



When Music Takes Our Breath Away: The Sounds of Reverence

Ted Zorn © 6 Sept 2026

Each Sunday including this one we take the opportunity to share our joys and concerns. For me, this talk is an extended joy. I'm no expert on music. I am not here to lecture you on the technicalities of music because I don't really understand them myself. Instead I want to share the joys that music brings to me and try to explain why that is, and the role that it plays in my spiritual life. My hope is that some of it will resonate with you and that it provides an opportunity for you to reflect on music in your life and share some of the joy I feel.

Several weeks back, Alix Geard spoke to us about [music and being human](#).

Alix began with the rhythms that are with us before we even know what music is—the heartbeat, the breath—and moved outward from there: to singing together, to music as memory, to the melodies we inherit and reshape, and finally to a wonderful image of life itself not as a solo performance, but as a chorus.

One idea in her talk really caught my attention: that our Unitarian Universalist tradition celebrates the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, but that truth is not discovered only through books or reason. Sometimes, Alix said, “it is experienced in resonance.”

That idea really struck a chord with me. Music can be a way of knowing, not just a form of entertainment.

We often think of the free and responsible search for truth and meaning in intellectual or rational terms.

But music reminds us that meaning can also be experienced bodily, emotionally, and intuitively. Sometimes we “know” something because we feel it resonate before we can explain it.

That’s important to me because I’ve spent most of my adult life as an academic. I’m trained to analyse, to question, to look for evidence, to make sense of things.

And I value that.

But music gives me permission, for a while, to put that part of myself aside. I don’t have to analyse what I’m hearing or work out what it means.

I can simply feel it.

Perhaps that is one reason music has become such an important part of my spiritual life.

So I want to build on that thought.

I want to talk about what happens inside us – inside me – when music resonates.

Why is it that a few notes can suddenly stop us in our tracks? Why can music calm us, stir us, make us ache, make us dance—or occasionally, quite literally, take our breath away?

And what might any of that have to do with reverence and spirituality?

About two years ago, I spoke here about reverence and awe and the roles they can play in our spiritual lives.

Reverence begins with attention—with recognising that there are experiences of beauty, wonder, love, mystery and connection that deserve something more from us than casual notice.

Sometimes we encounter that in nature. Sometimes in another person. Sometimes in art.

And very often, for me, in music.

What appeals to us musically—what moves us—is intensely personal. There’s a good chance some of my musical tastes won’t appeal to you, and that’s okay. I’m not trying to persuade you that they should.

I want to use them simply as examples of something larger: music’s extraordinary capacity to move us.

Minimalism, Repetition and Space

One of my recent musical passions is a style described, rather loosely, as minimalist or neoclassical.

This includes composers and musicians such as Ludovico Einaudi, Philip Glass and Max Richter.

It’s this style of music that first came to mind as I thought of this topic for a service – music that **FOR ME** can sometimes take my breath away and create a sense of awe or reverence.

I can’t give you a sophisticated analysis of its harmonic structures—or even, frankly, an unsophisticated one.

But I can tell you what I experience sometimes when I listen to a piece like Nuvole Bianche, which Frank played for the prelude.

Often this music begins with very little. A few notes. A simple phrase. Space around them.

Then perhaps the phrase repeats.

And then something changes almost imperceptibly. A new note appears. The harmony shifts. Another musical line enters. The sound grows and then retreats.

Listen again to first minute or so of Nuvole Bianche.

<https://youtu.be/8csZSBZoKXk>

Sometimes very little seems to be happening.

And yet something is happening in me.

There is something meditative about it. Something that makes me want to pause, breathe more slowly, take it in.

Musicologist Elizabeth Margulis has studied repetition in music and points out something that, once noticed, seems pretty obvious: music repeats itself far more than ordinary speech does.

And rather than necessarily boring us, repetition can draw us further into music.

Perhaps repetition gives our attention somewhere to settle.

In meditation, we return repeatedly to the breath. The breath itself isn't particularly exciting. That's not the point. The practice lies in returning, again and again—and noticing.

Some of this music works like that for me.

A musical phrase returns. I recognise it. I settle into it.

But then something shifts. And because the pattern has become familiar, I notice the change.

Another music theorist, David Huron, has written about the role of expectation in music.

His basic idea is simple: as we listen, we are continually anticipating what might happen next. And we can experience pleasure from recognition and surprise.

The composer sets us up for what to expect. And then plays with those expectations.

Sometimes the note or chord we expect arrives, giving us the pleasure of recognition.

But sometimes it doesn't.

A resolution is delayed. A chord goes somewhere unexpected. A phrase is repeated but shifted to a different octave.

We are momentarily **surprised**—and maybe discover that this unexpected turn belongs within something larger.

Part of what moves us in music may lie in that interplay between familiarity and surprise.

Between knowing and not knowing.

Between one note and the next.

And sometimes, quite literally, in **silence**.

You may have noticed the long pauses – moments of silence -- in Frank's playing of *Nuvole Bianche*.

Rachel recently spoke in another service in our arts series about art and the ineffable, using the example of Rodin's sculpture *The Cathedral*—two people's hands reaching towards one another.

She talked about the importance of negative space. That the sculpture isn't only the hands.

Part of its power lies in the space **between** the hands.

Music has negative space too.

There is the silence before the first note. The tiny interval between one note and another. The pause at the end of a phrase.

The instant when a sound has disappeared, but the next sound has not yet arrived.

The composer gives us notes, but also spaces in which to listen. Spaces in which to anticipate.

And -- perhaps -- spaces in which to feel.

That is certainly part of what I find in this quieter, sometimes somewhat repetitive music. It creates room around my thoughts. It slows something down inside me.

Sometimes it brings calm. Sometimes reflection. Sometimes sadness or longing.

Sometimes a feeling I can't quite name.

And perhaps that's part of the ineffable too. Music can give us access to emotions before we have turned them into words.

And there's something else important here.

Our attention changes experience.

Repetition, familiarity, surprise, silence – all of these can focus our attention.

And that's where reverence may come in. Reverence begins with attention.

We stop. We notice. We experience beauty, wonder, or surprise.

Listening becomes a practice of noticing—something like meditation, and perhaps even something like worship.

Reverence Isn't Necessarily Quiet

But I don't want to give the impression that reverence in music for me requires a piano playing slowly and delicately.

Because I can be moved in an entirely different way by the forceful opening notes of [Beethoven's 5th](#) ...

With those first few notes, immediately something in me wakes up.

Beethoven's Fifth is quite a distance from the minimalist music I've been discussing.

And here's even more distance!

I get something of that same visceral awakening from the opening chords of Black Sabbath's *Paranoid*.

<https://youtu.be/t4XwhoUJpQk>

I don't think I could maintain an aura of cultural sophistication since last week you were told my favourite movie is Muppet Treasure Island, but equating Beethoven's 5th and Black Sabbath's *Paranoid* ought to put any pretence of my having highbrow taste to rest.

More seriously, though...only a few notes or chords from Beethoven – or Ozzy Osbourne – and immediately something in me stirs, it awakens, it energises.

In fact, there's another style of music that I've been listening to that is very different from the minimalist -- and sort of combines Beethoven and Black Sabbath -- and is also emotionally evocative for me.

I've rather unimaginatively labelled my Spotify playlist for it **Instrumental Energy**.

It includes musicians such as Lindsey Stirling and Vanessa-Mae—high-energy instrumental music that often combines classical influences with a rock beat.

Those 2 artists are electric violinists, and since we don't have an electric violin in the church, I've asked Frank to play a piece that's representative of this style and a favourite of mine on that playlist -- Requiem for a Dream, by Jennifer Thomas -- for our special music today.

<https://youtu.be/msaRe18Hp1o>

This sort of music moves me quite literally.

A flamenco guitarist launches into a furious run and I can feel it physically.

Put on the right Latin music and remaining motionless becomes almost impossible. My shoulders move. My feet move. I want to dance.

I put on my Instrumental Energy music and an utterly mundane household chore like washing dishes suddenly has a beat, a rhythm.

I'm energised. I'm smiling. I'm probably moving around the kitchen more than is strictly necessary.

I am feeling joy.

None of these musical experiences is identical.

And I think that matters.

Music affects us in myriad ways—through rhythm, associated memories, bodily response, emotional expression, and the expectations it creates.

Which matters most varies from person to person and from moment to moment.

Your music may not be my music.

But perhaps what matters most is our capacity to be moved by music.

Our capacity to feel.

And, sometimes, our capacity to experience reverence.

And that brings me to something even more personal.

In mid-2020, I was going through a difficult period in my life.

At roughly the same time, two things happened.

I started coming to this church.

And I began assembling a playlist on Spotify that I called simply **Sunday Morning**.

I don't remember consciously thinking that these two things belonged together.

But over time, they did.

Sunday began to acquire a particular rhythm.

It became my day to stop. To rest. To reflect. To come here. And to listen.

The Sunday Morning playlist gradually filled with music that created the sort of space and mood I needed. Some pieces came and went. Others have become old friends.

They didn't tell me what to think.

They didn't solve the difficulties I was facing.

They didn't tell me everything was going to be all right.

They did something quieter.

They gave me somewhere to be. Somewhere to breathe. Somewhere to feel what I was feeling without necessarily having to explain it.

And in time I came to realise that listening to that music on a Sunday morning and coming here to Auckland Unitarian Church were, for me, connected spiritual practices.

Both involve stepping deliberately outside the ordinary rhythm of the week. Both invite me to pay attention. Both create space for reflection.

Both sometimes comfort me. And sometimes challenge me.

And both are part of what our UU tradition calls the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

I like that we call it a search. Because a search implies that we haven't finished.

Meaning isn't simply handed to us as a set of propositions to accept.

We discover it in ideas, certainly.

But perhaps also, as Alix suggested, in resonance. In beauty. In silence. In four explosive notes from Beethoven or in the long space between two notes on a piano.

And that suggests to me another of our UU principles: respect for the **interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.**

Usually when we speak of the interdependent web, I think about ecology, our relationships with other living beings and our dependence upon the natural world.

But there is another implication in that image that I value.

We are not sealed-off selves.

Things outside us enter us and change us.

A vibration in the air reaches the ear. Somehow, through processes both physical and psychological, it generates emotion.

A composer whom I will never meet moves her hands across a piano somewhere in the world.

Years later – maybe even decades or centuries later – I sit in my house in Auckland on a Sunday morning and those vibrations are recreated.

And something happens in me. I notice. I feel.

For a moment, the boundary between the world outside and the world inside seems a little less definite.

I happened to watch a movie last week called August Rush, and one of the characters asked: “Do you know what music is? It's God's little reminder that there's something else besides us in this universe. Harmonic connection between all living beings everywhere, even the stars.”

That’s a nice way to capture the interdependent web of existence.

Researchers studying awe have found that music is one of the things capable of producing experiences in which our ordinary preoccupation with ourselves diminishes and we feel connected with something larger.

When we sense that connection, it is sometimes accompanied by chills, goosebumps, changes in attention and a heightened sense of meaning. ([Monroy et al, 2022](#))

That comes close to what I understand as reverence.

It’s not necessarily solemn. Not necessarily quiet.

Certainly not found in one particular kind of music.

Reverence is a way of being fully present to something that takes us beyond our ordinary self-absorption.

Sometimes reverence whispers.

Sometimes, apparently, it has an electric guitar.

Sometimes it sits perfectly still awaiting the next sound.

Sometimes it dances.

You can be reverent by becoming still, but perhaps also by becoming utterly alive.

And my invitation is simply to notice those moments.

What music makes you stop?

What makes you move?

What allows you to grieve?

What makes you joyful?

What creates enough silence inside you to hear something you hadn't noticed before?

And what occasionally takes your breath away?

Perhaps music's spiritual power does not lie in giving us answers.

Perhaps it lies in making us more attentive. More receptive. More alive.

For a few minutes, we listen.

The familiar returns.

Or, something unexpected happens.

A note sounds.

It fades.

There is a space.

And we wait for what comes next.

Perhaps somewhere in that space—between sound and silence, expectation and surprise, ourselves and something larger—we encounter awe and reverence.

Amen

Thus ends my extended expression of joy.

Meditation / Discussion Questions

- What are your most memorable or profound experiences with music—including the music of nature (birdsong, wind, whales, etc)?
- How are you affected by different kinds of music?