

"What is Music?"

In this poem, jazz musician Duke Ellington (1899-1974) expresses his ideas about music. The poem appeared in his autobiography, *Music is my Mistress* (1973).

What is music to you?

What would you be without music?

Music is everything.

Nature is music (cicadas in the tropical night).

5 The sea is music,

The wind is music,

Primitive elements are music, agreeable or discordant.

The rain drumming¹ on the roof,

And the storm raging in the sky are music.

10 Every country in the world has its own music,

And the music becomes an ambassador;

The tango in Argentina and calypso in Antilles.

Music is the oldest entity.

A baby is born, and music puts him to sleep.

15 He can't read, he can't understand a picture,

But he will listen to music.

Music is marriage.

Music is death.

The scope² of music is immense and infinite.

20 It is the "esperanto" of the world.

Music arouses³ courage and leads you to war.

The Romans used to have drums rolling before they attacked.

We have the bugle⁴ to sound reveille and pay homage to the brave warrior.⁵

The Marseillaise has led many generations to victories or revolutions;

25 It is a chant of wild excitement, and delirium, and pride.

Music is eternal,

Music is divine.

You pray to your God with music.

Music can dictate moods,⁶

30 It can ennerve or subdue,⁷

Subjugate,⁸ exhaust, astound⁹ the heart.

Music is a cedar,¹⁰

An evergreen tree of fragrant,¹¹ durable wood.

Music is like honor and pride,

35 Free from defect, damage, or decay.¹²

Without music I may feel blind, atrophied, incomplete, inexistent.

1. **drumming**
(to drum) /

(l. 22) **drums:**
tambouriner /
tambours

2. **the scope:**
la portée,
l'influence

3. **to arouse:**
stimuler

4. **the bugle:**
le clairon

5. **warrior:** guerrier

6. **moods:**
des humeurs

7. **ennerve or**
subdue: provoquer
ou adoucir

8. **subjugate:**
soumettre

9. **astound:**
étonner

10. **a cedar:**
un cèdre

11. **fragrant:**
parfumé

12. **decay** (ici,
nom): la
déchéance