:

A musical habitus involves a taste or distaste for particular kinds of music, acquired habits and the ability to understand and interpret certain types of music and to manage certain types of musical actions (for example, the ability to play an instrument or sing). A musical habitus is formed by one's social background and experiences—what one is exposed to, becomes accustomed to, learns to like and learns to do.³

With regard to musical habitus, then, I will now engage with the classical sociological factors of age, gender, class, ethnicity and place of residence. Although I will present them separately, it should be noted that these factors overlap and influence each other in every possible way.

Age

Musical taste and activities change with age. In everyday speech, we use terms like children's songs, youth music, teenybop, adult-oriented rock, and so on—the categories vary in different languages, but all are charged with associations and values.

Every one of our informants touched upon the music of his or her youth, and many spontaneously (and without being asked) began by telling the story of their life in music. The younger informants had not yet experienced that many changing musical habits for themselves, of course, but the older informants also mostly talked about the music of their youth rather than about subsequent or present musical activities. Music is important for both young and old, but its experiences and effects may not be as evident or as profound later in life; our basic habits, preferences, tastes and capacities, musical and otherwise, are formed early on.⁴ Many people play an

³ See Bossius & Lilliestam (2011). Through the years the concept of habitus has been developed and redefined by many scholars. Recently, Judith Becker (2011, p. 130) discussed a 'listening habitus'. Rimmer (2010) uses the term musical habitus, but with a slightly different meaning than ours, in a study of which we were not aware when we decided upon our own definition.

⁴ For evidence of this fact outside of musical aspects, see, for example, Lonsdale & North (2011), Hargreaves & North (2010, pp. 535–537), Clarke, Dibben & Pitts (2010, p. 147), Bonde (2009, pp. 236–247), Levitin (2006, pp. 230–232), Pickles (2003), Schulkind, Hennis & Rubin (1999), and Russell (1997).

instrument in their youth, often in some kind of music school, and then quit after a few years—only a few of them continue to play into adulthood. Likewise, few people take up a musical instrument as adults. The musical tastes we develop as youths tend to follow us through life as a kind of blueprint of ‘good music’.

There are, not surprisingly, drastic differences between the older and younger informants in terms of dealing with music. Sven was born in 1913, and radio broadcasts started in Sweden when he was a schoolboy:

Well, we thought it was amazing, sitting there poking at that little box [a crystal radio receiver set] and all of a sudden there was music in your headphones. I was about twelve, and I remember our teacher telling us about something called ‘radio’. In the Stockholm City Hall, they have chimes playing a little melody. And he said that people standing some hundred meters away could hear the music, but we could hear it in our headphones before they did! And we thought, ‘Well, now he’s gone nuts, our teacher’.⁵

As Sven was growing up, music on the radio was something new and magical; in those days, in fact, even professional live music was a rare event. Music was generally something you sang or played yourself for fun or in school or church. Even a street musician playing the accordion and singing could make a deep impression, not to mention a visit to the opera house or concert hall.

Eric, on the other hand, was born in 1984; he was a twenty-three-year-old computer-engineering student at the time of his interview. Born and raised in the ‘digital age’, he knew how to handle a computer almost before he started school. Though he had bought a total of one (!) compact disc in his entire life, he listened to music many hours a day, using an iPod and a computer with some thirteen thousand songs (or forty gigabytes of music) on them, all downloaded from the Internet:

⁵ The chimes in the tower of the Stockholm City Hall are to this day broadcast daily at noon on Swedish Radio Program 1. A recent attempt to cancel the broadcast of the Copenhagen Town Hall bells on Danish radio failed after heated debate.

I have a server in my closet where I keep all my music. And then I think, 'Hm, what do I want to hear today?' and I take that folder and copy it to my music player. And I usually listen to a whole album, basically. Or I copy the songs I want. But mostly it's albums.

The abundance of music that is available to Eric in relation to that which was available in Sven's youth reflects generally growing societal wealth and the arrival of many new technologies, which together have changed living conditions, needs, habits and activities. In particular, new music technologies (both new machines and new formats for sound storage, from vinyl records and cassettes to CDs and mp3 files) have revolutionised listening possibilities and, in turn, people's opinions about and perspectives upon sound.

Between Sven and Eric's generations was the 'analogue generation', which grew up from the 1950s through the 1970s or so. This was an era of an ever-expanding media and recording industry and, therefore, an ever-increasing supply of music—vinyl singles and albums, radio and television programs, and concerts and festivals flourished from the time of Elvis Presley to that of Bruce Springsteen and Depeche Mode. The 'rock culture', in particular, linked music increasingly with lifestyle, subcultural movements, and sometimes rebellion in general and political or other ideologies in particular. Judging from the present interview material, there was a particular mindset that characterised this analogue generation.

With the development of digital music technology and the growth of the Internet in the 1990s, new possibilities for handling music, such as downloading, mobile listening and playlists rather than preordained albums, have affected the ways we listen to, experience, appreciate and value music (see also Bull, 2000, 2007; Bijsterveld & van Dijck, 2011).

Might the sheer abundance of music nowadays make people feel jaded or satiated? Might it stimulate a consumer mentality that hampers our ability to appreciate music deeply (whatever that means)? Might it alter what people think is attractive, beautiful or pleasing about musical structures? Much research remains to be done on how the analogue mindset has changed in the digital era, though speculation abounds in this regard.

Digital technologies are more comfortable for younger than for older informants, who 'grew up on vinyl' and will sometimes find new media to be a hindrance rather than a help in listening to music. One older female informant reported that she had

acquired a new audio device at home that was connected to both the television set and the video player ('everything in one'), but she did not know how it worked. In the present volume, the articles by Skånland and Beckmann discuss age and technology further, but in general, young people seem to be better able to take advantage of the health-musicking aspects of new music technologies than older people (see also Trondalen & Stensæth (2012) on children, music and health, and Ruud (2010) on music in mental health work among young people). Issues related to age and musical preferences are also discussed in the music therapy literature, especially in terms of dementia care.

Gender

It is by now well established that women and men deal with, use and perhaps value music somewhat differently, but this was less apparent and less investigated, say, 25 years ago. When choosing instruments in music school, girls often prefer piano, violin or flute, while boys prefer electric guitar, drums or bass. While many girls sing in choirs, it is often hard to find boys for the lower parts. Music technology and music collecting appeal more to men than to women. There also seem to be taste differences—boys prefer 'harder' styles of music and women, 'softer'. In addition, men's and women's positions in professional music life (music trade organisations, record companies, the music business) remain unequally distributed, with men usually in leadership positions and otherwise more numerous in general. Of the one hundred employees in a Swedish music instrument chain store in 2005, not one was female. And when it comes to traditional dancing, it is still the man's privilege to ask for a dance.⁶

Controversial and even stereotypical as some of these patterns may be, they were largely confirmed in our investigation. Some surprises did emerge, however, as the following quotations indicate:

I played guitar in municipal music school. I started with the violin and then I played guitar . . . My husband played guitar as well, but he was better than me, and eventually I quit playing. He had a much better musical ear than me. I was the one who was a good music reader. But he was much more musical. He can hear the music in another way than I can. He can hear more distinctly

⁶ See Lilliestam (2009, pp. 168–173) for a summary of research on music and gender with references.

if someone is not singing really well, not in tune. I don't have the ear that he has, and even though I was a good music reader I could not pick up tunes as easily as he did, you know, this free thing . . .

So you stopped playing?

Yes, as a matter of fact I did. I have not played since we had the children, but my husband has kept on. (Anna, teacher, born in 1958)

* * *

I hadn't thought too much about it before, but then I moved in with a guy two years ago. And music plays a big part in his life. He has been a hobby musician, playing in bands and stuff like that. His growing up was just music, and music still means a lot to him. I really like it when he puts on his music, but I can see that music means much more to him than to me.

He likes a little jazzy stuff. I don't turn his music off and put on mine, but I go by what he plays, as long as it is not too much jazz. He has learned what I will tolerate, so it's okay. I tell him, 'Well, now you have to put on some good music', and then he does, much better than I do. (Hanna, teacher, born in 1961)

* * *

As my husband is kind of dominant, I feel I have to give up what I like. So I play what I like when he is not at home. Unfortunately, he is at home a lot. (*laughs*) My husband, Roger, is obsessed with his music equipment and his loudspeakers, and he makes it sound incredibly nice, and I think that's great, but when he—and he doesn't mean any harm—but it becomes a bit too much when I feel that he dominates, and then I withdraw a little bit, and I get angry because I feel that I must be able to play what I like. I know that he doesn't like everything that I listen to. He thinks it's a bit so-so, and then I don't get to play what I want. But it's my own fault, so I have to take my chances . . .

These days Magnus Carlsson and Barbados are popular again. There was some song when Emil [one of Patricia's children] was small, and I thought it was really good, and Magnus Carlsson has a good voice. "But you can't

buy that!”, Roger said (laughs), and I haven’t bought it, but I liked it, and I take it for what it is . . . If I want to listen to something that is really ‘girlish’, then I do. I don’t care what other people think anymore. (Patricia, engineer, born in 1964)

In these quotations, a few different notions concerning gender are implied. Each of these female informants discusses her musical activities and habits in relation to her male partner’s. (Interestingly, not one man in our study, unless he was prompted, touched upon gender matters at all, while female informants frequently did so.) Anna quit playing music after she got married and had children, while her husband continued his musical activities. She played classical guitar from notation while he played guitar by ear, and she insists that he had a better ear than she did. This is in line with the stereotypical association of women with classical and notation-based musical experiences and men with ear playing. Hanna says that music ‘means more’ to her husband than it does to her, and that he usually takes the initiative when choosing what music to play in the home. Despite a keen interest in music, Patricia complains about her husband’s dominance in terms of their shared musical life.

In all three quotations, one finds some tension around musical taste, in this case around jazz and a pop singer but in other interviews controversy over heavy metal is also mentioned. Another tendency, not apparent here but evident in the material as a whole, is that men are generally the providers of music, buying, downloading and collecting, and men actively *choose* which music to keep and to play, whereas women more often play whatever happens to be there.

While it would thus appear that these women are subordinating themselves to their male partners, we can also view this as simply a case of different priorities for music and its use. Why these differences exist is a question worthy of investigation that, as far as we know, has received little attention in gender studies of music to this point. Research by DeNora (2000), as well as by Skarpeid (2009) and Stene (2009), does seem to indicate that women often do use music as a health-regulating technology.

Class

Class is a factor that affects people's musical habitus in many ways, as is evident from both scholarly studies and everyday life. We know, for example, that the opera audience in Stockholm generally has a considerably higher level of academic education than the audience of Swedish dance band music. The notion of the working-class origins of many rock musicians are also widespread—but often contested. Nonetheless, there are no simple relations between class and a taste for a certain kind of music. Some scholars prefer to avoid the issue altogether, but I see no reason not to acknowledge class among the factors affecting both musical taste and musical activities.

Class, of course, has to do with social levelling, differing standards of living and opportunities for advancement, and class is also bound up with one's occupation, income, habits, status and control of life and work situations. It is indicated in different ways. Where one is from (the wrong/right side of the tracks or the river, for example) can be a class marker, along with, for example, clothing, dialect, recreational activities, cultural habits and, of course, musical habits—or lack thereof, as Sven recalls: "I grew up in a working class home, and it was out of the question that you would have anything like that [music]".

Class has at least two dimensions, economic and psychological/cultural. The former has to do with what you can afford and where you live; the latter, with one's habits, perspective and sense of belonging or 'home'. Some informants, then, stated quite frankly that they could not afford musical instruments, or even records, in their childhoods—this was true for Sven and Tore, who grew up in the 1920s, but also for Ivar, who was born in 1959 in one of the new suburbs of Gothenburg. Ruth was born in 1915, and when asked about concerts she has attended, she said:

I have not been to the opera or anything like that. I have had to work, work and sew, taking care of time. I've been sitting at home, knitting, sewing and baking . . . We were working people—we were listening to 'Snoddas' and people like him.⁷

On the other hand, some informants came from middle-class homes and were financially comfortable in terms of their musical pursuits. Nils (filmmaker, born in 1962) had a family who built a special music room in the basement of their house in the 1970s.

⁷ Gösta 'Snoddas' Nordgren (1926–1981) was a Swedish singer who became immensely popular after his breakthrough in 1952 with the song 'Flottarkärlek', about a floater or log-driver.

Other informants had invested in expensive listening equipment, like Olle (engineer, born in 1957), who had a stereo system with a CD player that cost 17,000 Swedish crowns (around 1,600 British pounds):

But I don't tell people because then they think I'm nuts. But if some bloke at work buys a forty-two-inch television set, they think it's okay. And I'd rather listen to music with additional equipment. I own a quite large and valuable record collection ... and considering how much time I spend with it ...

Nelly (engineer, born in 1965) grew up in a family that she describes as 'first-generation academics' but said there was not very much music in the house and "not much of a chance to attend a concert in the countryside in Värmland". She did recall, however, "a common attitude in my childhood that you ought to learn to play something".

Lars-Bertil (journalist, born in 1959) recalls that a child of his middle-class circumstances was expected to learn to play music:

I come from a family where it was seen as good to have a certain musical schooling; it was part of the general education. So I had piano lessons in the municipal music school from the age of seven.

This eventually conflicted with his abiding interest in David Bowie, and later punk music, so he quit the piano and started playing the guitar.

Musical taste can be seen as a symbolic battlefield where class interests and struggles regarding values and ideological hegemony are fought over using musical preferences and habits. One informant told a story about saving money as a young man in the late 1920s to buy a record by the British jazz musician Jack Hylton. He only played it a few times on the family's record player, until his opera-loving father broke the record over his knee while shouting, "We cannot have this kind of bloody crap in here".

It was a common attitude among the informants that classical music was something one 'ought to listen to' but generally did not. Few people in fact mentioned classical music at all unless prompted, and often it was associated less with pleasure than with guilt or obligation. Some bought classical records but seldom or never listened to them. In general, despite its lofty associations, classical music was not part of most people's musical habitus.

Residence

The place where we grow up and/or live moulds our experiences, supplies our opportunities and limits our possibilities—the city, for one thing, offers many more live music venues, music schools and opportunities to hear music than the countryside. Yet there are lively local music traditions in many small towns or villages as well, and they can have an equal or greater influence upon residents than the manifold but sometimes superficial diversions of the city. In Sweden, as well, many music festivals take place in small towns, such as Hultsfred, Arvika or Emmaboda. The fact that one lives in a village, then, does not *necessarily* mean that the opportunities for musical and cultural cultivation are poor, or that cultural horizons in general have to be narrow and limited.

Both Johanna (administrator, born in 1952) and Eric grew up in small communities on the west coast of Sweden but under very different conditions. Johanna never really had a chance to learn a musical instrument, aside from a few recorder lessons; there was no music school, so music lessons were limited to church and regular school, and music was not a community priority. Eric grew up in a very well-educated family and went to music school in a nearby town, where he studied French horn and played in the local orchestra. As mentioned above, he mastered Internet-based music file sharing and digital distribution very early as well. In terms of one's habitus, then, it would appear to be less the size of the place of residence than its local traditions, the presence of local enthusiasts and entrepreneurs, the class patterns, one's level of education, and the attitude of one's parents that matter most.

If one lives in a small place, journeys to concerts in the big city can be musical milestones that one never forgets—examples from the present interviews include the concerts by Bruce Springsteen at Ullevi Stadium in Gothenburg in June 1985, the musical *Kristina från Duvemåla* by Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus (of Abba fame) staged in Gothenburg in the early 1990s and other concerts by various famous rock acts.

Ethnicity

In these times of global migration and multiculturalism, ethnicity (a group's perceived common origins or history) has received more scholarly attention, and it is acknowledged that music is an extremely effective tool for its expression (see, for example, Lundberg, Malm & Ronström, 2000). In Sweden, ethnicity is often associated with others rather than with Swedes themselves.

One of the few Swedish-born informants who touched upon ethnicity was Karl (born in 1987), and he did so with both seriousness and slight irony by comparing the novel *Vem älskar Yngve Freij?* [Who loves Yngve Freij?] by Stig 'Slas' Claesson, which is very famous in Sweden, with an album from 1963, *Jazz på svenska* [Jazz in Swedish] by the jazz pianist Jan Johansson, which is the most well-known and celebrated Swedish jazz album ever:

Vem älskar Yngve Freij? was the first novel I ever read. I got it from my Swedish teacher, and I felt that it was similar to *Jazz på svenska*. [Both evoked] exactly the same feeling that I recognised in the dark woods outside my window. Now, 'Slas' comes from Sjuhärad [a very different part of Sweden], and I really feel that it is the same kind of woods, these dark Swedish woods or the slightly blue light that I recognise from Helsingland [a province in northern Sweden] . . . One is a novel and the other is a record, but together they form the perfect picture of what I feel is a Swedish melancholia and my Swedish native home, and that I feel mirrors myself very well.

Karl then disassociates himself a little bit from this romantic idea with a clear insight:

I like music that makes me think of these dark blue woods and the mountains and the river and those things. It is not at all like that when I am there in reality; it is only an image of a melancholia that is very beautiful and that I like. But of course it is just an image.

The informants that had moved to Sweden themselves for whatever reason deal with music and ethnicity in different ways. Alberto (computer technician, born in 1955) came to Sweden from Chile in 1976 as a political refugee, and his musical tastes included Swedish, Latin American and Anglo-American popular artists. When he returned to Chile in 1994, he recorded local music programs on Chilean radio using cassettes and brought them back to Sweden, where he played them in his home environment to remind himself of his origins.

Maria (student, born in 1984) has a Greek father and a Swedish mother; she grew up in both Sweden and Greece and speaks both languages fluently. She learned lots of political music and dances from her father. Presently, she lives in Sweden; to connect to what she calls 'her Greek part', then, she dances *rebetica* in a local Greek association. She also likes to read Greek poetry and literature. Interestingly, she finds 'Swedish music' rather harder to define than Greek music and does not display the same attachment to it.

Laszlo (student, born in 1983) grew up in Rumania but has almost no interest in music from his Rumanian or ethnic Hungarian origins. He enjoys modern club dancing but also singer-songwriters like Bob Dylan or Tori Amos and the Swede Ulf Lundell.

Olivia (caretaker, born in 1972) was born in Gothenburg of Croatian parents—or ‘Croatian peasants’, as she calls them—who decided to raise their children in Sweden and immerse them in both the language and the culture. Olivia reports that she speaks ‘really bad’ Croatian and feels entirely Swedish. She feels no particular loyalty to or interest in Croatian music—as a teenager, in fact, she played football and became interested in heavy metal, along with her Swedish friends, to the dismay of other Croatians she knew. Her interest in heavy metal was so strong that she went to England and the United States to hear and meet some of the most famous heavy metal acts.

These examples clearly show the different ways in which music might be used and thought of as an ethnic symbol. Which strategy we apply and which music we enjoy depends partially upon our own feelings of ethnicity and identity—who we feel that we are and/or want to be, and with whom we want to identify.

Turning Points

We are born, grow up, go to school and get an education, get a job, get married, have children, perhaps get divorced and find a new partner, travel, work, move, retire. These are all examples of events, phases and turning points in life—moments when living conditions and circumstances change as we switch environments, meet new people and make new experiences. These kinds of changes often also affect our cultural and musical habits.

In our material, the most common story we saw involved how people’s musical tastes and habits changed when they went to secondary school (between the ages of sixteen and eighteen years). At this time, people had the opportunity to make new friends, potentially those with similar interests to their own. Some informants reported that they never really fit in with their local environment but felt much more at home in the secondary school.

Karl grew up in a small community with a lot of popular music, especially Swedish dance band music. He felt a little bit like an outsider there, however, because he read a lot of fiction and had more adventurous musical tastes as well. When he went to secondary school in a nearby, somewhat larger town, some older students introduced

him to fusion music (Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew*, Herbie Hancock and Weather Report), hip-hop (Public Enemy and the Last Poets) and Bob Dylan. He started buying all of the Dylan albums in chronological order. About this time, he recalled:

Before that, of course, I had a certain interest in music. I thought some songs were nice to listen to, but then I started to have thoughts about 'art' in music and that the nice thing is the craftsmanship. Music is not just a single song, a positive thing, but something more. I thought of music with some kind of higher values. And this meant that I switched from a general view about nice songs to a more explorative attitude.

Anna, born in 1958, had had a hard time in compulsory school, where there were lots of factions and bullying incidents, but when she went to secondary school, she found new friends and now has come to associate the Beatles' *White Album* with these much better times.

But other occurrences may come into play as well. Stina (florist, born in 1971) decided to attend dance school after she met and moved in with a man who was a professional dancer. Her aim was not to be a competitive dancer like her boyfriend but to learn to dance because it might be 'socially useful'. After she became a mother, Stina found that she had much less time for (and interest in) music-related activities, though she did start to like children's songs.

During a long trip through the United States, Australia and Asia, Lena (student, born in 1983) found that listening to music on her portable CD player was a good way to relax when the circumstances around her were very noisy, intense or stressful. She has continued this habit ever since. A number of informants who had been language students or au pairs abroad reported great experiences at rock concerts in their new (and foreign) environments as well.

Fredrika (teacher, born in 1962) recalls a musical moment that perhaps did not change her life but has stayed with her ever since as an unforgettably beautiful experience:

We were in Italy, wandering in the Dolomites, many years ago. And we heard classical music. In the middle of the mountains! Patric listened and said "Schubert! Death and the Maiden, third movement!" And then we passed a little hill and there was a string trio playing! That kind of experience engraves itself on your memory. It was magical—totally magical! It was like . . .

well, you get tears in your eyes and you don't know how to . . . 'can it possibly be this beautiful?' Everything is beautiful all around, and you have quite a few kilometres 'in your legs', and good pasta in your stomach, and a wonderful view, and then the music. It was such an experience!

Powerful, accidental experiences like these can become milestones in life—moments we never forget that make us think of 'before and after' or 'those were the days'. They are often linked to a specific time and place, and it is striking that, along with the musical memory, we often remember details like the weather conditions, peoples' clothing or other sensory impressions.⁸

Fredrika also associates music with the adoption of a daughter:

Our daughters are adopted, and you get a notification two months in advance, before you are to go and bring your child home. When we got this notification about our second daughter, I had just bought a compilation by Stevie Wonder, and there are two songs on that album that are strongly associated with her. We got this letter and a photograph of her . . . you 'go into the photo' and just look at it for weeks and you yearn and yearn and yearn . . . and you write pack lists. It was in the summer, it was the seventh of July when we got the notification, and then we went away in the beginning of September, just two months afterwards. There are two songs on that record that *are* our daughter. I have told her, 'This is our song now'. It is an incredible feeling to listen to those songs. One is 'As' and the other is 'Never Had a Dream Come True'. That is how it is—yes!—a wonderful feeling, all that yearning and the joy that goes with those two songs. I have nothing like that with my husband. This 'they-are-playing-our-song' thing, nothing like that. Not with our first daughter either. It so happens that these songs are associated only with her [our second daughter].

Memories

Another recurring theme in our material is 'my first record', which seems to represent something very special (or something very embarrassing). Many people spoke of their record collections with warmth and affection, as records represented many memories and associations, like a soundtrack to one's life. Laszlo states: "[My record

⁸ On strong experiences of music, see Gabrielsson (2008), Ruud (1997).

collection] is a life description, in a way. Browsing through your records, you remember episodes” (c.f Ruud, 2005, p. 173).

In general, people had positive memories of music, but there were some bad ones as well. Johanna remembers being forced to sing in front of her class in the third grade, when she was around ten years old:

We had to stand by the teacher’s desk one by one and sing ‘Dra dra min gamla oxe’.⁹ I got the lowest grade. I didn’t fail, but it was close. I often come back to how terrible it felt to stand before the whole class while the teacher played the harmonium and you had to sing that song.

This experience was so horrible that she never ever sang again, privately or publicly, and never even learned to play an instrument. In this regard, we heard many memories of various people—a music teacher, a parent or someone else—telling the interviewee that he or she had a bad voice, could not sing or was unmusical and thereby perhaps silencing a budding musical talent.

Conclusions: Music and Existential Health

One of the most conspicuous patterns in our material is that musical habits and activities have very close connections to a person’s life trajectory, which confirms our introductory propositions. Music often accompanies or connects to phases in a person’s life, and one’s musical habitus is further related to age, class, gender, ethnicity and place of residency. Many interviews actually turned into life stories that were mirrored and told through songs, albums, concerts, musical activities, experiences and memories. (It must, however, be stressed that music is not this important for everyone, and that other phenomena besides music can serve the same or similar purpose.)

Music is a sounding symbol—that is, it has a symbolic meaning as sound alone and it often has lyrics that evoke moments in life as well as other memories, associations (personal or cultural) and emotions. This makes music an effective tool for aiding one’s recall and for reflecting on oneself, or on life more generally. Music helps us to both shape and maintain an identity or feeling of self, both inwardly (through a dialogue with oneself) and outwardly (by showing others who we are or want to be). Identity should here be understood not as something static but as something

⁹ A well-known song by Swedish singer and songwriter Evert Taube (1890–1976).

that changes during a life trajectory or varies in different situations, depending on one's needs and emotions.

One's identity and musical habitus result from one's life trajectory, circumstances and experiences. An understanding and acceptance of one's own biography is an important factor when it comes to maintaining psychic balance and wellbeing, good self-esteem, self-confidence and a feeling of meaning and coherence in life—that is, one's *existential health*. Music can be an effective and useful means of both attaining and maintaining this form of health.

The concept of health, of course, does not simply mean the 'absence of illness or disease', and existential health (or existential wellbeing) was developed by the World Health Organisation in order to discuss and define one's quality of life. According to the organisation, existential health has eight aspects or facets: connectedness to a spiritual being or force, meaning of life, awe, wholeness and integration, spiritual strength, inner peace/serenity/harmony, hope and optimism and, finally, faith (WHOQOL SRPB Group, 2006).¹⁰ Existential health has to do with a philosophy of life and the meaning of life, or what some call a 'spiritual dimension'. Though some of the terms used in the list above may have a religious bias, it is important to note that the concept of existential health is *not* tied to a specific religion or philosophy but is more open—'faith', for example, could be placed in anything at all, not only a religion. The important thing is that one's existential health contributes a feeling of stability, comprehensibility and meaningfulness in life.

In this respect, the notion evokes Israeli sociologist Aaron Antonovsky's (1987) 'sense of coherence', which he claims has three dimensions: a sense of comprehensibility, meaningfulness and manageability. Antonovsky has also coined the concept of salutogenes—factors that lead to health instead of those that may result in illness.

As reported by many informants in this study as well as in numerous others, music is used in daily life, consciously or instinctively, as a kind of self-therapy to regulate one's mood or emotional state and to cope with problems in life, great or small (See,

¹⁰ In this article, the term used is 'existential wellbeing', but the more or less synonymous concept of 'existential health' seems to be gaining ground of late. For example, 'existential public health' is analysed in a recent Swedish dissertation on the psychology of religion by Cecilia Melder (2011) at the University of Uppsala. See also DeMarinis (2003). The abbreviation WHOQOL means World Health Organization Quality of Life (investigations); SRPB stand for Spirituality, Religion and Personal Beliefs.

for example, DeNora, 2000; Skånland, 2009, 2012; Lilliestam, 2009).¹¹ Roger (engineer, born in 1965) states:

Music is some kind of well-being and relaxation, I think. When you are in the concert hall, you disengage from everything and just listen. Nothing else exists. Maybe you can compare it with meditation, and people who relax totally. You've got a lot of things to think about, and even if it doesn't feel like you are pondering, there are lots of things that you solve or work out, that get settled.

In our conclusion in the report *The Music and I*, we link our work to modern theories from the study of religion as well as to existential health:

The ongoing cultural modernization, including secularization, has led to great changes in the field of religion. Religiosity has frequently been relocated from the traditional great religions, with their universal claims, to smaller, more personal, existential spheres, where feelings of community and experiences of nature or art, including music, have been described as substitutes for the traditional faiths as meaning-making systems.

Experiencing one's own life as meaningful is decisive for individual mental and physical health. On the basis of our material and theories of religion, we propose that music, musical experiences, and feelings of community within an audience can be seen as parts of a system that creates and sustains meaning and coherence in life, or what we call existential health. (Bossius & Lilliestam, 2011, p. 294)

In summary, there is substantial evidence that people do use music as a self-therapeutic tool in their daily lives, to maintain their existential health. Further research into how this works is both important and necessary.

¹¹ See also Axelson's (2008) study of how people use fiction film as a resource when dealing with existential matters.

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