

# On Strong Experiences of Music

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Music experience

In our opinion the core of music psychology concerns the creation, the performance, and the experience of music. Most important is the experience of music, because it involves practically all human beings, and furthermore because creation and performance by necessity involve experience as well.

However, most research in music psychology has rather focused on various components of music, such as pitch, loudness, timbre, rhythm, and melody, as well as on musical ability regarding such components. Research on music creation (composing, improvising) is still scarce and a very difficult undertaking like research on creativity in general. Studies on music performance are more common (Gabrielsson, in press), but there are still many questions lacking an answer.

With regard to music experience, one may distinguish between two partly overlapping lines of research. One of them aims at studying how people perceive and describe the structure and/or the expressive character of different pieces of music. A common method is to present lists of adjectives, or other expressions, that the listeners should use in order to describe the music. There are many studies of this kind, not least in Germany (e.g., “Polaritätsprofil”). Some researchers have tried non-verbal techniques, for instance, to express the pulse, rhythm, and emotional character in music by using the sentograph proposed by Clynes (1977, 1986, Clynes & Walker, 1982; Gabrielsson, 1993). Nielsen (1983, 1987) had listeners press a pair of tongs to describe the experienced tension in music by Haydn and Richard Strauss.

While the purpose of these studies is to *describe the characteristics of the*

*music*, as perceived by the listeners, another line of research aims at studying *how the listeners themselves are affected by the music*. The problem is how to do this without interfering with the experience itself. One way that has been frequently tried is to make recordings of various physiological processes during listening and use them for inferences concerning the listener's experience. This approach has as yet had only limited success, and the fundamental question concerning the relationship between physiological measures and experience is still open. Turning to psychological methods, a natural way is to let people simply tell about what they experience and how they are affected. However, if they are asked to do this in real time, this interferes, of course, with the experience itself. And if they do it retrospectively, we run the risk of various memory distortions. Furthermore, we meet with the perennial question concerning the capability of language to describe the experience of music.

Obviously there is no Perfect Method to study the experience of music. A multi-method approach that may provide converging evidence from different sources seems commendable (Neale & Liebert, 1986).

## 1.2 Strong experiences of music

Some years ago we initiated a research project on Strong Experiences of Music (SEM). The general motive for this was the scarcity of studies regarding music experience as described above. Another contributing factor was questions from persons, who asked for explanations of some unusually strong experiences of music. Once the idea of this project was launched, it immediately attracted the attention of many people – people who wanted to tell about their SEM and to know about SEM in others, and students who wanted to conduct studies on SEM as part of their studies in psychology. As a consequence of that the project actually became much bigger than we originally planned, and the analysis of all material is not yet complete. This paper should be considered as a brief progress report on selected parts of the project. Short reports were also given in Gabrielsson (1989, 1991) and in Gabrielsson & Lindström (1992, 1994).

The purpose of the project is to get a description and classification of SEM and to investigate, as far as possible, what factors in the music, the person, and the situation may contribute to such experiences.

There are very few earlier studies touching this topic. The concept of “peak experience” launched by Maslow (1968) inspired some investigations

including music. Among these is the study by Panzarella (1980), little known in music psychology. He got descriptions of peak experiences from 103 persons, about half of them relating to music and the other half to art. From a combination of content analysis and factor analysis, he found four dominating factors in the experience, called “renewal ecstasy”, “motor-sensory ecstasy”, “withdrawal ecstasy”, and “fusion-emotional ecstasy”. “Motor-sensory ecstasy” and “fusion-emotional ecstasy” were relatively more common in connection with music than with art, “withdrawal ecstasy” was equally common for music and art, and “renewal ecstasy” more common for art. None of the factors was related to the persons’ age, sex, education, or musical ability, but some relations to personality variables were suggested.

“Peak experience” was defined by Maslow (1968, p. 73) as “...moments of highest happiness and fulfillment” and by Panzarella (1980) as an “intense joyous experience”. It is known, however, that music can also evoke strong negative feelings, such as anxiety, anger, or even panic. We therefore prefer not to use the concept of “peak experience” but rather the more neutral “Strong Experience of Music”.

## **2. Methods**

The way of collecting and analyzing the data is briefly described in the following.

### **2.1 Persons**

About 800 persons have participated in the investigation, many more than we originally planned. There are more women (about 62 per cent) than men (about 38 per cent). The age of the persons ranges from 13 to 91 years. Their music preferences are spread across most musical genres: “classical” music (art music), jazz, rock/pop, folk music, and various types of popular music. The sample includes musicians representing different genres as well as non-musicians.

All participation was voluntary. In the initial phase of the project, 149 persons were recruited among students and personal acquaintances. The results for 92 of them were first presented in Lindström (1989). The sample was then successively widened through announcements in newspapers, ra-

dio, and television. Furthermore, several students made studies on special groups, such as Rock'n' Roll musicians (Lundahl & Sanner, 1990), choir singers (Boman, 1991), people interested in folk music (Grill 1991), and high school students (Antonsson & Nilsson 1991). Of course, we cannot claim any kind of strict statistical representativeness for the general population. Use of volunteers always involves the risk of selection bias (Neale & Liebert, 1986). However, considering the size of the sample (800 persons) and its range concerning age, music education and music preferences, we believe that most possible aspects of SEM do appear in our results. After reading them you may form your own opinion on this matter.

## 2.2 Task and procedure

The main task given to the persons was to describe the strongest (most intense) experience of music that they ever had. It was emphasized that they should do this using their own words without any demands on literary elegance. They furthermore answered various supplementing questions concerning time, place, situation, their physical and psychic condition, whether they were listeners or performers, whether they had heard this music earlier or later in life, how often they had strong experiences of music, and if they had similar strong experiences in other, non-musical contexts. The information was collected by means of interviews for about 10 per cent of the persons and by means of questionnaires for the remaining 90 per cent.

The majority of persons also completed another, quantitative task. They were given a large number of statements concerning SEM (98 statements in the initial phase, later reduced to 74) and were asked to indicate how well each statement agreed with their own strong experience. This was made on an "agreement scale" from 10 (perfect agreement) to 0 (no agreement at all).

## 2.3 Analysis methods

There are thus two sets of data. One is qualitative, that is, the verbal descriptions of SEM, and the other is quantitative, the ratings on the agreement scales. The latter are analyzed by means of conventional descriptive statistics and by factor analysis. On the whole, this type of analysis is a routine affair and can be expediently performed. However, the content analysis of the persons' own SEM descriptions is very demanding and time-consuming.

We read every description very carefully, note all experiences and responses that are reported and try to sort them into suitable categories. The two authors (and several students) have done this, at first independently of each other, then checking each other's classifications and discussing cases in which differences appeared. The general principle is to stick to the words used by the persons themselves, avoiding further interpretation. Due to the task and the nature of language, a certain arbitrariness can hardly be avoided but is hopefully kept to a minimum through the independent readings. The whole procedure is also repeated several times in order to refine the analysis.

### 3. Results

We concentrate here exclusively on the content analysis of SEM descriptions. A "full" understanding may in fact require reading of the about 1000 reported experiences (many persons described two or more SEM, so the number of experiences is larger than the number of participating persons). In order to give some idea of their contents, we first present excerpts from ten reports (that is, about one per cent of the material). They are translated into English from the Swedish originals.

#### 3.1 Individual reports

##### *Person A*

This SEM occurred in the late forties, when he was 17 years old. He used to listen to music on the radio, and on a Sunday morning he wanted to hear Sibelius, whose "Finlandia" was well-known to him.

"This Sunday the gramophone concerto at 10 o'clock would broadcast a complete symphony by Sibelius. It would probably be too much for me, being a jazz fan! However, one could always try to hang on for a little while. One or two movements. After all, there were four of them.

Jean Sibelius: Symphony no. 2.

I hadn't experienced my first real love yet. That ought to be the total experience... Now Sibelius 'Second' sounded from the loudspeaker. And it became a total experience almost as strong as the 'first love'. I remember how the music penetrated my consciousness entirely. How I gradually lost con-

tact with the ground and experienced an *ecstasy of all my senses*. Yes, it wasn't only my hearing that received its share!

When the tremendous intensification of the finale started, I cried. I remember that my face was all wet, and I experienced a happiness that, as I realized later, only could be compared with an intense love of another person.

I was so totally moved and happy that I just had to sit down and write a letter to this fellow-being Jean Sibelius, thanking him for giving me and many other this incredible music, that seemed to purify oneself...both physically and mentally. Yes, I wrote a letter with a couple of pages to my fellow-being Jean Sibelius! Totally disrespectful and without hesitation. I just had to. Whether it arrived at Järvenpää or not at the end of the forties, I don't know. But I do know that I wandered directly out in the woods and thanked God for that there was something so incredibly beautiful *created by the human hand*."

### Person B

This SEM occurred in a recent first-time listening to Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6, "Pathétique", in a concert hall.

"I have had similar experience of other music...but none so terribly deep as 'Pathétique': in certain passages it evokes sobs and I feel totally crushed – my listening is fully concentrated, the rest of the world disappears in a way, and I become merged in the music or the music in me, it fills me completely. I also get physical reactions...wet eyes, a breathing that gets sobbing in certain passages, a feeling of crying in my throat and chest. Trying to find words for the emotions themselves, I would like to use words as: crushed, shaken, tragedy, maybe death, absorption, but also tenderness, longing, desire (vain), a will to live, prayer. The whole experience also has the character of a total standstill, a kind of meditative rest, a last definite and absolute end, after which nothing else can follow.

One more thing is of special interest...It is something that has happened solely with the 'Pathétique' and not at all with any other music whatsoever. It is that I feel that I meet the composer! I think he communicates directly with me, and I think that I *know him personally!* I know who he is. This made me...look him up in a reference work of mine, and what I read there gave me a slight shock thinking: 'But I already knew that!' I was amazed that the music alone could have conveyed this information so exactly...

After the music experience I am sort of 'gone' – the people in the foyer and their murmur are at a distance, like a stage set rather than something real. I have a hard time trying to talk to them, to 'get started', and to 'return' to the ordinary reality. The most difficult part is to talk about the music experience itself, it is possible only after a while, when it has faded out a little. T., one of my concert friends, is very sensitive to classical music and he too can have wet eyes. It has happened several times that we are just standing there, shaking our heads and looking down on the floor. Nobody finds any words, one cannot add anything to what the music already has told. One gets the clothes in the wardrobe as in trance."

### *Person C*

He was going to attend a concert with Mike Oldfield. He knew his music and was especially fond of a piece called "Platinum" but did not expect that this piece would be played in the concert.

"The enthusiastic cheers rose when Mike at last climbed the stage but was silenced by himself when he said some words in Swedish. The musicians got themselves ready and the audience silenced.

This is the moment when I got my musical experience. The first notes made me almost pass out. It was Platinum! I felt that I disappeared for a moment and then woke up like in a dream but aware of the music all the time. Somehow I was soaring above the audience that was merely there but could not be heard and did not disturb. It was like a dream, I was soaring and they played just for me. It is very hard to explain the feeling I had. That I was totally gone was observed by E and A who had been trying to get in contact with me during the tune but failed. I regained my senses again when somebody hit me on my shoulder several times and shouted my name. That was E who wondered what was the matter. I was wet on my cheeks and had evidently been crying. The concert continued with old and new tunes and it was super! What happened during Platinum didn't happen again, maybe due to E, who kept a watching eye on me the whole time.

After the concert my mind went blank. I can't remember that it was me who drove the car, nor what I did the day after that. E and A have told me what we did and how I behaved. I had been very silent and reserved. The only thing I can remember from the day after is that I felt totally cleansed and empty inside, but satisfied, incredibly satisfied!"

## *Person D*

This is an example of SEM during childhood.

“...one of those early experiences of music that I know was emotionally very strong and has been decisive for my choice of profession as a musician.

I am six years old and my parents want me to go with them to an organ concert with Helmut Walcha in the S. church in M.. I know that I made great resistance against going with them, I know this from reflections and conversations with my parents sometime later. It was in the evening, autumn-like and dark. I was tired and difficult and fell asleep once we got there, waiting for the concert to begin. I then slowly woke up in the organ music, I find myself in some kind of drowse, probably with my senses in a state between consciousness and unconsciousness, maybe in a liberated state where the experience can stand wholly for itself. I felt that I was resting in a large space, almost gliding weightless in space. That could be because of that for a child so obvious architectonic room, but the time-space feeling was as obviously coming from the flow of music. I know through later information that it was Bach's Trio Sonata in E flat major that I was listening to.

I experienced an absolute clarity in a free, infinite room, where dots, strokes, small signs were playing with each other in the air. A kind of kaleidoscopic three-dimensional movement composition that I followed intensively during at least 20 minutes. My parents have told me later that I was completely captured in the experience during this composition, they had tried to speak to me and almost been scared by my absence. The reason why I myself can remember this concert so well is that I from now on myself wanted to play the piano, my parents observed my interest and I soon started taking piano lessons.

After some years I also played the organ and I tried the Trio Sonatas and again remembered the experience of that concert when I was a child. In fact I can still recall that experience from this early concert. I can feel how my little child-body was entirely relaxed, that easy warmth in the body, that weightless state, the clarity of the sound and movement in that big, infinite room. Also a feeling of the notes touching me physically, almost as caresses, as material, as light, color etc. Now afterwards, I would like to describe it as a unique meeting of space-time experience. It is difficult to give a closer verbal description of the experience, but I can still feel that state within myself when I think back on that concert.

I became different as a child after this concert, something fundamental

happened with me – my parents have later told me that they noticed an obvious change.”

### *Person E*

This SEM happened during a vacation in the Alps together with some friends. On a rainy Sunday they had gone with an immensely steep-going lift up to one of the mountains and because of that felt a thrilling feeling in the stomach waiting for the descent with the same lift.

“When the cabin arrived, we were pushed at the very back of the cabin. It was crammed with people. I have a faint recollection of some late-comers entering in the very last second. The door was closed, and this ‘human room’ was set in motion. Slowly at first, then faster and then came the post at the steep! Then some ‘idiot’ pulls down the window on the entrance door. One was ready to shout: ‘Are you out of your mind!!!!’, but then the post came, and the jerk, and the whole cabin started to sway, and strange sounds came out of almost every throat – spontaneously created by that feeling of scare in the pit of the stomach. In the same moment a wonderful triad is heard that resolves into the most simple, yet most wonderful melody I’ve ever heard! The atmosphere of terror disappeared as if by a stroke of magic. After having experienced that terror individually – standing there as a small and miserable human being, struggling – we were transformed into a smiling assembly, smiling in safety to each other.

The ‘late-comers’ proved to be three musicians, who, to be able to play in this crowd, had to open the window. They were standing there with their instruments, pointing to the sky (a trumpet, a French horn and a tuba) and played – certainly Austrian folk tunes – melancholically, devotedly, lovingly. They sort of searched themselves in a common understanding towards these amazing triads, making short slow melodic phrases resulting in new, surprising harmonies. They expressed their love to music, their pride in being able to play, and their own alliance with this fabulously beautiful landscape.

I felt tears dripping down on my cheeks, I felt myself being right in the middle of a *holy moment of life*. It can’t be better than this! That once literally dangle between heaven and earth and slowly but so wondrously safe and secure approach to our planet. I have attended several musical events during my 60-year long life – from Daddy’s singing and playing in my childhood to ‘world class’ concerts, but nothing has ever succeeded to affect me

throughout my whole 'being' as this 'simple' music, mediated as a gift of love during a 22 minutes long air trip.

Like the Phoenix our cabin landed so gently and elegantly as I never experienced a landing before. When we found each other again on solid ground, we cried long and openly...immensely grateful for this common experience in the essence of music...during these last minutes we had been living right in the middle of the music and experienced the HEALING POWER of music."

### *Person F*

This is an SEM during own performance. Person F had been practising the C minor Prelude in J. S. Bach's "Das wohltemperierte Clavier I" in school and had performed it in connection with an examination. The performance went well, and practice was interrupted for a while.

"But one day when I was in school, alone in that big music hall, I sat down at the grand piano. I played the Prelude and the Fugue, and then I suddenly experienced a tremendously strong feeling that was perceptible both in my body and in my head. It was as if I was charged with some kind of high tension, like ecstasy. The feeling made me ecstatic, inconceivably exhilarated, everything focused on a single here and now. The music flowed as by itself. At that moment I interpreted it as if I was penetrated by the spirit of Bach: the music suddenly became so self-evident. There were no doubts any more concerning how it should be played, as if I had come to the deepest insight and found the genuine, true and correct expression. The ecstasy remained during the whole piece and I staggered out afterwards. I can't remember how I felt afterwards, but I guess that I was exhilarated, even if the ecstasy was gone.

Two days later, I wrote in my diary: 'Last Friday, when I was alone in the music hall, I sat down and played the Prelude and the Fugue in C minor by Bach, that I have hardly ever played since the entrance examination, and then I was suddenly filled by something that was like being intoxicated. Perhaps it did not go so well technically, but the performance itself, the emotion, was in my whole body and everything suddenly became so self-evident. It was as if my whole being was filled with the spirit of Bach. What an incredibly happy experience! I could feel it everywhere, even at my 'hairtops', that it sounded fantastic, that everything was fantastic. It is not possible to describe.'

## *Person G*

He and his daughter were going to attend a concert with a Hungarian string quartet.

“We came with big, positive expectations and it became an unforgettable evening! Since I make music myself, it often happens during concerts that I – if the musicians show some insecurity – myself become worried about how things will work out. You get tense and focus your listening on technical matters. But here only some minutes’ listening was needed to make oneself feel totally safe, to lean oneself backwards in the chair and let the music speak. The musicians proved themselves to be in total control of their instruments and the music, and played in such a self-evident manner that one was amazed. The ensemble playing and the communication were complete. The music hit oneself directly – with no thoughts of the reproducing factor, the working musicians.

In big concert halls I often get disturbed by the distance to the musicians and disturbing signals from other listeners. Not so this time! We were close to the podium – no disturbing audience between us – and all were connoisseurs who could listen with great concentration and thereby not disturb other people. ‘The pin’ would have been very disturbing! The conditions for a great listening experience were optimum. Bartók’s String Quartet No. 6 has many brutal passages...and often has a rather difficult musical language. It is considered to be difficult to get access to and also to interpret. Here there were no difficulties – neither for the performer, nor for the listener. There was a clear, translucent interpretation with nuances from brutal fortissimo to the most subtle. I have never heard Bartók’s String Quartet been played like that before. Both this piece and the following Brahms Quartet became strong, moving experiences of ‘super-terrestrial’ value. We both left the hall, deeply moved and dizzy by the music-playing and above all by the enormous power of the music and its message to us!”

## *Person H*

The experience occurred a summer evening some days after the funeral of a beloved grandmother.

“The grief and the loss felt heavy, even though she was more than 93 years old...My brother and I were sitting in my living room. The bay outside gurgled quietly and the big window was deep black. Mahler’s Tenth Sym-

phony rotated on the turntable. The conductor was Rafael Kubelik and I had hardly ever heard the piece before. The largest part of this symphony is heavenly Mahlerish stale stuff. A super-chromatic, early-Schönberg-kind-of-piece winding between different keys where the obvious absence of beginning and end produces a hypnotic effect, not unlike the feeling you experience lying down on a moored boat next to an archipelago island.

But then, there it was. A chord so heart-rending and ghost-ridden that I had never experienced before. A single tone (a trumpet, if I remember it right) is added with an endless number of different instruments from the orchestra, not unlike a huge organ where you pull out every organ stop at random, a dissonance that pierced my very marrow. My brother and I reacted the same: we were both filled with such a primitive horror, almost pre-historical, that none of us could utter a single word. We both looked at the big black window and both of us seemed to see the face of Death staring at us from outside. A face with a diameter of about two meters.

It took me five years before I dared to listen to that piece again. The very thought of this chord gives me cold chills and a kind of atavistic horror, even today, fourteen years later.

Neither sooner nor later have I experienced something like I did that late summer evening so many years ago. Surely, I have my 'kicks' a few times a year, as a performer as well, but never fully comparable to this, never. The only mental experience that eventually could be comparable is the rudimentary horror I once felt 45 years ago when I as a teenager met with an earthquake for about 20 seconds."

### *Person I*

This description was short but the experience was apparently very strong.

"When an experience is this strong, it goes beyond the barrier where we have made use of words to describe and relate. That's why I am groping for words. I find it very difficult to find words for this music that I have experienced so strongly at *one* occasion. The closest description I can come up to is that it was a cosmic wholeness-experience beyond time and space. The body and the music became a whole, where I knew that I was dead, but it was a death that also gave birth to something that was liberating and light. A light that did not belong to this life. I disappeared even from this life, so I can't remember anything of my surroundings. I feel hesitant to write what it was, because it has never been important, since everything that happened

had no connection to this world. I remember the words 'Es ist vollbracht' and the singer Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. In addition a woodwind instrument (the oboe?) that played heavenly. Probably a movement from a Bach cantata."

### *Person J*

"The music experience I am going to tell about...was a rock concert with the band called Saga...One can say that Saga plays a classical symphonic rock-music, where Rock'n' Roll and some classical scales together with a perfectionistic arrangement form a harmonic unity. It is an incredible feeling to be in a numerously attended arena together with several thousands of people, everybody there for the same purpose, that is, to listen and 'give everything' to this wonderful music. To be in that crowd of people in front of the stage and sing along with those songs that one has heard long ago on records, that has an intoxicating effect, you feel simply happy, all senses are focused on one point, the stage. If you see Saga live, it's not only the music that matters, but the show on the stage, they have a fantastic show with lots of lights on stage.

The music and the light-show are supplementing each other and increase the feeling of happiness. 'Get high on music' is exactly what this is all about, one gets feelings that cannot be described by words. Just going to a concert is a great experience, even before you attend it, you play old records with the band to get 'in the mood', get the right feeling, a feeling that grows during the course of the concert. Going to a concert is a feeling of wholeness that cannot be described, it can only be experienced right on place. A very special feeling is when the band introduces their hits, for example 'Don't be late' (Chapter Two), a song that the audience had been calling for for an hour before it came. A song that begins quietly and everybody are lightening their lighters – what an atmosphere. The whole stadium illuminated with lighters, that's when you get goose flesh.

When you go home from the concert you feel uplifted, you walk around intoxicated by happiness humming the songs, just enjoying. A music experience can last for quite a long time when you listen to records afterwards, but a good concert always gives the greatest experiences. A live concert has to be experienced – it cannot be described in words – it lies in another dimension of reality. Still I have tried to do my best to describe a music experience."

## 3.2 Categories in SEM

The ten examples above demonstrate that each single SEM is in fact unique. However, one can also find various features that appear in two or more reports.

A content analysis of the SEM descriptions in the initial phase of our project, comprising 149 persons, resulted in a list of about 125 different aspects of SEM. These have been classified into seven basic categories, in their turn comprising a number of sub-categories. In the following we provide a sketch of this categorization. The complete scheme will be published elsewhere. The seven basic categories are:

- General characteristics of SEM
- Physical responses
- Perception
- Cognition
- Emotion
- Transcendental and existential aspects
- Personal development

### 3.2.1 General characteristics of SEM

This category includes general, evaluative descriptions of SEM such as “a unique experience”, “exceptional”, “fantastic”, “incredible”, “unforgettable”, “incomparable”, “outstanding”, etc, that is, expressions that in some way are part of the definition of SEM. Examples are easily found in the above reports.

Another characteristic often pointed out is the difficulty or even impossibility to describe SEM by words. For instance, person C said that “It is very hard to explain the feeling I had”, person I said that “I am groping for words”, person B explained that “nobody finds any words, one cannot add anything to what the music already has told”, and person J declared that “a live concert has to be experienced – it cannot be described in words”.

### 3.2.2 Physical responses

There is a long list of various physical responses usually associated with strong feelings. They may be rather general, such as feeling tension in the whole body, feeling shivers, moving to the music, or weeping. However, the

music may as well make oneself relax, bring oneself to complete stillness, make it difficult to breathe or to speak (or sing, play), make oneself feel dizzy, and the like. There are further more specific reactions, such as goose flesh, hair bristling, changes in breathing and heart rate etc. Many examples of physical responses are found in the descriptions by persons A (weeping), B (“wet eyes, a breathing that gets sobbing in certain passages, a feeling of crying in my throat and chest”), C (weeping), D (“I can feel how my little child-body was entirely relaxed, that easy warmth in the body”), E (“I felt tears dripping down on my cheeks”), and J (goose flesh).

This category also includes quasi-physical responses, such as feeling weightless, the body is soaring, one feels like being carried away by the music. For instance, person A “lost contact with the ground”, person C felt like soaring above the audience, and person D felt like gliding weightless in space.

### 3.2.3 Perception

Perceptual aspects of SEM include auditory, visual, and tactile phenomena.

The auditory percepts concern, of course, various components of the music such as pitch, loudness, timbre, rhythm, and harmony; see, for instance, some comments on such components in the reports by persons E, G, and H. (On the whole, however, most people do not talk very much about musical details in describing their SEM.) Another important aspect is the perception of being “embedded” in the sound, as when one is very close to, or even surrounded by, the instruments, as listener or as performer.

Visual percepts often concern the behavior of the performers, their body language, their concentration and involvement, furthermore the environment or setting in which the music takes place. No doubt such features play a very important role for music experience. Examples can be seen in the descriptions by persons C and J (big rock concerts with much “show”), person E (the music in the Alps landscape), and person G (chamber music concert, sitting close to and watching the performers).

Tactile perception of the music may include vibratory sensations in different parts of the body or feeling that the music is touching or even penetrating the body. For instance, person D felt that “the notes were touching me physically, almost as caresses”.

### 3.2.4 Cognition

This category includes five sub-categories.

A first sub-category refers to a change of attitude, in one way or another. It may mean a total concentration on the music, nothing else matters; see persons B (“my listening is fully concentrated”), C (“That I was totally gone was observed by E and A who had been trying to get in contact with me during the tune but failed”), G (“all were connoisseurs who could listen with great concentration”), and J (“all senses are focused on one point, the stage”). One’s concentration may be so complete as to scare the persons around as happened for persons C (see quotation above) and D (“my parents...had tried to speak to me and almost been scared by my absence”). A music-analytic attitude, common among musicians, is abandoned in favor of an “open”, receptive attitude as was the case for person G (“But here only some minutes’ listening was needed to make oneself feel totally safe, to lean oneself backwards in the chair and let the music speak”). Other aspects in this category refer to an absence of thoughts and a feeling of living just now, in this very moment.

The second, related sub-category concerns a changed relationship to the music, for instance, a total merging as described by person B (“I become merged in the music or the music in me, it fills me completely”), and person I (“the body and the music became a whole”), or, in case of a performer, that the music plays itself and everything is felt self-evident as described by person F when playing a Bach prelude.

A third sub-category refers to an altered experience of one’s body and of time and space. One loses consciousness about oneself, the surroundings disappear, the time may stand still and the space seems somehow transformed. Examples are given by persons B (“the rest of the world disappears in a way”, “the whole experience also has the character of a total stand-still...an absolute end, after which nothing else can follow”), person C (“I disappeared for a moment and then woke up like in a dream...soaring above the audience that was there but could not be heard”), and person D (“I felt that I was resting in a large space”).

The experience may evoke various associations, memories, fantasies, and inner images. Person D found himself in “a free infinite room, where dots, strokes and small signs were playing with each other in the air. A kind of kaleidoscopic three-dimensional movement composition”), and person H experienced the face of Death glaring through the window. There are further

some SEM, not exemplified here, that exclusively relate to internally heard, imagined music, both in “listeners” and in composers.

The borderline between cognition and emotion is sometimes very diffuse, and we found it necessary to include a kind of transitional “cognition-emotion” category. This includes a variety of aspects, only some of which are mentioned here. One may get surprised, positively (person C) or negatively (person H), get totally captured by the music, it goes directly into oneself passing all barriers (person A: “I remember how the music penetrated my whole consciousness entirely”; person E: “nothing has ever succeeded to affect me throughout my whole ‘being’ as this ‘simple’ music”). Person B felt as being directly spoken to by the composer: “I think he communicates directly with me, and I think that I know him personally”, and person C felt that the performers “played just for me”.

Still another aspect is a feeling of perfection (person E: “it can’t be better than this”), and in the case of a performer this may mean that one’s achievement reaches unusual heights as happened for person F. The experience is so wonderful that one wants it to go on forever, and one may feel an enormous gratitude for having got such an extraordinary experience – like person A who wrote a letter to Sibelius and also thanked God for that there was something so incredibly beautiful created by a human being, or the gratitude felt by person E for the music during the dramatic cabin travel in the Alps.

### 3.2.5 Emotion

The psychology of emotion is still very much in a confused state, and there are no generally accepted classifications of emotions. Furthermore, you will find practically nothing on music in psychological texts on emotion, although music is often called “the language of emotions”. For the time being, we simply make a distinction between positive and negative emotions. There is a large number of examples within each of these categories, only some of which can be mentioned here.

Many of the positive emotions described in SEM may be ordered along an intensity continuum ranging from rather mild feelings, such as pleasure, enjoyment, and getting moved, to very strong ones, as euphoria and ecstasy. The most common case is happiness, in one form or another. For instance, person A compared the happiness during his SEM with the happiness felt in fully loving another person, person E alluded to the Phoenix, and person J

repeatedly described the happiness felt before, during, and after a big rock concert. At perhaps a still stronger level, person F exclaimed “What an incredibly happy experience!” and felt charged with high tension “like ecstasy. The feeling made me ecstatic, inconceivably exhilarated”.

Another group of positive emotions relate to love, safety, calm, and peace. The horror felt by person E in the crowded, steeply descending cabin was suddenly turned into a feeling of complete calm and safety by the three musicians lovingly performing some folk tunes straight out into the air through the open window.

A SEM may also evoke negative feelings, such as grief, nervousness, anxiety, anger, horror, even panic. On the whole there are relatively few instances of this type in our material. In the examples above, person H had a strong experience of horror listening to an exceptional chord in Mahler’s Tenth Symphony, which stills fills him with horror and was comparable to the horror that he felt during an earthquake.

Sometimes a SEM brings forth a spectrum of different, perhaps contradictory, emotions. For instance, person B tried to describe the feelings in listening to Tchaikovsky’s “Pathétique” as “crushed, shaken, tragedy, maybe death, absorption, but also tenderness, longing, desire (vain), a will to live, prayer”.

### 3.2.6 Transcendental and existential aspects

This category refers to descriptions of experiences that somehow transcend ordinary life and reality or deal with various aspects of life and being. They include various religious experiences, experiences of another kind of existence, experiences of “wholeness”, out-of-the-body experiences, changed attitude to life and existence, and still others.

The SEM described by person I belongs here: “a cosmic wholeness-experience beyond time and space...I knew that I was dead, but it was a death that also gave birth to something that was liberating and light. A light that did not belong to this life.” Person E felt like being right in “a holy moment of life”, person F felt like penetrated by the spirit of Bach, person G talked about “experiences of ‘super-terrestrial’ value”, and person J described a live concert as lying “in another dimension of reality”.

### 3.2.7 Personal development

This category includes four sub-categories. One of them refers to getting new insights and new possibilities. Person A felt purified, both mentally and physically, by the Sibelius symphony and felt free and unrestrained to write directly to the composer himself. For person F the Bach prelude suddenly became self-evident, “as if I had come to the deepest insight and found the genuine, true and correct expression”. Person E wrote, in capital letters, about the HEALING POWER of music, and person J felt uplifted by the rock concert. Person D stated that his SEM, at the age of six, made him different as a child, “something fundamental happened with me”.

Other sub-categories refer to confirmation of one’s identity, increased self-confidence, and a sense of community with other people – musicians, listeners, or “everybody”. Person B felt as if Tchaikovsky “communicates directly with me, and I think that I know him personally. I know who he is”. Person C felt that the musicians “played just for me”. Person E described how, after having experienced the horror individually, the music made them change into “a smiling assembly, smiling in safety to each other”. Person J emphasized the incredible feeling of being together with thousands of other people who are there for the same purpose all of them, “to listen and ‘give everything’ to this wonderful music. To be in that crowd of people in front of the stage and sing along with those songs that one has heard long ago”.

### 3.3 Some further results

The examples given above and the sketch of our present categorization hopefully give a flavor of what SEM can be like. Although the reports selected here provide examples of many categories and aspects, there is, of course, very much to add in order to get a reasonably “complete” picture of SEM.

This paper has focused on description and classification of the SEM while it is going on. We also make similar classifications concerning how and what one experiences after the SEM, directly after as well as in a longer perspective. Examples of the “direct-after” feelings may be found in most of the above reports. For instance, person B told that “After the music experience I am sort of ‘gone’...I have a hard time trying to talk ...to ‘get started’, and to ‘return’ to the ordinary reality. The most difficult part is to talk about the music experience itself, it is possible only after a while, when it has faded out

a little.” Person C had a kind of black-out for the time after the concert: “After the concert my mind went blank...E and A have told me...[that] I had been very silent and reserved. The only thing I can remember from the day after is that I felt totally cleansed and empty inside, but satisfied, incredibly satisfied!” Persons F and G both felt dizzy, person J uplifted, and persons A and E felt a deep gratitude.

Long-term effects of SEM are briefly discussed in Gabrielsson & Lindström (1992), and examples of therapeutic implications of SEM are described in Gabrielsson & Lindström (1994). This will be further discussed elsewhere.

The factors influencing SEM – in the music, the person, and the situation – are numerous and interacting. This will likewise be spared for discussion elsewhere. However, the examples may give the reader an opportunity to find out at least some influencing factors. There are some hints regarding musical factors in the reports by persons E, G, H, and I. (Actually person B presented a rather detailed discussion of musical factors that is not included here; the excerpt above covers barely 1/5 of the whole report from this listener.) Factors related to the person appear in several descriptions. For instance, persons A, C, D, and E had somehow “low” expectations on what was going to happen, whereas persons G and J came with great expectations. The temporary state of mind was mentioned by several persons: D (slowly waking up after sleep), E (fear before descent), H (grief), and J (enjoyment). The importance of the situation is evident, in various ways, in the descriptions by persons C and J (big rock concerts with big audience and much show), D (small child in large church), E (cabin travel in the Alps), F (alone in the music hall), G (intimate chamber music concert, concentrated audience), and H (some days after a funeral).

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

There is, of course, no ready theoretical framework to rely upon for explaining SEM phenomena, nor for music experience in general. However, parts of such a framework may be found in various theories concerning music and its capability of representing and arousing emotions, that is, through conditioning to a situation with a certain emotional atmosphere, through violations of expectations, and through an isomorphism between the structure of music and the structure of feelings; see Dowling & Harwood (1986, chapter

8) for a review and Gabrielsson (1994) for some explications of the isomorphism idea.

There are several methodological problems with this type of investigations concerning the use of language, the use of retrospective reports, possible memory distortions, biased samples, and still others (Gabrielsson 1989, 1991). However, as the analysis of our large material progresses, it seems that there is a converging evidence from many different sources regarding the characteristics of SEM and its meaning for the individual. The reader who may recall an own SEM can form his or her own judgment concerning the validity of the classification sketched above. This classification will certainly be subject to successive revisions by us and may never become quite ready. But we feel assured that we have at least gone some part of the way towards a better understanding of music experience and in demonstrating what is so often referred to as “the power of music”.

## **5. Summary**

One may distinguish between two partly overlapping lines of research on music experience. One of them aims at studying how people perceive and describe the characteristics of the music. In the other approach the purpose is to study how people are affected by the music. The research project presented here belongs to the latter category. It focuses on Strong Experiences of Music (SEM). About 800 people have described the strongest experience of music that they have ever had. The content analysis of their descriptions reveals a multitude of different aspects, which have been classified into seven basic categories: General characteristics of SEM, Physical responses, Perception, Cognition, Emotion, Transcendental and existential aspects, and Personal development. These are in turn divided into several sub-categories. The present paper is a brief progress report, providing examples of SEM and the use of the classification scheme, as well as discussing various methodological problems.

## **6. Acknowledgments**

The authors want to express their gratitude to Sonja Forward for helpful advice concerning the English (however, the responsibility for remaining

errors is ours), and to all persons who generously shared their strong experiences of music with us. The research was supported by The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation.

## 7. References

- G. Antonsson & K. Nilsson (1991) – *Starka musikupplevelser hos ungdomar i gymnasieåldern* [Strong Experiences of Music in High-School Students]. Uppsala University: Department of Clinical Psychology. (Unpublished thesis)
- H. Boman (1991) – *Sång i kör. Stimulerande stämningsfull sambörighet* [Singing in Choir. Stimulating Solemn Affinity]. Uppsala University: Department of Clinical Psychology. (Unpublished master's thesis)
- M. Clynes (1977) – *Sentics. The Touch of Emotions*. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday.
- M. Clynes (1986) – *When time is music*. In: J.R. Evans & M. Clynes (Eds.) *Rhythm in Psychological, Linguistic and Musical Processes*. Springfield, Illinois: Charles C Thomas, 169-224.
- M. Clynes & J. Walker (1982) – *Neurobiologic Functions of Rhythm, Time, and Pulse in Music*. In: M. Clynes (Ed.) *Music, Mind and Brain. The Neuropsychology of Music*. New York: Plenum Press, 171-216.
- W.J. Dowling & D.L. Harwood (1986) – *Music Cognition*. New York: Academic Press.
- A. Gabriellsson (1989) – *Intense Emotional Experiences of Music*. In: Proceedings of the First International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition, Kyoto, Japan, 17-19 October, 1989, 371-376.
- A. Gabriellsson (1991) – *Experiencing Music*. Canadian Journal of Research in Music Education 33, Special ISME Research Edition, 21-26.
- A. Gabriellsson (1993) – *The Complexities of Rhythm*. In: T.J. Tighe & W.J. Dowling (Eds.) *Psychology and Music. The Understanding of Melody and Rhythm*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 93-120.
- A. Gabriellsson, in press – *Music Performance*. In: D. Deutsch (Ed.) *The Psychology of Music* (2nd ed.). New York: Academic Press.
- A. Gabriellsson (1994) – *Expressive Intention and Performance*. In: R. Steinberg (Ed.) *Psychophysiology and Psychopathology of the Sense of Music*. Berlin: Springer Verlag.
- A. Gabriellsson & S. Lindström (1992) – *Esperienze musicali intense e loro implicazioni nello sviluppo personale*. In: L.R. Pritoni (Ed.) *La musicoterapia. Implicazioni cliniche e psicopedagogiche*. Pisa: Edizioni del Cerro, 11-18.
- A. Gabriellsson & S. Lindström (1994) – *May Strong Experiences of Music Have Therapeutic Implications?* In: R. Steinberg (Ed.): *Music and the Mind Machine. Psychophysiology and Psychopathology of the Sense of Music*. Berlin: Springer Verlag.
- M. Grill (1991) – *Folkmusik – World Music* [Folk Music – World Music]. Uppsala University: Department of Clinical Psychology. (Unpublished master's thesis)
- S. Lindström (1989) – *Sanslös sinnesnärvaro i tid och o-tid. En uppsats om starka musikupplevelser* [Senseless Presence of Mind in Time and Un-time. On Strong Experiences of Music]. Uppsala University: Department of Clinical Psychology. (Unpublished master's thesis)
- M. Lundahl & I. Sanner (1990) – *“That’s Why I Go for That Rock’n Roll Music”*. En uppsats om starka musikupplevelser. [On Strong Experiences of Music]. Uppsala University: Department of Clinical Psychology. (Unpublished thesis)
- A.H. Maslow (1968) – *Toward a Psychology of Being* (2nd ed.). New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- J.N. Neale & R.M. Liebert (1986) – *Science and Behavior. An Introduction to Methods of Research* (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- F.V. Nielsen (1983) – *Oplevelse av musikalsk spænding* [The Experience of Musical Tension]. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag. (With English summary.)
- F.V. Nielsen (1987) – *Musical Tension and Related Concepts*. In T.A. Sebeok & J. Umiker-Sebeok (Eds.) *The Semiotic Web '86. An International Yearbook*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 491-513.
- R. Panzarella (1980) – *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Peak Experiences*. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 20, 69-85.