

Music and spirituality may be legacies of motherese: expert

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Ancient humans may have developed a capacity for music and a sense of spirituality linked to music because of the foetal/infant-maternal bond, according to international authority on the origins of music, Professor Richard Parncutt.

Professor Parncutt said that while definitions of music depend on historic and [cultural context](#), we know that music's main function is social, in that it can coordinate group behaviours; that it is emotional, and is particularly good at evoking pleasure and spirituality; and that aspects of musical melody, rhythm and structure linked to the physicality of the human body are almost universal."

But he said one of the big questions still puzzling musicologists is to understand how music began.

"Some researchers think music began because it promoted group survival, mate selection, or cognitive skill acquisition in [ancient humans](#) or primates. But to be honest we just don't know enough about ancient environments and behaviours to evaluate such theories satisfactorily."

"I find it more helpful to look at current theories of the origins of music and evaluate them on how well they predict music's apparently universal social functions, emotional qualities, and structural features," he said.

"The central mystery of music is that it evokes strong emotions, without being clearly adaptive, or useful. We can survive and reproduce without

music, but not without food and sex, for instance.

“Another mystery is the universal association of music with spirituality. The ability to be reflective emerged around 50,000 - 100,000 years ago and enabled early humans to wonder about their ultimate origins. But why do gods and spirits have personal qualities in most cultures, and why are they associated with music?”

Professor Parncutt said one of the most compelling arguments is that music is based on ‘motherese’, a universal form of sonic and gestural communication between mothers and infants, which probably emerged between one and two million years ago as brain size increased and the gestation period of humans shortened. As infants became increasingly fragile, mother-infant communication became increasingly important for survival.

“The origin of the [music](#) and [spirituality](#) link may be the pre-linguistic child’s unconscious perception of the mother, while the origin of the emotionally laden vocabulary of motherese may be prenatal: learned associations between sound and movement patterns experienced within the mother’s body during gestation, and hormonally shared emotion,” he said.

More information: Originally from Melbourne, Professor Parncutt, who is currently Head of the Centre for Systematic Musicology at the University of Graz, Austria, will give a public lecture, “The origins of music: Grooming, flirting, playing, or babbling?” for the Centre for Music, Mind and Wellbeing at the University of Melbourne this Wednesday, 2 February.

Provided by University of Melbourne

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