

Music has power to bring us together, boost our brains

Dr. Larry Sherman might have a future as a diplomat. You know, in case this scientific genius thing doesn't work out.

Sherman, a professor of neuroscience at Oregon Health & Science University, delivered a multimedia presentation Wednesday at Kiggins Theatre about music and its impact on the brain. It was part of the "Science on Tap" series, which organizer Amanda Thomas introduced by saying, "I think having people be smarter is better."

Agreed. But that has nothing to do with Sherman's abilities as a statesman. No, those became evident after the good doctor induced the standing-room-only audience into a brief singalong to

The Beatles' "Hey Jude." Sherman noted that singing or playing in a group increases dopamine in participants, and the bigger the group the better:

"Can you imagine what would happen if Congress sang together?" he asked. Enthusiastic applause ensued.

As a diplomat, Sherman has nothing on the late Arnold Palmer. Years ago, during the Gulf War, I was at a press conference in which the golfing great went on a tangent and suggested the conflict could be resolved if only Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein were a golfer, because golf brings people together.

Hey, why not? Maybe President Trump can try that with Kim Jong Un. According to North Korea's



official state media, Kim shot a 38-under-par score of 34 with five holes-in-one the first time he played golf, which would put him atop the Dear Leader Board in any tournament. And if you can't believe North Korea's state media, who can you believe?

Anyway, Sherman talked about the neurology of the brain and about evidence that playing an instrument and learning new songs can help ward off the effects of dementia or Alzheimer's. He talked about how "the act of learning to play an instrument can structurally and functionally change the brain" and how "if you challenge your brain, you're structurally altering your brain." And he had singer/composer/pianist Naomi LaViolette help demonstrate the intricacies and brain connections involved with playing music.

For the musicians in the audience, all of this undoubtedly provided proof that they are going to live healthy lives for another 100 years or so. But for those of us who don't play an instrument yet consider obsessively *listening* to music to be a spiritual event, there was disappointment. "Listening to music can't improve the brain," Sherman said, although he did point out there are benefits.

Ideas into my brain

Au contraire. Sherman might have a Ph.D. and might have conducted a study called "Hyaluronate in aging-related gliosis and demyelination," but he has nothing on O2. The music and entertainment venue in London recently commissioned a "scientific study" that determined attending concerts can increase your lifespan. The press release says frequent concert attendance "could extend life expectancy by NINE years," which means I will be healthy for a long time.

Never mind that O2 officials were using results of the "study" to sell concert tickets. If you can't

believe the scientists at a concert venue, who can you believe?

The O2 findings could lead to an examination of good science vs. bad science. That discussion seems particularly important in this age of information overload, but we'll save it for another time.

Instead, we shall mention a quote shared by Sherman from 19th century British novelist George Eliot, who was actually Mary Anne Evans writing under a pen name: "I think I should have no other mortal wants, if I could always have plenty of music. It seems to infuse strength into my limbs and ideas into my brain. Life seems to go on without effort, when I am filled with music." That quote, um, struck a chord, and I am determined to have it carved into my headstone when the time comes. But for now we will simply revel in confirmation of our belief in the power of music — and encourage Congress to have a singalong.

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