

No matter who you are or what you do, you most likely listen to music. You may have put on your favorite playlist last night to push you through to the end of a tough paper. Maybe you belted out a tune in the shower this morning. Perhaps you heard a song yesterday that you can't get out of your head. Music, as anybody who listens to music knows, is not merely sound. It can get you through a tough time. It can motivate you. It can distract you, annoy you, and even haunt you. Played loud enough, it can harm you. Music, in a word, is power. Yet just how much power does music have over us? Richard Powers answers this question in his short story “Modulations.” Powers published “Modulations” in 2009 in *Conjunctions Literary Magazine*. Unlike most short stories that focus on one or two characters, Powers takes us through the lives of four characters whose lives are all greatly influenced by music. One of the many underlying themes in “Modulations” is that in the global music industry, millions of people enjoy similar popular genres. However, each song means something different to everyone and can influence an individual's life in unique ways. Through the lives of four characters, Powers demonstrates the power music has to become an all-consuming force in one's life.

The first character Powers introduces is Toshi Yukawa. Powers gives just enough information for the reader to understand how vital music has been in shaping Toshi's life. Toshi, a reformed hacker, works for the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) after spending two years in prison for pirating music. Under the alias *free4u*, Toshi became obsessed with the sole idea of liberating music from the music industry. In fact, Toshi “admits” his hacking was really about the action of liberating music; he hardly ever listened to what he stole. Music took over his life. Now, Toshi surfs websites working for the people he previously stole

from, hunting for pirates like him. He is still not out of the music piracy business and he probably never will be.

Throughout Powers's story, Toshi observes the global spread of a mysterious computer virus that not only embeds itself in digital music files but also migrates into the listeners' brains. One of the first people infected with this new kind of computer virus is a Brazilian journalist named Marta Mota. Once again, and in the space of just a few days, music alters the life of someone. Marta has just traveled abroad to Iraq to research a piece on the war. In her quest to find an undocumented point of view on the war, she investigates how soldiers listen to music in combat. As soon as she listens to a soldier's iPod, Marta becomes infected with an earworm—a song that continues to play in her head. When she reaches home, she is almost driven insane by the song and considers seeking professional help. When the virus finally runs its course at story's end, Marta is liberated from the all-consuming tune. However, in the meantime, her life had been completely taken over by music.

Jan Steiner plays the part of the third character whose life is also spent obsessing over music. He has just retired from teaching collegiate music classes somewhere in Midwest America. Jan has spent his entire life researching music, its true meaning to culture, and reshaping the way academia thinks about music. Now, at the end of his life, Jan is tortured by the mundanity of music he's spent his life becoming familiar with—even music he wrote. He dreams of something undiscovered. Just before he dies in a freak accident by slipping on some ice, he turns on an infected iPod his colleagues had given him at his retirement party. He suddenly hears the earworm and realizes that this kind of viral music is what he has been searching for his entire life. His life's wish is fulfilled and his ears are blessed with a new type of music. This revolutionary new music occupies Jan's thoughts until his thoughts become extinguished.

Finally, Mitchell Payne comes to the scene as a young and prodigious “Futurepop composer” who has dedicated his life to bringing his listeners the latest and greatest music composed solely on personal computers. Only twenty-three years old, he is haunted by the idea that he is falling behind in the ever-competitive Futurepop world and will soon be obsolete. In fact, he chooses to worry over keeping up with next genre on the scene rather than his one-hundred and fifty thousand dollar student debt. During a big Futurepop battle, all Mitchell can do is worry that somebody else’s new form of music will interfere with his own performance. Little does he know that the earworm has infected his own computers. While playing his set, the viral earworm starts to play over his own composition. The crowd goes wild, a wholly new kind of tune stuck in their heads. The ironic victim of a computer virus, Mitchell nevertheless takes personal credit for finding the newest form of music on the planet, thus alleviating his fears and catapulting him to the top of the music frontier. Thus, it appears music will continue to rule Mitchell for some time to come.

Music, regardless of its meaning to an individual, has the power to consume people. What is it about music that allows it to do this? Why is music universally appealing? For most people, playing music is a simple way to relax and express oneself is easily done. However, for others, music is what life is all about. Powers makes the reader stop and think about the true role and importance of music in today’s society through a dramatic and exciting short story. The reader never learns who made the earworm, where it came from, or even why it was created. Powers’s earworm is a science fictional idea; nothing like it exists in our world. However, it also represents a truth about music. It is Powers’s metaphor for how music has a life of its own and can impose its will on all who dare to listen.