

Dreams as Inspiration for Music Composition In American and European Musicians

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In May 1965, Paul McCartney woke up with a melody in his head. He had dreamt that he heard a classical string ensemble playing and upon waking, ran to the piano in the corner of his room to attempt to replicate the melody (Barrett 2001, 66). McCartney worked on the melodies he dreamt until he had recreated the sounds from his dream. However, having never composed music in this manner before, he was convinced that the melody was not his own (Barrett 2001, 66). It was not until he played the tune for several friends and family, that McCartney believed that he had composed the song himself in his dream (Barrett 2001, 67). From here, the famed Beatles song “Yesterday” was born.

McCartney is far from the only musician to draw on dreams to create music. From Billy Joel to 1600s Italian violinist Giuseppe Tartini, musicians have recounted instances where either imagery or melodies which inspired their music came to them in their sleep. The phenomenon of music in dreams and dreams influencing musical composition has been studied to a moderate degree of depth in psychologists and neuroscientists, but few anthropologists have contributed to this body of research. Many indigenous cultures place more significance on manifest content of dreams and on dream music than modern American and European cultures. Some cultures believe that music is communicated from other worlds through our dreams, and some cultures hold that only certain individuals, namely shamans, are able to interpret and subsequently play dream music (Collins 2016, 72). In this paper, I focus on the influence of dreams on American and European musicians, although I suggest future cross cultural studies.

Psychologist and dream researcher Deidre Barrett has spent several decades studying health, hypnosis, and dreams through the lens of evolutionary psychology (Harvard Catalyst Profiles n.d.). Her research has paid particular attention to the presence of musical elements in dreams. Barrett approaches research on dreaming from a more individual psychological

perspective than a cultural one, however many of her theories are applicable in anthropological analyses. I will focus here on two of Barrett's works: the fourth chapter of her book, *The Committee of Sleep* which concerns musical dreams, and her 2019 article *Creative and Problem-Solving Dreams*. In *The Committee of Sleep*, Barrett initially notes that as found in a 1966 study by Calvin Hall and Robert Van de Castle, examining five thousand dreams of college students, the majority of people did not record experiencing any sound, let alone music, in their dreams (Hall and Van de Castle 1966 as cited in Barrett 2001, 69). Barrett discusses more modern musicians who have used melodies they found in dreams in popular music. In addition to discussing McCartney's notable experience composing the melody to "Yesterday," Barrett discusses Billy Joel's consistent uses of his dreams to inspire his music. "I always dream music," Joel has said. "I know all the music I've composed has come from a dream" (Barrett 2001, 71). Joel's song "River of Dreams" (1993) even lyrically discusses his musical dreams (Barrett 2001, 71).

In the middle of the night
 I go walking in my sleep
 From the mountains of faith
 To the river so deep
 I must be looking for something
 Something sacred I lost (Billy Joel – River of Dreams n.d.)

Barrett then shifts her focus in this chapter to visual components of dreams where she introduces Hungarian-Austrian composer, György Ligeti (1923-2006). In 1961 at age thirty-eight, Ligeti composed a classical piece of music titled *Atmospheres*. In this piece, he wove musical notes together beginning with natural rhythms and introducing more and more counter melodies and harmonies as the piece builds into a sound designed to make the listener experience slight discomfort (Barrett 2001, 75). Ligeti composed this piece to represent images

from a dream he'd had as a child that stuck with him for decades (Barrett 2001, 74). He described this dream to Barrett.

“In my early childhood, I dreamed once that I could not find a way through to my little bed ... because the whole room was filled up by a fine-threaded but dense and extremely complicated web, like the secretion of silk worms ... Beside me, there were other beings and objects hanging up in the vast network; moths and beetles of every kind, trying to reach the light around a few barely glimmering candles ... Each movement of the stranded creatures caused a trembling carried through the entire system ... Now and then these movements, acting on one another reciprocally, became so powerful that the net tore in various places and a few beetles were unexpectedly set free, only to be lost again soon in the heaving plaitwork, with a stifling buzz. These events, occurring suddenly here and there, gradually altered the structure of the web, which became ever more twisted (Barrett 2001, 74-75).

While Barrett does an exceptional job in illustrating the way in which Ligeti used imagery from this dream to compose *Atmospheres*, from an anthropological perspective, she falls short of assessing what, in Ligeti's case, made this particular dream so special. It is uncommon for one to remember a dream from childhood in a large level of depth, let alone well enough to draw on dream imagery to create music several decades after the initial dream.

There are two pieces that I believe should be addressed here. Initially, on an individual level. I am curious about what in this particular dream created its impact for Ligeti. Barrett notes that this dream was from Ligeti's early childhood, but does not note exactly when the dream occurred or the events in Ligeti's waking life at this time. Ligeti grew up Jewish in eastern Europe shortly prior to World War II (György Ligeti n.d.). Depending on Ligeti's age at the time of the dream, components of pre-war persecution for him and his family would have likely influenced the manifest content of this dream. In this case, Barrett establishes that the song is about the dream, but does not discuss what the dream (and by association the song) is about.

Barrett continues with themes introduced in *The Committee of Sleep* in her article *Creative and Problem Solving Dreams*. In this article, she reiterates the idea that average people do not report hearing significant amounts of music or sound in dreams. She builds upon this idea however, adding that those devoting their lives to composing music do sometimes hear it in their dreams – significantly more so than non-musicians. These individuals also see scenes that they later express in a musical piece or may see completed scores” (Barrett 2019, 305).

In *Creative and Problem Solving Dreams*. Barrett introduces dreams as core components of other artistic, creative, and athletic endeavors in addition to music. She proposes that:

[The power of dreaming] lies in the fact that it is so different a mode of thought that it supplements what we have already done awake. The areas in which dreams excel are any that benefit from vivid visualization – dreams have more hallucinatory imagery than most people experience awake, and those that involve “thinking outside the box.” Our mind casts a wide net while asleep and censors ideas less harshly if they seem to go against conventional wisdom (Barrett 2019, 301-302)

This “outside of the box” thinking is the essence of all forms of creativity, so it is logical that many creative endeavors stem from dream experiences.

Lucy Davis, an architect who previously composed music, said that for her, “[dreaming has] always been a problem-solving state” (Barrett 2019, 302). She continued to tell Barrett that the projects which make their way into her dream state are often things she is stuck on or projects that don’t seem to be getting anywhere however long she problem solves while awake (Barrett 2019, 303). Dreams approach issues from new angles whether it’s architecture or music as for Davis, physical art, inventions, or science and math. Dreams allow one’s subconscious to approach complex issues through more unconstrained methods of thinking than we typically allow ourselves to explore in waking life (Barrett 2019, 302). While American and European cultures place significantly less value on the manifest content of dreams than many others, the

fact remains that dreams exist, are interpreted, and hold some significance. I anticipate that the lack of shared constructed significance to dreams in these cultures impacts whether or not some musicians put substantial effort into retaining their dreams and subsequently capitalizing on the unfiltered musical thoughts of their dream selves.

Former English Literature professor, Irving Massey, approaches the connections between music and dreaming in a similarly scientific manner to Deirdre Barrett. In his 2006 article, *The Musical Dream Revisited: Music and Language in Dreams*, Massey explored connections and differences between music and languages in dreams. Massey posits that one of the most important facts about the presence of musical melodies in dreams is that unlike images or language, “music alone remains intact in dream . . . If it were to undergo major deformations, it would not even be reported as music” (Massey 2006, 42). This concept is immensely important to anthropological studies of dream music. Every other element from a dream’s manifest content could be interpreted vastly differently depending on the culture and upbringing of the dreamer. For example, the appearance of a sailboat in one of my dreams having grown up sailing in Maine all summer would carry a very different meaning than were it to appear in the dreams of my close friend who was born and raised in Iowa (where there are very few sailboats for obvious geographical reasons). Dream elements like the hypothetical sailboat are representative of other aspects of life, but the metaphors and analogies are not consistent dreamer to dreamer. The same cannot be said for music. While the presence of certain musical elements would carry different meanings to different people, were the music itself to be significantly distorted in the manifest content of a dream, it would quickly become no longer music (Massey 2006, 45).

Massey also notes that unlike other dream components, music and peoples’ feelings towards it do not typically change once awake (Massey 2006, 45). Whereas dream elements and

phrases that peoples' dream selves feel to be profound and poetic often seem trivial or silly upon awakening from the dream, music heard or played that is expressive and beautiful in dreams still feels equally as beautiful when one remembers it after waking up (Massey 2006, 45).

Barrett recounted a lucid dream experience shared by former musician Bill Barton.

Barton recalled:

I was about twenty-one years old, performing with a band, St. John's Wood. We did rock and roll, but I had always loved big band music, especially Count Bassie. The first dream was a morning dream – the dream right before waking up. I heard the most fantastic big band chart – very sophisticated section work – the saxes would play as a unit, then the trumpets as a unit. Call-and-response work, just exquisite harmony. All the elements of classical jazz were there. I knew at the time it was absolutely original – I was listening to it being formed. I thought it would be so wonderful to write it down. I was in the presence of something that my intellect was creating, but I knew I didn't have the facility – chops – for arranging that it required. I would have to settle for listening to it a few times. When I woke up, I thought it was such a joyful experience that I wanted it to happen again and it did! A week later, about one in the morning, I dreamed a pop song. The lyrics were there, the music was there. I was above the whole thing, listening and saying, "That's really good!" I remember knowing in the dream that I could wake up and write it down – I did have the capacity for this one. I was writing popular music at the time. But an angel on my other shoulder said, "You're not going to, are you? You could, but you're not going to! You slug, you're just going to listen to it and keep dreaming." And that's what I did. Much later, when I finally did wake up, it was gone – in the sense of enough detail to write down. There was just the smell of gunpowder after the fireworks are over. This time, remembering the dream, I had a different sensation – chagrined and embarrassed (Barrett 2001, 70-71)

While Barrett notes the fascination of Barton's loss of the melodies from his dreams once he wakes, like with Ligeti's "Atmospheres," she does not investigate factors in Barton's waking life that could have contributed to the components of this dream. She touches on this in noting that Barton ultimately decided a musical career was not for him and suggesting that the angel in his dream may have been "hinting at an alternative career" (Barrett 2001, 71). However, I would

argue that there were likely factors in Barton's waking life at the time of these dreams that contributed more directly to the dreams' manifest content.

I'll illustrate this point further with a dream I had a few weeks ago.

I dreamt that I was at a party with several friends, mostly people I know from college. There are colorful balloons all over the room and everyone is dressed in summer dresses drinking cocktails and mingling on a dance floor. I notice a piano in the center of the room. [Ella] grabs my hand and pulls me over to the piano and makes me sit on the bench with her. We begin improvising and the party gathers around the piano, drunkenly singing and dancing along. My hands seem to take on a mind of their own and I am watching my own fingers play complex jazzy melodies. Even in my dream, I am acutely aware that the music I am playing is beyond my musical abilities, and I think "Wow, imagine if I could actually do this." When I woke up, I could remember the tempo of the music, but none of the notes.

At first glance, it would be easy to interpret this dream as me spending a great deal of time in the days leading up to this dream practicing piano in my university's music building late at night.

The night before this dream, I was in fact playing until it was pushing midnight. However, there are significant other residues from the few days prior that I believe factored into this dream.

Initially, the fact that my dream self did not approach the piano on my own and my friend, who in this paper I'll refer to under the pseudonym Ella, pulled me over to it with her is of note. Ella is a musician, and has given me piano lessons sporadically over the last few years. A few days prior to this dream, a good friend of mine asked me if I would be willing to perform a song at her wedding. While I initially said yes, I later second guessed the decision and questioned whether my skill level at piano was high enough for the commitment I had made. Ella was the first person I approached regarding this, and we worked through a couple options while sitting at a piano almost exactly how we sat in my dream. I believe that the setting of this dream at a celebration or party is representative of the wedding that I am meant to perform at this

summer and my realization that the music I am playing in this dream is above my waking skill level stems from my anxieties about this performance.

While musicians do often compose melodies in their dreams, these melodies aren't as random as may initially be assumed. Just as when they write songs in their waking life, musicians' dream selves draw on other music they like or listen to frequently, life experiences, or deeply felt emotions. Paul McCartney's "Yesterday" exemplifies this. When McCartney first dreamed the melody, he thought he recognized it as a jazz piece his father had played when he was younger (Kadavy 2019). While "Yesterday's" melody ended up in fact being an original, Musicologist Ian Hammond raised the point that the melody is quite similar to "Georgia On My Mind" (Kadavy 2019). While Ray Charles released a version of the song in 1960, just five years before McCartney dreamed "Yesterday," "Georgia On My Mind" was originally composed as a piece of jazz music in 1930 (Kadavy 2019). As McCartney's subconscious crafted the melody of "Yesterday" while he slept, he was in fact pulling from familiar themes and pieces of music.

Modern American and European cultures place minimal significance on dreams and their meaning. As evidenced by Paul McCartney, Billy Joel, György Ligeti, Lucy Davis, and many other musicians and creative thinkers, dreams provide valuable avenues for problem solving and creativity. Cultural perspectives which deem dreams as unimportant and meaningless are a disservice to creative thinkers in America and Europe.

I propose further anthropological studies into connections between dreams and music composition. I suggest the incorporation of cross cultural analyses and engagement with indigenous cultures which place much higher significance on the meaning of dreams.

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