

Does Dissonance Exist?

Over the last few years, I have felt the need to reinvent my guitar playing or at least to explore new approaches and methods of making sound. I first picked up the guitar in primary school and since then have played in many different styles and in many musical situations. At some point though I found myself hitting a brick wall of repletion in my playing and decided to abandon the use of standard guitar tuning altogether in favour of a more dissonant, ever changing approach to tuning and pitch where the guitar strings are intentionally tuned to intervals that sound awkward or wrong.

The more that I explored my emotional responses to dissonant sounds the more they seemed to make sense and display their own unique set of characteristics, which paralleled those of conventional tunings. I began to understand that dissonance does not really exist, it is only a perceived cultural hurdle that can be removed.

In Western music, the relative pitch between notes is based on a hierarchical relationship created by a system of organising seven notes. Keeping within the expected pitch and interval patterns of this system is like driving between two white lines, which you aren't allowed to cross. There is a vast world of sound at our disposal that the Western diatonic system excludes us from.

Having been in place for roughly 400 years this recognised pattern of sound is so instinctively ingrained in our souls that cognitively we find it difficult to tolerate alternative more dissonant patterns and combinations of notes causing us to define what we hear as 'out of tune' uncomfortable or wrong

However, we only need to listen for example to the music of African or Asia to recognise that the way we derive pleasure and emotion from sound is not standardised across the whole world.

The Chinese Pipa looks like a lute. It has frets with pre-determined intervals but neither the tuning of the instrument nor the chromatic nature of the intervals share any relation to Western scales nor tuning.

So is musical dissonance in the mind?

Various studies have proved that a preference for consonance or dissonance is dependent on an exposure to western music. When tested, an isolated Amazon community with no knowledge of Western music rated consonant and dissonant sounds equally. They had no preference

We can conclude then that a significant degree of variation exists across cultures in terms of how people hear and evaluate music but clearly that variation is "masked" by the ubiquity of Western music. Nearly everyone with access to a radio or Internet connection is now immersed in music that associates consonance with triumph and dissonance with fear

Exploring dissonant tunings not only underscores the importance in culture of how people hear music, but it also underscores the importance of exploring non-Western culture in our pursuit of a greater understanding of our emotional engagement with sound.