

### 13. ENHANCING MUSIC LISTENING IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

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**Abstract:** *A growing body of research has shown the importance of music listening in psychological frameworks such as the construction of emotional and social identity. Nonetheless, the educational implications of this activity involve the way students use music listening for cultural development, cognitive processing and aesthetic reaction enhancement. The present study aims to review the relevant literature regarding how musical preference, a concept used mainly in music psychology, may be explored in educational contexts. Zajong's (1968) theory of repeated exposure indicates that mere exposure to a stimulus is enough to create a favorable attitude towards it. This study investigates the experimental researches focused on the conditions where repeated exposure to academic music may generate the development of musical preference.*

**Key words:** *music listening, musical preference, repeated exposure*

#### 1. Introduction

Students of all ages prefer to listen to music as a recreational activity from which they benefit emotionally and socially, as most of them tend to build their self-identity and to establish interactions within peer-groups based on their musical preferences (Hargreaves & North, 1997).

Music educators are interested in using adolescents' predilection for music listening in a way they can also benefit from it in an educational and a cultural manner. A growing body of research (Boal-Palheiros & Hargreaves, 2001, 2004; Todd & Mishra, 2013) has revealed that students view music listening at home and at school as two very different activities. A closer perspective on the functions of music listening and analyzing the content of music students listen to may bring a better understanding of how music listening can become an efficient educational resource.

#### 2. From repeated exposure to preference

Students' familiarity with diverse musical styles is one of the key elements of building music preference, and a frequent way of raising familiarity is by repeated exposure. Commercial music producers often use this strategy, as they simplify the melody in a way that a certain motif is repeated five or six times during the song. Also through multiple Radio and TV broadcasting during the day a simple song turns into a "hit", as it reaches the preference of many people just by repeated exposure. Although the success of the same song is often short lived (as we can also see many cases of overexposure), this strategy offers important data about the psychological processes involved in the development of musical preferences.

Some scientists have raised the question of applying the same repeated exposure strategy in music education classes in order to build students' preference for academic music. During the mid-60's Gets (1966) asked a group of 339 seventh grade students to listen to 40 fragments of classical music over a

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period of 10 weeks. The researcher repeated five of these fragments several times during this time. At the end of the experiment, a test has revealed that students' preference for the five repeated fragments was significantly higher, due to the higher familiarity with the same music (between familiarity and preference Gets found a direct significant correlation).

This finding is not singular, as other researchers (Bradley, 1971) established that the simple exposure of middle school students to academic music over a period of several weeks may determine the development of preference. Two Americans (Demorest & Schultz, 2004) asked 224 fifth grade students to report their preference for 19 songs from universal children repertoire (African, Spanish, American, Mexican, Vietnamese, Porto Rican, Jamaican, Khmer, Israeli) in two experimental conditions: in their authentic version (solo voices of different nationalities) or in a version arranged for children voices. The study's results have shown:

- higher degrees of familiarity determine higher levels of musical preference; American students gave higher scores to American songs (authentic or arrangements for children voices) because these songs constitute the music they listened to more frequently;
- no matter the cultural zone of the songs, the students preference was higher for the arrangements for children voices; therefore the familiarity with a certain timbre determined the preference for that same timbre, even when the musical style is completely unfamiliar.

Siebenaler's study (1999) focused also on children's repertoire, only this time it was completely American and the researcher measured the effect of different exposure strategies on musical preference. In 1996, The American Association for Music Education has published a list of 42 songs, which "every American should know" (Siebenaler, 1999, p. 213) through music education classes. Siebenaler has selected 10 songs from this list, in order to include them in his experiment. First of all, 160 third, fourth and fifth grade students have indicated their preference for each of the ten songs. Afterwards, over a period of 10 weeks, during music education lessons, students have performed each song vocally with piano accompaniment. In the last phase, the researcher measured again students' preference for the 10 songs.

The results have revealed that students preferred more the melodies children were familiar with. In addition, repeated exposure through singing determined higher preference scores. There was also an effect of age, in the sense that younger students offered higher scores in all experimental conditions and this result confirmed the open-earedness theory.

An American team (Peery & Peery, 1986) also tested the influence of repeated exposure through singing on musical preference. Twenty-one preschoolers have expressed their preference for six classical music fragments and two commercial songs before and after 2 months and a half of weekly musical lessons. During these lessons, the preschoolers have listened to the experimental stimuli and played musical games using the same melodies. A

control group of 24 preschoolers reported their preference for the same musical stimuli without benefiting of any musical lessons.

The results have indicated a lower preference for classical music in the control group, while the experimental group maintained the same preference level for classical music before and after the 10 weeks of music lessons. Between the two groups there was a significant difference regarding the preference for classical music after 10 weeks. Therefore, music lessons organized in music listening combined with interactive teaching methods form higher levels of familiarity with classical music and convey higher preference.

A Canadian research (McClean, 1999) performed on 241 fifth and sixth grade students investigated the effect of exposure through music listening versus singing on musical preference. The experiment lasted one school year and it involved music lessons organized in two conditions: one group listened to four classical music fragments and the other listened to and sang the melodic themes of the same fragments. The researcher used musical fragments such as Beethoven's *Moon Sonata*, Beethoven's *Symphony no. 1*, Haydn's *Concert for trumpet*, and Schubert's *Trout Quintet*. The results have shown no significant differences regarding the increase of musical preference for the four fragments between the two experimental conditions. Therefore, the simple musical listening was enough to develop a higher preference for academic music. The result may be a paradox considering students' need to be involved in active teaching strategies such as singing. McClean also underlined the fact that singing the melodic themes of the four classical fragments contributed to better skills associated with musical memory. Consequently, at the end of the school year, the students involved in the singing condition recognized the fragments' titles better than the students from the listening condition did.

### **3. New perspectives on music listening strategies**

Music listening in Music Education lessons aims mainly on gaining wider cultural knowledge or learning about musical language elements. Therefore, the cognitive aspect of listening occupies an important part of this activity. Music teachers are usually preoccupied with auditory skills and musical memory and often overlook students' emotional reaction regarding what they perceive in music (Zerull, 2006; Hopkins, 2002; Baldrige, 1984; Gromko & Russell, 2002). In addition, a growing body of research is dedicated rather on developing strategies focused on cognitive music listening such as cooperative listening (Smialek & Boburka, 2006; Johnson, 2011) and its effect on musical analysis skills. Music listening has also been studied in relationship with creative thinking (Dunn, 1997). Researchers have even identified the factors that may obstruct students' attention during music listening (Flowers & O'Neill, 2005; Sims & Nolker, 2002; Sims, 2005).

A professor of Musicology from Santa Barbara University (Dirkse, 2011) noticed the terminology irony related to the subject of Music appreciation she teaches to undergraduate students. The author was wondering if through this course, students really learn how to appreciate music, as she often noticed the danger of over-intellectualization the learning experiences associated with music

listening. Other researchers (Silverman, 2012; Griffin, 2009; Zalanowski, 1986; Diaz, 2014) confirmed her opinion. She saw the contradiction with the term “appreciation” defined as an “appropriate recognition of the music’s expressivity and a willingness to listen to the music on one’s own time” (Dirkse, 2011, p. 26). Dirkse has also drawn attention to a previous study (Price & Swanson, 1990) performed on students enrolled in a Music history course. They discovered that the subjects had a significant gain in factual knowledge from the beginning to the end of the term, but no significant difference in opinion of the works, suggesting that increased knowledge does not necessarily result in increased appreciation.

Another study (Halpern, 1992) asked three groups of students to rate their preference for classical music after music listening in three conditions. Before listening, the first group has read historical information about the music, the second group has read the musicological analysis of the fragments, and the third one listened to the musical fragments without receiving any previous information about them. The results have revealed that historical data about the music lead to the highest “level of auditory pleasure” (Halpern, 1992, p. 42).

Annete Zalanowski (1986) has also tested the effect of previous information on students’ reaction during music listening. She performed an experiment on 60 undergraduates divided in three groups who listened to Berlioz’s *Fantastical Symphony*, the movement *March to the scaffold*. Before listening, the first group was simply asked to listen to musical fragment that will last for several minutes. The second group was asked to create mental images (visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory) associated to the music and to develop them as much as possible. The third group was given a detailed description of the musical program described by the composer and its relation to the musical discourse. Results have discovered that the second group reported the highest level of pleasure during music listening. The author therefore suggests that mere music listening is not enough to create a strong aesthetic reaction and that requiring mental imagery during music listening may be an efficient way for the students to get emotionally involved into music.

Diaz (2014) confirmed the same result and added that asking students to perform simple cognitive tasks during music listening enhances their emotional attitude towards the music they listen to. Shelley Griffin (2009) indicates several strategies that facilitate the link between academic music and students:

- encouraging students to keep journals reflecting their musical interests (texts, pictures, drawings); these journals may facilitate the communication between students regarding musical preference;
- asking students to identify innovative ways to include music listening in school activities;
- encouraging students to teach their colleagues about academic music;
- inviting parents to give their opinion about the music students can learn from.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In order to bring their students emotionally closer to academic music listening, music teachers may use a series of psychological findings related to

the mere exposure effect. Thus, a series of conditions tend to influence students preference for music in the circumstance of repeated exposure. Singing the melodic themes does not seem to improve musical preference, in comparison to music listening, in the case of middle-school students. In general, higher degrees of familiarity determine stronger musical preference. The cultural, age and timbre effect may also be present.

When trying to optimize music listening in the classroom, teachers should find a balance between cognitive tasks and the liberty to listen to the music freely. Difficult cognitive tasks tend to over-intellectualize music listening, while the lack of them determines lower levels of involvement.

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