

# Charles Darwin and music

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THE great naturalist and evolution theorist Charles Darwin was born in 1809, two hundred years ago this year. While he may not be associated with music, it played an important role in Darwin's life and eventually formed part of his revolutionary theories about the origins of human beings. Darwin was born to a family of wealthy gentry in rural Shropshire. It was Jane Austen's England and the society, clothing, and artistic tastes of that period are still somewhat familiar to us today. The same is true for the music of the period, which the young Darwin would have heard at home, visiting friends and relatives, and at church.

But it is from his time as a student at Christ's College, Cambridge (1828-31), that we have significant traces of Darwin's musical interests. Darwin studied for the BA degree (not a divinity degree as often claimed) which he received in 1831. Much of his time in Cambridge was spent in his rooms at Christ's, which have recently been restored and are open to the public this year. Recollecting some of his Cambridge friends in his *Autobiography*, Darwin wrote:

'I acquired a strong taste for music, & used very often to time my walks so as to hear on week days the anthem in King's College Chapel. This gave me intense pleasure, so that my backbone would sometimes shiver. ...I sometimes hired the chorister boys to sing in my rooms. Nevertheless I am so utterly destitute of an ear, that I cannot perceive a discord, or keep time & hum a tune correctly...My musical friends soon perceived my state, & sometimes amused themselves by making me pass an examination, which consisted in ascertaining how many tunes I could recognise, when they were played rather more quickly or slowly than usual. "God save the King" when thus played was a sore puzzle.'

While still an undergraduate, Darwin attended the 1829 Birmingham Music Festival, and was enchanted by the young soprano Marie Malibran.

After graduating, Darwin was offered the opportunity to travel on HMS *Beagle* as naturalist. The five year expedition spent most of its time in South American waters, but eventually

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circumnavigated the globe. The experience changed his life. When he returned in October 1836, Darwin was a new man. He was a naturalist and geologist of the first rank and soon took his place in the élite scientific community of the day. A series of scientific publications about the *Beagle* collections ensued and would continue for over ten years.

Early on in this publishing career, Darwin began to speculate on the origin or source of species. Inspired especially by the fossils he uncovered in South America, the proximity of cousin species there, the similarity of the Galapagos flora and fauna to those of South America, and the way they differed on different islands, Darwin came to realise that each species was not specially created and then fixed forever, but that they evolve. That is, they are descended, genealogically, from earlier forms. Such a revolutionary and far reaching theory would take many years to complete. He did not keep his belief in evolution secret. Indeed he wrote in the last edition of the *Origin of species* that he spoke to 'very many naturalists' about evolution during the many years prior to its publication.

In 1839 Darwin married his cousin Emma Wedgwood. Before settling on marriage Darwin prepared a pros and cons list on marriage. On the pro side he wrote 'Charms of music & female chit-chat. ...Only picture to yourself a nice soft wife on a sofa with good fire, & books & music perhaps'. The couple settled in London until 1842. Emma was a talented pianist, at one time taking lessons from Chopin, and for their wedding her father gave her a Broadwood grand piano. The piano still resides at their former country home, Down House, in Kent.

In his private *Notebook N*, composed between 1838 and 1839, Darwin speculated on the origins of music deep in our evolutionary past. 'Does music bear any relation to the period when men communicated before language was invented, – were musical notes the language of passion & hence does music now excite our feelings.' Elsewhere in the notebook he scribbled 'smell, Sir. Ch. Bell says, & hearing music, to certain degree sexual'.

By the mid-1850s the *Beagle* and barnacle publications were at last completed and Darwin began to prepare his species theory for publication. He was proceeding at a steady pace, and about half way through what could have become a massive three volume work when he received a letter and essay from Alfred Russel Wallace, a naturalist collecting in Indonesia. The essay contained a theory of the origin of species almost identical to Darwin's. Always an honourable man, Darwin sent the essay, as requested, to the geologist Charles Lyell. Lyell, together with the botanist friend of Darwin, Joseph Dalton Hooker, decided it would be best to publish Wallace's essay together with extracts from Darwin's early drafts. The papers were published in the *Journal of the Linnean Society* in 1858. It was the first publication of the theory of evolution by natural selection. Darwin was urged to publish an overview of his big unfinished book. Rather than using one of his early drafts, which he felt were no longer adequate overviews of his theory, he spent thirteen months composing the *Origin of species*. It was published in November 1859, 150 years ago. It has never gone out of print and is without doubt one of the most influential books ever written. In the 4th edition he mentioned that a 'taste for beautiful colours and for musical sounds runs through a large part of the animal kingdom'. After a fiery reception, Darwin's book began to convince most of the scientific community.

Once evolution was firmly established, Darwin moved on to discuss the origins of human beings in his *Descent of man* (1871). The book famously concluded that 'man is descended from a hairy quadruped, furnished with a tail and pointed ears, probably arboreal in its habits, and an inhabitant of the Old World'. In a section entitled 'Voice and Musical Powers', Darwin wrote what is perhaps his most detailed published account of

music. Many species produce sounds to communicate, to seduce mates, to claim territory, warn off rivals and compete for status. Sounds were not music, but they must have been the origin of music. 'Although the sounds emitted by animals of all kinds serve many purposes, a strong case can be made out, that the vocal organs were primarily used and perfected in relation to the propagation of the species.'

'With man song is generally admitted to be the basis or origin of instrumental music.' However, Darwin reasoned that since music is not necessary for survival, its origins are mysterious:

'Music affects every emotion... It awakens the gentler feelings of tenderness and love, which readily pass into devotion. It likewise stirs up in us the sensation of triumph and the glorious ardour for war. These powerful and mingled feelings may well give rise to the sense of sublimity. ...Love is still the commonest theme of our own songs.'

This led him to conclude that

'musical tones and rhythm were used by the half-human progenitors of man, during the season of courtship, when animals of all kinds are excited by the strongest passions.'

In his next book, *Expression of the emotions* (1872), Darwin returned to the subject of music:

'Music has a wonderful power...of recalling, in a vague and indefinite manner, those strong emotions which were felt during long-past ages, when, as is probable, our early progenitors courted each other by the aid of vocal tones. ... it is not surprising that music should be apt to cause our eyes to become suffused with tears... [and] the thrill or slight shiver which runs down the backbone and limbs of many persons when they are powerfully affected by music...'

We know little of Darwin's own musical tastes, though his son, Francis, provided a recollection of his father's musical tastes for *Life and letters of Charles Darwin* (1887):

'In the evening... he would often lie on the sofa and listen to my mother playing the piano. He had not a good ear, yet in spite of this he had a true love of fine music. ... I never heard him hum more than one tune, the Welsh song "Ar hyd y nos" ... he used also, I believe, to hum a little [Tahitian] song. ... He liked especially parts of Beethoven's symphonies, and bits of Handel. ...when Hans Richter paid a visit at Down, [Darwin] was roused to strong enthusiasm by his magnificent performance on the piano. His niece Lady Farrer's singing of Sullivan's "Will he come" was a never-failing enjoyment to him.'

In latter life, Darwin recalled in his Autobiography:

'I have also said that formerly ... music [gave me] very great delight. But now for many years ...I have also almost lost any taste for ... music. – Music generally sets me thinking too energetically on what I have been at work on, instead of giving me pleasure.... if I had to live my life again I would have made a rule to read some poetry & listen to some music at least once every week; for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied could thus have been kept active through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness.'

This is perhaps a good lesson. If we neglect music we neglect part of what makes us human.

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