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Sonic stimulation

Science still cannot explain why we value music so highly — but humanity wouldn't be the same without it

BY GUY DAMMANN
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Steven Pinker laid down the evolutionary-psychological law about music. "Music," he put it, "is auditory cheesecake." For those who avoid cheesecake, whether administered orally or aurally, he added: music is "a cocktail of recreational drugs that we ingest ... to stimulate a mass of pleasure circuits at once."

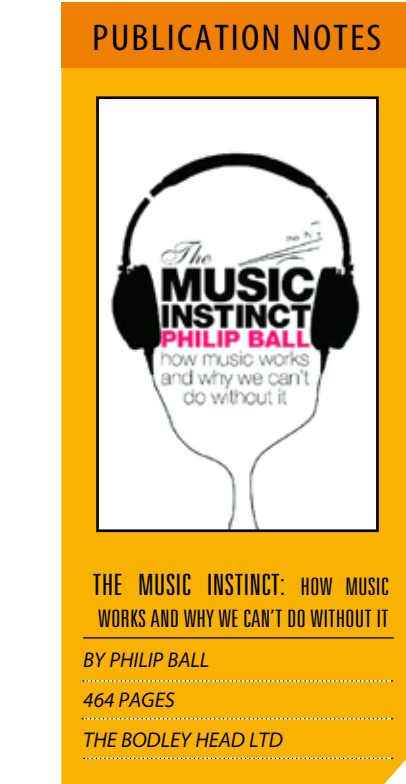
Understandably, some people took against this remark. Humanity accords cheesecake (and even recreational drugs) a certain respect, but to equate them with music? A universal element of human culture that is at the same time unknown in animal societies, music seems to reach to the very core of what it means to be human. The sense of communal identity in many tribal societies is built and maintained through musical activity, while the average Western citizen allows music a role in his or her sense of individual identity vastly more formative than any other art form.

Those taking umbrage at Pinker's cheesecake quip fell into two opposing camps. On the side of evolutionary science, many thought he had simply failed to grasp the nettle: Since it is indisputably the case that humankind in some sense needs music, there must be an evolutionary account that explains this need along the lines attempted by Darwin's theory of sexual selection. On the side of the humanities, Pinker had gone wrong in appearing to trivialize music simply because science proved unable to offer a convincing explanation as to why we should value it.

Music has been understood as lying at the origins of distinctively human culture — or at the heart of our attempt at self-definition — for centuries. In the 18th century, both Condillac and Rousseau identified music, alongside language, as separating man from animal, substituting biblical legends of the fall of man with something both more secular and optimistic. Indeed, Rousseau went so far as to suggest that music's importance lay precisely in offering alienated modern man a kind of spiritual link with his less deprived ancestors. Since then, of course, Darwinian accounts of man's ascent have flourished, but it is only recently that advances in cognitive neuroscience and evolutionary psychology have suggested the possibility of providing scientific answers to the question of why the play of abstract sounds should have become something, in Philip Ball's phrase, "we can't do without."

Ball is an award-winning popular science writer. His "biography" of water stands as an exemplar among the glut of synecdochic histories of this kind, and the more recent *Universe of Stone*, about the cathedral at Chartres, succeeds admirably in communicating to its readers the same sense of wonder that allowed medieval minds to conjure heaven in stone and glass. His latest book is exemplary for different reasons. While the title obviously nods in the direction of Pinker's book *The Language Instinct*, his method is much more modest, taking the form of a survey of current knowledge and, more importantly, its limits.

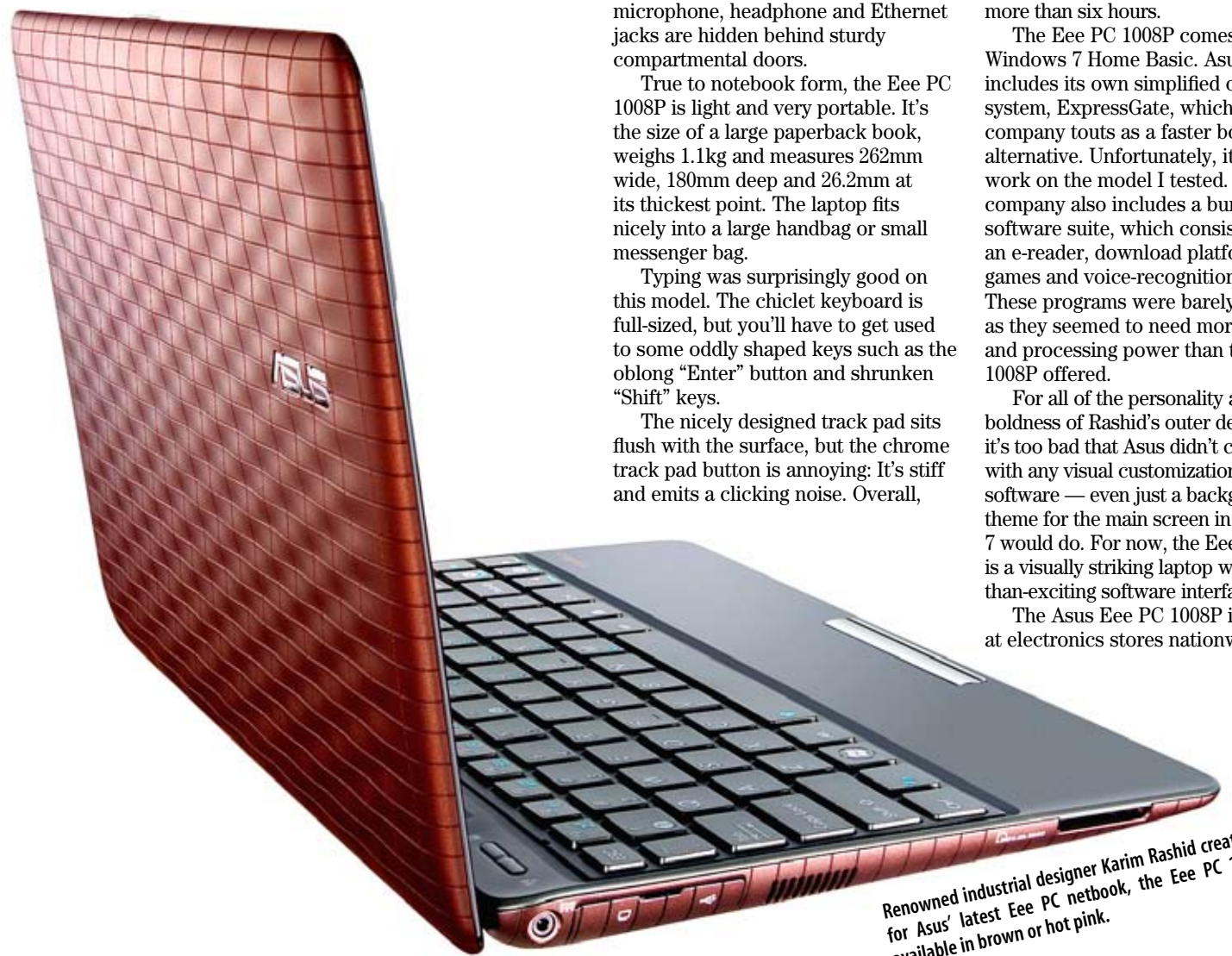
Much as in a primer in the old-fashioned sense, Ball fits between rudimentary briefings on chords, scales and sound-waves, to accounts offered by scientists,



philosophers, musicologists and (for once) musicians themselves, trading narratives against each other rather than sculpting a grand one of his own. Popular songs are used to label theories: The theory that music is instrumental in group selection and survival is advanced under the banner of the New Seekers' *I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing*, while the "Ronettes theory" (*Be My Baby*) covers the idea that adult musicality is an extension of the process of cognitive stimulation that begins with the sounds mothers (historically) and fathers (more and more) make to soothe and excite their infant offspring. The pace is kept fast throughout, with pull-out boxes to fill knowledge gaps where necessary — useful even for specialist readership: Though a professional writer on music myself, I have somehow managed to get by without bothering to learn how the human ear works.

Despite its breezy tone, *The Music Instinct's* greatest virtue consists in conveying the impression that answers to genuine questions about music won't come to anyone in too much of a hurry. Music, after all, is something we spend time engaged in playing, listening to, studying, practicing and loving. Indeed, it is the necessarily temporal structure of musical experience, and the way that musical "ideas" cannot be reduced to instantly communicable concepts, that guarantees its importance to us.

We do not love music because it exercises our brains or makes us more attractive to members of the opposite sex, but because we have lived with it since we came into being. It is entwined in our common and individual consciousness to the extent that, simply put, we would not be ourselves without it. In contemplating the mysteries of music we are also thereby contemplating the mystery of ourselves. Because of this, easy answers tend to be irrelevant. Ball, thankfully, doesn't try to provide any, but rather sends the reader back to the music a better listener.



BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER

The netbook, the popular name for small, low-cost notebook computers, has come a long way since Asus (華碩) released the first Eee PC model in 2007. The Taiwanese manufacturer currently offers dozens of Eee PC netbooks, which are attracting a growing number of users who want something that can handle basic multimedia and Internet surfing and is easy to carry.

Asus is aiming for the fashion conscious with its first designer netbook, the Eee PC 1008P, which boasts an eye-catching exterior created by renowned industrial designer Karim Rashid. Retailing for around NT\$19,000, you're paying a little more for the looks of this Eee PC model, which boasts run-of-the-mill specs for a netbook: a 10.1-inch LED screen, Intel Atom N450 processor, 1GB of RAM, and 250 gigabyte hard drive.

Rashid's outer casing is certainly unique. Available in a handsome matte brown color or hot pink, the exterior is made of a plastic material shaped in an intricate grid of ripples, which Asus refers to as a "techno-chic digi-wave" design.

This Eee PC is easy to grip and simply nice to hold. The surface feels smooth and the ripples are contoured to the fingertips. Despite the precise grid-like pattern, the casing almost feels handmade. Up close, it brings to mind the braids of a woven basket. More importantly, it feels solid and functional. There are no signs of flimsiness, and the overall shape of the laptop is clean and smooth, with nothing sticking out — consistent with Asus' "seashell" line of Eee PCs. The two USB ports, SD card slot and the microphone, headphone and Ethernet jacks are hidden behind sturdy compartmental doors.

True to notebook form, the Eee PC 1008P is light and very portable. It's the size of a large paperback book, weighs 1.1kg and measures 262mm wide, 180mm deep and 26.2mm at its thickest point. The laptop fits nicely into a large handbag or small messenger bag.

Typing was surprisingly good on this model. The chiclet keyboard is full-sized, but you'll have to get used to some oddly shaped keys such as the oblong "Enter" button and shrunken "Shift" keys.

The nicely designed track pad sits flush with the surface, but the chrome track pad button is annoying: It's stiff and emits a clicking noise. Overall,



navigating was a so-so experience, as it is on most netbooks — there's just not enough space for the track pad. Two finger-scrolling works fairly well, but there was a slight lag. The other multitouch functions felt awkward and unresponsive — I gave up trying to figure them out.

Performance-wise, the Eee PC 1008P does a reasonable job when it comes to surfing the Net, listening to music, watching video and editing documents. Internet Explorer was not blazingly fast, but it never dragged long enough for me to get up from my chair, even with three or four tabs open. It's fast enough for word processing — I spent an hour typing my notes for this review on Microsoft Word and the only thing that bothered me was the small screen space. For video, Windows Media Player played the 720p HD trailer for *Avatar* without a hiccup, but the 1080p version was full of lags. I also made an hour-long video call on Skype, which worked perfectly.

Asus claims a battery life of six hours for the Eee PC 1008P. I managed around four hours with Wi-Fi constantly on and music playing while surfing the Web. If long battery life is your priority, then look to other similar models such as the Eee PC 1005HA, which clocks in more than six hours.

The Eee PC 1008P comes with Windows 7 Home Basic. Asus also includes its own simplified operating system, ExpressGate, which the company touts as a faster boot-up alternative. Unfortunately, it didn't work on the model I tested. The company also includes a bundled software suite, which consists of an e-reader, download platform for games and voice-recognition system. These programs were barely usable as they seemed to need more memory and processing power than the Eee PC 1008P offered.

For all of the personality and boldness of Rashid's outer design, it's too bad that Asus didn't come up with any visual customizations in the software — even just a background theme for the main screen in Windows 7 would do. For now, the Eee PC 1008P is a visually striking laptop with a less-than-exciting software interface.

The Asus Eee PC 1008P is available at electronics stores nationwide.

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The final days of Leo Tolstoy

'The Last Station,' which has recently been made into a movie, is an imaginative account of the end of the Russian author's life, when he struggled to reconcile his fame and fortune with his philosophy of pacifism, self-sufficiency and compassion

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Following the release of *The Last Station*, the new movie on the final days of Tolstoy starring Christopher Plummer and Helen Mirren, it seems appropriate to consider the novel of the same name on which it's based. It's not without interest that the advance proof copy for the book's latest edition I read stated "Major new movie in production starring Anthony Hopkins and Meryl Streep," but that just goes to show how movies sell books.

One of the characteristics of the 19th century was the way its major artists were treated as gurus, or leaders of new movements. Wagner had his tribe of Wagnerites, and societies were set up all over the UK to work out the philosophy concealed in the poems of Robert Browning. But this tendency was nowhere more pronounced than with Tolstoy, the supreme Russian novelist who, in later life, developed a philosophy of pacifism, vegetarianism,

self-sufficiency and compassion of which there had been little foretaste in his most celebrated novels. Tolstoyan communities dedicated to these principles were set up all over the world, and a non-violent Tolstoyism became an international philosophy influencing men as diverse as Mahatma Gandhi and, arguably, Martin Luther King.

How to relate this late-life guru status with the novels written in middle age by an aristocrat who had spent a lot of time as an army officer has always been problematic. The most brilliant solution was offered by the historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin, who stumbled on an ancient Greek inscription "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." He quickly started dividing famous writers into foxes and hedgehogs, and came to the conclusion in Tolstoy's case that he was by nature a fox, but one who thought he ought to be a hedgehog. Thus the man who in his greatest novels

had displayed an understanding of a huge variety of human beings, without committing himself to overly praising or condemning any of them, turned into a visionary who thought all men should adhere to one overwhelming and redeeming philosophy.

Jay Parini has constructed an intriguing novel featuring the 82-year-old Tolstoy on his country estate of Yasnaya Polyana surrounded by scheming acolytes and even more problematic family members. The main contention is between his wife, Sofya Andreyevna, who wants to keep his legacy within the family, and outsiders, who essentially have the support of the great man himself, who want his manuscripts and works to be freely available to all mankind.

But Tolstoy himself is riven with doubts. Becoming more and more convinced that it was unjust for him to exist in comparative luxury while the peasants in the surrounding countryside wanted for basic necessities, the real-

life Tolstoy one day walked out of his home and caught a train (traveling in the cheapest class), intent on embarking on a new life as a penniless mendicant. The fact that he was known and recognized by just about everyone in Russia didn't deter him. Unfortunately, however, his health was very poor, and before long he died at Astapovo railway station, the "last station" of the book's title.

Parini organizes his material into chapters and shorter sections, each narrated by a different character. Most sections are imagined, but there are also real letters and diary excerpts, including one important letter from Tolstoy to Gandhi. I was slightly perplexed, however, when coming across some poems attributed to "J.P.," and couldn't be sure which character this represented. Then I suddenly realized it was the author himself, Jay Parini, who'd visited the woods through which Tolstoy had often walked and recorded his impressions in verse.

The general picture Parini paints is of a household of scribblers. Not only was Tolstoy the world's most celebrated author, but everyone else was busy recording his movements and conversation, listening in awe and then hurrying back to their rooms to write it all down. The character Bulgakov, for instance, a convinced Tolstoyite, has been sent to Yasnaya Polyana to record the old man's doings and report them back, together with the activities of his daughter Sasha, to a character called Chertkov, the prime mover in the campaign to save the great man's heritage for posterity.

Parini states that he found a copy of Bulgakov's diary in a used bookstore in Naples, and subsequently read the diaries of Sofya Andreyevna, Sasha, the local doctor Dushan Makovitsky, and many more. Much of the novel is a mosaic of such diary excerpts, so that a multi-viewpoint network is developed, with Tolstoy himself as only one of the participants.

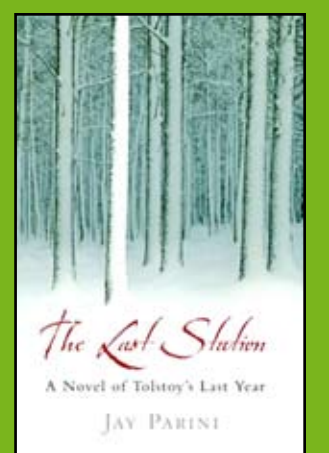
Tolstoy died in November 1910,

so the author has the advantage of being able to incorporate many evocations of the Russian countryside in autumn — cold, crisp, with golden woods and brilliant blue skies. The sections purportedly written by Sofya Andreyevna also serve to fill in flashbacks to Tolstoy's youth — his first meeting with his future wife, as well as the famous occasion when he showed her his account of all the other women he'd had sexual congress with on the night of their marriage.

There are innumerable incidental items of interest — Tolstoy's habit of "vegetarian hunting" (going into the woods to observe birds and animals rather than to shoot them), that his favorite author was Rousseau, that he objected to Shaw's persistent frivolity, and of course his well-known dislike of Shakespeare (no consistent philosophy — too much the fox, in other words).

What remains most unforgettable, however, is the aged Tolstoy's insistence that it was totally unac-

PUBLICATION NOTES



THE LAST STATION

BY JAY PARINI
372 PAGES
ANCHOR

ceptable for states to send out their young to kill the young of other states in horrific wars. Yet less than four years after his death Europe, Russia included, was to embark on the most grotesque orgy of government-inspired killing the world had ever seen.

This is an excellent novel, and if the film equals it in interest it will be well worth catching.