



How do people choose what to listen to?

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Neuroscientists are fascinated by our response to music. They believe that responses to music are partly inbuilt and partly learned – but learned very early in life.

We tend to like music that is familiar but not too familiar and strikes a balance between simplicity and complexity. We prefer music that is similar to music we already like because our brains have already build neural pathways to musical memories that have been processed in a similar way, have triggered similar emotions and are stored nearby.ⁱ

So, people need to be exposed to music in order to develop music comprehension skills. But making them listen to it just doesn't work ^{viii} because people hate music they have no control over.^{vi}

Musical taste

Personality and the way people think affect musical preferences.ⁱⁱ But people with a similar demographic profile and similar personalities like very different types of music. Fans of opera and country and western music have a lot in common. So the split isn't between high culture against popular culture. The key factor seemed to be whether someone had conservative or liberal beliefs, with conservative and law-abiding people saying they liked music they categorised as classical, adult pop or sixties pop.ⁱⁱⁱ

Other researchers explored responses to 14 musical genres. They seemed to fall into four clusters:

- reflective and complex (classical music, jazz, blues and folk)
- intense and rebellious (indie, rock and heavy metal)
- upbeat and conventional (pop, country, gospel and film sound tracks)

- energetic and rhythmic (rap/hip hop, soul/funk, electronica/dance)

These clusters produced results that contrast with the previous personality profiling project. In this research project, people who liked music in the reflective and complex category tended to:

- be open to new experiences
- think of themselves as intelligent
- have good verbal communicators (but not analytic)
- be politically liberal
- not be sporty
- not be socially dominant^{iv}

This profile is the complete opposite of ‘conservative and law abiding’.

“It doesn’t matter how much I understand it.”

Almost all audiences enjoy talks before the performance, but for most it doesn’t change what music they like. The key factor appears to be age - musical knowledge has far less impact than social influences on listeners whose musical preferences are already formed.^v

“If it’s really bad music then I don’t think there’s a lot anyone can do about it. If I’m like ‘Oh, I’m not quite sure,’ if it’s intrigued me a little bit, then I can be steered different ways by learning new information about it.”

Analytical listeners relish getting more information about the music but for emotional listeners it just highlights how much they don’t know:

But even the analytical listeners are clear they want information that gives them emotional and social relevance rather than too many facts:

“I want to know what has led them to create that piece of music, is it related to something personal, or whatever.”

Our existing and potential audiences have one thing in common: music is an important part of their lives. If they don’t have music accompanying their everyday lives, they are not up for trying different kinds of music.

On the whole, they don’t like musical categories as they aren’t helpful in describing their own musical tastes. This is even more marked among the under 30s.

The only factor that influenced sales was whether non-specialist audiences had heard of the performer. Even then, the effect was small. People decide on a gig by gig basis whether they want to go. So how we describe each of our events is crucial.^{vi}

“It’s live. It’s real”

Three aspects of the live experience are essential in creating emotional and social responses to the music:

- the anticipation
- that you can’t predict what’s going to happen
- the interaction between the musicians and between the musicians and the audience.

Spontaneity was particularly important to newcomers to jazz:

“I didn’t feel they were like taking any risks really in the music. I felt it was all very controlled and rigid.”

“Jazz isn’t meant to be like that, it’s meant to be improvised.”

“They were improvising but it all felt very clean and nothing new about it.”

Audiences love the role that the audience can play in creating a great concert and they want musicians to engage with them:

“I think the band should say more about the music, tell people what the music is about, how did this tune come about, what have we done before, where have we been - talk to people more. They come on, play their music and walk off.”

The potential attenders that we spoke to as part of our research didn’t go to jazz because:

- they had narrow and negative perceptions of the music
- they had negative perceptions of who else might be in the audience
- they believed that you had to know a lot about jazz before you could enjoy it

And the publicity we produce about our concerts reinforces these negative preconceptions – when they can find any.

So how can we persuade them to give our music a go?

We need to rely much less on labelling musical genres and compete with other opportunities to see live music on a gig by gig basis. Our images should convey how the music will make them feel and include pictures of the audience, not just the artists. Giving potential attenders opportunities to sample the music will also help.^{vi}

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