



CREATING A WORLD

As long as a person can hear properly, music can find its way into the mind. However, it may not be recognized once it arrives, a condition known as amusia, which can transmogrify the most beautiful melody into the most monstrous drone. Fortunately, Trina does not have amusia, because if she did, playing the piano would be a kind of torture.

Music can also originate from within the mind, the equivalent of hearing voices. Such experiences can be uplifting or excruciating, the latter being the case when a song is repeated over and over. Fortunately, music is more likely to be palliative than deleterious. Probably the oldest account of music helping to alleviate suffering is that of King Saul in the Bible who found relief from his debilitating headaches in the playing of the lyre by a gifted young musician and warrior named David. Another example is the singing of Farinelli, a famous Italian castrato, who sang the same four arias every evening for ten years to the king of Spain, relieving (albeit temporarily) his suffocating melancholy.

In *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*, Oliver Sacks describes an unusual case in which the patient, a professional musician, retained his musical skill while losing his ability to visually perceive the world as it actually was,

including the identity of his wife and music students. Only by means of constant singing could he make it through the day, the melodies providing the essential power for the most basic of tasks, such as putting on a sock. If interrupted in his singing, he would be unable to continue, the sock dangling in his hand, an incomprehensible thing. Confounded by these strange symptoms, Sacks could offer him no help except for an unusual piece of advice, which was to make music not only the core of his life (as it always had been) but the totality.

In his book *Awakenings*, Sacks tells of the stunning effect of music on patients with Parkinsonism, unlocking them physically so that they could move again. One woman told him, "as I am unmusickeed, I must be remusickeed." Since those early days of neurological research, what is now known as melodic intonation therapy (MIT) has become the subject of intense study.

Just why music has such power is explored in a non-neurological theory put forth by Robert Jourdain in his book *Music, the Brain and Ecstasy: How Music Captures Our Imagination*: "Music's movement is more perfect than a body's. Physically, we fumble through a world of inelegant, discontinuous activity....But well-crafted music creates the very world it travels through, meeting every anticipation with a graceful resolution, and raising new anticipations at every turn." At the end of the book, Jourdain, who is himself a pianist and a composer, expands his theory about the power of music. To him, it surpasses mere beauty by enabling people to see the world as more orderly than it really is and themselves as larger than they are, providing a sense of transcendence, even ecstasy. "In this perfect world, our brains are able to piece together larger understandings than they can in the workaday external world, perceiving all-encompassing relations that go much deeper than those we find in ordinary experience."

Does that mean that people with amusia or simply with a tin ear are barred from Jourdain's kingdom of heaven?