

# Music and Melancholia

‘Music doesn’t create emotion, but rather amplifies what is already within us’

Arts Editor at The Weekly Review and faculty member of the School of Life **Myke Bartlett**, explores how music helps us tap into, and navigate, our inner emotions.

It’s not uncommon for anything in a minor key to be branded depressing. To put on Schubert’s *Death and the Maiden* during a lively party is to invite everyone to finish drinks and clear out, pronto.

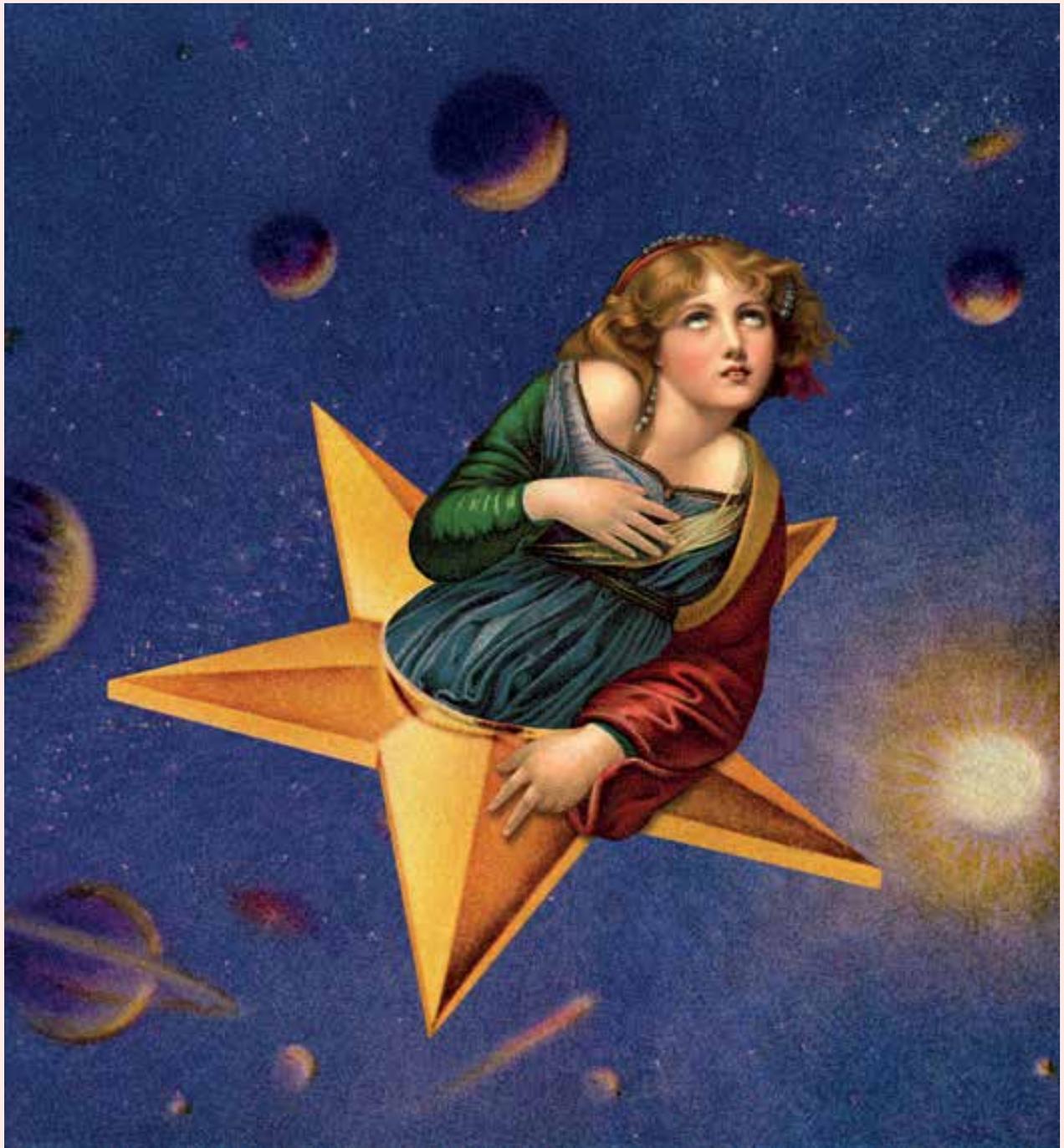
But it’s unfair to blame music for being depressing. After all, there is nothing inherently miserable about Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*, even if it has a knack for reducing an audience to tears. Music doesn’t create emotion, but rather amplifies what is already within us. It elucidates and gives permission to emotions that we might struggle to express through language alone.

There’s a reason that teenagers have forever been drawn to music that swings between extremes of ecstasy and despair. Adolescence is a time of great turmoil, when our developing inner geography can seem a foreign and bewildering land. This is a time of life when music matters most. We map our inner lives in songs that give sense to the apparently insensible, helping us fashion the emotional toolkit we’ll need to navigate the delights and hardships that await us in adulthood.

Little wonder that we often return to music for solace in times of hardship. It was through composing his *Concerto funebre* that Karl Amadeus Hartmann made sense of the horrors inflicted on Germany by the Nazi party. Its mournful violin refrain echoes his despair and foreboding at what is to come, but also seems to speak of a tender humanity, wounded but not without hope. It is telling that some of the most melancholic music is also the most beautiful, perhaps because we recognise truth in its complexity. Sad songs shine a light into our own private darkneses, showing us things we already knew were there, however we might have tried to deny them.

To embrace melancholy feels deeply counter cultural at this moment in history. Ours is a world of celebration and

OPPOSITE: This dreamy illustration by John Craig featured on the cover image of The Smashing Pumpkins’ 1995 album *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*



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hedonism, where music exists to inspire us to party on or, more often, to cheerily distract us. But melancholic tunes offer an antidote to this relentless, noisy and exhausting positivity. They invite us to slow down and spend time with our own thoughts – a prospect many seem to find confronting.

Melancholic music offers a roadmap to the parts of ourselves we most need to access, in dark times and bright. It helps us hone in on the wordless emotions we need to feel in order to better understand ourselves. Far from being depressing, it reminds us of the full breadth of our emotional landscapes and the solace of knowing that life can’t – and shouldn’t – always play out in a major key.