

Transported to Narrative Worlds: The Effects of A Narrative Mode of Listening on Music Perception

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ABSTRACT

Background

In recent years, researchers have become increasingly interested in the experience of immersion while listening to music (Gabrielsson 2011; Herbert 2011). Most of this research is usually centered around feelings, moods and emotions featuring in listeners reports (Juslin et al. 2008 & 2010), although studies also occasionally come across listener responses characterized by having a distinct narrative or story-like profile, even when it concerns instrumental music (e.g. Tan & Kelly 2004). For example, a particular piece of music may prompt autobiographical memories being like short stories and featuring the self (e.g. Baumgartner 1992), convey “the feeling of a heroic struggle triumphantly resolved” (Sloboda 1985, 59), or is felt as being a “romantic fairy tale-like story” (Popovic et al. 2009, 112). These and other studies suggest that listeners sometimes tend to integrate emotions perceived in music with the feeling as if the music is telling a story, and this may well be a frequent listening mode in the West.

Stories are generally considered to be one of the most basic of our acquired constructs for organizing and making sense of the incoming data of experience (Herman 2009). In the context of music, the story-form might function as an organizational matrix as well, not only for recalling our musical experiences in order to communicate them to others, but possibly also as a cognitive tool for engaging with (musical) experience in order to give it structure, coherence and to make it a meaningful whole.

Aims

Strongly reflecting on my dissertation subject, this presentation is meant to point to three fundamental mechanisms that in my opinion lead and contribute to narrative sense-making of music: (1) the narrative potentiality of ‘music itself’ (i.e. crucial parameters time, motion, and suspense), (2) the narrative nature inherent to musical emotions and (3) the individual’s tendency for ‘narrativization’, also conceptualized as ‘narrative emplotment’ or ‘narrative mode of thought’ (Bruner 1991). By bringing these components together and investigating the manner in which they constitute narrativity, I intend to make clear how the narrative faculty of the human mind might be relevant to certain modes of musical engagement.

I’ll focus in particular on the experiential effect of a narrative mode of listening on music engagement. It has been observed that story lines suggested by music often go together with the feeling of the music ‘transporting’ the listener away to ‘other

worlds’, in so doing changing his or her emotional state. Yet, in comparison to the study of emotional effects of listening to music, little is known about the immersive experience while being engaged with music as a narrative. Existing research so far refrained from thinking of certain modes of listening to music as a narrative experience, or from drawing on the extensive literature concerning the immersive power of narrative in other domains such as film or literature.

Main Contribution

To operationalize the effects of a narrative mode of listening to music I draw on the observable fact common to narrative involvement in media such as literature and film: the feeling of absorption into the world of the story, conceptualized as ‘narrative world’ (Gerrig 1993) or ‘storyworld’ (Herman 2003; 2009). Correspondingly, I propose that it may be useful to investigate these musical responses in precisely those terms; that is, of actually being a narrative experience equivalent to those of readers or film viewers feeling ‘transported’ in the fictional world created by the book or film. The principle behind this approach is informed by the theory on ‘narrative transportation’ (e.g. Green & Kaufman 2004; Green and Donahue 2009). This theory describes ‘transportation’ as “an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings, focused on story events” (Green & Kaufman 2004). Correspondingly, I will argue for the model’s appropriateness for studying the engagement with music as well, pointing to a potential cross-disciplinary field of research.

Implications

Music imbued with narrative meaning (e.g., personality-driven associations and autobiographical memories) that leads to the experience of transportation shares important aspects with the pleasurable engagement with an immersive story in a book or film. It features transformations in consciousness that demonstrate changes in attentional focus, arousal, and altered experience of time, thought processes and mental imagery. This suggests that the engagement with stories and a narrative mode of thought triggered by music might share a number of deeper psychological mechanisms. I propose this might be due to an underlying psycho-biological need for organizing temporal experience according to the same parameters that allow us to construct, engage with and enjoy stories.

Keywords music and narrative response, narrativization, absorption, transportation-imagery model, music and emotion

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