

## The Happiest Music on Earth!

Ron Bopp

The *Happiest Music on Earth* (HME) is a phrase that has been used over and over in association with outdoor mechanical music. The phrase was coined in 1983 by Ken Smith (see inset, page 12) and was adopted quickly by the Mid-America Chapter of the Musical Box Society International to illustrate the quality of its fast-growing band organ rallies (15). The HME now is common wordage by many individuals and groups throughout the world. The phrase HME may have had benign beginnings, used to illustrate and explain the mood of the organ rally scene but, in fact, the phrase has meaning beyond that for many of the organ and calliope community.

I personally began to question the phrase while recently listening to a CD of a well-tuned Dutch Street Organ, *De Korsikaan International* (Figures 1 & 2). I noticed that, while in the midst of the CD, my mood had become improved to the point of that what I felt was becoming euphoric—I had reached a plateau of a “high” or elevated mood. I had been asked previously that day to volunteer my efforts for one of our associated collecting groups and had not given much thought to it until the time while I was listening to the music. Being in an elevated mood at the time, I thought I would call the contact person and agree to perform the task I was asked about. The next morning, after the effects of the music had worn off, I no longer felt I should take on this task. Wow! What an effect this music had on me. It was at that time I felt I needed to know more about the effects of music on mood and thus, the reason for this investigation and resulting article.

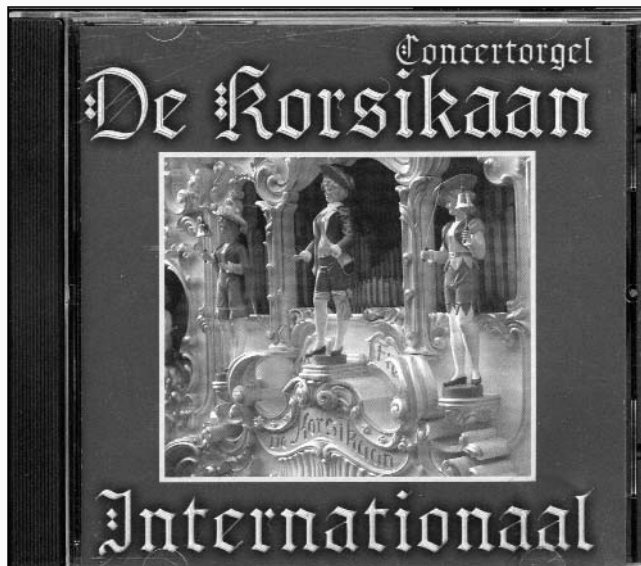


Figure 1. An mood-inspiring CD, *De Korsikaan International*.

The purpose of the preceding paragraph is to illustrate the effect of music on the mood. The questions I pose are: Why is band and fair organ, street organ and calliope music the HME? What within the human mind causes the increased mood that the listener interprets as being happy music? Just how does this

type of music change our, and other listener's, moods?

These are questions I will try to explain in simple but exact medical terms. Please bear with me.

When searching HME on the Internet (using the search engine “Google”) I found 27 primary results—of these ten were direct references to band or fair organs. All ten were references from all over the world, including Japan, Australia and Holland, as well as those in the United States, where the phrase was developed.



Figure 2. *De Korsikaan*, as depicted in a 1974 photo printed in the KDV's *Het Pierement* (Vol. 3).

Organ players (gavimen or organ grinders), as purveyors of this type of music become, by nature, some of the happiest people on earth (HPE). What more joy can be had then to please and see the pleasing effect your HME has on the faces of strangers, whether they be children or adults?

### The Medical Explanation

Our trip through the explanation of the pathways of HME correlates with the recent news-breaking stories on terrorism, specifically the country of Afghanistan. While watching in horror and awe the telecasts of the “911” events we all learned of Afghanistan’s primary moneymaking industry, that of opium production. Opium, the precursor of morphine, is derived from the unripe seedpods of the opium poppy plant, *papaver somniferum*. Discovered in 1809, the effects of opium on humans are analgesia (pain relief), cough suppression and “euphoria” (18). Another substance derived from the poppy plant is, of course, heroin.

Euphoria: yOO-fOr-i-uh—a feeling of happiness, confidence, or well being sometimes exaggerated in pathological states as mania (a mood disorder characterized by excessive euphoria, hyperactivity, restlessness and accelerated thoughts and speech). A euphoriant, therefore, would be something tending to induce euphoria. (2)

### “THE HAPPIEST MUSIC ON EARTH”

In 1983 I originated the theme “The Happiest Music on Earth” when Dan Slack asked me to design a new appreciation certificate to be given to members bringing organs to the 8th annual rally he was planning in Fremont. This was to be the first “super” rally of the MBS Mid-America Chapter; “Super” because 50 organs attended rather than the 14 to 16 previously considered a normal rally.

Dan wanted a better looking certificate and he particularly wanted to get rid of the “phony stock certificate” border on the old design, which he detested. So I drew up a new design and put a line drawing of Dan’s 153 Wurlitzer on it.

The theme “The Happiest Music on Earth” came to me from comments from two friends. The first said he smiled so much while listening to my organ that his jaw hurt; the smiling was involuntary because it was such “happy music.” The other friend did slide shows on carousels for audiences and described the carousel organ music as “The Happiest Music in the World.” Borrowing from the theme of Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus: “The Greatest Show on Earth,” I came up with “The Happiest Music on Earth,” which went on the new certificate.

While agreeing to redesign the appreciation certificate for Dan I offered to rough out a new rally poster design, of which he was all in favor. He was sufficiently impressed with the roughed out poster that he took it directly to the printer as is. It also displayed his 153 and the “Happiest Music” theme. T-shirts were also made with the new poster design on them. Dan liked the new appreciation certificate so well that he had it professionally framed and presented it to me. I had drawn it twice life size to get finer detail when it was reduced.

I didn't give the theme much thought later on until it started appearing on organ trailers and various places, and eventually places like England and Australia. My one regret about the 1983 poster was that I didn't think to put the year on it. It never occurred to me then that years later people would have a string of these posters displayed in their homes or their organ trailers. The poster design I originated continues to be used, with variations, up to this day, and it delights me that the “Happiest” theme also continues to be used.

I was asked to define why I believe that band organ music is “The Happiest Music on Earth.” Ask any organ owner who has seen people walk up to their instrument while it's playing, and see the innocent, almost child-like smiles begin to form on their faces. These smiles say: “Gee whiz, look at this, isn't this wonderful?” I feel the organ music put the smiles on those faces, and that's proof it is truly: “**The Happiest Music on Earth.**”

Ken Smith

Well, now we've done it! We have developed and encouraged a bunch of maniacs! Now, let's look at this more carefully. Todd (18) also noted that pleasant memories such as a first bike ride or great vacation were linked to the autonomic nervous system (this regulates the internal environment during both peaceful activity and stress, whether physical or emotional), and brain stem by way of endorphins and other neurotransmitters being released into the bloodstream.

Now we have two important terms: **Neurotransmitters** and **Endorphins**. It has been found that neurotransmitters (chemicals that float in the blood stream) can effect functions in the body, such as serotonin (which enhances calmness and sleepiness); norepinephrine (makes you feel energetic and focused) and endorphins (create a sense of euphoria or a “natural high”) (21). The term “endorphin” comes from endogenous meaning “produced within the body” and morphine. Remember, morphine is a chemical substance derived from opium that elevates mood

The brain responds to morphine because of morphine receptors in the brain. However, it is thought that they wouldn't be there unless it was a naturally occurring interchange—i.e., something to stimulate and something to receive the stimulus. (20). The first attempt to actually define and measure these receptors in the brain was by Dr. Vincent Dole in 1970 (3). His comment was “For why, would God have made opiate

receptors unless he had also made an endogenous morphine-like substance?”

With the hypothesis that there are substances that cause an euphoria/morphine-like response, we need to define what these might be. One study (5) has indicated that endorphin levels are controlled by dietary fat and that eating fat-like foods (such as chocolate) might improve one's mood. A more recent study (21) also indicates that the fat in chocolate stimulates a surge of endorphins and the author feels the phrases “addicted to chocolate” or “chocoholic” maybe are partially true. If this is the case and you apply this to the euphoria brought on by HME then we can follow up with organ owners being “addicted to the Happiest Music on Earth.” And, how many of us are?

Other events that can bring on euphoria include the phenomenon known as “runner's high,” a situation where a state of euphoria is caused by the stimuli of the stress of running (20). Apparently the continuous exercise contributes to an increased production of endorphins (1).

#### *How does all this work?*

As we hear the HME it enters the ear and stimulates the ear drum, causing a nerve signal to travel on the 8th Cranial nerve, which then finds its way to the brain (see **Figure 3**). The area of the brain that seems to be involved is the right cerebral hemi-

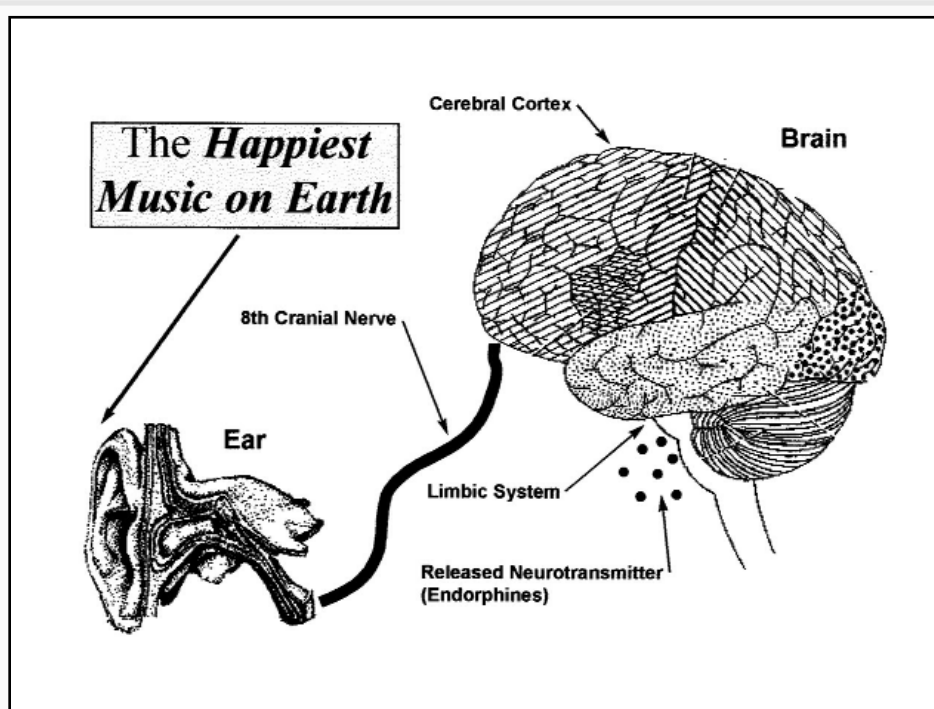


Figure 3. The pathway from the external ear to the brain and then to the limbic system, where the endorphines are released, is illustrated

sphere (the right and left cerebrum make up 85% of the weight of the human brain (12)) where identification of environment sounds as well as perception of most aspects of musical stimuli occur (9). The sensation of hearing and interpreting that sensation, or stimulus, as pleasant is converted in the brain into a peptide bond (a totally organic-all natural- molecule which is a protein building block). This peptide bond that forms the endorphin is comprised of 31 amino acids in the formation seen in **Figure 4**. It is produced in the pituitary gland in the brain (3).

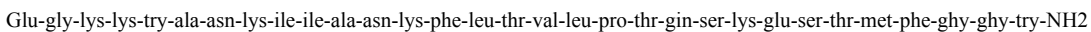


Figure 4. The peptide bond that comprises the endorphin neurotransmitter is represented above.

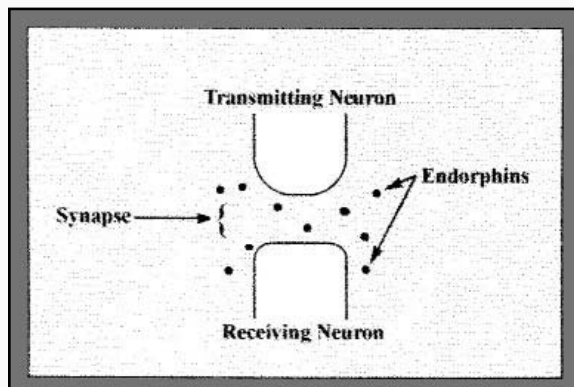


Figure 5. The neural synapse—the site where the endorphines can exert their effect, thus causing euphoria.

The resultant neurotransmitter, endorphin, then is released into the blood stream where it affects the synapse—the connection point between nerve cells (**Figure 5**). The synapse becomes flooded with this neurotransmitter and an “endorphin rush” is felt (the same as for heroin, morphine and other opiates). Apparently the affected synapses happen in the limbic system (the main regulator of emotion) just below the cerebral cortex (14). The receptors for opium are denser in this area than anywhere else in the body; consistent with the effects opioids have on emotional behavior. A resultant euphoria is produced that lessens anxiety and melancholy.

Nerve cells have two functions— one is to propagate a nerve impulse (or signal) and the other is to transmit that signal from one nerve ending (known as a neuron) to another. Once this propagation begins, drugs can

modify the amount of neurotransmitter released—such as the endorphin (6).

Whereas morphine and other opoids are addictive, the body’s endorphins are not. Enzymes break down endorphins as soon as they act at receptors, so they are never in contact long enough to form a dependency (13). Self (14) noted that “Euphoria stimulated by opioids can be characterized as “too much of a good thing”—because if opioids are not rapidly broken down, they continue to activate receptors for extended periods and produce a level of euphoria that is considerably

more intense than that initiated by endorphins.”

Putting this pathway in more simple terms, I quote Restake (12) who states “An emotion may be provoked by a thought in the cerebral cortex or by messages from the sense organs [such as listening to HME—author].” In either case, nerve impulses are produced that reach the limbic system. These impulses stimulate different areas of the system, depending on the kind of sensory message or thought. For example, the impulses might activate parts of the system that produces pleasant feelings involved in such emotions as joy and love. Or the impulses might stimulate areas that produce unpleasant feelings associated with anger or fear.”

### Our Current Feelings

We have explained the medical (physiologic/anatomic) response to the HME, but we still haven't come up with a reason why this music is, and other music isn't, the HME. First of

all, I think all would agree that for any musical instrument to exert its greatest effect it needs to be more-or-less in tune and operating correctly. It is hard to have a true smile on your face when the organ is out of tune or dropped notes are evident.

In doing research for this project I questioned many COAA members for their opinions on the subject of the HME. All but one were in consensus that band and fair organ, street organ and calliope music was indeed the HME. I received 26 responses and, while space does not permit repeating every complete response, a summarization is necessary.

Many organ aficionados (7) relate the HME to a former event in childhood life (**Figure 6**) such as Tom Meijer who related that:

The reason it makes you happy is perhaps you were happy when you heard it for the first time, maybe as a child . . . when you hear it now, you remember that you were so happy and feel as if it was when hearing it for the first time.

Likewise, Eve Chaillat Crasse notes that:

The reason is it is the music of our childhood. When the street organ plays, we see the world through our childhood and the world becomes beautiful again.

Fritz Gellerman and Nita Maerck noted:

We react to band organ music because it brings back early childhood memories of being put on a carousel and held safely there by a parent, where there is movement, bright lights, brilliantly colored but non-threatening animals, and simple lively music with a strong beat.



Figure 6. An attentive listener absorbs the happy music at an early age from this “organ grinder.”

Former carousel events were also a reason why organ-owning members consider the HME a true statement. As Angelo Rulli noted “Few adults remember the color of the carousel pony they rode, or other details, but they remember the music of the carousel.” Mary Pollock related:

I know the first time I heard the sound we were close to Dan Slack's organ and I could hardly wait

to get there. It reminds one of the circuses or merry-go-rounds and those memories are always pleasant.

Next, Tom Grace brings back lots of memories as he stated:

Carousel music brings thoughts and/or memories of a simpler time and carefree time; a Saturday or Sunday afternoon in the park at the carousel. It makes me think of State Fairs, boardwalks and amusement parks of the early years of the roaring 20s and the 4th of July. It makes you forget all the hassles and worries of everyday live-it's relaxing.

Likewise, Matthew Caulfield actually had me reliving the effects of the midway as he related:

. . . some of my happiest memories are of listening to the big band organ on the merry-go-round belting out the old tunes of the Tin Pan Alley days. Childhood memories, candy apples, cotton candy, the smell of caramel corn in the crisp night air, the lights of the merry-go-round, and the sound of the band organ.

Fred Dahlinger (8) brings up some important considerations with his response:

Unless someone is psychologically numb for a good reason, or tuned out of and ignoring the earthly world and its beauty, I seldom see a person not break into a smile, chatter a skip or a dance step when they come upon this type of music for the first time. Their naiveté disarms them and takes them back to childhood, where unrestrained emotion is allowed to manifest itself in public without learned social restraint. Those actions, to my way of thinking, are expressions of happiness. It's overtly seen in the two to three year olds that simply commence to smile and swing when they come upon an instrument; we've all seen and experienced it, and we always will. I don't think that you can say that without qualification for many, if any, other types of music [illustrated in **Figure 6**].



Figure 6. Young listeners enjoying a Dutch Street Organ

Photo: Dan Slack Archives

There may also be a physiological phenomenon at work. Perhaps the volume of the music places other senses into an inactive state, or they're overwhelmed. In that way the listener can focus on a single emotion-producing experience and turn off the filter that keeps out all other stimuli. With music being the most emotional-stirring of the senses, the ability to immediately connect with its impact perhaps is intensified.

His first comment is born out by researches, Anthony Storr (16) as he points out that:

“The natural human response to music is some kind of physical movement (let muscles of concert audience tense up); small children find it difficult to sing without moving their hands and feet.” Interestingly, he goes to say “Ancient Greek choruses danced as well as sang—he ban on movement on concert audiences is highly artificial. Music causes more physical arousal than novels or beautiful pictures [illustrated in **Figure 8**].”



Figure 8. Dancers, caught up in the tempo and beat of the Happiest Music on Earth. Photo: Fritz Gellerman

Likewise, Francy Reitz, one of the caretakers of Cafesjian's Carousel in St. Paul (along with its wonderful Wurlitzer Style 153), noted:

Their smiling faces and the rhythmic body movements reveal their reaction to the music. Little children often break out in spontaneous dancing, leaving no doubt that the Happiest Music on Earth is making people happy. That can't be said about very many other kinds of music.

In an interesting study by H.G. Walbott (19) involving music videos where he noted greater emotion from listening to music presented as a music video as opposed to just music itself. He felt that “music videos seem to “euphorize” the recipient.” Ron Smuck noted that effect in his response to me:

I know the music made by these amazing instruments is definitely the happiest music known to man or woman simply by watching their faces as they approach a band organ. Immediately they look at each other and begin to laugh, their pace quickens in the direction of the music, their kids start to skip and bounce along the ground. When they get in front of the instrument everyone starts to point at things they see and then they try to talk louder than the organ. Finally, when time runs out and they have to leave, I always see them looking back longingly or lovingly at the organ and every once in a while some little kid breaks away from his mom's arms and runs back to the organ for one last look. No other music that I know of has an effect on folks like this so it's simply got to be the happiest music on earth.

Our organ grinder members can relate to the previous research paper, much as Angelo Rulli did when he mentioned:

When a grinder is included, the listener is treated to a character that typically is trying to entertain and bring a smile [illustrated in **Figure 9**, back cover].

There are no depressing lyrics and the music is “bouncy” and full of energy.

Many responders felt the way the music was played seemed to qualify it as the HME including Ron Wolf who noted that:

... the tunes which are played on these organs are primarily upbeat in tempo and the rhythms are uncomplicated (Waltz-Fox Trot-March), while the pipe voices are sweet and mellow in most cases.

Tim Trager concurs as he responded by saying:

Most band organ music tends to be upbeat and lively! Most American enthusiasts I know first became familiar with band organ music by listening to Wurlitzer arrangements. Even the waltzes on Wurlitzer rolls are lively. I do not think a Wurlitzer band organ “blues” roll exists! Also, band organs are found in happy and fun environments like the carnivals and amusement parks, which lend to the aura of the instruments. I doubt that the owners of these places ever wanted depressing music or somber music for their organs ... I think they knew that it was the organ music that set the mood for the visitors. Thus, depressing rolls would never sell. So, as a consequence, you end up with the Happiest Music on Earth!

Gerry Bay noted that:

There are no depressing lyrics and the music is “bouncy” and full of energy.

Art Reblitz (11) supported this aspect in his response (see inset, this page). Art's thoughts have also been borne out in my research as K. D. Olsen (10) noted in his dissertation of *The Effect of Music on the Mind* where he was reviewing different effects of music and stated:

Another study was done on 205 people testing the effects of major and minor modes. Minor mode gave the feelings of . . . melancholy, mournful, gloomy, depressing . . . while major mode most often gave the feelings of . . . happy, sprightly, cheerful, joyous, and bright.

Sonya Strevy (17) in her thesis on using music to release endorphins to aid in pain relief for patient related:

Different types of music affects us in different ways: music with a lot of brass, percussion, bass and electronic sounds primarily affects the body, helping us feel stronger and more energetic.

### Summary

The phrase, the Happiest Music on Earth, started innocently enough about 20 years ago. Now it has grown to the proportions of being used by nearly every gathering of fair and band and street organs promoting its event. The pathways of taking the HME and converting it into a neurological signal, enhanced by the euphoria released by the endorphins to the end stage in the brain has been explained.

*Perhaps the precision of a well-arranged roll, book or cylinder contributes to the "happy" sound.*

The reason why it has the effect on the listener, however, still remains unclear. The rational of the strong beat of the music, along with major chords seems to be a deciding factor. The history of great arrangers (old and current) of our mechanical organ music is a factor that can't be ignored. Certainly, the allure of the beautiful facades of our organs along with shiny brass pipework adds to this effect.

One thing remains clear, the same effect (the Happiest Music on Earth) on our emotions would not occur with a mechanical musical instrument rally consisting of snuffboxes, musical boxes or player pianos. There truly is something unique and special about mechanical organs that creates this special sound, ***The Happiest Music on Earth!***

Ron Bopp, a semi-retired physician, is currently the editor and publisher of the *Carousel Organ*. Digging into medical information is not new to Ron so this article gives an excellent opportunity to combine occupation with pleasure.

## "Happy" Sound

Music is generally thought to be comprised of melody, harmony, and rhythm. Counterpoint—or counter melody—is also important. Good mechanical music includes all of these elements, a refreshing reminder of the days when most live music did too, in contrast to the rhythmic grunting that comprises rap "music" pouring forth from boom boxes today. Perhaps the precision of a well-arranged roll, book or cylinder contributes to the "happy" sound. Mechanical music with lively rhythm is especially invigorating to me.

I like all sorts of music, and I'm fascinated by mechanical things. As I was growing up, my mother taught piano, and I was always fascinated to watch the piano action working while she played . . . I went on to get a degree in music education, and continue to be one of the few professionally trained musicians in contemporary times who really likes mechanical music. To this day, I can state that the experience of hearing a good music machine playing a well-arranged piece of music is still pleasing to me, apart from the the lifetime of positive associations that it now carries with it.

Art Reblitz

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