Children's Modes of Listening to Music at Home and at School

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how children listen to music, by examining relationships between their different modes of listening and different contexts, home and school. It also looked at developmental and cultural perspectives, by comparing children from different age levels and nationalities. The 120 participants were British and Portuguese children aged 9-10 years, attending primary schools, and 13-14 years, attending secondary schools. Children responded to an individual interview with open-ended questions, concerning their modes of listening to music at home and at school. Findings showed that children's modes of listening imply various levels of attention and emotional involvement with music, and depend on the context, which may be related to different functions of music. At home, few children listened to music as a main activity. They preferred listening and performing (singing, dancing), or accompanying a variety of non-musical activities (studying, playing games). At school, children listened to music often while doing musical activities (analysis, performing), moderately as a main activity, but rarely while doing non-musical activities. There were no relevant national differences, and age differences resulted mainly from specific teaching strategies at each school level.

INTRODUCTION

Music has multiple functions in everyday life, and people listen to it in various contexts (Russell, 1997). Different ways of listening to music may depend upon listener's personal characteristics and focus of attention, and listening context, both physical and social. Behne (1997) has investigated the importance of age changes in music listening. He identified nine listening styles of 11-20 year-olds, which related to emotional, cognitive and body-orientated components. Behne found significant developments in appreciating music in later adolescence: listening increased in frequency, and some styles changed considerably with age.

People listen to music with varying degrees of attentiveness, to suit different activities (Hargreaves, 1986). Attention implies selectivity of processing, focus and concentration. Attention can be focused, when people respond to one of more stimuli, and divided, when they respond to all stimuli (Eysenck & Keane, 1990). Research showed that people may perform two complex tasks simultaneously if they use different sense modalities (visual and auditory), or are dissimilar from each other, and relatively easy (Eysenck and Keane, 1990). Thus, "processes *may* take place simultaneously provided that they do not use the same kind of mechanisms" (Sloboda, 1985, p. 167), for instance, listening to music and doing housework. Listening attentively is difficult, and listeners 'choose what to focus on" (Aiello, 1994, p. 276). Research indicates that musicians and nonmusicians focus on different musical elements (Madsen, 1997; Madsen & Geringer, 1990), and that musicians change their attention in the course of listening (Clarke & Krumhansl, 1990). Sloboda (1985) put forward the hypothesis that "polyphonic music is perceived as an ambiguous pattern capable of 'figure-ground' reversal" (p.168), "focal attention" is paid to one melodic line at a time, and the other lines form the background. A similar pattern might be proposed for attention in children's everyday music listening. Music may be either in the foreground or background.

Sloboda *et al.* (2001) found that adults' everyday listening to music occurred with different frequencies in different contexts, most often in public places, and moderately at home. Music accompanied active leisure, more than deskwork or passive leisure. Autobiographical memories of childhood showed that the enjoyment of music was linked to the context in which it took place: there were far more positive memories of music in concerts or at home, than of school events (Sloboda, 1990). Other studies suggest the greater importance of music for teenagers outside, than inside school (Boal-Palheiros & Hargreaves, 2001; North *et al.*, 2000). Thus, the functions of music in each context may influence children's involvement with music. At home, children's listening depends on them, whereas at school, music listening is determined by the curriculum, and in public places, background music has primarily extra-musical functions (Crozier, 1997; North & Hargreaves, 1997).

Four modes of listening to music

Although the literature refers to listening styles (e.g. Behne, 1997; Kemp, 1997), expression modes seem more appropriate: whereas style implies stable characteristics of listeners, mode suggests changing situations (the listener may experience different modes). Children may use different modes in different contexts (listen quietly at school; dance to music with friends). This dynamic view corresponds to the idea that listeners can shift modes in different contexts, and these modes vary according to the music and listener's expectations (Becker, 2001). Becker's term "*habitus* of listening" adapted from Bourdieu's term *habitus* suggests a "disposition to listen with a particular kind of focus, to expect to experience particular kinds of emotion" (p.138). Four modes of children's

music listening are proposed (Table 1), that are mentally and physically passive or active, and concern different degrees of attention to and emotional involvement with music: listening to 'background' music, as accompaniment to nonmusical activities, as a main activity (just listening), and performing musical activities.

Table 1.
Modes of music listening

Modes of music listening	Intention	Activity	Attention	Context
Listening to background music	No	Passive	Unaware / low	Public places
Listening as accompaniment to non-musical activities	Yes	Passive	Low / moderate	Home, school
Listening as a main activity	Yes	Mentally active Physically passive	High	Home, school
Listening and performing musical activities	Yes	Active	High	Home, school

Listening to background music. Background music does not capture people's attention (Radocy & Boyle, 1997). Music is heard "but not actively or purposely listened to" (Musselman, 1974, p. 93). Children do not intend to listen to, and are not usually aware of, background music.

Listening as accompaniment. Children intend to listen for accompanying nonmusical activities, in which they are engaged. They may shift their attention between music and those activities. Music is more often used as a secondary, than as a main, activity, by adolescents and young adults (Larson & Kubey, 1983; Sloboda et al., 2001)

Listening as a main activity. Children intend to listen and may be concentrating, thus, participating mentally in the music. Listening with focused attention may have both cognitive and emotional functions.

Listening and performing. Children listen attentively, and respond physically to the music (e.g. singing and dancing to a song). Through performance, children may express enjoyment, increase their participation in music, or identify themselves with their favorite singers.

The present study investigated how children listen to music, by examining relationships between their different modes of listening and different contexts, home and school. It also looked at developmental and cultural perspectives, by comparing children of different age levels and nationalities. Children's modes of listening to music at home and at school were investigated in two similar questions:

When you listen to music at home, do you do anything else as well?
When you listen to music at school, do you do other activities as well?

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 120 participants, in four groups of 30 children with equal numbers of boys and girls in each. British and Portuguese children were selected from two age levels: 9-10 year-olds, attending primary schools (younger: YB, YP), and 13-14 year-olds, attending secondary schools (older: OB, OP).

Procedure

A structured interview with open-ended questions was adopted, which allowed for children's spontaneity and motivation in responding. The richness and quality of data were enhanced by children's involvement and expressiveness. After a pilot study with a small group of younger children, each child was interviewed individually at school. Interviews were conducted in British and Portuguese primary and secondary schools. They were tape-recorded and fully transcribed, and then the Portuguese interviews were translated into English.

Analysis

Response categories were revised and refined. All responses were subsequently coded and assigned to each finalised category. An inter-rater reliability test was carried out, in which responses and categories for each question were presented to an independent judge. The mean level of agreement between the blind ratings of this judge and the other rater (the first author) was 85.9 %, which was considered to be acceptably high.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Modes of listening to music at home

Children's modes of listening to music at home were organised into three categories (Table 2), which are based on the modes discussed above. Background music was not reported because the question was about intentional listening. Most participants preferred *performing musical activities* while listening (43%), and *accompanying nonmusical activities* (40%). Some mentioned just listening (15%), and a few did not respond (<2%). There were no significant differences, in responses, for either age or nationality across the three categories.

Table 2.
Modes of listening to music at home

Modes of listening to music at home	Total	(%)	YB	YP	OB	OP
Just listening	37	(14.7)	10	10	5	12
Performing musical activities	108	(42.9)	18	33	27	30
Singing	63		10	14	21	18
Dancing	40		7	17	6	10
Playing	5		1	2	0	2
Accompanying non-musical activities	102	(40.5)	18	20	32	32
Do homework, study	48		2	9	19	18
Read	17		6	4	4	3
Play (on the computer, games)	17		4	3	5	5
Other (e.g. watch TV, draw, talk, eat)	20		6	4	4	6
Other (Did not respond / know)	5	(1.9)	4	0	1	0
Total	252		50	63	65	74

(YB-Younger British; YP-Younger Portuguese; OB-Older British; OP-Older Portuguese)

Just listening. This was the least often reported mode, with a similar number of responses from all groups, except the older British participants, who preferred singing while listening. Children listened attentively, while relaxing or concentrating on the music:

"I just lay down on my bed."

"I like to concentrate on it. I like to know what kind of instruments they are using."

Performing musical activities. Performing while listening was the most preferred mode, mainly singing and dancing to pop songs. A few participants played an instrument, when trying to learn a tune by listening to the recording. Older children preferred singing rather than dancing, although some boys seemed embarrassed about singing. These statements, by an older boy and a younger girl, illustrate different ways of singing:

"I might hum along, because I get told off if I sing too loud."

"We dress up like a pop band, and sing along to it. We pretend we've got a microphone."

Accompanying non-musical activities. Children also listened to music very often while engaging in everyday activities (read, play), especially the older participants. These reported much more homework than the younger ones, perhaps because children at secondary school get a greater amount of homework. Another reason for this age difference might be the increasing role of music listening for older children, in the management of mood. Music helped either to relieve them from boredom or concentrate on a difficult task:

"When I do my homework I put the music on, and it helps to relax."

"I always put the music on. I like to listen to it when I am studying."

Some participants reported difficulties in performing two intellectual activities (listening to music and studying), whereas others carried on dissimilar activities simultaneously:

"When I am studying I want to be concentrated, so I turn the music off."

"I often listen to music and I just watch the pictures on television."

These statements agree with research, which showed that people may attend to visual and auditory input simultaneously (Allport *et al.*, 1972; Eysenck & Keane, 1990), and with the explanation of attention, by Sloboda (1985). Thus, children may listen to music

while doing non-intellectual or easy activities. However, while doing another intellectual activity (studying) children concentrate on one at a time.

Modes of listening to music at school

Children's responses were organised into identical categories for school music listening (Table 3). Listening while doing other *musical activities* and *just listening* were the most frequently reported modes (57% & 33%, respectively). Only a few younger participants (4%) mentioned accompanying non-musical activities, and a few did not respond (6%). There were no significant differences, in responses, for either age or nationality across the three categories.

Table 3.
Modes of listening to music at school

Modes of listening to music at school	Total	(%)	YB	YP	OB	OP
Just listening	56	(33.1)	15	15	8	18
Musical activities	96	(56.8)	23	18	32	23
Sing, Play, Dance, Compose	33		4	8	10	11
Training skills (e.g. rhythmical)	27		13	7	4	3
Analysis and history of music	36		6	3	18	9
Accompanying non-musical activities (e.g. group work, tests, arts)	7	(4.2)	3	4	0	0
Other (Did not respond / know)	10	(5.9)	3	5	1	1
Total	169		44	42	41	42

Just listening. This mode occurred moderately in lessons, mainly when learning about musical styles, elements, or instruments. For instance, children were asked to "try out the beat," "guess what instruments are playing" or "what kind of music it is."

Musical activities. Teachers proposed musical activities before, while, or after listening, to help students understand the music. Children's responses were organized into three subcategories: *Analysis and history of music* (21% of the total number of responses), *performing – sing, play, compose* (20%), and *training skills* (16%). The significant age differences across these activities were related to teaching practices at each school level. Training skills was reported more, and analysis and history of music were reported less, in primary than in secondary schools. Throughout these school levels, there was a shift from an approach based on rhythmic and movement activities towards a more analytical approach. Rhythmical skills were trained through body percussion (tapping, clapping hands). In musical analysis, children were often asked to concentrate on musical elements, and rarely on the musical mood of the piece. Performing while listening was more frequent in secondary than primary schools. It included "sing or dance to the music," "play instruments to the beat," or "improvise some rhythms to go with it."

Accompanying nonmusical activities. Nonmusical activities while listening were reported by younger participants only. Teachers played music to facilitate children's learning of other subjects (language, arts) and to motivate them for classroom activities (group work, tests). This may be related to a generalist curriculum in primary school, taught by nonmusically trained teachers, as compared to specific objectives of music in secondary schools.

Age differences in children's modes of listening may relate to both developmental differences and specific teaching strategies at each school level. For instance, older participants preferred singing rather than dancing, and they also listened more often than younger ones did, as accompaniment to everyday activities (mainly homework).

Generally, there was a tendency for a more practical, performing-based, approach in British schools and a more theoretical, listening-based, approach in Portuguese schools. However, the variety within each school, among teachers and lessons, makes it difficult to generalise. Therefore, national differences, if any, may be attributed to particular teachers' approaches.

Although children's modes of listening to music were identical at home and at school, their relative frequency was different in each context. Participants reported significantly more nonmusical activities and less just listening ($\chi 2 = 67.7$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), and significantly more *musical activities* and less *just listening* ($\chi 2 = 4.4$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$) at home, than at school. Listening as a main activity occurred less often at home, and moderately at school. Musical activities were frequent in both contexts, although performing was much more frequent at home, whereas nonmusical activities occurred very often at home, and rarely at school.

These findings show that children have different modes of listening to music, implying various levels of attention to and emotional involvement with music. Their different modes at home and school may result from differences between these two contexts, in musical repertoire, frequency of listening, and functions of music. Listening at home seems to have mainly emotional functions, whereas school music listening emphasises the purpose of learning. Understanding children's different modes of listening and various levels of attention to music is a relevant issue, which may have important implications for music education. Teachers might increase children's motivation for school music, not only by including some of their favorite repertoire in lessons, but also by promoting more often physically active modes of listening, which children use, and which might therefore enhance their involvement with music.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to children and staff at following schools for agreeing to participate in this study: St. Margaret's Church of England Primary School and Johnston Comprehensive School (Durham), Colégio Sagrado Coração de Jesus, Escola Primária Azenha, Escola Primária Bairro S. Tomé, Escola Básica S. Mamede de Infesta, Escola Básica Leça do Balio, (Porto), and Escola Básica Aires Barbosa-Esgueira (Aveiro).

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