



Written by [James Heiser](#) on March 1, 2010

UK Torturing Youth With Classical Music

Can music be a weapon? Undoubtedly Gen. Manuel Noriega thought so, when U.S. troops blasted his hideout — the apostolic nunciature — with rock music during the invasion of Panama in December 1989. According to the United States Southern Command After Action Report detailing the events of “Operation Just Cause,” troops were asked to furnish suggestions for the “play list” of tunes for blasting the Panamanian dictator during the siege of the nunciature:



We opened the request line 21 December. Requests were light until late in the day and Friday when the started picking up.... When the troops started coming in from the field, the requests became quite imaginative....

... On 27 December someone who identified himself as a member of the PSYOPS team from Fort Bragg called to tell us what they were doing with their loud speakers. We already had reports on radio news as to what was happening. We had been receiving requests with a “musical message” for Noriega either by the words or the song title, but as soon as the media picked up on the story, those types of requests increased dramatically.

The use of music in Psychological Operations has apparently become a regular element of breaking the will of detainees being held as part of the “War on Terror.” As [an article](#) at *New York* magazine’s website explains it:

So what is it specifically about music that gives it the potential to torture? Loud music can’t be shut out in the same way that loud speech can. Neurologist Oliver Sacks, author of the book *Musicophilia*, once referred to “musical brainworms, the annoyingly repetitive musical phrases that may run through one’s mind for days on end.” That’s partly what makes effective pop music.

But, strangely, what makes effective “acoustic bombardment” is the very unfamiliarity of the music to non-Western ears. “Our brains automatically process music and try to figure out what comes next,” says Daniel Levitin, a psychology professor at McGill and author of *This Is Your Brain on Music*. Because the brain can’t help but anticipate music’s next steps, “any Western music would have done the trick,” he says. “These were tonal structures the detainees’ brains can’t figure out. They kept trying, and they kept failing. Just as if I made you listen to Chinese opera, it’d probably drive you crazy.”

Thus it appears that the power to torture through music is not limited the “pop music” — for those raised without exposure to classical music it appears that playing Mozart can have the same effect on one’s target audience. And as citizens of the United Kingdom are now finding out, torture is not just for dictators and terrorists anymore.



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In an article at Reason.com, "[Weaponizing Mozart](#)," Brendan O'Neill observes that classical music is becoming one of the State's favorite weapons against the nation's youth.

In recent years Britain has become the Willy Wonka of social control, churning out increasingly creepy, bizarre, and fantastic methods for policing the populace. But our weaponization of classical music — where Mozart, Beethoven, and other greats have been turned into tools of state repression — marks a new low. ...

Britain might not make steel anymore, or cars, or pop music worth listening to, but, boy, are we world-beaters when it comes to tyranny. And now classical music, which was once taught to young people as a way of elevating their minds and tingling their souls, is being mined for its potential as a deterrent against bad behavior.

In January it was revealed that West Park School, in Derby in the midlands of England, was "subjecting" (its words) badly behaved children to Mozart and others. In "special detentions," the children are forced to endure two hours of classical music both as a relaxant (the headmaster claims it calms them down) and as a deterrent against future bad behavior (apparently the number of disruptive pupils has fallen by 60 per cent since the detentions were introduced.)

One news report says some of the children who have endured this Mozart authoritarianism now find classical music unbearable. As one critical commentator said, they will probably "go into adulthood associating great music — the most bewitchingly lovely sounds on Earth — with a punitive slap on the chops." This is what passes for education in Britain today: teaching kids to think "Danger!" whenever they hear Mozart's Requiem or some other piece of musical genius.

There is something perverse about using a cultural treasure as a means of punishment. Perhaps it is an act of mercy that Michelangelo's Pieta is safely ensconced in St. Peter's Basilica, or British authorities might be using the weight of the marble statue to crush miscreants... literally.

As O'Neill observes:

The weaponization of classical music speaks volumes about the British elite's authoritarianism and cultural backwardness. They're so desperate to control youth —but from a distance, without actually having to engage with them — that they will film their every move, fire high-pitched noises in their ears, shine lights in their eyes, and bombard them with Mozart. And they have so little faith in young people's intellectual abilities, in their capacity and their willingness to engage with humanity's highest forms of art, that they imagine Beethoven and Mozart and others will be repugnant to young ears. Of course, this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The dangerous message being sent to young people is clear: 1) you are scum; 2) classical music is not a wonder of the human world, it's a repellent against mildly anti-social behavior.

Photo of Sir Simon Rattle, the chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra: AP Images



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