

## **Conference Review**

### ***SEMPRE Day Conference: Music and Familiarity***

***Department of Drama & Music, University of Hull, 24 October 2009***

The title of this day conference, 'Music and Familiarity', reflects a growing interest amongst scholars in human perceptions, responses, behaviours and attitudes towards music. The influence of familiarity, broadly defined, was examined by eight delegates from Universities across the country. Topics ranged from self-regulation in music listening to the notion of familiarity as a structural force and the effects of familiarity in ensemble rehearsal and performance. The event was well-attended and there was plenty of opportunity for lively discussion and debate throughout. The day was divided into three sessions; 'Listening Perspectives', 'Musicological Perspectives' and 'Performance Perspectives'.

The opening paper, a joint presentation by Alexandra Lamont and Alinka Greasley (University of Keele), arose from the findings of two separate studies, which explored the various ways in which musical preferences change during a lifespan and the influence of musical familiarity on human behaviour and attitudes toward music. Several important points were raised at the outset, issues that would return throughout the course of the conference concerning the processes defining how music becomes familiar, whether familiarity is constant or whether it changes, and the listener's conception of, and behaviour towards, familiar or favourite music. Lamont used Berlin's model of optimal arousal as a basic framework for representing listener's responses to musical complexity. In this model, liking for music increases on par with musical complexity as individually perceived. Lamont argued that simple pieces of music are perhaps "too simple for us to engage with". The most intriguing hypothesis in Berlin's model relates to the 'optimal arousal limit'. In this case, the arousal limit refers to an upper limit of complexity, after which point liking for the music decreases. However, Lamont was quick to point out that the location of the arousal limit is flexible; it changes from individual to individual and it can move around for certain pieces of music after repeated exposure.

The findings of the first study exposed some of the reasons why listeners choose music as favourites. Motives ranged from emotional needs and a desire to evoke memories and links with the past, to contextual issues whereby music is chosen to 'fit' a certain situation. Examination of participant diaries led to a refined understanding and classification of listener behaviour. Lamont identified two types of listener; affectionately labelled 'magpies' and 'squirrels'. The magpie listeners chose music that was readily available, changing musical preferences over short periods of time, whereas the squirrel listeners focused on collecting and building up a diverse range of music, whilst constantly updating and refreshing their collection, choosing from both older and more recent music when selecting daily favourites for the diary. Common to both types of listener was the fluctuation of musical preferences even over short spaces of time. The second study investigated the temporal aspects of musical preferences and identified phases of listening, whereby listeners self-regulated their exposure to certain pieces of music over time in order to avoid over-exposure, resulting in dislike of the music.

Clemens Wöllner (Royal Northern College of Music) approached the topic of familiarity from the comparatively neglected perspective of the researcher involved in music psychology. The project stemmed in part from a consideration of the impact and influence of music psychology research on the world of music, an assumption that has repeatedly been challenged within the literature. In response, Wöllner, along with his colleagues Jane Ginsborg and Aaron Williamson, conducted an internet survey in order to investigate the musical background of researchers. The survey incorporated questions relating to listening perspectives and habits, current and previous levels of participation in practical music making and the influence of research findings on music making. The majority of respondents had received some sort of musical training with a teacher on one or more instruments, although it was emphasised that roughly two thirds of the respondents had stopped instrumental lessons, largely due to time constraints, dissatisfaction with levels of ability, changing priorities or financial issues. Time constraints, brought on largely by career-advancements, also affected the amount of instrumental practice time. Participants mentioned a variety of reasons for beginning work in the field, from career-related issues to interests in the scientific study of performance. Initial research questions ranged from performance expertise and memorisation to psychological responses to music and musical meaning. Regarding individual preferences for musical genres, classical and jazz styles received the highest ratings whereas dance and rap / hip-hop received comparatively low ratings. For Wöllner, this suggests that researchers and academics may have wider musical preferences in comparison to those who are less-educated. Responses regarding listening habits revealed a preference for emotional listening over analytical listening, challenging the long-held view that expert musical listeners concentrate primarily on musical structure.

The degree to which one attends to the structure of music during the listening experience may depend less on musical expertise and may have more to do with the listener's familiarity with a piece of music, and with its pitch-system. This was the general theme of the next paper, presented by Helen Daynes (University of Hull). Daynes had developed a method of visually illustrate mental representations regarding perceptual responses to tonal and atonal musical stimuli through the use of highly detailed schemata. She argued that patterns of listening are "person-dependent", yet remain flexible and change over time in line with increasing familiarity with the music. Three pieces of musical stimuli were used (tonal, atonal and free-atonal) in a series of interviews involving 19 participants and subsequent analysis of diary entries. The results revealed some interesting patterns of listening behaviour. For most of the participants, greater familiarity with the musical stimuli enabled easier access to the structure of the music and to its thematic properties, with the tonal piece allowing easier access in this regard than the atonal pieces. Of the case studies presented, the music students appeared to identify musical structure more quickly and with greater ease across the three pieces. For each participant the construction of a story or plot helped in the identification of the structure, highlighting the importance of narrative structure as an aid to understanding musical structure. Others compared the musical stimuli to more familiar works or made judgements about the performance of the music rather than strictly the music itself. Rather than generalising the results to musically trained and untrained listener types, Daynes suggested that such information could be used in order to predict individual listener responses to other types of musical stimuli.

The second session got underway with a stimulating case study presented by Jon Hargreaves (University of York) on 'Black Angels', a work by the American Composer George Crumb. Whereas previous papers had considered the role of familiarity in relation to the listeners' understanding and perception of musical structure, Hargreaves proposed that familiarity itself can be considered as a structural force, with the structure of the music, and the meaning brought about by an understanding of the structure, both located in the mind of the listener and not in the piece itself. In 'Black Angels', Crumb plays on the listener's expectations by quoting famous pieces of music, setting up expectations and then subverting those expectations in order to "bring about meaning". In this sense, Hargreaves explained, the listener is drawn primarily to the connections between referents rather than to the referents themselves. According to Hargreaves, Crumb achieves this by playing with a listener's individual "musical geography". Hargreaves used this term in relation to musical memory, whereby an individual constructs a kind of road map of "listening situations" that enables him or her to situate a piece or an excerpt of music more precisely in relation to other stored musical memories. The degree to which Crumb is successful in achieving his goal depends on the extent to which listeners are familiar with the various referents, quotations and stylistic allusions that Crumb deploys. These range from Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' to Penderecki's 'Threnody for the victims of Hiroshima'. At times the quotations create a kind of echo effect, whereby one extract quotes another so that everything is heard "in the context of an older quotation", taking the listener back through the "mists of time".

Since perhaps the early 1980s, musicology has been in a state of constant flux. Since that time an increasing number of scholars have examined, challenged, re-considered, and reflected upon established methods, approaches, ideologies, models and foundational concepts in order to gain fresh perspectives and new motivations for research. In the process, musicology has become ever more interdisciplinary and the search for connections, interactions and the need for communication between the disciplines has become a major concern. This concern was addressed by Vanessa Hawes (University of East Anglia), who proposed various ways of thinking about musicology as a systemal process. Hawes called for a greater connectivity and communication between the often divided and divergent branches of humanitarian-based and systematic, or science-based, music research. She argued that familiarity with other disciplines, in terms of the similarities and differences between methods, approaches, types of discourse and modes of thought, is vital if scholars are to become more aware of their place within musicology and if original and useful work is to be achieved. According to Hawes, if the somewhat amorphous state of musicology can be mapped out or described in simpler terms, then musicology as a discipline will more easily be able to engage with, and influence, the work of other disciplines. For Hawes, this can be achieved via a consideration of the "connection-driven" perspective of the processes of musicology, such as the structures and functionality of the various strands of musicological discourse. Looking more generally at the subject of connections and their examination, Hawes made use of Goertzel's criteria for theory assessment, whereby the success of a theory can be judged according to its scope of applicability, simplicity and predictability, and then applied those criteria to examine specific texts. The findings were then mapped onto musicology in an attempt to "identify points of connection between sub-disciplines". Such points of connection, Hawes explained, can then be used

as a reference, a “starting point” for music research before pursuing the research itself. Hawes likened this to “coming out of something, going over the top of it, looking down upon bits of it, the bits that can be seen, and using those to pull yourself back down again into the work”.

The third and final session of the day consisted of three contrasting papers on the topic of familiarity from a performance perspective. Elaine King (University of Hull) and Jane Ginsborg (Royal Northern College of Music) opened the session with an in-depth look at the nature of non-verbal communication in ensemble rehearsal. This paper focused specifically on performance gestures (the bodily movements of the performer) and glances (eye-contact used between co-performers) that occur between the members of a vocal-piano duo. The impact of familiarity was measured by recording and categorising the various types and frequency of gestures and glances observed during familiar and unfamiliar, professional and student, duo partnerships. Non-verbal communication was grouped into two categories; ‘point’ and ‘state’, according to the duration of the event observed. The ‘state’ type of gesture related to bodily movements that could be recorded (i.e. movements that had a measurable duration) and included pulsing with the hand and head, shaking the hand and conducting the beat, gazing between co-performers and gazing elsewhere. The gestures in the ‘point’ category referred to those that could not be easily measured because of their brevity and included general gestures and brief glances. These were further grouped according to classifications developed by various researchers such as Cassell, Delalande and Davidson. It was observed that, once a new partnership has been formed, entrainment can occur even over the course of a single rehearsal for same-expertise duos. With the familiar duo partnerships, non-verbal communication was used more frequently, over longer periods and with a greater variety of gestures than for non-familiar partnerships. The most established duos involved what King referred to as a “combined rhetoric” of bodily movements, enabling a greater efficiency and harmony in the use of gestures. For King, this can be attributed to the ways in which established ensemble partners “anticipate, attend and adapt their own and each other’s playing to develop joint mental representations and implement shared decisions”.

The kinds of musical encounters that take place during a life-span, and the ways in which those encounters are experienced and perceived, can have a dramatic effect on one’s attitudes toward music and how one identifies with musical learning and participation. This was the general theme of a fascinating paper given by Angela Taylor (Institute of Education, London), who studied the effects of such encounters on older amateur keyboard players and the ways in which their attitudes evolved over time. Three case studies were presented, and a variety of research tools were implemented in order to map out participants musical experiences and responses to those experiences. Each participant completed a ‘river of musical experience’ sheet, charting both positive and negative musical incidents encountered during their lives. Repertory grids served as a written record of attitudes relating to specific musical skills and trends of continuity or change in attitudes or judgements could then be mapped through time. Recordings of performances given during a piano masterclass were used as a further stimulus for the interviews. Analysis of individual profiles revealed both threads of continuity and aspects of change in relation to musical learning, identity and participation. Threads of ‘continuity’, Taylor explained, related to

aspects of active participation or musical learning that showed a continuous evolution over time, whereas 'change' related to "peak experiences" whereby participants encountered a new found freedom in relation to musical learning or participation in contrast to previous negative experiences of the same type of activity. For Taylor, adult performers experience active music making in a different way to children, adults having had more time to build up experiences, all of which contribute towards an individual's musical enculturation in terms of musical learning, identity, participation and self-fulfilment.

The final paper, presented by Mine Doğantan-Dack (University of Middlesex) explored the topic of familiarity and its relation to performance from a variety of different angles, including the performer's familiarity with the music, the familiarity that evolves over time between co-performers of an ensemble and the ways in which familiarity from both of these perspectives affects performance quality. The paper began with a discussion of the terms 'familiar' and 'familiarity', and it was proposed that a number of contrasting, and not always synonymous, connotations form part of our understanding of the term, from "being familiar" to "having experience in" or "having knowledge about". The notion of familiarity in connection with musical performance was divided into three distinct components; cognitive, motor and social familiarity, relating respectively to the work and its performance-attributes, the gestural aspects of performing and the social aspects of performing traditions in specific cultures. For this reason, it was argued that familiarity in relation to performance can only be properly understood or conceptualised when a cultural context or perspective is first specified. Even when this is possible, Dack suggested that discussions of familiarity in relation to musical performance also need to consider the processes involved in "getting familiar". She was quick to point out that the various kinds of knowledge transfer involved in activities such as rehearsals, score-based analysis or repeat performances, would be "radically different" in each case.

The formation of interpretations relating to musical works is gradually being understood less as a means to achieving perfection or some distant musical ideal, and more in terms of its fluidity, as a continuing process of renewal. Similarly, Dack explained, achieving a high degree of cognitive familiarity is only part of the process of becoming familiar with a work, one that should also involve a continuous renewing (and not just retrieving) of past experiences and the knowledge gained from those experiences. For Dack, the ideal context for such a renewal of interpretative knowledge is the "temporal environment" of live performance. In this environment, it was argued, a type of schematic representation for performance is developed that is unique to the context of live performance, enabling interpretative decisions to be formulated that would otherwise go unnoticed. The subject of live performance has been comparatively neglected within the literature, perhaps largely due to its temporal nature. In order to overcome this limitation, Dack's recent project, entitled 'Alchemy; Qualitative Transformations in Chamber Music Performance', used video recordings of rehearsals to examine the nature of live performance and the evolution of knowledge production in the context of a professional piano trio, from the initial stages of ensemble formation and rehearsals through various live performances and workshops. Drawing on her experience as a pianist within the trio, Dack reflected on the evolution of social familiarity over time. She mentioned how, as the co-performers became more familiar, there was a notable increase in time spent performing, and a decrease in the amount of

group discussion. In addition, members observed an increased ease in giving and receiving critical remarks. During the live performances, the acoustics of the performance venue was a crucial factor and Dack explained how it influenced a range of performance parameters from dynamics to phrasing and the control of tempo. Familiarity with the acoustic qualities of a venue was therefore deemed an essential part of the rehearsal process.

Congratulations to all the speakers, organisers and other participants for putting together such a successful, stimulating and thought-provoking conference. For further details and copies of abstracts contact Dr Elaine King (SEMPRE Conference Secretary) at [e.c.king@hull.ac.uk](mailto:e.c.king@hull.ac.uk)

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