

MUSICAL MEDITATION

By Steven Halpern

As far back as I can remember, I've been fascinated by music's ability to take me "somewhere else." Whether jazz, rock, classical, or new age, music has a power over me that I honor and enjoy.

Exploring music's transcendental effects, in fact, has been a major focus of my life, and for the last fifteen years I have delved into the subject through both personal observation and scientific study. My work has shown me that music can be not only a source of pleasure and entertainment, but also a tool for reducing stress and improving our well-being. In fact, we can create music specifically aimed at making our lives balanced and peaceful. This is what I call new age music.

Though my musical interests have always tended toward the experimental—I was even thrown out of my high school band for improvising on the often-boring scores—the real turning point in my work came in 1969. I had just completed my undergraduate studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo and was playing guitar and trumpet in a jazz-rock fusion band. During a short vacation to the West Coast, two weeks before I was scheduled to begin a graduate music fellowship, I heard about a Zen center in the mountains outside Santa Cruz. A few days before my scheduled flight back East, I hitchhiked to the center for a visit.

As I walked down the winding half-mile driveway, I was met by a staff member who asked me, "Are you the one looking for a job?"

Acting on impulse, I replied, "No, but if you're offering, I'll take it."

He suggested I meet the staff in a couple of hours, and told me I could wait in a natural redwood amphitheater across the road. This site, which I later learned had been a sacred area for the Native Americans who once had inhabited the area, was so beautiful that I simply sat in awe. Soon I was absorbed in the most powerful meditation I ever had known. As if in a dream, I "heard" music inside my head, music that was different from anything I ever had played or heard. Yet it was hauntingly familiar.

This music was radically different from the high-energy music I had been playing

on the trumpet and guitar in my jazz fusion bands. The tonal quality—the sense of space and lightness—was breathtaking.

When it was time to meet the Zen center staff, I walked back down the drive, entered the main building, and found my way to what appeared to be the main meeting room. There were no people around, but there *was* a piano, and I was drawn to it like filings to a magnet. My fingers arranged themselves over the keys, and I closed my eyes and started playing music that sounded like what I had heard during my meditation. This was all the more astonishing because I never had formally studied the piano.

The next thing I remember was opening my eyes and seeing a half-dozen people sitting or lying on the floor around me. I stopped playing, and one of the people asked, "Who are you, and where did you learn to play like that?"

I could answer only the first part of that question, but that was enough to win me the staff position. I called Buffalo that night and informed the university I was not returning.

It was the most spontaneous act of my life, and one I never have regretted.

Under the progressive direction of Michael Conant, Ph.D., Bridge Mountain Foundation was being transformed from a Zen center to a facility where leaders of the human-potential movement could offer weekend workshops. My staff position afforded me plenty of time to walk in the woods and practice playing the piano, and I also participated in many of the workshops. Often, I was invited to share my musical compositions.

Playing this meditative piano music meant letting go of all of the fancy scales and blazing speed I had mastered while playing jazz guitar and trumpet, letting go of ego and allowing the music to flow as though it had a life of its own. No longer experiencing the emotional and physical catharsis of high-energy jazz, I now was reaching states of serenity and calm I'd never dreamed of.

And so, it seemed, were those who listened. Audiences at the Bridge Mountain Foundation—people as diverse as long-time meditators, uptight executives, and "ordinary" housewives—told me they felt

How do certain sounds help us reach the calm within? A premier new age musician spent fifteen years finding out.

the same joy and peace while listening to my music that I had felt while playing it. But we still didn't know why it worked.

One thing we did know, from previous studies, was that the body is not necessarily impressed by complexity in music. Classical music, for instance, is not effective in evoking a meditative state. A simpler, gentler, more subtle music seemed to be a better prescription for relaxation.

One day, John Lilly, M.D., one of the human-potential movement's pioneers, made a suggestion to me during a workshop at the center. Rather than relying on subjective responses to my music, he said, I should conduct some biofeedback-based research and record these perceived effects with objectivity. A week later, at another workshop, Stanley Krippner, an internationally known psychologist and dream researcher, offered another suggestion. He invited me to do my research at the Humanistic Psychology Institute, a program at Sonoma State University that was looking for graduate students to conduct innovative research in the psychology of consciousness. I was back in school.

With Krippner's assistance, I began to design an experiment that would satisfy scientific protocol while seeking to answer my question: Could this "new age" music produce in listeners a state of peace and harmony that was demonstrably different from the effects created by other kinds of music? Measuring this, I realized, might present a problem.

Even as a somewhat naive grad student, it occurred to me that the subtle responses we were looking for might lie outside the normal parameters of measurement employed by previous researchers. In other words, if the music didn't stimulate the usual kinds of response, then perhaps we would have to employ more "subtle" kinds of measurement.

Fortunately, recent scientific developments had made it possible to go where no musicological researchers had gone before. With high-frequency, high-voltage electrophotography (or Kirlian photography), a process that had just come of age at a major international parapsychology conference in Moscow, it was now possible to produce a picture of the electromagnetic energy field that surrounds the physical body—known as the

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"aura" or "subtle body." To me, it seemed wholly appropriate to focus on the subtle body to determine the effects of subtle music.

And so I began. With faculty advisor Krippner helping me gain access to one of the first Kirlian devices in the United States, I started work with Dan Kientz, Randall Fontes, and their associates at the Psychotronics Research Institute. These researchers had received national recognition for their studies. Soon, in one of their more dramatic findings, they would show that my "experimental" music produced a "statistically significant" effect on a wide variety of listeners.

In Kirlian photography, red hues signify areas of physical and emotional disease and stress, while rose pink is associated with deep relaxation and meditative states. Our double-blind study found that a more pronounced color shift occurred when subjects were listening to my music on headphones than when they were listening to classical music. Even more fascinating was the fact that these people, while listening to the "new age" music, achieved a greater change in their electromagnetic fields within fifteen seconds than they did after listening to fifteen minutes of classical music.

These results remained consistent whether the experiment involved Kirlian photography, electroencephalogram (measuring brain waves), or Galvanic Skin Response (measuring electrical resistance on the surface of the skin). For instance, we found in further studies that we could tell who was listening to what kind of music, simply by monitoring the frequency of each subject's brain waves: A person listening to classical music would have brain waves in the beta range (thirteen to thirty-nine cycles per second); when new age music was played, the waves most often would be in the alpha range (eight to twelve cycles per second).

Clearly, then, the subtle effects of music could be measured. One might conclude, therefore, that music—if properly composed, performed, and recorded—could trigger the body's "relaxation response."

When explaining the physical effects of this music, I would simply tell people

that I had observed my own body functioning better when I allowed it periods of meaningful relaxation, such as those evoked by the music. And further, I would add, I had found relaxation to be a key factor in helping my body to heal itself.

This sort of explanation was important. It meant I wasn't saying, "This music is healing music." It also meant I wouldn't appear to be practicing medicine without a license.

Perhaps what I appreciate most about this emerging sub-genre known as new age music is that, at its best, it allows for an open-ended response by the listener. Most music manipulates the listener into responding in a certain way, by virtue of the structure: Either the melody and chord progression sets up the listener to expect a certain resolution, or the rhythm itself is appropriated by the nervous system. (On the day I found out my heartbeat would entrain to the beat of a drummer, whether the music was live or on tape, I also learned a major lesson about the power of rhythm and its potential to control an audience.)

In contrast, gentle music with a slow pulse or no regular rhythm at all, such as my *Spectrum Suite*, lets the listener's body "choose" what it needs to achieve a relaxed and balanced state. By simply slowing down the body, we begin a process that other preprogrammed relaxation reflexes can take over.

And that, I believe, is one of the secrets of music. For it is by slowing down that we approach that stillness so many spiritual traditions associate with getting in touch with our true essence.

"Be still and know that I am God," says the Bible.

"Calmness is the voice of God speaking to you through the radio of your soul," is how Paramahansa Yogananda (*Autobiography of a Yogi*) put it.

In other words, an appropriate musical stimulus provides a legal, nonaddictive, and natural vehicle for opening us to that place of peace and serenity within.

As a composer and recording artist who keeps these deeper meanings in mind, I believe this music cannot be faked. Like the ancient Chinese artist

who decreed, "Invoke ch'i (life force) or do not paint," I find I must be in an emotional and spiritual place of inner peace and balance to create this music. Otherwise, it will not "feel" right when I listen to it, even if it sounded good when I recorded it.

I believe music is a carrier wave of consciousness. That is, the emotional and psychological state of the composer and/or performer is reflected in the overall effect of the music. Is it any wonder, for instance, that Tchaikovsky's Symphony no. 6, *Pathétique*, which was written shortly before he died, is credited by music researchers as having caused a number of suicides and deep depressions? The piece has the overtones of the composer's imminent death built into it.

Therefore, I consider it a matter of personal responsibility and integrity, when I am in the process of recording a new album, to be as clear in my intent and purpose as I can be. I think of the recording studio as my temple. The total silence of the soundproof room invariably opens me to a profound experience, which leaves me feeling right with the world and with myself. (I certainly am not the first to feel this way about music. From the masters of classical music to the greats of today's popular music, many have expressed a sense of awe and wonder at the spirituality their music has evoked in them—a feeling they have attempted to share with their listeners.)

Over the decades, musical style often has reflected the society of the day. It should be no surprise to us, then, that the super-stressful '80s have given rise to this new stress-balancing music. In that sense, what we term "new age music" really represents a return to some of the most ancient attributes of this healing art. Long before David was soothing Saul with his lyre, Pythagoras was prescribing certain scales and melodies to ancient Greeks to help heal their physical and psychological ailments.

We need not limit new age music to the background, however, listening to it solely for its ability to make us feel centered and serene. The best new age recordings are eminently listenable as foreground music, too. With headphones, especially, this music can be as entertaining as good pop, rock, jazz, or classical.

I am not suggesting that new age music is the music for today, or that it is arbitrarily better than other styles of music. Rather, I am simply saying that this music can be a meaningful addition to one's life. Just as nutritionists advise eating a well-balanced diet, I recommend that people include a balanced sound diet in any personal well-being program. So stay tuned, and enjoy.