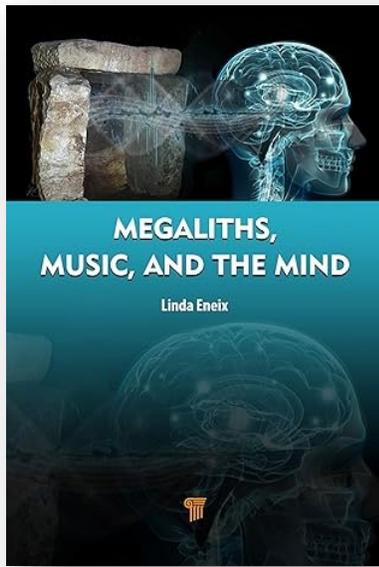


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## *Megaliths, Music, and the Mind: A Transdisciplinary Exploration of Archaeoacoustics*

**Linda Eneix**

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**Review by Amanda J. Haste. First published online on 25 July 2025 and will appear in the next volume of *The Independent Scholar*.**

This reviewer was delighted to learn of Linda Eneix's work, and particularly this book. Having avoided the Acoustics option like the plague during my first music degree (far too much physics and maths for my liking) it is a subject that no musician can ignore in practice. As an example, when wild-camping near Carnac in north-western France in the 1990s, I found a dolmen (stone tomb) and went inside to play some music in this abandoned megalithic space. It was soon evident that anything melodic, or even tonal, simply didn't work at all. It was as if the space itself was repelling my efforts. I ended up 'communing' with the space, playing low notes with different dynamic (volume) levels, using these as fundamentals and creating natural harmonics, and all the time I was listening to the response, staying in tune with what the space was telling me. I was down there for hours, lost in this 'other' world. (Apparently a couple wandered up to the entrance, but once they heard these unearthly – or rather very earthly – sounds

emanating from the chamber, they took fright and ran away!)

After this experience, I started wondering about the possible soundscapes that could be generated in such spaces, and how music could have been a powerful tool in neolithic rituals and ceremonies. So I am delighted that Linda Eneix has been exploring those very topics, using material from archaeology, architecture, anthropology, ethnomusicology, genetics, neuroscience, physics and more to create a truly interdisciplinary opus.

As the author points out in her introduction, "the human capacity for listening was functioning just as well thousands of years ago as it does today. The past was not silent" (p. 1). She begins with the question of why humankind abandoned a nomadic hunter-gathering lifestyle in favour of a settled lifestyle, and points out that recent discoveries pinpoint this as

contemporary with the building of megalithic structures such as Stonehenge in southern England.

“Why start building huge stone structures? Obviously there are folks who believe that sound and music may have had something to do with it. Something very interesting happens when we add a soundtrack to the picture” (p. 4).

The field of archaeoacoustics developed from a meeting of Princeton physicist Robert Jahn and English writer and artist Paul Devereux in ruins in New Mexico. They hatched a plan that resulted in “an evaluation of the acoustic properties of several ancient megalithic sites in England and Ireland.” In Malta, the site of the world’s oldest freestanding buildings, a multidisciplinary international symposium in 2014 demonstrated the evidence for widespread use of sound in monuments and sacred places.

“Participants learned from a psychologist about the human experience of a primordial scream. They found that Babylonians sang out painful emotions in a language as fierce and angry as any modern rap lyric. And they had a chance to sample sounds in an environment that echoes and astounds today just as it did more than 5,000 years ago.” (p. 13).

Chapter 2 describes the 6,000-year-old Maltese structure, Hal Saflieni, abandoned at about the time the Egyptians were building the Great Pyramids. It is a complex “of interconnecting rock cut chambers set on three distinct underground levels.” Importantly, “[t]he soundscape in Hal Saflieni is virtually unchanged [...]. Sound behaves within this space exactly the way it was heard by people in the Stone Age” (p. 25) and this has been the basis for acoustical analysis of the space.

In Chapter 3, the author gives a wide-ranging account of the elements that contributed to our ancestors’ development. These include cooking, allowing them “to spend less time gnawing on raw material and digesting it, providing time – and energy – to do other things instead, like socialize” and to “develop more powerful brains [using the] calories that cooked food provided” (p. 51). She also tackles genetics and migration, including the use of crop and livestock farming.

Chapter 4 deals with the megaliths themselves – how they were built, the choice of location, and their design – and leads into Chapter 5 on music. The author points out that, while we are “hopelessly removed” from our ancestors’ world, “sound and music still have the power to move us deeply” (p. 104). While we have no evidence for what our ancestors sang or played, music anthropologist Prof. Iegor Reznikoff says:

“That people sang laments or prayers for the dead in the [Hal Saflieni] Hypogeum is certain, for (a) it is a universal practice in all oral traditions we know, (b) at the same period, around 3,000 BC., we have the Sumerian or Egyptian inscriptions mentioning singing to the Invisible, particularly in relationship with death and Second Life, and finally (c) the resonance is so strong in the Hypogeum already when simply speaking, that one is forced to use it and singing becomes natural” (p. 105).

The author goes on to explore the role of musical instruments – or rather the instruments or tools that humans have always used to make music. Wind instruments of bone or wood; percussion, starting with using the body (clapping, stamping); and the human voice. She describes the use of song to transmit stories and histories, with the “person who knew and preserved the songs [becoming] the keeper of knowledge and of memory: the whole identity of the community” (p. 108). The chapter ends with a discussion of the concept of ‘melody’ in the context of megalithic spaces.

“What we have to go on for clues would be the effectiveness of the low notes. It seems logical that in a venue like the Hypogeum, there would be a period of maximizing of a single note to bring it to full force, combined with a period of slight variation so that the returning echo of one note could be incorporated with the next” (p. 112).<sup>1</sup>

In Chapter 6 “The Mind” the author examines the religious and spiritual connotations of megaliths, and the use of sound in rituals and ceremonies. She emphasizes that:

“theirs was a world that was full of spirits and powers that hadn’t been explained by science

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<sup>1</sup> Definitely an ‘Aha!’ moment for this reviewer.

[and] the mysteries of nature were interconnected all around them because it touched their lives so directly" (p. 121).

This means that unfamiliar natural phenomena could be perceived on a spiritual level, as a sign of the gods, or as magic. The rest of the chapter focuses on representations of sound in sculptures, carvings and paintings, and recent research into the neurological aspects of music-making, including the relationship between music and dopamine release. She also tackles "transcendental resonance", the term for "an altered state of consciousness triggered by the right sound" (p. 149).

The final chapter "The Present of Archaeoacoustics" tackles thorny topics such as the risk of the discipline being seen as pseudoscience due to the lack of firm evidence. The author outlines recent research that demonstrates the therapeutic benefit of sound in many areas, including chanting and overtone chanting with Alzheimer's patients as it is said to help with memory function. Rigorous research with replicable results are of course necessary, and the author suggests laboratory-based means of achieving this.

The overall premise of this book, as stated in the introduction, is the exploration of "an ill-understood sensory element of developing culture, with hope for therapeutic application in the modern world" (p. viii) and the growing phenomenon of intonation therapy

and sound baths would suggest we are well on the way to benefiting from our neolithic roots.

Writing in an accessible style, and providing plenty of illustrations, the author also creates lively descriptions of how our ancestors may have used the spaces, as well as encouraging the reader to think about how they themselves listen to and process the world around them. For anyone interested in the history of human civilization, and the human response to sound, this book is an absolute treasure.

**Amanda J. Haste** (PhD Musicology) is an Anglo-French musician, musicologist and academic translator. She was adjunct faculty in both the Translation Studies and Music departments of Aix-Marseille University, France, and her research interests include identity construction through music and language. Her books include *Music and Identity in Twenty-First-Century Monasticism* (London & New York: Routledge, 2023), and co-authored (with James E. Block) *Constructing Identity in an Age of Globalization* (Paris: Ex Modio, 2015), and (with Linda Baines) *the NCIS Guide for Independent Scholars* (NCIS, 2024). She is currently working on two more books: *Becoming a Successful Independent Scholar* (with Linda Baines), and a monograph on the *British in nineteenth-century Marseille*.  
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