

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF SIMILARITY RELATIONS IN MUSIC

Naomi-Jane Martin¹, Alexandra Lamont¹ Nicola Dibben²

¹ Keele University, UK

² University of Sheffield, UK

Background

Music theory provides elaborate accounts of similarity relations in music, yet experimental studies in psychology have struggled to demonstrate that listeners are aware of the theoretical relationships between parts of pieces of music. This has only been demonstrated for listeners with musical training, or who are explicitly instructed in the categorisation processes required, or are very familiar with the specific piece of music; in most situations listeners categorise musical events based on surface similarities such as dynamics or melodic contour.

Aims

The current research addresses some of the methodological problems demonstrated by previous research. The focus on children's perception of similarity relations enables this study to explore the effects of age and of musical training, independently and together, on listeners' sensitivities to various levels of similarity in music.

Method

The research piloted a new technique of free sorting of musical extracts alongside a more conventional attribute ranking task, both using a computer interface, in order to explore how children perceive similarity relations in music. Participants were 71

children aged between 5 and 12, with three levels of instrumental musical training (Suzuki-trained, Standard-trained and non-trained). The music used was Haydn's string quartet Op 50 no. 4, in a familiar idiom but an unfamiliar piece of music to the participants.

Results

Both training and age have significant effects on how children perceive similarity. Older and more trained children use more intermediate and deep level features, alongside surface features, as similarity criteria, whilst younger less experienced participants rely mostly on surface features.

Conclusions

There are differences in children's perception of similarity according to both development and level and type of training. This supports the new explanation-based theories in psychology as an explanation of similarity perception in music, since listeners do not use attributes in a logical and ordered way.