



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Music and being human

the beat and the borrowings / the song we become

Alix Geard © 16 August 2026

Friends,

I invite you to begin with something so ordinary that we rarely notice it.

Take a breath.

Feel your heart.

Before we learn language, before we develop beliefs, before we choose identities or communities, we live inside rhythm. The pulse in the womb and the rise and fall of our lungs are among the first music we ever know.

We are rhythmic creatures.

The heart does not speak in propositions. The lungs do not reason. They sing. Not in melody perhaps, but in pattern, repetition, timing, and flow. The body itself is a percussion section accompanying our entire lives.

It is tempting to think of music as a cultural artifact, something humans invented after we had already become human. Yet perhaps the opposite is true. Perhaps music is one of the ways we became human in the first place.

Long before written language, our ancestors gathered around fires. They called across distances. They wailed, chanted, hummed, laughed, cried, and sang. Vocalization served practical purposes: warning, reassurance, coordination, affection. But it also served a deeper purpose. It turned isolated nervous systems into community.

A cry says, "I am here."

A song says, "We are here."

This matters because being human has never been a solitary achievement. We become ourselves through one another. Music is among the oldest technologies for accomplishing that miracle.

Consider what happens when people sing together.

Breaths synchronize.

Heart rates often begin to align.

Attention converges.

Individual voices remain distinct, yet contribute to something larger than themselves.

This is a spiritual lesson disguised as an artistic practice.

The choir knows what the philosopher struggles to express: that individuality and belonging are not opposites. Harmony does not require sameness. In fact, harmony only exists because differences coexist.

Our Unitarian Universalist tradition celebrates the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Music reminds us that truth is not only discovered in books and arguments. Sometimes it is experienced in resonance. Sometimes we know something is true because we feel ourselves joined to one another in a way that transcends explanation.

And music does something else.

It remembers.

Across many cultures, before there were archives and libraries, there were bards, storytellers, tōhunga, poets, singers, and keepers of memory. Community history lived in human voices. Genealogies, victories, losses, migrations, warnings, and wisdom were carried not on paper but on breath.

A song could travel where a monument could not.

A melody could cross mountains, survive storms, outlast kingdoms.

Music became memory that could move.

The bard's role was never merely entertainment. It was cultural preservation. To sing a song was to keep ancestors present. To repeat a story was to renew a covenant between generations.

Even today, we experience this power.

A single tune from childhood can instantly retrieve a forgotten world. A hymn, a protest song, a lullaby, a national anthem, a folk melody, a pop song from adolescence: all can become vessels carrying fragments of ourselves through time.

The human mind forgets.

The human community remembers together.

And one of the ways it remembers is through music.

Yet memory in music is rarely static.

One of the most fascinating things about human culture is that we almost never create entirely from scratch. Instead, we inherit, adapt, borrow, remix, reinterpret, and transform.

Musicians call it arrangement, variation, quotation, sampling, interpolation.

A melody returns in a new context.

An old tune acquires new words.

A traditional folk song becomes a jazz standard.

A hymn borrows from an older melody.

A contemporary artist echoes a phrase from generations past.

This is not cultural failure. It is cultural life.

We sometimes speak as though originality means complete novelty. But human creativity has always depended on conversation with the dead and with one another.

The old tune carries memory.

The new performance carries experience.

Together they create meaning neither could achieve alone.

Every interpolation is a dialogue across time.

Every reused melody asks: What can this inheritance mean now?

Every new rendition answers: This is what we hear in it today.

Culture survives not because it remains unchanged, but because people continue to find themselves within it.

This, too, may be a spiritual lesson.

None of us begins as an original composition.

Each of us is assembled from inherited materials.

We speak languages we did not invent.

We live among stories we did not create.

We inherit customs, values, dreams, fears, and songs from people who came before us.

And then we improvise.

We add our own verse.

We alter the tempo.

We introduce new harmonies.

We become both recipients and co-creators.

Our lives are acts of interpolation.

We are not copies of our ancestors. Neither are we detached from them. We carry fragments of countless lives and transform them into something newly our own.

That transformation is sacred work.

For a religious community, this understanding offers both humility and hope.

Humility because none of our wisdom emerged from nowhere. We stand within traditions, histories, and relationships that sustain us.

Hope because culture is never finished. Meaning is never fixed. The story is still being written. The song is still being sung.

When we gather in worship, we participate in something ancient and ongoing. We breathe together. We listen together. We speak together. We sing together.

In doing so, we join a chain of humanity extending backward beyond memory and forward beyond imagination.

The pulse beats.

The breath flows.

Voices rise.

Old melodies return.

New meanings emerge.

And through this endless exchange between memory and invention, inheritance and creation, individual and community, we become a little more fully human.

Perhaps that is what music has been teaching us all along.

That life itself is not a solo performance.

It is a chorus.

And each of us, for our term, is invited to add our voice.

Amen, and blessed be.

Meditation / Discussion questions

- Is there music that's made your heart soar, made you weep, or helped you endure in difficult times?
- What music would you share with someone else?