

CHILDREN'S AURAL PERCEPTION AND POLYPHONIC MUSIC: AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

Mary Stakelum

Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland

Background

A review of the literature in developmental psychology and music education reinforce the multi-faceted nature of listening to music, incorporating the physiological, psychological and acoustic in the listener as well as stylistic and organisational structures inherent in the music. How these apply to the development of musical perception in the young child is of particular interest in this study.

Aims

The aim of the experimental study was to investigate the development of listening skills in children and in particular their ability to apprehend polyphonic music. The null hypotheses of the experiment were as follows:

First, that children will not be able to attend to two melodies presented simultaneously and recognition of criterion melodies will not be better than would occur by chance;

Second that ability to attend to two melodies is not developmental and no differences between age groups in numbers of recognitions will be observed and

Third, that recognition will not be affected by the pitch interval separating the standard and criterion melodies – a wider interval of separation will not bring better recognition.

The criterion task constructed for the experiment was the ability to hear the lower melody of a passage in which two melodies were sounded simultaneously.

Results

The first and second hypotheses were rejected. The third null hypothesis was not rejected and it was concluded that increased separation of the standard and criterion melodies did not enhance the audibility of the latter.

Conclusion

The experiment confirmed that ability to attend to two parts simultaneously is present in seven year olds with a plateau appearing to be reached at around ten years of age.