



The singing animal

Description

Looking back at my [“Newsletter”](#) entries of 2014, I saw an article on music, [Music makes it better](#) #190, followed by [Why cartoons have animals 2](#) #191. In this multi-referential world of online adapting and publishing, I recall that the title of the latter refers to an even [earlier post](#) exploring the oddity of our obsession with anthropomorphic depictions of non-human animals.

The [number 2 update](#) was actually about the philosopher [Jacques Derrida](#)’s interesting take on the forced distinction between humans and (other) animals presented in his essay [“The animal that therefore I am.”](#)

Since 2014, the online evidence for people’s fascination with non-human animals has only increased. Perhaps the social media algorithms have picked up on my own curiosities, but I suspect it’s widespread.

We don’t have a pet, but roe-deer and hares roam the neighbouring field, and there are birds, specifically passerines (tits, robins, nuthatches) attracted to bird feeders and that seem to sing at us.

Zoomusicology 101

And people play music and sing to animals. The French singer Loris Assadian (under the nom-de-plume of *Plume*) keeps cropping up with his pink acoustic guitar and furry mic on my video feeds serenading farm and zoo animals, and pets. They seem to respond. At least, they evince curiosity.

It’s touching, and further evidence that some of us like to think that non-human animals are capable of paying us some regard [“feeling as we do in the right conditions.”](#)

If I do a Google search on [“Do animals respond to music?”](#) the AI engine (Gemini) tells me that non-human animals perceive and react to music but do so differently than humans. Apparently reactions depend on the animal species, and the rhythm, frequency, and genre of the music.

The common thesis is that rather than appreciating a melody, non-human animals react to vibrations, tempos that mimic natural rhythms, and the masking of environmental stress factors such as unpredictable loud noises.

As yet there is no strong evidence that music has an emotional effect on non-human animals, as it does for humans. These conjectures are also outlined by the [American Academy of Audiology](#).

Animal Affect

By one reading, the identification of an emotion (happy, sad, proud, melancholic, curious) is a sophisticated cultural overlay to basic, raw *affects*. Affects are best understood as sensed intensities, pleasant or unpleasant and strong/weak to varying degrees. See my early reflection called [After affects](#).

In short, affects become emotions when we name them. I discuss this and other theories in my book [Mood and Mobility: Navigating the Emotional Spaces of Digital Social Networks](#) (2016).

Following this line of thinking, without *our* kind of language at their disposal, non-human animals are less likely to give expression to the rich and varied emotional landscapes we associate with *our* kind of music.

But the languages and sign systems of our fellow creatures may afford them other dimensions of expression, of musical, sonic and emotional experience as yet unknown to us.

Iâ??ve observed that pet owners and other people who observe and interact with a diversity of living creatures have strong views about the emotional lives of non-human animals. What do they feel? What do animal intimates feel about their animalsâ?? emotional worlds?

References

- Coyne, Richard. *Derrida for Architects*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2011.
- Coyne, Richard. *Mood and Mobility: Navigating the Emotional Spaces of Digital Social Networks*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016.
- Derrida, Jacques, and David Wills. â??The animal that therefore I am (More to follow).â?• *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 369-418.

Category

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Tags

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