Amusing Amusia: Tin Ears & More

In last month's column, my sister Susannah talked about some of the songs Dad liked to sing in our childhood home, like the 1940 troop-gathering song by Romberg and Hammerstein called **Stout-Hearted Men**. Dad would put down his banjo for this one and just belt it out, with Mom on the piano. Even then this macho song struck me as peculiar, though I realize now that the movie came out when he was 21 years old, and the world was sinking into WWII.

But the main reason the song made us uncomfortable was that Dad had a notorious tin ear, and he gave this particular song all the stentorian passion he could muster. Yikes.

There are different kinds of tone deafness. His was of the type that allowed him to sing *almost* on pitch but not quite. He was accurate in capturing the general *shape* of the melody. He had a fine sense of rhythm and was outstanding on the banjo. As far as I remember, he had no trouble tuning it. He was a musical fellow all around, and had quite an evenhanded taste in music, hating Sinatra, Dylan, and Elvis equally. But he just couldn't hit the notes on the head.

In the 1960s I was in a jug band and our guitarist had a very specific tone deafness. He never sang a *sour* note, and always sang a note that was *in the chord* we were playing, but it was often the *wrong note*. It was as though he could only sing harmony. He had no ability to grasp a melody's contour. He ended up as the vocalist in a rock band featuring his own compositions. His voice quality was a lot like Johnny Cash, and the end result was pleasantly unique. But nobody knows what melodies were actually in his head, I can say with conviction.

As the late Oliver Sacks points out in his book **Musicophilia** *(Vintage Books, 2008)*, because of the complicated nature of music, there are so many brain tasks involved, "...all concerned with the perception, decoding, and synthesis of sound and time," there is a corresponding large number of things that can go wrong.

And studying *amusia* (tone deafness) can be tricky because not only does the brain continually adapt, but many of the problems can be cultural or psychological, and not actually medical, or can be a combination. My sister Mary, whom we all assumed inherited the full dose of Dad's tone deafness, made a conscious effort to overcome this problem a few years ago, and can now sing in perfect tune. I asked her how she did this and she said, "I sang along with records, choosing those where the singer had a similar range to my own. I did it over and over and over again in places where I felt private: shower, car, or just around the house alone. That's the whole of it." This is in line with one factor which makes studying amusia difficult: Those who exhibit a trace of amusia in their childhoods are often teased about it and abandon the pursuit of making music altogether, exacerbating the problem.

But there are forms of amusia which are congenital or the result of brain trauma, brain tumor, stroke, etc. These usually can't be fixed (though the brain has been known to devise elaborate workarounds).

There is rhythm deafness. When we recorded our first LP, we had a bunch of friends come into the studio and clap along to one of the songs. One person could not clap on or anywhere near the beat, no matter how much we tried to help her.

Some people can appreciate rhythm but not meter; some just the opposite. There can be an inability to detect dissonance. There is "disharmonia," with which a person can hear a solo voice just fine, but can't integrate the voices of a choir into any sort of cohesive whole.

While Sacks refers to many forms of amusia, there are very few people who have what Sacks calls "complete congenital amusia." If a person has this condition, an orchestra piece sounds to them like pots and pans being thrown onto the floor. It's flat-out annoying and even can be painful. These folks can't understand what others find enjoyable about the racket. Fortunately, they usually don't have a problem speaking or understanding speech, even with its complicated *intonation* (the way in which your voice rises or falls when you speak).

I didn't inherit Dad's sturdy military pipes but I do have to struggle a bit with pitch. I don't have quite the problem he did (I don't think) but then again, I have a different issue that is related to music: It takes me a while to really GET a melody. I'm the lyricist in our little duo, and Lou, who writes the music, has to be patient with me. I'll deliver a set of lyrics to her and after a while she'll send me a MIDI file of a melody. I'll listen to it right away but, unless it's crazy simple, it will take me a while to understand it; to feel it properly. She'll write, "Do you like it?" and I'll have to write back truthfully, "I don't know yet."

I do have a theory about this. In the essay **Music, Melody, and Speech Intonation: Singing A Different Tune?** by Robert J. Zattore and Shari R. Baum, (https://www.plos.org/) it is explained that the "cognitive and neural mechanisms" used for analyzing the intonation of speech, and those used for analyzing music, are altogether different mechanisms. I think as a lyricist I have learned to automatically shunt a melody from the MUSIC analysis section of my brain to the INTONATION analysis section before I can understand what I'm listening to as a potential lyric carrier. And this transition takes a while.

This can be very handy but is also a curse. it's awful for me to hear background music in commercials, movies, weather reports, etc, because with the music reinterpreted as speech intonation, if it's behind a traffic report shall we say, it seems like two people are talking at the same time. Drives me nuts.

So if you think you're tone deaf, you MAY be able to teach yourself out of it, like my sister Mary did, though you should try not to feel bad about it if you can't. But if you can, and go on to write songs, be prepared to hear all background music as some bloke yammering in your earbud.

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