



THE REPORT

# Music is a Powerful Tool for People With Autism

Music becomes the way through which people with autism channel intense emotion, energy and focus and connect to the world.

By Gabrielle Levy Political Reporter June 8, 2018, at 6:00 a.m.

**MUSIC AND MUSIC THERAPY** have become widely used and important parts of treatment for people with diagnoses on the autism spectrum disorder, helping them engage, calm and communicate.

After witnessing such an experience with a young autistic relative, Michael Bakan, an ethnomusicology professor at Florida State University, began to explore the possibilities of making music with autistic people, first through [the Music-Play Project](#) and later the Artism Ensemble, which paired children on the spectrum and their parents with professional musicians to create and perform original and improvisational works.

In his new book, "Speaking for Ourselves: Conversations on Life, Music, and Autism," Bakan shares his conversations with 10 people who all have diagnoses on the autism spectrum and for whom music is an integral part of their lives.

Through those conversations, and in a recent interview with U.S. News, Bakan challenges many of the assumptions neurotypical people – people without autism spectrum conditions – make about how autistic people see and interact with the world. Excerpts:

**Several of your interviewees, all of whom are on the autism spectrum and have language ability, talk about feeling more comfortable with music, with one even talking about how she sometimes thinks in music and that helps her access language. How does that work?**

I don't think it's necessarily that these people are more fluid in music than they are in language. But I think music allows you to more purely engage with the act of communication than spoken dialogue does.

The kind of rules of etiquette and the kind of social demands are actually much looser in a music making environment, and especially if it's a music-making environment where there isn't a predetermined outcome. In conversation, you're having to constantly modulate to satisfy the expectations of the other person, second by second, minute by minute. So I don't think it's language so much that is the challenge, I think it is the social paradigm of language exchange that makes communication difficult for verbal autistic people and why there's a certain kind of fluency in music that exceeds that.

Because we live in a linguo-centric society, where language is so referential, certain words mean certain things, the connotations of the way you use a word, the gestures you make when you utter something, are so deeply coded and so open for being misinterpreted or manipulated if you don't do it right, that if you are set up differently neurocognitively, that can generate a lot of anxiety. Whereas the kinds of environments in which music is made are more sympathetic to a more neurodiverse theater of operation in which people can find meaningful ways in which to interact and communicate.

**You refer to the work of Joseph Straus and his ideation of autism as its own cognitive style, and how that led you to consider studying autism through the lens of ethnomusicology, the study of music as culture. What are the common themes that popped up again in your conversations and in your work with musicians on the spectrum?**

I've defined ethnomusicology as the study of how people make and experience music and why it matters to them that they do. And essentially the book starts from that question, of how do autistic people make and experience music and why does it matter to them that they do, not them as some large cultural anonymous group without individuals but as individuals who share a certain kind of neurocognitive profile and an interest in music.

*"It's not about helping these kids to improve their autistic symptoms, it's about helping the larger neurotypical population see these people, these autistic people, as real human beings with a sense of humor and creativity."*

I don't really think there is a music of autism. What I think you could say, though, it's consistent with the kind of work that Straus has done, is that there is a way of being in the world that is autistic, and this idea that autistic people take in more information – or at least the information is less variegated in terms of the kinds of hierarchies that maybe neurotypical people immediately, intuitively make. Neurotypical people decide to focus on this person is talking to us, as opposed to the people who are having a conversation elsewhere, whereas in the autistic experience, maybe all of those things are coming in and it's less clear, it's less obvious, which one is more important, which one should be the point of focus.

Ironically, it makes many autistic people more sensitive listeners, more attentive listeners, and actually more socially responsive to the kind of musical cues that happen in an improvisatory situation. And this would seem to totally cut against the grain of how the condition is usually described, because you would assume the opposite. But there's this real attunedness to the larger surrounding environment, whereas a neurotypical musician would say, 'Well, I'm going to focus on my part, focus on this one other instrumentalist sharing the other thing that's closest to my line, and I'm going to shut out the other kinds of things because I don't want to get distracted.' I think there's a more holistic way of experiencing the soundscape of a musical environment that an autistic person has.

On the other side, because there is so much information – and because there are less filters that immediately kick into place in an intuitive way – there is a tendency to become overwhelmed by so many details. So I think what a lot of autistic musicians will do, whether performing or composing music or people experiencing music in some other ways, they focus in, they select very consciously on some detail, some segment, that they're going to really hone in on because, 'If I don't then I'm going to be lost because everything will come at me.' So there's this paradoxical relationship, where on the one hand, there's more information coming in and there's a more holistic way of processing that information, and on the other hand there's a narrower and more specific point of focus that becomes the place where attention goes.

When I listen to Thelonius Monk's music, for example, to me that speaks very much like an autistic way of communicating. And I'm not saying Monk was autistic and I'm not saying he wasn't. I don't know. I didn't know him and there was no diagnosis at that time for people like him. But if you listen to Monk's music, he'll take one particular motive, one particular figure, and he'll keep working it around, working it around, spinning it upside down, spinning it inside out, and eventually the larger piece takes place around that. So I think there is something in it if we wanted to call it the autistic style of approaching music that gravitates toward that molecular level of musical design and then sort of builds inward and outward from that to create the larger whole. That has interesting implications, and there are actually – some of the same musicians have been retrospectively painted with the brush of, 'Maybe they were autistic.' When I listen to their performances or when I listen to their compositions, I can hear that.

### **What are the practical implications for this in working with autistic people?**

This conflict between the genuine intellectual curiosity, creativity, fascination, dedication – all of the things that we as musicians, educators, scholars, the things we tell our students, 'This is the meat of what you do. You need to have this passion, this curiosity. You need to be dedicated to it' – taking that literally and maybe coming to it naturally – someone like Dotan, the virtuoso concert pianist I interview who goes ahead and digs in deep like that.

But the reality is in the neurotypical world, we're emphasizing all those kinds of things because, in general, a lot of students don't go deep enough. They don't get into the detail enough. We need to overcompensate on the assumption that they're going to be more interested in getting through all the stuff that they have to get through, and maybe if we talk to them that way maybe they'll dig into it a little bit deeper. But if you're talking to an autistic person that way, they're going to take you at your word for it. They're going to go deep into it, and they're not going to get stuff done.

That's the bitter pill or the double-edged sword of this wonderful, creative, deep probing way of operating in the world – musical or otherwise – is that the world really isn't set up to allow us to do that because there's a bunch of other stuff that we have to do. And it's at that level, the kind of planning and organizing and what is called in the autism literature, 'executive function,' it becomes really difficult to operate efficaciously, in a world that's not really set up for you.

### **Have you found that music can help alleviate some of the difficulties autistic people face in social interaction, learning and other daily activities?**

I became involved in this collaborative work with Dr. Amy Wetherby and her team over at the Autism Institute at Florida State University, which became the Music-Play Project. We came to a point where, through this free, improvisatory music play activity, we found statistically significant gains of expressions of self-confidence. Take these kids, put them in this kind of environment, close the door, let them define their terms of engagement with the musical experience rather than directing or teaching or telling them this is the song they have to learn, let the music emerge from the experience – that seemed to have a positive effect in terms of engendering expressions of self-confidence in these kids.

When I was approached by the National Endowment for the Arts and ended up getting this three-year grant for the Artism project, we decided to see what happens if we let this music emerge, and rather than thinking about what can we do to help these children to move away from social deficits toward social efficacy, what we can do to help them improve their academic skills or their musical skills. We thought, 'Let's turn the whole thing on its head.' These are children who enjoy playing music, these are children who are having a good time. If we put them into an environment with some really good musicians from all over the world, with their co-participating parents, and let them play, let them take charge of the group and let them compose their own pieces. It's not about helping these kids to improve their autistic symptoms, it's about helping the larger neurotypical population see these people, these autistic people, as real human beings with a sense of humor and creativity and ability and social engagement and all the different kinds of things that we appreciate about our humanness.

It's so easy if we're thinking about autism in terms of, 'What are the symptoms? What is the pathological profile? What are the interventions and what kind of remediations can we put in place?' If we're constantly thinking about basically, 'How do we fix it?' then we're really never going to take very seriously what the basic life-world is. Because not everything needs to be fixed. There's a lot that works really well.

**You and several of your interviewees challenge the general assumption about autistic people that they don't feel or express emotion as much as neurotypical people do, but rather they actually feel emotion more acutely because they take in more information than neurotypical people do. How do they describe their emotional experience with music?**

People respond to music emotionally. That's part of why we like it and that's part of why it's meaningful to us, whatever our neuro-configuration might be. But in autism, there are qualities of empathy and qualities of being able to listen to what a lot of us aren't hearing. And there does seem to be some kind of an imaginative capacity to not just draw symbolic associations between different realms of experience but to actually merge different realms of experience into something holistic, that maybe is more acute in the realm of autistic experience. It's not necessarily that autistic people have more talent for this but, whether it's by choice or neurological design or whatever the case, there's this compelling attraction of going into a space and staying there and to allow all the associations, to allow those to filter into something that connects a lot of things that the rest of us don't normally connect. We don't necessarily afford ourselves – I say us as the neurotypical majority – we don't necessarily allow ourselves the indulgence to sit and revel in the possibilities in those imaginative connections. And, therefore, we don't necessarily come to them as readily.

Those kind of imaginative associations, those large-scale ways of connecting the dots in a way we wouldn't normally do, they have to do it. They don't feel that it's a choice, and they don't have the kind of pragmatic executive function pull to lead them out of it. The good news is it leads to some very interesting images and ideas that we read about in the way that they tell their stories. The bad thing is, when they do get pulled out of it, they find that they're in a world where they're even further behind than before, where they're even more alienated, where people are even more disappointed at the inability to meet the expectations of whatever it is, the 9-to-5 world, or the learn-three-pieces-before-the-next-lesson world.

So that constant tug and pull between the world of the imagination, the willingness to sit in the experience of the moment, to make the imaginative associations and then the pull of 'This is what I have to get done today,' becomes even more intense, because more information is coming in, there is less filters to process it. The creation of it may be incredibly rich and poignant, but the consequences of it become potentially disastrous because it just doesn't match up with the way the world is set up for people to work in it.

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