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Conceptualizing the Subjective Experience of Listening to Music in Everyday Life

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ABSTRACT

Background

Empirical studies of everyday listening often frame the way individuals experience music primarily in terms of emotion and mood. This accords with an established tradition, traceable to the ancient Greek notion of catharsis, of conceptualizing musical experience in terms of emotion. Yet emotions - at least as represented by categorical, dimensional and domain-specific models of emotion - do not account for the entirety of subjective experience. The term 'musical affect' may equally relate to aesthetic, spiritual, and 'flow' experiences, in addition to a range of altered states of consciousness (Juslin & Sloboda, 2010), including the construct of trance.

It is widely accepted that the nature and quality of subjective experiences with music arise from the interaction between perceiver, environment and musical attributes. This supports an understanding of subjective experience as a dynamic system, made up of a set of inter-dependent variables. These include individual differences (personality factors, age differences, gender, musical training), musical variables (extent of awareness of/ involvement in musical attributes) situational variables (environment, whether alone or with others, motivation for listening) (Juslin et al., 2011). The nature of a system is that every point within it has the potential to be seen to be central. However, if the role of music is privileged above other components of experience (by framing everyday music listening episodes primarily as experiences *of* music) the possibility arises that the contributory importance and interaction between the different components of experience (as subjectively perceived) could become skewed/distorted.

The disadvantages that result from considering music as a separate organising impact upon individuals' subjective experiences in daily life are reflected in debates concerning the extent to which it is possible to establish clear distinctions between musical emotions (emotions induced by music) and everyday emotions. For example, Juslin et al. (2011: 195) have acknowledged that musical emotions are 'multiply determined' by a range of causal variables, while Zentner et al. noted that the domain-specific Geneva Emotional Music Scale (GEMS) could be equally applicable to non-musical everyday life experiences, leading the authors to observe that 'one possibility is that the aesthetic components of emotional experience in daily life are vastly underestimated' (2008: 515).

Aims

To examine how alternative ways of conceptualizing and mapping experience can inform understanding of the subjective, frequently multimodal, experience of music in daily life.

Main Contribution

Taking consciousness, rather than mood and motion as its starting point, this paper promotes an inclusive approach towards charting the subjective experience of listening to music in everyday life. Acknowledging that different constructs/vocabularies frame experience in different ways, it explores:

1. Categorizations of aspects of conscious experience used outside music psychology, such as checklists of basic dimensions of characteristics of transformations of consciousness (e.g. Pekala's Phenomenology of Consciousness Inventory (PCI), Vaitl et al.'s (2005) four-dimension descriptive system for altered states of consciousness, Tart's (1983) eleven subsystems of consciousness), in addition to music-specific categorizations of experience such as Gabrielsson and Lindström Wik's descriptive system for strong experiences with music (SEM-DSM);
2. The potential impact of specific kinds of consciousness upon experience (e.g. the notion of present centred (core or primary), and autobiographical (extended/higher order) forms of consciousness (Damasio, 1999, Edelman, 1989).
3. Theoretical constructs relating to the subjective feel of the totality of experience, rather than to individual cognitive, sensory-affective characteristics e.g. absorption, trance, dissociation, flow and instances perceived by individuals as 'states of mind'.[1] Three recent empirical studies (Herbert, 2011) which used unstructured diaries and semi-structured interviews to explore the psychological processes of everyday involving experiences with music in a range of 'real-world' UK scenarios are referenced.

Implications

Everyday experiences with music in naturalistic contexts are frequently multisensory and multimodal. They are also not necessarily exclusively 'about' emotion, but may feature a range of 'other experiential qualia' (Juslin and Sloboda, 2010: 941), some of which appear to be without either positive or negative valence. Other organising 'frames' such as consciousness, states of mind, psychological processes, provide a useful means of tapping such phenomena. Free phenomenological report is highlighted as a valuable, if partial means of charting subjective experience. Importantly, it constitutes a method that provides insight into the totality of experience, so enabling researchers to move beyond the confines of emotion.

[1] Juslin et al. (2011: 197) found that states demonstrating some kind of "deviation" from the "normal" state of mind (feeling strongly emotional, relaxed, energetic, tired, nostalgic or intoxicated) were conducive to the experience of musical emotions

Keywords

Phenomenology, Emotion, Consciousness, Everyday Life, Listening.

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