

9th International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition

Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, August 22-26 2006

Early acquisition of musical aural skills

Richard Parncutt¹, Gary E. McPherson², Margit Painsi¹, Fränk Zimmer¹

¹Department of Musicology, University of Graz, Austria

²School of Music, University of Illinois, USA

Background

Acquisition of musical aural skills involves interaction between genes and environment, practice during critical early periods, and intrinsic/extrinsic motivation. Musical ability is a complex of skills, of which audiation appears central. Memory is stronger for meaningful events.

Aims

We explore when, how, and why musically talented children spontaneously recognize musical pitch structures, with the aim of improving (aural) music education.

Method

Some 200 internet users responded to a questionnaire at

<http://www-gewi.uni-graz.at/staff/parncutt/omas/>. Data of about 100 respondents was sufficiently complete, consistent, and appropriate for quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Results

Preliminary analysis of data from 10 female and 9 male respondents yielded the following. All reported receiving grade A or equivalent in a post-secondary ear-training course. Countries of origin reflected the internet's western, anglophone bias. Their mean age was 40, casting doubt on their ability remember childhood events. They had played music for mean 33 years, implying that their audiation skills contributed to their intrinsic musical motivation. 12 respondents gave piano as their main instrument, suggesting that keyboard provides a good visual representation for aural structures. Musical activities before beginning formal instruction tended to involve piano and/or choir. The average number of musical instruments in early childhood homes was 2.5 and usually included piano. Most reported a musically active mother or father. Early musical activities (age about 6) were consistently rated as very enjoyable with many positive emotions. Early musical activities were considered very important for musical skill acquisition. Respondents began playing music at average age 6.5 - mostly piano. In their first year they practiced mean 5.7 days/week @ 1.7 hours/day plus rehearsals and performances. They learned most about music from music lessons and engaged in many musical activities.

Conclusions

Aural skills (like general musicianship) gain from early, frequent, long-term, guided, social, enjoyable, meaningful musical engagement. No evidence was found for a genetic basis.

Implications

Parents should enjoy making music, own several instruments incl. keyboard, encourage curiosity, sing (esp. in choirs), and offer conventional music lessons. Educational systems should focus on enjoyable musical activities for young children, and involve their parents.

Key words: Argument, Textbooks, Software

parncutt@uni-graz.at

In: M. Baroni, A. R. Addressi, R. Caterina, M. Costa (2006) Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Music Perception & Cognition (ICMPC9), Bologna/Italy, August 22-26 2006. ©2006 The Society for Music Perception & Cognition (SMPC) and European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music (ESCOM). Copyright of the content of an individual paper is held by the primary (first-named) author of that paper. All rights reserved. No paper from this proceedings may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the paper's primary author. No other part of this proceedings may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information retrieval system, without permission in writing from SMPC and ESCOM.