
Title	The preference for popular music: Reasons and problems
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Source	<i>REACT</i> , 2001(2),33-38
Published by	National Institute of Education (Singapore)

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The Preference for Popular Music: Reasons and Problems

Review by Timothy Teo

INTRODUCTION

With the onset of television, development of FM broadcasting, changes in recording technologies, and a rise of youth affluence since the 1950s, popular music has become accessible to most parts of the world. In the 1930s to 1950s, popular music was mainly aimed at the adult middle class, but after 1955, it became more diverse and fragmented. While country, soul and folk styles abandoned their regional appeal and acquired national audiences, popular music became music of the adolescents (Radocy & Boyle, 1997). In the intervening years it has developed into a multi-billion dollar industry targeting and influencing young people all over the world. This article reviews research into adolescents' consumption of popular music, the importance it plays in their lives and their motivations for listening; it also discusses some of the problems inherent in labelling popular music.

REVIEW

Research in recent years has indicated the importance of popular music to young people and to the music industry. A study by Santrock (1990) found that that approximately two-thirds of all recordings (including CDs, cassette tapes, LPs) were purchased by adolescents of

10 to 24 years of age, and that one-third of all radio stations aimed their broadcast music at this pool of adolescent listeners. Research has also revealed that, between the 7th and 12th grade, a typical adolescent spends approximately 10,500 hours listening to popular music (particularly rock music), only 500 hours less than the amount of time spent in class over the 12 school years (Mark, 1988). Other estimates of an adolescent's listening time range from two to three hours a day in early adolescence (Christenson & Roberts, 1990) to over 30 hours per week by late adolescence (Decima Research, 1991). The primary sources of adolescents' music have been found to be radio, TV and CDs or cassette tapes.

There is research to suggest that interest in popular music increases during adolescence and is associated with peer influence. A study of Swedish youth by Roe (1985) found that at age 11, 70 percent of the subjects were interested in popular music and 58 percent of these listened to popular music everyday. By age 13, 68 percent of the subjects would be listening to popular music everyday. The results also showed that between ages 11 to 13, increased frequency of popular music listening seemed to be related to increased peer orientation, and that the interest in popular music

continued to rise beyond age 11, a trend also observed by other researchers (Christenson & Roberts, 1990; Larson, Kubey, & Colletti, 1989).

Reasons for Popular Music Preference

Of interest to educators wishing to understand youth culture are the reasons why adolescents are so attracted to popular music. Using factor analysis, Roe (1985) found that, among the 12 possible reasons for listening to popular music, three categories of reasons could be found: (a) *atmosphere creation* and mood control (e.g. relaxing and not thinking about things, getting into the right mood, setting a social atmosphere, and dancing), (b) *silence filling* and passing the time when there is nothing else to do, and (c) *attention to lyrics* (e.g. listening to the words when they express one's feelings). Of these three, atmosphere creation and mood control was ranked the most important, followed by silence filling, and then attention to lyrics.

In another study, Dominick (1996) identified four reasons for the use of popular music among adolescents. He categorised these as cognitive, diversion, social utility, and withdrawal. *Cognitive* reasons refer to the use of music for information. Listeners use music to stay abreast of or reflect on current issues, or learn about other cultures. *Diversion* refers to entertainment and includes the emotional or affective rewards of listening such as relaxation, relief from boredom, release from tension, or distraction from problems. *Social utility* reasons include the use of music to establish and facilitate relationships with

family, friends, and groups. Listeners often use music as topics for conversation with friends, or as a social lubricant, to identify with one's crowd. However, when listeners establish a vicarious relationship with the people associated with the music (e.g. singers, composers) to keep them company or compensate for their loneliness, this may result in solitary behaviours (the extreme opposite of social). *Withdrawal* listening is largely motivated by the need to be alone. This last use of music has been given impetus by the invention of the personal audio player (e.g. Walkman), a powerful tool for establishing one's personal space and privacy, and musical preferences.

Popular Music Preferences

Obtaining a clear picture of listeners' preferences for popular music has been fraught with difficulties. Foremost is the difficulty of establishing what constitutes popular music. Do listeners really know what they prefer? Do the stylistic labels mean the same to different listeners? Several attempts have been made to present an accurate genre classification of popular music. Fink, Robinson, and Dowden (1985) used cluster analysis to uncover the embedded structure in the musical preferences of a national sample of 18,000 adults aged 18 and above. The analysis revealed four major groups of music: (a) barbershop and sacred music, (b) country and bluegrass, (c) opera, classical, and Broadway musicals, and (d) soul, rock and jazz.

However, these groupings were problematic because they included music types (e.g. classical, Broadway, opera) that many adolescents did not care much for (Smith, 1994). Secondly, the

groupings sought to yoke together genres that were very different from the perspective of the youth culture. For example, Christenson and Roberts (1998) noted that adolescents would not normally agree to clustering soul, rock, and jazz together as they perceive these genres to have nothing in common.

Other attempts used radio programme formats to group genres. Lull, Johnson and Edmond (1981) used categories such as of *Top 40s*, *Album-Oriented Rock*, *Adult Contemporary*, *Beautiful Music*, and *All News*. However, while these categories represented common formatting practices used by radio stations and MTV, they did not help to differentiate among the complex stylistic structures of popular music.

Despite the conceptual and methodological awkwardness inherent in attempting to group genres within popular music, it has lent support to the theory that popular music preferences may be clustered around various genres. Christenson and Roberts (1998) noted that, from the listener's standpoint, some types of music do seem to 'go together', while other types 'go apart'. For instance, one suspects that the soul fan will probably also like rhythm and blues or 'urban contemporary', but the heavy metal fan, one suspects, is more likely to *dislike* 70s disco music than to be neutral about it. Christenson and Peterson (1988) believe that underlying such associations of preference, at both the individual and audience level, are *metagenres* — coherent groups of music that reflect the way listeners map the universe of music types.

However, Christenson and Peterson also

note that the only certain factor in popular music is change, and that no 'perfect' list of music types is possible because boundaries are in constant flux and open to considerable argument. For this reason, they say, the use of labels is probably only at best a necessary evil. For educational purposes, however, we need to arrive at a set of choices that reflects well enough the range of music types familiar to students in our schools.

DISCUSSION

From the research literature, it is hard for teachers to ignore the importance of popular music in the lives of our students. Among other reasons, popular music meets social and developmental needs of the listeners. It gives them a sense of belonging and identity when they interact with one another.

The impact of out-of-school music listening on music preferences is enormous and should not be underestimated. Music educators who do not consider the musical preferences of their students risk appearing ignorant of musical trends and unsympathetic to students' preferred styles. When students are not confined by time (time-table) and are beyond the influence of authority figures (teachers), it is common for them to choose music that is very different from that presented in the classroom. It is more than likely that the materials used by the teacher do not match those preferred by students. A possible and undesirable effect of this might be students' dismissal of the classroom materials because of their perceived lack of relevance. Left unchecked, both teachers and students could experience frustrations that lead to uninspired teaching and ineffective learning.

While teachers need to bear the objectives of music education in mind, they should also be willing to leave their own comfort zones to become acquainted with the music of their students' choice. Instead of deliberating on the relative merits of the different styles of music, they should be aware of the evolving nature of musical preferences among their students. With the proliferation of mass media, such as the MTV and internet, and the increased level of music consumption among older students, music educators cannot ignore the fact that students will compare the materials presented in the classroom with the experiences and knowledge they have acquired during off-school hours. If teachers can manage and respond well to their students' perceptions, their role as facilitators in the music learning process will be greatly enhanced.

CONCLUSION

To many students, popular music is more than just a musical style. It is, among other things, a medium of communication and expression of one's thoughts and feelings, verbally or behaviourally. Listening to popular is both a cognitively and emotionally engaging activity and no less important than the other tasks that students perform both in and out of school. In view of the important role that popular music plays in the lives of students, teachers should re-examine their teaching methods and materials used in the classrooms. By being more open-minded to unfamiliar popular styles they may discover its merits, which they can then harness in fulfilling educational objectives.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

From the reviewed literature, the followings implications for teaching and learning can be drawn:

- ***Students spend more time listening to popular music as their grow older.*** Teachers could consider using popular music as a catalyst to teach unfamiliar materials. This would prevent students from thinking that musical exposure in the classroom is isolated and unrelated to those they would choose to listen on their own.
- ***Students listen to popular music for various reasons and these reasons are personal to the listener.*** Teachers should treat students' preference for popular music with sensitivity and avoid giving the impression that popular music is inferior to other styles, such as when making comparisons to the more established styles of music e.g. Classical Art music.
- ***The use of stylistic labels in popular music can be misleading and interfere with learning.*** Depending on one's preference and familiarity

with the popular genres (sub-styles), a label may not mean the same when used by another listener. This may lead to confusion in an educational setting. It would be more fruitful for teachers to focus on the music itself instead of dwelling on the characteristics among the genres within popular music.

- ***Developments in popular music are changing the ways music is taught and learned.*** Teachers do not need to know everything about what their students listen to. However, they need to know how to draw on resources to facilitate their teaching and to enhance students' learning.
- ***The musical preferences of teachers and students may not match most of the time.*** In order for effective teaching and learning to take place, there should respect for each other's musical preferences. Teachers should leave their 'comfort zone' and explore unfamiliar musical styles to reflect their commitment to continuous learning.

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