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How Did It All Start

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We can doubtless never know exactly how or when music first entered human life. Seeking such an answer will in part depend both on where we choose to draw the line between music and self satisfied grunts or howls — the distinction between what is music and what is noise is even now not widely agreed upon — and at which point in the human evolutionary schema we choose to pinpoint what we will call humans. This may all sound like a ruse set up to avoid a precise answer but these boundaries are at once both arbitrary and important.

Let us consider each of these in turn. I think we are cutting things too narrowly if we point to the first time a complete song was created, appreciated and passed on as the beginning of music. There are other possible scenarios. Early hunters while making a great noise to chase game into a trap may later have recreated these sounds as a kind of magic retelling of the story of their success. Humming and even moaning to oneself as a form of self soothing or soothing of some one else could be thought of as a kind of proto music. In fact, there are many song types today, Flamenco singing, old country Blues, Romanian Bocet funeral songs, to name just a very few, consist often of pathogenic expressions that cannot be considered melodic but lie much closer to what may have been a very early use of music to sooth, to heal and to aid in seeking balance.

At some point even before this, an observation must have been made that making some sort of sound was effective, felt good, or yielded the right results and it went into the bag of tricks to be used again and again gradually becoming formalized.

When did this start? Just as it is more than likely impossible to know how the first event that we might think of as music began, it is equally difficult to say when it might have begun. Some argue that music is an activity known to many animals, birds and whales to name those that come most readily to mind. Others may prefer to argue that these are not like human music. Recently however, clear evidence has appeared in Slovenia showing that Neanderthals made flutes from animal bones 53,000 years ago. This predates current estimates of the first modern *Homo sapiens* coming into Europe by 10 to 15,000 years. These flutes were made from bear and deer bone, had finger holes and produced sounds that are remarkably clear and sweet in sound. While this tells us little about neither how Neanderthal man may have used music nor what he used it for, the appearance of these flutes is unmistakable evidence of a clear and deliberate use of music.¹⁾

We have recognized the ability of certain primates such as chimpanzees, to communicate with humans, albeit without the capacity for human language. This does not preclude that chimpanzees may have some means, as yet not understood by us, of communicating amongst themselves. Such a means of communication could be transmitted by gesture, expression, or sound. In whatever form such communication would not be about words as in human speech, but would more directly be an expression of the inner state of being of the individual sending the message. This in essence is what music is at heart after all, the communication of the inner state of being from one individual to another. It is entirely possible in my view that this could have been going with the earliest humanoids.

This is an important beginning point at which to pinpoint what we choose to call music, because whether it is used for self nurture or for communication with others it is based on an expression of an inner state of feeling, something which in no way guarantees that it will be understood by those hearing, but that is another matter. What is important is that this view of music allows us to encompass the vast spectrum of human musical expression through history.

Notes

- 1) Gray, Patricia M. and Bernie Krause, Jelle Atema, Roger Payne, Carol Krumhansl, Luis Baptista, *The Music of Nature and the Nature of Music*, Science, 2001 291: 52-54.