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Herbert, Ruth and Dibben, Nicola (2015) Making Sense of Music: Meanings Children and Adolescents Perceive in Musical Materials. In: Proceedings of the Ninth Triennial Conference of the European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music. .

DOI

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Making Sense of Music. Meanings Children and Adolescents Perceive in Musical Materials

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ABSTRACT

Background

What do young people hear when listening to music? The importance of music within the lives of young people has long been recognised (Thomson et. al., 2014; Zillman & Gan, 1997; North & Hargreaves & O'Neill, 2000) and the detailed study of young people's engagement with music, including musical interaction as a means of self-regulation, is a burgeoning area (Larson, 1995; Miranda & Claes, 2009; Saarikallio and Erkkilä, 2007). However, researchers have often privileged uses and functions of music in daily life, rather than exploring how children and adolescents understand music when they listen.

Aims

The study reported is the third stage of a mixed-method nationwide UK enquiry concerning young people's subjective experiences of music. The aims were to: 1) explore listening modes used and meanings perceived in musical materials; 2) examine whether age, gender and level of musical involvement affect music listening experiences.

Method

84 students (aged 10-18, F=42, M=42) with varying levels of formal musical training completed a web-based listening study. Participants were presented with 20 short musical extracts (30s or less), heard through headphones, to which they gave free written responses. Prior general level of musical involvement (in terms of listening, playing and training) was assessed via completion of section A of the Music USE questionnaire (Chin & Rickard, 2012). Free responses were analysed thematically, and associations between the thematic analysis and factors of musical training, age and gender were analysed using analytical statistics.

Results

Data indicated young people made sense of music in relation to other media experiences, with a large visual component evident. Age-specific listening/reporting characteristics were apparent. Specifically, free responses from younger participants (10 - c.13) were more likely to show evidence of induced affect, to use first-person pronouns, include self-in-scenario visualisations often demonstrating vicarious experience through music. By contrast, responses from older participants (c.16-18) often featured a more objective, detached mode of reporting characterised by a sense of connoisseurship. Across the age range, participant responses highlighted

perceived meanings indirectly related or detached from original source specifications, commonly demonstrated filmic literacy, referenced a generic 'otherness' with relation to non-Western musics. The mediating cognitive/evaluative effect of formal music education was apparent, both in technical vocabulary used and in an association between self-in-scenario fantasies and less exposure to musical training.

Conclusions

This novel focus on meanings 10-18 year olds perceive when listening to music reveals that age, media exposure and musical training impact on the ways young people make sense of music, with multimodal listening particularly common. Understanding the ways in which young people's engagement with music alters across the age span has the potential to enhance the way music education professionals and music therapy practitioners work with young people.

Keywords

Musical meaning; adolescence; pre-pubescence; subjective experience; enculturation.

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