

Richard Dale Sjoerdsma

Auris Vermis—Earworms



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Here we will sit, and let the sounds of music
Creep into our ears . . .

Wm. Shakespeare,
The Merchant of Venice, V, i

AMONG MY LAMENTABLY INFREQUENT EXERCISE ACTIVITIES, hiking the trails at Petrifying Springs, a nearby park, is one of my favorite options. Interesting name for a park, and, at this time of writing in deep winter, one that is probably more fact than metaphor. The trail I usually choose begins with a long ascent at a heartrate escalating grade in a woody area, densely populated with sugar maples, oaks, and ash trees, especially resplendent in autumn with red, yellow, and rust colors. On a walk one day last October, as I looked up to see the brilliant colors against a cloudless blue sky, a song burst into my consciousness, “Such beauty as hurts to behold” (Paul Goodman/Ned Rorem), and lingered for the rest of the day.

Earworms—bane or blessing? The word itself is fraught with unfortunate connotations. It sounds similar to earwigs, which concomitantly brings to mind the attendant folklore of the despicable little critters burrowing into the human brain. In that respect, at least, the two words are not unrelated. Cognitive science describes sensations of motor and visual imagery as “involuntary musical imaging” (INMI),¹ but at the same time admits “earworms” as a viable synonym. Other terms, with less scientific gravity than INMI and lacking the odious imagery of earworm, include “stuck song syndrome” (SSS),² “sticky tunes,”³ and similar descriptors. For the present, however, we will stay with earworms.

Considerable research on this ubiquitous cognitive phenomenon has been generated over the past few decades, but much uncertainty and debate remain. Early data, for example, suggest that INMI frequency is “lowest in people with the highest levels of musical experience compared to those with more moderate or little experience.”⁴ Beaman and Williams, however, cite research that shows “musicians are *more* [emphasis mine] likely to have earworm attacks than non-musicians, and that people with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) are more likely to report being troubled by earworms . . .”⁵ I need to plead guilty on both counts, and I suspect that most singers and singing teachers would fall into the category of the more seriously afflicted.

Are earworms only songs? Certainly, in situations of high melodrama, for example, the ominous four note motive from *Dragnet* may come to mind, and, when in a hurry or when one’s brain is spinning, the galloping tune from

Rossini's Overture to *William Tell*, but, for the most part earworms are songs. Their tenure may be fleeting, of obstinate duration, or somewhere between; they may be maddeningly unwelcome, mildly entertaining, or provocatively instructive. The reason for an aural intrusion, that is, why a specific song in a particular situation, is a fascinating but relatively little investigated phenomenon.

What triggers loosen these interlopers?

Any thought process can have associations with specific song lyrics, including the way you were feeling, the place you [were] when you first heard the song, who you were with—even the smells around you or what you were eating at the time!⁶

Everyone, I would think, responds to the usual verbal, emotional, and experiential stimuli. Merely reading or hearing a sentence, phrase, or sometimes only a word can initiate mental playback mode. (Consider, for example, numerous verses from Isaiah that will bring to mind music from Handel's *Messiah*.) Similarly, recent rehearsals and/or performances can keep music lingering in one's mind for days. But other activities, trains of thought, sights, smells, can also act as stimulants.

Voice pedagogues and vocal performers, having built careers on daily exposure to beautiful poetry and music, provide a rich loam in which earworms can thrive, ready at the least provocation to wriggle into their victims' brains. Please allow me to cite a few persistent examples from my experience.

- **Hiking.** Often while on a brisk walk, I will mentally hear "Am frisch geschnittenen Wanderstab" [On a freshly cut wandering staff] ("Fußreise"; Eduard Mörike/Hugo Wolf). Sometimes, too, I'll kick a stone a few meters down the path, thinking "How happy is the little stone who rambles in the road alone" (Emily Dickinson/Ernst Bacon).
- **Church.** A recent sermon on the Babe of Bethlehem born to die evoked "Und dort im Walde wonnesam, ach, grünet schon des Kreuzes Stamm!" [And blissfully there in the woods, ah! already the tree of the cross turns green] ("Auf ein altes Bild"; Eduard Mörike/Hugo Wolf). And, as previously indicated, biblical passages, sermons, creeds, and other liturgical activities generously occasion earworms. From my earliest memory, the tune "Great is Thy Faithfulness" (Thomas Chisholm/William Runyan) was sung at important

family events—birthdays, reunions, funerals—and any thoughts about family will unearth this song from a vast repertoire of "hymnworms."

- **Family.** As I age, I tend to reminisce periodically on my childhood, "n then I got to thinkin' 'bout my pa; he ain't a hero 'r anything but pshaw! Say! He could [. . . do almost anything]" ("The Greatest Man"; Anne Collins/Charles Ives).
- **Time of Day.** Often a quiet, star-lit summer night will comfortingly evoke "Sure on this shining night of starmade shadows round, kindness must watch for me this side the ground" (James Agee/Samuel Barber). Similarly, a sunset will induce me to ponder "O wie schön ist deine Welt, Vater, wenn sie goldnen strahlet!" [O how beautiful is your world, Father, when it golden radiates] ("Im Abendrot"; Karl Lappe/Franz Schubert).
- **Politics.** Constantly bombarded with the disingenuousness, equivocation, evasion, double-speak stemming from our elected officials, I hear Littlechap's "Mumbo, jumbo, rhubarb, rhubarb" (*Stop the World I Want to Get Off*; Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley).
- **Melancholy.** When contemplating complexities of modern existence, threats of war, terrorism, challenges of global warming, resurgence of intolerance at many levels, I sometime long for the innocence and simplicity of an earlier time, and "O wüsst ich doch den Weg zurück, den lieben Weg zum Kinderland!" [O, if only I knew the way back, the lovely way to the land of childhood] plays in my brain ("O wüsst ich doch"; Klaus Groth/Johannes Brahms).
- **Life and Health Issues.** During two confrontations with cancer, especially when outcomes were uncertain, I was conflicted with opposing earworms representing both anger and acceptance: "Do no go gentle into that good night" ("In Memoriam Dylan Thomas"; Dylan Thomas/Igor Stravinsky) and "Herr, schicke was du willst, ein Liebes oder Leides; ich bin vergnügt, dass beides aus deinen Händen quillt" [Lord, send what you will, good or ill, I am content that both stem from your hand] ("Gebet"; Eduard Mörike/Hugo Wolf).
- **Mortality.** As one ages, one becomes increasingly grateful for the gift of life: "Freunde, das Leben ist Lebenswert! Jeder Tag kann Schönes uns geben, jeder Tag ein neues Erleben" [Friends, life is worth living! Each day can give us something beautiful, each day a new experience] (*Giuditta*; Paul Knepler/Franz Léhar).

At the same time, however, as friends, relatives, and colleagues continue to pass out of my mortal orbit, I receive an aural reminder that “Meine Lebenszeit verstreicht, stündlich eil' ich zu dem Grabe” [My lifetime slips by, hourly I hurry to the grave] (“Vom Tode”; Christian Fürchtegott Gellert/Ludwig van Beethoven).

It is only a small sampling, but as I reflect upon this aural travelogue, I am struck by the predominance of English and German earworms. An occasional French song will make an appearance, when, for example, I work in the garden and observe “les papillons couleur de neiges” [butterflies, the color of snow] (“Les papillons”; Théophile Gautier/Emile Paladilhe), but, interestingly, no Italian. German is my second language, I often have sung there, and I have made a career studying lieder and German culture, so the prevalence of German earworms is no surprise. The spiritual nature of many personal earworms also makes sense, given my background, experience, and belief system.

An overarching earworm, never an unwelcome guest, needing no definable trigger, is “An die Musik” (Franz Schöber/Franz Schubert). Spontaneously reaching into every corner of my life, from “grauen Stunden” [gray hours] to exuberant joy, lending comfort and inspiration, sounds the refrain, “du holde Kunst, ich danke dir dafür” [you wonderful art, I thank you]!

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As another publication cycle ends, I still count it an honor and privilege to serve as your editor. I thank you, dear reader, for your continued support. Additionally, I wish you an enjoyable, restorative summer, and I hope to have the occasion to greet you in Knoxville.

As I finish the second round of proofs for this issue and as we prepare to go to press, we find that the world has plunged precipitously in those “grauen Stunden” that I wrote about several weeks ago at a time innocent of the current anxiety. Alas, several global communities are several shades darker than that. Suddenly everything has changed—physically,

materially, spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, academically, financially, politically . . . Rarely have we had a greater need for the healing power of art. Goethe once said, “Every day one should at least hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine painting, and—if at all possible—speak a few reasonable words.”

Gellert, in his poem “Vom Tode” cited above, further asks us to contemplate “denn Eins ist Not” (for one thing is essential). It's up to each of us, of course, to determine what that is for us, and God help us to find it. So sing a little song today, and (discreetly) share it with others who need to hear a song sung. We have the opportunity to come to the other side of this crisis a better people, to find our nobler selves.

Dear reader, I send my fervent wishes for your health and safety.

NOTES

1. Lassi A. Liikkanen, “Inducing involuntary musical imagery: An experimental study” (2012); <https://doi.org/10.1177/1029864912440770> (accessed January 15, 2020). I am indebted to Lynn Maxfield and Lynn Holding for directing me to important research in this area.
2. Anne Margriet Euser et al., “Stuck song syndrome: musical obsessions—when to look for OCD,” *British Journal of General Practice* (February 2016); doi: 10.3399/bjgp16X683629 (accessed January 27, 2020).
3. Victoria J. Williamson et al., “Sticky Tunes: How Do People React to Involuntary Musical Imagery?” (2014); <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.086170> (accessed January 27, 2020).
4. Victoria J. Williamson and Sagar R. Jilka, “Experiencing earworms: An interview study of Involuntary Musical Imagery,” *Psychology of Music* (2013); doi:10.1177/0305735613483848 (accessed January 10, 2020).
5. C. P. Beaman and T. I. Williams, “Earworms (‘stuck song syndrome’): towards a natural history of intrusive thoughts,” *British Journal of Psychology* (2010); doi:10.1348/000712609X479636 (accessed January 15, 2020).
6. Aubrey Almanza, “Why Some Songs Get Stuck in Your Head, According to Science” (updated November 26, 2016); <https://www.thehealthy.com/aging/mind-memory/why-songs-get-stuck-in-head/> (accessed January 15, 2020).