

PERCEIVED IDENTITY OF POLISH FOLK SONGS

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Background

Tune identification is a basic component of musical information processing. For psychological research purposes it is assumed to be a universal, species specific, cognitive ability of the mind that is not variable socially or culturally. However, tune identification implies man's auditory knowledge acquired through experience and learning. The latter depend on the social model of musical communication, hence on the socially accepted musical identity concept. In oral cultures people are identity sensitive - they will always recognise a tune originating in their own culture and will usually tolerate a change of its parameters, providing that it does not exceed the limits of their tradition. Tunes which do not meet the identity criteria are immediately and mechanically rejected as being "different" or "alien". This phenomenon, frequently discussed in ethnomusicological literature, is very seldom explored by music psychologists.

Aims

The above research aimed at (i) identifying the criteria which determine the process of recognising folk songs which have a range of local and individual variants, and (ii) examining the extent of tolerance towards alterations of the parameters which are crucial to the tune identification process.

Method

39 experienced folk singers from south-eastern Poland were chosen for the research. They were

asked to assess a dozen or so variants of songs selected from the region's popular folk repertoire. The songs, recorded over the last 50 years, are rather diverse in terms of melodic-rhythmic structure and performance style. The research method combined an informal interview and a "same-or-different" test.

Results

Statistical analysis of the data was performed to study the degree of acceptance of the variants by all study participants as well as by the each of the six groups separately. Four variants were rejected by study participants as being different to the original songs. Among the remaining eight variants, four had a really high level of acceptance while for the remaining six the acceptance level was somewhat lower, and we considered it moderate.

Conclusions

We consider obtained results as moderately satisfactory, primarily because we were unable to sufficiently control the type and extent of modifications in variants of original songs. Our experiment included "natural" transformations of songs, with a lot of attention paid to preservation of their musical and emotional context. Such an approach makes it difficult, often even impossible, to manipulate musical processes freely, and consequently does not allow the designing of an experiment that could be more conclusive.