

Music of Sleep & Dreams
Music of Nature VI
Professor Milton Mermikides
19th June 2026

Music and Sleep



Figure 1: (Left) Orpheus with his lyre charming Cerberus –the three-headed guardian of Hades – to sleep. (19th-century unknown artist). (Centre) Plato putting animals to sleep with organ music. (British Library Collection, Or. 12208, fol. 298r) (Right) Hermes' music lulling to sleep the many-eyed giant Argos (Alejandro de la Cruz, 1773)

The Nature of Music series concludes with an investigation of the strange relationship between music and sleep. There are several themes which connect these two worlds. Both are essential to humans, sleep being a physiological imperative, and music – judging by anthropological evidence – an apparent inevitability in human culture. Furthermore, despite their universality and centrality to our lives, music and sleep remain relative mysteries to us. We are largely unconscious during both. Even the most learned music scholar ultimately encounters a locked door when trying to unpack the musical listening experience and creative act, and yet our sleeping minds are remarkably open to music – studies show responses to both musical rhythm and harmony during sleep. It's as if there is a sonic gatekeeper curating what is fed to us while we sleep. Understandably, our names and loud sounds are allowed through the gates, but strangely so it seems are elements of music. Both music and dreams also share what might be described as a 'secret grammar'. There is a sense to them that we comprehend in the moment, but escapes easy explanation: a dream-logic.

It is for such reasons perhaps that the interaction of music and sleep appears in ancient myths and literature. such as that of Orpheus who lulls Cerberus, the monstrous dog guarding Hades, into sleep so he

may descend in search of Eurydice. Similarly, Hermes in order to rescue Io, uses music to entrance the many-eyed all-seeing giant Argos (see Figure 1). Stories survive of Plato, Aristotle, and Persian musicians such as Safī al-Dīn being able to control the sleep of both beasts and people with music. And Shakespeare, for whom music and sleep are recurring themes, depicts Ariel's "solemn music" magically lulling the courtiers into sleep in *The Tempest* (Act 2, Scene 1). Music here is transformative: a force that not only can control the consciousness of others but opens a passage between worlds.

Endless Lullabies

"Little brother, little brother ...

This lullaby continues in the every part of the garden,

And all through the house, this lullaby is endless,

Lullaby, little brother, little brother,

Even if you cry and cry, I will carry you."

Translated from the Solomon Islands lullaby *Roragwela* presented in my very first Gresham lecture.

Music has accompanied sleep for as long as humans have recorded experience. The oldest known lullaby survives on a 4,000-year-old Babylonian clay tablet, its text warning a crying infant not to disturb the household gods. Even in antiquity, music for sleep already combined tenderness, ritual, fear, and practical necessity. Across cultures, caregivers discovered that patterned sound could calm the body, regulate emotion, and shape transitions between wakefulness and unconsciousness long before neuroscience began to explain why.



Figure 2: *Ritual to Quiet a Child* (YPM BC 009132, NBC 6151 ≈4000 year old clay tablet, a 'lullaby' and one of the oldest surviving pieces of musical text.

Lullabies appear in approximately 98% of surveyed societies, making them one of the most universal musical practices known. While specific songs differ enormously, their functions are remarkably stable: soothing distress, regulating arousal, masking environmental noise, and establishing emotional security around sleep. Children and adult listeners from around the world can successfully identify a lullaby from songs in other categories, even when the music is from an unfamiliar culture or sung in an unfamiliar language. Historically, lullabies were transmitted orally, predominantly through maternal lineage. Many parents sing the same songs they themselves heard in childhood. This continuity gives sleep music a

peculiar status in musical history: unlike concert music or ritual music, it survives less through notation than through intimate repetition inside families. Grandparents, especially grandmothers, often become custodians of these traditions during periods of social instability or economic hardship.

Like the ancient myths where music-induced sleep occurs in moments of great danger, the content of lullabies is often stranger and darker than modern sentimentality suggests. Alongside images of stars, dreams, and rocking cradles are themes of danger, death, exhaustion, and social anxiety. “Rock-a-bye Baby,” for example, imagines an infant falling from a treetop cradle. Lullabies from wartime regions describe air raids and insecurity. Japanese lullabies from impoverished rural communities encoded the frustrations of overworked nannies and mothers unable to speak openly about hardship. Sleep songs often functioned not only to calm infants, but also to regulate the emotions of exhausted caregivers themselves.

Modern science has begun to explain why these practices emerged independently across cultures. Lullabies possess striking acoustic regularities. Compared with playful songs, they are slower, softer, lower in pitch, more repetitive, and less rhythmically complex. Descending melodic contours predominate, along with reduced pitch variability and predictable phrasing. Even caregivers without formal musical training spontaneously simplify and slow their singing when trying to soothe infants. Infants appear biologically prepared to respond to these characteristics. Studies using electroencephalography show stronger neural tracking when infants hear lullabies rather than playful songs. Six-month-old infants prefer unfamiliar lullabies sung at lower pitches, even in foreign languages. In a major cross-cultural study, infants exposed to unfamiliar lullabies exhibited reduced heart rate, smaller pupil size, and lower skin conductance, all markers of physiological relaxation. Remarkably, these calming effects occurred even when the songs came from cultures entirely unfamiliar to the listener. This suggests that certain acoustic properties of lullabies exploit universal features of human perception and autonomic regulation.

Researchers increasingly describe lullabies as multimodal regulatory systems rather than merely songs. Their effects arise not only from melody but from touch, rocking, darkness, warmth, rhythmic breathing, and social contagion between caregiver and infant. Infants physically synchronize with the emotional state of the adult holding them. If the parent relaxes while singing, the infant’s physiology often follows. This relationship between rhythm and bodily regulation may help explain why repetitive sound so readily alters consciousness. Slow pulse rates encourage parasympathetic nervous system activation, lowering arousal and heart rate. Repetition reduces cognitive surprise and predictive uncertainty. Their predictability creates a stable auditory environment against which the nervous system can safely disengage vigilance. We constantly listen while we sleep, but the gatekeeper does not bother us when there is a safe predictability. This helps explain why ambient music, classical instrumental music, white noise, nature sounds and music we already know features highly in our sleep playlists.

Clinical applications have expanded rapidly. In neonatal intensive care units, carefully controlled lullaby interventions can stabilize premature infants’ heart rate, oxygen saturation, feeding behaviour, and sleep-wake cycles. Live maternal singing often outperforms recorded music, particularly when infants hear their own mother’s voice rather than generic instrumental recordings. Music therapy has also shown benefits for hospitalized children undergoing cancer treatment, reducing anxiety and improving sleep quality. Among older adults, meta-analyses suggest that music interventions reliably improve sleep quality without the side effects associated with sedative medication. .

The history of music as a sleep aid therefore reveals an unusual continuity between prehistoric caregiving, literary imagination, and contemporary neuroscience. Across millennia, humans discovered empirically that slow, repetitive, predictable sound could regulate breathing, emotion, and attention, shaping the transition into sleep. Science now explains many of these effects through physiology, entrainment, conditioning, and social bonding, but the underlying practice has changed surprisingly little. We continue to pass on this ancient practice.

Dreaming up Music

The dreamworld from the trance states of the Sufi, Shona, to the reveries and nocturnes of the Romantic and the strange imaginary landscapes of the Beatles is embedded in musical depiction. Such dream music tends to possess *through-composed* stream of consciousness (rather than typically structured) forms, magical shifts in tonality, hypnotic ambiguous rhythms, and floating harmonies and modes.¹ So music can depict dream-like states but dreams are sometimes used more directly in musical creation.. Indeed, dreams have long been associated with inspiration across literature, art, and even science. Samuel Taylor Coleridge claimed that *Kubla Khan* arrived almost fully formed during a dream, while Mary Shelley described the central image of *Frankenstein* emerging from a nightmare. Science offers similar examples: the chemist August Kekulé reportedly conceived the ring structure of benzene after dreaming of a snake seizing its own tail, and physiologist Otto Loewi devised the experiment proving chemical neurotransmission after waking from a dream with the idea in mind. So it is therefore unsurprising that musicians, too, have described melodies and compositions emerging from sleep. One of the most famous examples is Giuseppe Tartini's *Devil's Trill Sonata*. Tartini claimed that he dreamed the Devil appeared beside his bed and played a violin sonata of astonishing brilliance. Upon waking, he hurried to his instrument to reconstruct what he had heard, later writing that the Devil's playing was "so wonderful and so beautiful" as he had "never even conceived." The written sonata, he admitted, was only a shadow of the dream original.

The melody of *Yesterday* reportedly came to Paul McCartney fully formed upon waking in the London home of Jane Asher's family. Assuming he must unconsciously have borrowed it, McCartney spent weeks asking friends whether they recognized the tune. Until proper lyrics emerged, he preserved the melody using the placeholder line: "Scrambled eggs, oh my baby how I love your legs." Dreams in music are often tied not only to invention but also to memory and emotion. Jimi Hendrix spoke about being deeply inspired by a dream involving his mother – she was being carried on a caravan and said to Jimi "I'll be seeing you" as the sun cast "leaf patterns across her face". After her passing, the dream lingered: "some dreams you don't ever forget", Jimi would later say.

Both Mozart and Richard Wagner reportedly had musical ideas arrive during half-sleep states. The entire solo sections of *Sweet Home Alabama* "absolutely note for note" came to Lynyrd Skynyrd guitarist Ed King in a dream. Dreams also delivered (*I Can't Get No*) *Satisfaction* to Keith Richards, *Sun King* to John Lennon and *Just the Way You Are* to Billy Joel respectively. Sting cites not only *Every Breath You Take* and *Walking on the Moon* as dream compositions, but numerous of his lyrics are sourced directly from his dreams, including the title of his debut solo album *The Dream of the Blue Turtles*. Such accounts suggest that sleep may loosen the constraints of conscious thought, allowing unusual associations and emotional connections to emerge more freely.

Modern neuroscience offers partial explanations for these phenomena. During REM sleep, associative brain activity increases while executive control weakens. Memory fragments, emotions, and sensory

¹ See for example the 'untethered' Lydian mode usage in Joe Satriani's *Flying in a Blue Dream*, the uncanny major 3rd modulations in the Beatles *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* ("marmalade skies") and the dream sequence of *A Day in the Life* (from "went in to a dream" to "woke up got out of bed.."). The appropriately named *Reverie* of Debussy avoids the goal-driven logic of harmonic cadences, instead wanders through flexible phrase structures and ambiguous tonalities. Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* tells the story of the artist's opium-fuelled hallucinations, beginning with a ball and a scene in a field and ending with a march to the scaffold and a satanic dream

imagery become unusually fluid, allowing the sleeping mind to recombine material in novel ways. Sleep also plays a crucial role in memory consolidation and problem-solving, helping explain why creative insights sometimes appear suddenly upon waking.

Music may have an especially close relationship with dreaming because both resist precise verbal explanation. Dreams unfold through shifting images and emotional logic; music through tension, transformation, and association across time. Both can feel simultaneously structured and mysterious. Perhaps for this reason, musicians so often describe dream melodies not as invented, but as heard, discovered, or revealed. Artists have often believed that this dreamworld might be accessible through other altered states as well. Through meditation, trance, reverie, or psychotropic substances, composers, writers, and painters have repeatedly sought the hidden associations and artistic truths thought to lie beneath conscious thought. Romantic artists in particular cultivated these liminal states, hoping to bypass ordinary rationality and encounter more direct forms of imagination and emotion. The creative act itself (even while awake) involves a similar surrender to the unconscious, a letting go of much of our alert selves in order to mine our subconscious depths.

Having had some profound experiences with lucid dreaming – the ability to awaken, be fully consciously aware, during sleep – I’ve explored practising, jamming and composing (at least trying to remember music) in my dreams. Like Tartini reported, what was music was grasped from dream to reality was a mere shadow of the dream music itself, yet I remain intrigued and optimistic about the practice – perhaps aided by technological intervention – whereby our dreaming selves are allowed to listen to, and conjure up musical ideas that can be pulled over to our realm also.

Sound Asleep

Sleep is often described as the absence of experience: a shutting down of consciousness, a nightly retreat from the world. Yet beneath sleep unfolds an astonishing – and perhaps musical – choreography of rhythms, cycles, pulses, repetitions, and transitions. Brainwaves oscillate in changing frequencies. Breathing rises and falls in phrase-like arcs. Oxygen levels fluctuate. Muscles twitch, settle, and release. Dreams emerge and dissolve. Across the night, the body performs an immense hidden composition.

This idea lies at the heart of my ongoing project *Sound Asleep*: a long-running collaboration with sleep scientists, neuroscientists, programmers, and visual artists that translates sleep data directly into sound and music. Rather than merely using sleep as inspiration, the project attempts to reveal sleep itself as an intrinsically musical phenomenon. Music and sleep share many fundamental properties. Both unfold through time. Both involve cycles of tension and release. Both can bypass language and communicate directly through sensation, emotion, and bodily response. Even the vocabulary overlaps: rhythm, phases, and the use of PSG ‘scores’ - with their uncanny similarity to musical notation.

One of the central works in the project, *Nocturnes*, transforms an entire night of clinical sleep data into an orchestral score. In collaboration with sleep physician Dr. Renata Riha, polysomnographic recordings – essentially vast charts of bodily activity during sleep – are translated systematically into music. A flute melody traces sleep depth, descending as the sleeper drifts off and fluttering during REM dream states. String harmonies reflect oxygen saturation in the blood. Body position becomes a slow bassline. Snoring, breathing interruptions, and restless leg movements appear as percussion and pizzicato gestures. What is remarkable is how expressive the results become, despite the translation system remaining fixed. A peaceful sleeper generates tranquil harmonies and spacious textures. A subject with sleep apnoea produces fragmented rhythms, unstable harmonies, and abrupt interruptions. Someone with restless leg syndrome creates incessant movement in the percussion and bassline. Without adding emotional interpretation, the sleeping body begins to compose its own music.

Another project, *49:48*, explores the subtle mismatch between our social clock and our internal circadian rhythm. Human beings naturally tend toward a body clock slightly longer than 24 hours. Without daylight or

external cues, sleep drifts gradually later each day. In musical form, two versions of the same melody

unfold simultaneously at a ratio of 49:48, producing slow hypnotic phasing patterns. The effect is strangely beautiful: a sonic portrait of biological time gently slipping against mechanical clock time.

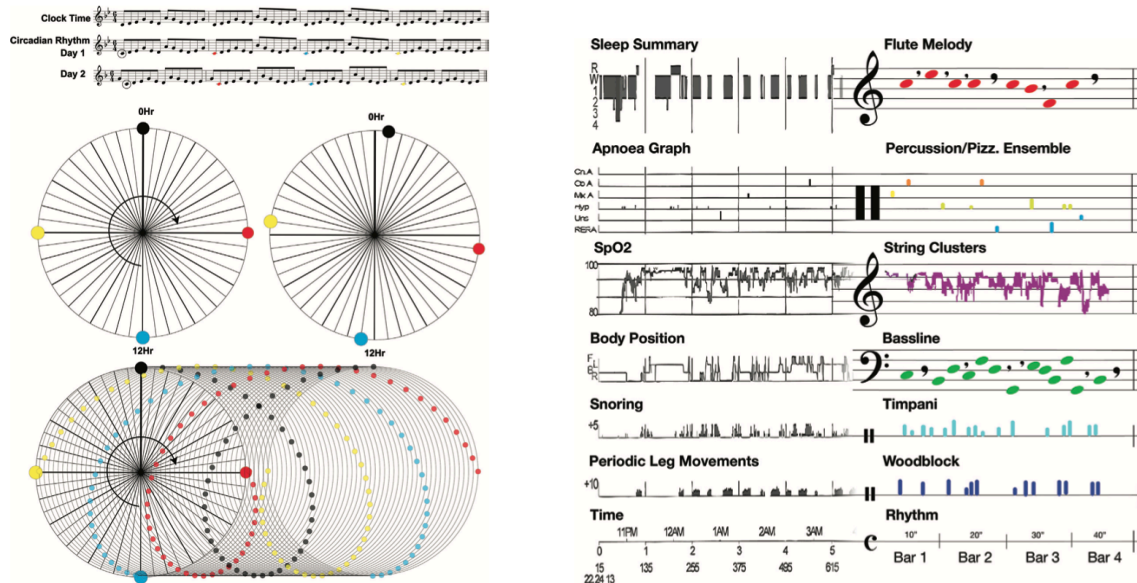


Figure 3: Illustrations of two projects from the *Sound Asleep* series. Left: The phasing of the body and day's clocks in 49:48 Right: channels of polysomnographic (PSG) data are translated into musical layers in *Nocturnes*.

Transitions, developed in response to neuroscientific research by Professor Morten Kringelbach and colleagues. Their work suggests that falling asleep is not a simple linear descent from wakefulness into unconsciousness, but a complex network of interlinking states. Some pathways are reversible, others are one-way, and certain routes are more likely than others. The resulting maps looked astonishingly similar to harmonic flowcharts used by composers and theorists: webs of possible journeys, tensions, resolutions, and dead ends. In *Transitions*, these sleep-state networks are translated into harmonic pathways using Neo-Riemannian transformations and voice-leading techniques. Rather than generating a single piece, the system creates a framework capable of producing countless musical trajectories through “sleep space.” There are many ways to arrive at deep sleep, just as there are many ways for music to move from one harmony to another.

Inner Sound of Sleep translates real-time EEG brainwave recordings directly into sound. As sleep deepens, dominant frequencies descend lower and lower, eventually dropping beneath the threshold of hearing itself. During REM sleep – the state most associated with vivid dreaming – frequencies rise and become more active again. Rather than artificially forcing these subsonic frequencies upward, I developed techniques that allow listeners to feel their movement through shifting electronic textures and modulations. The experience is less like listening to a melody and more like entering the architecture of sleep itself. Artists and scientists are now exploring real-time music generation from sleep, as an artistic act or in order to feedback the resulting music to the sleeping subject: a circular lullaby.

Come Heavy Sleep

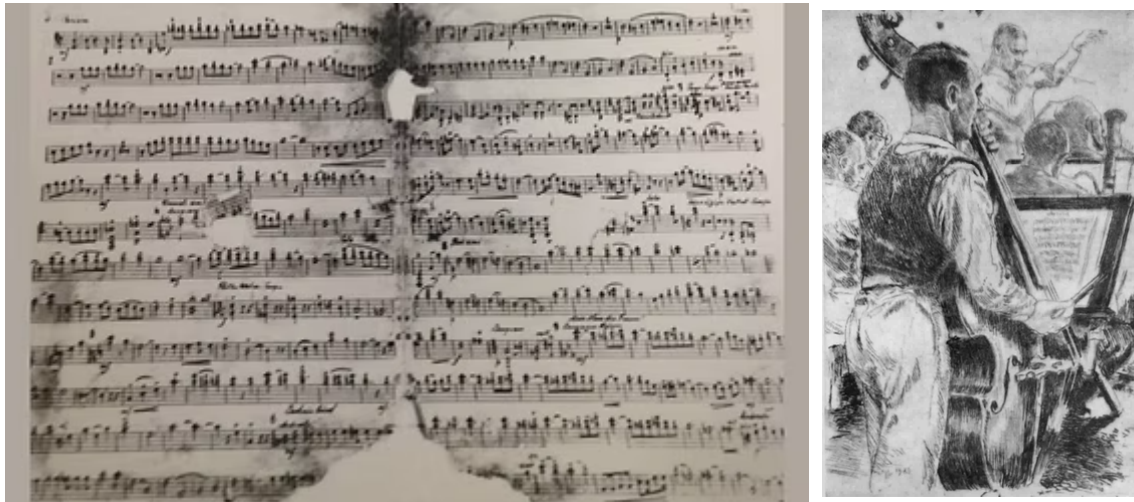


Figure 4: Left: A surviving manuscript from the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum Right: An etching of a concentration camp musician made by Koscielniak in Auschwitz (1943)

At some point, any exploration of sleep must confront its oldest and darkest companion: death. Across myth, philosophy, religion, and art, sleep and death have repeatedly been imagined as siblings. In Greek mythology, Hypnos (Sleep) and Thanatos (Death) are twin brothers, children of Night itself. The Roman poet Ovid described sleep as the “image” or imitation of death, while Shakespeare repeatedly entwined the two states. Macbeth’s horrified reflection that sleep “knits up the ravell’d sleeve of care” contrasts with the permanent rupture of murder, while elsewhere sleep becomes rehearsal, threshold, or shadow of mortality.

John Dowland explores this connection in his 1597 song *Come, Heavy Sleep*. The opening lines remain among the most devastating in English song: “Come, heavy Sleep, the image of true Death, And close up these my weary weeping eyes.”

Sleep here is not merely rest, but release. Dowland’s music hovers in that extraordinary emotional territory where exhaustion, grief, longing, and transcendence become inseparable. The falling melodic gestures and suspended harmonies seem perpetually to yield downward, as though consciousness itself is sinking beneath unbearable weight. Yet there is comfort too. Sleep promises temporary oblivion from suffering, a nightly surrender of the self that foreshadows death while mercifully stopping short of it.

This relationship between music, sleep, and mortality takes on profound significance in humanity’s darkest moments. Take the music that emerged from concentration camps during the Holocaust: works composed, performed, hidden, and smuggled out by prisoners who knew that death was near. In camps such as Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, composers including Viktor Ullmann, Gideon Klein, and Pavel Haas continued to write music under unimaginable conditions. Many of these works were literally final acts of conscious existence before deportation and murder. What is astonishing is not simply that music survived there, but why. Music became memory, resistance, dignity, prayer, testimony, and continuity of self against annihilation. In conditions where ordinary human identity was systematically stripped away, music preserved something irreducibly human. As Ullmann in 1944 wrote shortly before his murder: “It must be emphasized that Theresienstadt has served to enhance, not to impede, my musical activities ... our endeavour with respect to arts was commensurate with our will to live.” Górecki’s third symphony is based on a poem/prayer found in the walls of Auschwitz about a mother losing her son, and the work of these composers is now being reconstructed and performed, freed from its walls.

Sleep challenges us in a related way. Each night, it removes the very thing we most closely associate with existence: conscious awareness. Our safe world disappears, and yet we return. Dreams, too, suggest strange territories beyond rational control: emotionally vivid, temporally fluid, governed by obscure but undeniable logic. Perhaps this is why music accompanies these thresholds so naturally. Like sleep, it can transport us beyond ordinary language and identity while somehow remaining deeply, unmistakably human.

And perhaps music helps guide us across these strange borderlands: between waking and dreaming, self and dissolution, life and death. A common thread upon which we cling through unknown worlds.

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Acknowledgments

The Gresham Team for the wonderful continued support of these lectures; Professor Debra Skene and Professor Morten Kringelbach for expert guides through the terrain of sleep; and a special thanks to whom-or whatever weaves our dreams.

References and Further Reading

For more on the Sound Asleep project see <https://www.miltononline.com/soundasleep>

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