Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition and the 8th Triennial Conference of the European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music, July 23-28, 2012, Thessaloniki, Greece
Cambouropoulos E., Tsougras C., Mavromatis P., Pastiadis K. (Editors)

The Effect of Conductor Expressivity on Choral Ensemble Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Background

While music is considered an aural phenomenon, the movement musicians incorporate into performances exerts an effect on observers (Juchniewicz, 2008; Vines et al., 2006). Conducting presents a unique opportunity to examine this phenomenon since it is a physical task with which sound is associated but not produced. Prior results indicated that among university music students instrumental performances led by conductors deemed to be expressive were evaluated more positively than those led by non-expressive conductors even when the performances were identical (Morrison et al., 2009; Price & Mann, 2011).

Aims

The purpose of this study was (a) to determine whether a similar response pattern would be observed for choral performances among younger and less experienced music students and (b) to compare responses against evaluations of performances presented in an audio-only condition.

Method

Students (N = 429) enrolled in secondary music classes rated the expressivity of two pairs of two choral excerpts using a 10-point Likert-type scale. One group of participants (n = 274) watched an audio/video version of each excerpt performed twice, once featuring a conductor demonstrating high-expressivity (HE) conducting and once with a different conductor demonstrating low-expressivity (LE) conducting.

After each video excerpt, participants assessed the expressivity of both the choir and the conductor. A control group (n = 155) rated only the choir performances after hearing audio-only versions of the excerpts.

Results

Participants rated conductors in the HE excerpts significantly more expressive than in LE excerpts. Similar to the results for conductor ratings, participants evaluated choir performances featuring HE conducting as significantly more expressive than those shown with LE conducting. There was a significant positive correlation between overall ratings for the conductor and for the ensemble (r = .57, p < .001). Differences between audio-only and audio/video ratings for LE examples were significant for both excerpts (Fig. 1).

Conclusions

Difficulty separating visual and auditory information persists among listeners across a range of age and experience. Visual performance information can provide important information about a musician's intentions that mediates interpretation of the accompanying auditory stimulus (Vines et al., 2006). We speculate that mismatch between visual and auditory information may be the source of evaluation interference.

The relative absence of tension demonstrated by an inexpressive conductor may serve to undermine the emotional intensity of a performance. Conversely, expressive conductors draw attention to salient aspects of a performance enhancing emotional impact. Findings such as these reinforce that musicianship facilitates shared experiences in which movement and sound transmit ideas and intentions among many individuals.

Keywords

Auditory-visual integration, conducting, expressivity, evaluation.

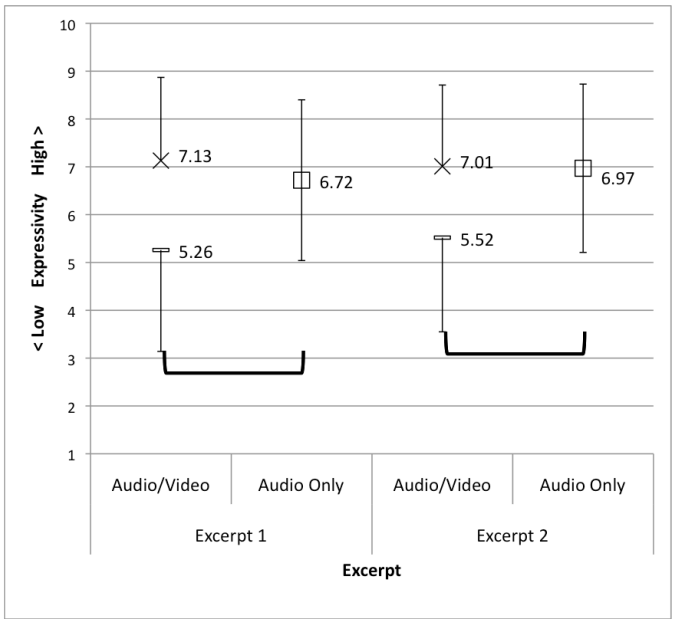

Figure 1. Mean evaluations of high (x = HE) and low (— = LE) expressivity performance excerpts compared with audio-only evaluations. Brackets indicate significant differences (p < .001).

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