

Ecstatic Meditation: Brahms, take me away!

(Brief Excerpts)

Fri, Apr 2, 2010

Listening to great music is often described as a religious experience. Why not take your listening to the next level and make it a real meditation?

Whether you believe in a spiritual component, the practice of meditation is universally accepted as a great thing for body, mind and soul. The object of any meditation practice is to clear the chatter of your mind, to calm your mind in a way that is different from sleep. This process can have innumerable benefits, and music can help.

First, set aside 10 to 30 minutes in a place where you can listen undisturbed. Put away all reading materials, knitting or whatever else you usually do while you listen to music — during Ecstatic Meditation, you are just listening.

Focus on the music and let your mind relax. When the chatter starts up, just recognize it for what it is and let it go, gently bringing your focus back to the music you are listening to. Anyone who has been instructed in meditation will recognize this technique, though the practice is traditionally to bring your attention back on your breath. With Ecstatic Meditation, bring your attention back to the music.

Virtually any music can work for Ecstatic Meditation, but in the beginning, focus on chamber music of a maximum 30-minute duration. Chamber music is particularly effective, because you can focus on the individual parts (e.g., the violin, the piano, etc.) or how the instruments blend together. Initially, it's much more difficult to do this with larger-scale works.

Something that may seem counterintuitive is that you're not just looking for relaxing, mellowing music. No way! While it's fine to nod off during Ecstatic Meditation (which means you're just exhausted!), the aim is to remain engaged. So the music can vary from soft and gentle to wildly energetic.

While you are listening, you can let go of your own feelings and sensations and focus on the emotion of the music — the joy, the brilliance, the melancholy, whatever qualities you find meaningful in the piece you are listening to. Your problems will not go away, but when you return from your meditation, you'll be in a better, stronger frame of mind to resolve them.