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UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' MUSICAL PREFERENCES

Review by Timothy Teo

INTRODUCTION

Students come to school with knowledge of, and attitudes towards, certain styles of music. One of the most important goals in education is to broaden students' understanding and appreciation of various styles of music. It is often assumed that students' attitudes (preferences) toward unfamiliar styles of music will change as a result of exposure and cognitive learning. Research undertaken by Fung (1996) showed that preference is an important mediating agent in the process of music education and a 'springboard' for further music learning. Individuals are likely to spend more time on tasks that are considered pleasant and enjoyable. Engaging in these tasks could enhance intrinsic motivation that increases the likelihood that the same tasks would be repeated.

Music teachers who experience difficulties in the classroom may be dealing with a mismatch between students' musical preferences and the curriculum. One way to resolve their difficulties is by understanding and accomodating students' musical preferences.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

In the research on students' musical preferences, the independent variables have traditionally been grouped under one of three types of effects (Finnas, 1989). These are the effects caused by specific characteristics of the music, repeated listening and familiarity with music, and social influences.

Effect of Specific Characteristics of the Music

When listening to music, most people are affected by its basic qualities such as tempo, rhythm, pitch, melody, volume, and timbre. Other factors that affect music listening include the complexity of the music and its emotional expression.

Wapnick (1980) found that when students were given the opportunity to control the tempo while listening to classical recordings, they tended to prefer faster tempi to those of the original recordings. Similar tendencies were observed in studies employing other styles of music such as jazz music, country music, and popular music. Regarding rhythm, students preferred pieces with strong and emphatic rhythms, and clearly defined meters (Getz, 1966). On the attitudes towards folk music from different parts of the world, students enjoyed those with well-defined rhythm patterns. In the case of preference for musical pitch, both high and low pitches appeared to be equally liked, although musical pitch is often examined together

with volume in most studies. As for melody, students of all ages preferred pieces with coherent and distinguishable tone sequences (melody) in most styles of music. Younger students generally preferred softer music, except for hard rock music fans.

Getz (1966) also found that students preferred music with a reasonable amount of variety (complexity) and music consisting of elements that appear in a way which seem natural and predictable to the listener. A study by McMullen (1974) found that school and college students preferred tone sequences (melodies) consisting of high and low redundancy (number of pitches and variations). However, it should be noted that the subjective complexity level of any given piece of music varies from one individual to another. Another observation of the effect of musical complexity on music preference is that students who had received extensive musical training showed greater preference for more complex music (i.e. contemporary art music) than those who had no training.

Considerable research has focused on how music can represent and transmit different emotions. Young students were found to prefer lively and cheerful pieces as opposed to those that they considered sad and sorrowful (Hoover, 1974). In addition, musical pieces that were considered gay, mysterious, and carefree were generally preferred, compared to those that were classified as solemn, melancholic, and dignified.

Effect of Repeated Listening and Familiarity with Music

Several studies have shown that repeated listening to serious musical pieces or excerpts, especially those containing unusual rhythms and discordant chords, may lead to higher preference. (i.e. Bartlett, 1973; Hargreaves, 1984). Apart from specific musical pieces, increased preference was also noted for music that belonged to the same style as the music used in research studies. This suggests that by increasing the preference for a selection

of pieces through repeated hearing (or exposure), the more general preference for the corresponding type (style) of music may also increase to some extent. In other words, exposing the students to a selection of classical pieces may result in an increased preference for classical music as a whole.

In some studies, researchers have referred to the ***Optimal Complexity*** model when interpreting their results (Finnas, 1989). According to this model, preference tends toward an inverted-U relationship with familiarity. It predicts that repeated listening should raise preference to an 'optimal' level beyond which further listening of the same piece will cause preference to decrease. Furthermore, as repeated listening is likely to decrease the subjective complexity of the music, continued repetition may make the music sound too simple (thus lowering the preference). This model is particularly useful in shaping students' interests in 'complex' music such as contemporary art music, foreign folk music, very dissonant music, and quarter-tone music.

In general, a positive relationship exists between the level of familiarity and musical preference (Hargreaves and Castell, 1987). This finding suggests that individuals may avoid developing a high degree of familiarity with some music so that it becomes too trivial and, therefore, unpleasant. Using frequently played and rather 'unavoidable' music (for example, common nursery rhymes and carols) Hargreaves and Castell observed an inverted-U trend consistent with the optimal complexity model. It showed that preference was higher among children around ten years of age and then decreased for older subjects, who are presumably more familiar with this music.

Effect of Social Influences

Sociological and psychological factors are considered important in the formation of musical attitudes, especially among young students. The relationship between musical preference and other factors such as family background, peer-group membership, authority figures, and media influence has been studied in survey and correlational research.

Inglefield (1972) found that when students were asked to rate their preferences the second time after having been given the impression that their original ratings were different from those of the peer-group leaders, they showed a clear tendency to adjust their own ratings in the direction of the leaders' (alleged) ratings, suggesting the presence of social influence in musical preference. Such conformist behaviour was particularly evident among students with a dependent personality. Students also tended to conform in their preference ratings when they listened to music with an unclear popularity status (for example, jazz and folk music rather than rock or classical music). In addition, when students' ratings were made in the presence of their peers, they gave lower ratings for traditional (folk and classical) music than when the ratings were made anonymously. Apart from peer influences, disc jockey approval was found to play a significant role in students' overt preference behaviours that may be different from their 'private' preferences.

It should be noted that the extent to which students' preference is influenced by their peers depends on how much prestige they accord to the music. The effect of prestige

information about the music on preference judgement can be real or fictitious. In most cases, such information is obtained from views given by people who are perceived as music experts or specialists. In this respect, students generally prefer pieces written by famous composers or, in the case of non-classical music, pieces written by composers whose names they are familiar with. On the influence of teachers and adults, Pantle (1978) found that teacher approval enhanced the preference for mainly classical music compared to other types of music such as country, rock and folk music. In the case of young children, they tended to give higher preference ratings for the music that receives praise from teachers and positive facial expressions such as smiles or nods. Apart from higher preference ratings, these children appeared to be more attentive when listening to the music. In some cases, the classroom environment created by the teacher affected musical preference. Steele (1967) found that students gave lower preference ratings in a 'threatening' classroom compared with other venues that were perceived as cordial.

CONCLUSION

It appears that the application of research findings on musical preferences implies manipulating the attitudes, hence values of students. The practical and of this issue most often revolve around the choice of music to be studied in the classroom, that is, should it reflect students' preference and background, or should it be determined by what the teacher believes is most worthwhile? Although a teacher may believe that students should be exposed to the great classical masterworks, the latter, on the other hand, may wish to listen to rock, jazz, and folk music. Unfortunately, some schools are still using only classical music because of its perceived inherent superiority to rock or other types of popular music.

It seems unlikely that the question of whether the teacher should or should not attempt to alter students' values will be resolved satisfactorily, at least in the near future. However, it is hoped that further teaching methods resulting from attitude and preference research will provide more enlightening solutions.

IMPLICATIONS

1. ***Expose students to a variety of music.***
   Such action is especially appropriate in schools where students feel that school music has become irrelevant because of its undue emphasis on classical music to the exclusion of other musical styles. In addition, teachers should not be unduly concerned that their personal musical preferences are different from those of their students. Instead of trying to make the students conform to what they perceive as the 'acceptable' styles, teachers need to reconsider their views regarding those styles outside of their preferences.

2. ***Provide students with a variety of experiences in music through listening to popular music.***
   Similar to classical music, popular pieces are able to portray different kinds of feelings such as happiness, joy and humour, gloom and depression. Bearing in mind the preference for higher volume, students can be encouraged to enhance their musical expression by learning to vary the dynamics in their playing.

3. ***Consider the level of melodic complexity (as defined in this review) and the associated musical images in the selection of listening pieces.***
   As most students rely on the melody in their listening, they are able to feel and enjoy music without paying close attention to the finer details. This is particularly applicable in classes with students who have little musical training, for example, a general music class.

4. ***Shift students' preferences in a desired direction by exposing students to certain styles or medium of music.***
   This can be done during music seminars, appreciation courses and camps. However, since repeated exposure often results in familiarity, which correlates positively with musical preferences, students may become 'numbed' or 'put off' if the period of exposure is too long. The frequency at which a piece of music (especially an unfamiliar popular piece) is being played should be controlled in order to sustain students' interest in it.

5. ***Appoint student leaders to share their musical preferences, especially in the upper primary and secondary levels, where group conformity is strongest.***
   At other times, it may be necessary for teachers to use their authority as experts to influence or direct students to listen to music outside the students' preferences, in order to meet educational objectives. In addition, teachers may also introduce pieces that are not well known to broaden students' musical interests.

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