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Influences on Music Preference Formation

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Abstract

Music preference is a multifaceted topic that addresses questions which continuously elude musicologists, music researchers and social psychologists. How does something so pervasive in our lives, such as music, remain a mystery to us? Music preference has been studied on many levels and the factors that influence the types of music we prefer are numerous, including genres, exposure, personality, and musical characteristics. However, our understanding of how and why music preferences are formed is still fragmented. We can narrow down music preferences into two broad categories: intrinsic and extrinsic qualities. In attempt to explore these characteristics, three commonly emerging theories concerning musical preference formation will serve as the foundation: repeated exposure, social learning, and inherent musical qualities. The current paper aims to draw on these theories in relation to the development and reasoning behind our musical preferences.

Keywords

music, preferences, tonal, atonal, social influence

Cover Page Footnote

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Influences on Music Preference Formation

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Music preference is a multifaceted topic that addresses questions which continuously elude musicologists, music researchers and social psychologists. How does something as pervasive in our lives as music remain a mystery to us? Music preference has been studied on many levels and the factors that influence the types of music we prefer are numerous, including genres, exposure, personality, and musical characteristics. However, our understanding of how and why music preferences are formed is still fragmented. We can narrow down music preferences into two broad categories: intrinsic and extrinsic qualities. In attempt to explore these characteristics, three commonly emerging theories concerning musical preference formation will serve as the foundation: repeated exposure, social learning, and inherent musical qualities. The current paper aims to draw on these theories in relation to the development and reasoning behind our musical preferences.

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Music preference is a multifaceted topic that addresses questions, which continuously elude musicologists, music researchers and social psychologists. How does something as pervasive in our lives as music remain a mystery to us? Music preference has been studied on many levels and the factors that influence the types of music we prefer are numerous, including genres (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003), exposure (Peretz, Gaudreau, & Bonnel, 1998), personality (Chamorro-Premuzic, Fagan, & Furnham, 2010), and musical characteristics (Katz, 2004). However, our understanding of how and why music preferences are formed is still fragmented. One of the main reasons music preferences are so hard to understand is the multiple roles music plays in our lives. Motivations for using music are vast and varied, with some examples including physiological arousal, mood regulation, distractions, aesthetic enjoyment, social identity, and communication (Rentfrow, Goldberg, & Levitin, 2011). With such an expansive list, our preferences consequently are likely just as diverse. Many of the studies on music preference formation do not account for the differing motivations behind an individual's current preference.

The use of music is fundamentally contextual and one type of music rarely fits within all the situations we are faced with. For example, a particular type of music may be suitable for relaxation, but not for working out (Rentfrow, Goldberg, & Levitin, 2011). We can narrow down the factors that influence music preferences into two broad categories: intrinsic and extrinsic qualities. Intrinsic qualities include inherent musical qualities such as structure, melody, and timbre, while extrinsic qualities include personality, social influence, and emotions. In

attempt to explore these characteristics, three commonly emerging theories concerning musical preference formation will be reviewed in the current paper: repeated exposure, social learning, and inherent musical qualities (Peery & Peery, 1986). The current paper aims to draw on these theories in an attempt to understand the development and reasons behind our musical preferences.

Tonality as a Factor of an Inherent Musical Characteristic

To categorize musical preferences, genres are often examined and most fit into certain characteristics. One notable example is Rentfrow and Gosling's five-factors: mellow, unpretentious, sophisticated, intense, and contemporary (2011). The aforementioned study was comprehensive and included genres such as avant-garde classical and acid jazz, which are not as commonly addressed when examining music preferences. Taking a broader look at musical characteristics can help us focus in on inherent levels of music. The tonal/atonal parameter is one that displays an obvious contrast.

Atonality, in its broadest sense, is music that lacks a tonal center, such that one tone holds no greater importance than another. In Western music, tonality is the organization of tones through a hierarchy, ultimately creating a tonal center, or key, that a piece may revolve around. This, in turn, gives us functions such as key signatures, scales, and chords. Tonality is the reason we hear "wrong" notes. For example, when someone practices scales on a piano it is easy to distinguish whether they make mistakes or not because a scale organizes pitches

hierarchically. Atonality, however, does not rely on typical hierarchical organization and notes do not hold such relationships to each other as in tonality.

The lack of expectation and predictability associated with atonal music has implications for judgments of pleasantness and preferences. Huron (2006) attributes pleasantness to predictability. Common examples in Western music are cadences, which are often important in a musical piece, as they provide a resolution from one chord to another (reflecting the tonal hierarchy) and typically evoke a pleasant feeling. The high rate of predictability in cadences contributes to the prediction effect, which Huron describes as the increased pleasure we feel when our predictions are accurate. This suggests that predictability contributes to the pleasurable experience in listening (2006). Atonal music has no such predictable structure, except the tone row, which does not provide enough explicit organization for our minds to conceptualize it as anything other than randomly presented notes.

Preferences in tonal versus atonal are not so clearly black and white (many musical pieces use elements of both), but it has been shown in many studies that people simply prefer tonal music (Smith & Witt, 1989; Ball, 2011). Infants as young as 2-months old have shown a preference for consonance (which, in music, is characterized by harmony and stability) and this persists for hearing infants with deaf parents, eliminating possible prenatal exposure as a confounding variable (Trainor, Tsang, & Cheung, 2002; Masataka, 2006). While this gives further weight to our preferences for tonal music, it does not answer questions about preference formation for atonal music. Dissonance implies a context of consonance, while atonality on the other hand, does not hold the same constraints of a tonal hierarchy.

The clearer distinction between the parameters of tonality and its evoked responses from a cognitive perspective provides an opportunity to look at other possible avenues in which preferences may be manipulated. If preferences are susceptible to manipulations it may give us greater insight into the influences that develop music preference.

The Exposure Effect in Musical Preferences

The mere exposure effect, described by Robert Zajonc (1968), refers to the finding that people tend to prefer things that are more familiar. The exposure effect seems to be working through our implicit memories. Peretz, Gaudreau, and Bonnel (1998) presented participants with a number of familiar (e.g. “happy birthday”) and unfamiliar musical excerpts (as noted through a familiarity decision task) and rated their judgments on a 10-point scale. After the first presentation of the excerpts, they were given

either an affect task (participants judged the excerpts pleasantness) or recognition task (participants were asked if they recognized the stimuli) with a new mix of excerpts, including the ones they had heard previously. Preference for the unfamiliar excerpts rose in the affect task, while familiar excerpts showed no significant changes. Recognition for familiar excerpts were expectedly higher than unfamiliar excerpts. To further separate explicit and implicit memories for the excerpts, another study using the same method was executed, but this time they included encoding distractions – the same melodies were used but timbre (flute or piano) was changed and participants were asked to note which timbre the piece was played in. Results for the affect group remained the same, but the recognition group was notably impacted. Explicit memories for melodies were dramatically decreased when provided with a distraction, yet the implicit memories withstood both the manipulations and distraction (1998). The finding that implicit memories for music influence preference ratings indicate that exposure is effective in improving preferences.

The effect of exposure on musical preferences is a “rule of thumb,” and it does not necessarily apply to all types of music. For example, Heyduk (1975) aimed to explore the relationship between musical complexity, exposure, and preference by exposing individuals to piano excerpts at different levels of complexity and then measuring preference. The results indicated that the complexity and preference relationship follows an inverted U shape. If a person is exposed to a variety of musical excerpts, those below their preferred level of complexity would fall lower on a scale of preference. Alternatively, excerpts at or slightly above an individual’s optimum level of complexity will likely produce higher ratings of preference when repeated. In other words, participants liked pieces more when they had experience with them, but only if they were near or above the individual’s optimum level of complexity. Participants showed decreases in liking with pieces that were markedly below or above their optimum level of complexity after repeated exposure.

Similar results have been found when examining both atonal and non-Western music (Mull, 1957; Meyer, 1903). Cross-cultural studies have shown that listeners can learn to comprehend non-Western harmonic structures with repeated exposure (Krumhansl, Toivanen, Eerola, Toiviainen, Järvinen, & Louhivuori, 2000). Music education can also increase preferences for music by providing background information and promoting understanding of those pieces one is being exposed to. To illustrate, Bradley (1972) conducted a 14-week contemporary music program with three classes of seventh graders. One class received no exposure to contemporary music. The second was

exposed to repetitive listening of contemporary pieces. In the third, analytical training and listening were included with exposure. Findings indicated the greatest increase in preferences in the third class, suggesting that repeated exposure and deeper breadth of musical knowledge significantly produced positive change in expressed preferences. Although only suggestive, it is possible that through education and exposure, we can alter musical preferences.

External Motivators for Music Preference

It is no surprise that social perceptions play a big role in personal preferences. As stated by social learning theory, we learn through observation (Bandura, 1977). If someone is rewarded for a certain behavior, such as listening to a particular type of music, we then learn that these actions can reap benefits and will be more likely to imitate that behavior. In support, Hall (2007) found that if a certain genre of media (e.g., music, art, etc.) is perceived to be disliked by others, reports of individual use of that particular genre were dramatically lower. Conversely, the use of certain genres that are perceived to be well regarded by other individuals were reported more often.

Musical genres can be associated with specific social stereotypes, and research has shown that young adults hold consistent beliefs about others who claimed to be fans of certain music (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2007). Those social suggestions can then in turn attract people who seek to validate a type of persona they wish to communicate (Rentfrow, Goldberg, & Levitin, 2011). It is suggested that people may use music socially in two general ways. Firstly, they may use music to reinforce their self-views; individuals who are more conservative generally prefer music with more conventional styles. Secondly, music is used as a communicator to the world, voicing an individual's self-views or ideal self-image (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003).

The degree to which these social influences affect our music preferences may be stronger than we realize. Perception is indeed to some degree subjective, as we all experience different variations of the same thing. However, large-scale societal preferences can increase or limit exposure to certain types of music and thus impact individual-level preferences. Famously, Mozart's music found renewed publicity when the media took notice of a study showing increased spatial IQ after listening to a Mozart Sonata (Rauscher, Shaw, & Ky, 1993). The found "Mozart Effect" resulted in increased public fascination with classical music and its effects on spatial-temporal skills. In turn, exposure to classical music dramatically increased. In one example of this, a Georgia Governor allocated \$105,000 of taxpayer money to provide every child born in

Georgia with a classical tape or CD. Although studies attempting to replicate the original results were weak and the validity of the "Mozart Effect" is now questionable (McKelvie & Low, 2002), this illustrates how society has the power to change the perception of music, whether or not there is any objectively valid reason to do so. Indeed, many still purport classical music's ability to enhance intelligence today.

Societal influence is possibly one of the strongest factors shaping our musical preferences. Exposure to music is highly dependent on what type of music society deems "popular" and consequently what we hear in daily life. We are most commonly exposed to music by what is available to us via mainstream media (e.g., radio, television, music suppliers). A stark example is that of classical music and its decreasing listener-ship. Less than a century ago, classical music was the equivalent of our "popular" music today. The decrease in classical music listenership is matched by a dramatic rise in pop/rock music listenership. Jazz music, which was once thought of as uncivilized is now thought of as a sophisticated art form and gives further evidence to our evolving musical preferences. Clearly the music hasn't changed. We still listen to pieces that were composed in the early 1900's, yet our preference for this music has changed.

Future Directions for Music Preference Research

Research is needed on the social influences on music preference. Studies on the social views of music, such as stereotypes and how our choices of music reflect these societal standards, have been conducted. Not enough research has been done exploring how these standards may change our musical preferences, however. We have seen how manipulations of inherent musical qualities and exposure can produce a significant change in music preference, but future studies exploring manipulations of social attitudes in relation to an individual's music preference are needed to validate the strength of social influence.

The prestige of Western classical music is evidence of societal shaping in music. Even those who do not prefer classical music recognize its pleasantness, possibly because of its positive reputation. Rentfrow, Goldberg, and Levitin's (2011) Five-Factor model of music preference designates classical music as "sophisticated", which reflects a sense of intelligence and complexity. The question that needs to be addressed is, how are these assumptions about musical genres formulated? Is it in response to a social norm associated with certain music, or is it the inherent qualities of the music itself that creates the image? Furthermore, are we able to determine what happens first when an individual formulates a preference

or dislike for certain music: social influence or judgment of musical characteristics?

Returning to the topic of atonal music, we may be able to use this genre to better investigate social influences. As mentioned earlier, atonal music has been shown to be less favored when compared to tonal music (Smith & Witt, 1989). With this knowledge we can possibly control for intrinsic musical qualities that may factor into preferences. While many composers today are utilizing more atonal techniques in their music, strictly atonal compositions are still rare in mainstream music. If we are able to use social influence alone to sway an individual's preference for this type of music, we may be able to isolate important social factors in music preference formation.

If large-scale social preferences have the power to influence individual-level preferences through popularity and positive regard, then we have been holding ourselves back from diverse music already existing in our Western repertoire. With further investigation on the roles society plays in the shaping of our ideas on pleasantness, we may learn more about the importance of external factors in our decision-making and preference formation regarding music.

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