

BOOK REVIEW

The Prehistory of Music: Human Evolution, Archaeology, and the Origins of Musicality, by IAIN C. MORLEY. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xiv + 447. Hardcover. ISBN 978-0-19-923408-0.

In 1997 Stephen Pinker theorized that music served no function in the evolutionary survival of *homo sapiens* but was, rather, a derived behavior dependent on other capacities that *did* provide an adaptive benefit. While language was built into the evolutionary heritage of *homo*, Pinker claimed, music wasn't – it was no more than “auditory cheesecake, an exquisite confection crafted to tickle the sensitive spots of at least six of our mental capacities.”¹ The claim was the evolutionary-theory equivalent of a shot heard round the world. Scholars rushed to music's “defense,” most of them eager to show Pinker wrong: music was universally present in all cultures and essential to the development of children and the species alike, ultimately more like water than cheesecake. Music in post-Pinkerian theories can appear older than language and fundamental to it, or it can seem equally important for survival as language, or it can be derived from an earlier behavior with important adaptive functions, and from which language also emerged.

Iain Morley's superb book defends the last option: before language or music there was a hominid vocal behavior, described by Stephen Brown as “musilanguage” and by Steven Mithen as “hmmmm” (for holistic, multi-modal, manipulative, and musical), from which language and music properly so-called would eventually emerge. Hmmmm, in turn, argues Morley, depended on a set of cognitive interrelations linking manual manipulation, body language, facial expression, and vocalization—all of which are forms of gesture, “vocalization” being a gesture you hear, rather than see. Such gestures prompt emotional experience: when we feel, we gesture, and when we see or hear gesture, we instinctively feel. This multisensual system for communicating affect (which can be seen most clearly in

¹ Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2009; original ed. 1997), 534.

the way modern adult humans interact with infants) served an adaptive function: as hominid social groups became bigger and more complex, and as they moved into environments within which they had not previously evolved, group maintenance and collective action became increasingly important, such that those clusters of hominids who could regulate themselves through affective communication were more likely to survive than those which did not.

Thus, for Morley, “music ... should not be considered to be a stand-alone activity that *makes use of* a set of otherwise unrelated mechanisms that fulfill other purposes, but instead is a specialized category of the use of a set of related and interdependent mechanisms that underlie a broader capacity, *musicality*, which itself serves a wide variety of selectively important roles,” namely “cultural learning of information (including emotional information) and establishment and communication of shared understanding (including establishing sympathetic movement, recollection, and collaborative planning)” (318). Musicality was probably first evident in *Homo ergaster* and *Homo erectus* (beginning around 1.8 million years ago) and continued to be elaborated over the next million years or so. The earliest *Homo sapiens* inherited a fully developed capacity to engage in musical behaviors: no evidence for this exists in the archeological record, however, because musical instruments are a very late development, first appearing in Europe about 40,000 years ago (Morley thinks that musical instruments from about this time will eventually be found outside Europe as well).

Morley bases his argument on an impressive array of evidence, including that of ethnomusicology (he looks in particular at pre-colonial musical practices among hunter-gatherers), paleolithic archeology (he includes an exhaustive survey of artifacts known or thought to be musical instruments), linguistics and cognitive science, neurology and neuropathology, physiology, child development, and (of course) evolutionary theory. The book is very clear and easy to follow and understand, but it is not a “popularizing” book, and it does not sacrifice precision for “accessibility.” The nature of its argument makes it much less about archeology than the subtitle suggests: though there is an exhaustive review of the earliest archeological evidence for musical behavior, this evidence is more than 1.7 million years more recent than the evolution of the behaviors Morley is really interested in. But I wanted more on the archaeology, particularly the remarkable suggestion that musical instruments can produce sounds which, while being interpreted using the same mechanisms as are used for perceiving other, natural sounds (including the voice), go beyond what is naturally producible by the body—this can lend to them the powerful combination of being perceived *in the*

same way as natural sound, whilst being alien to the normal world and thus being attributed special significance. A visual parallel to this combination is provided by images that combine natural features in ways that do not occur in nature, such as the lion-man from Hohlenstein-stadel (an ivory figure with the body of a human and the head of a lion) which whilst combining natural elements creates a product which is supernatural (325).

Here, Morley has an idea that could explain quite a lot more than early human instrumental music: he describes what looks to me like the emergence of a kind of proto-technological sublime. But Morley's rhetoric is that of the survey, and it is perhaps unfair to ask him to develop any single idea too deeply: that would throw off the elegant balance of the whole.

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