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In search of the inner voice: a qualitative exploration of the internalised use of aural, visual, kinaesthetic, and other imagery in the perception and performance of music

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In Search of the Inner Voice:
A Qualitative Exploration of the Internalised use of
Aural, Visual, Kinaesthetic, and Other Imagery in
the Perception and Performance of Music

Completed in fulfilment of requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Nicole Saintilan BCA (Hons), M Mus, A Mus A, Grad Dip Ed

Faculty of Education,
University of Wollongong

2008

Statement of Sources

Apart from the acknowledged borrowings from other sources, the work in this thesis, to my knowledge, is original. No part of this thesis has been submitted to any other institution for academic credit.

Nicole Saintilan.

September, 2008

Style Guidelines

According to Departmental advice received, the Style Guidelines to be adopted for the presentation of this thesis were optional. Therefore, the guidelines of choice were those of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Society (5th.ed.). Taken into account was the variation allowed by these guidelines (for material other than journal articles) that is not only permissible, but also desirable in the interests of clear communication.

Abstract

This study is about imagery, mostly sound imagery, but also a more complex set of imageries used by musicians in the perception and performance of music. Imagery is the internal representation of a stimulus, experienced in the presence or absence of that stimulus. Imagery may be of different types, such as visual (imagined seeing), auditory (imagined words or sounds), spatial (imagined distances or placement), or kinaesthetic (imagined movement). The thought processes that musicians use in this regard are not well-documented. This lack of knowledge contributes to the mystique that surrounds music literacy, a mystique that, in turn, does little to help student musicians develop useful strategies for performing and listening to music.

The aim of the study in the first instance was to find out what types of thought processes musicians actively employ during their work. The research expanded progressively to become an exploration of the psychological and physical tools musicians use when they perform and listen to music. The underlying premise was that there is an inner voice with multiple manifestations, and that musicians have the capacity to generate such internal imagery.

A review of the literature in this area showed the absence of a comprehensive description of the sounds that musicians are able to imagine in terms of range, speed, timbre, and complexity. Also lacking from the literature is a description of the differences in the *feel* of imagery, and the range of imagery skills that musicians combine when performing and listening to music. Thus the starting point for this thesis was the search for an *inner voice*.

The research centred on a series of questionnaires and interviews with 10 experienced musicians over a 12-month period. In the course of these interviews the musicians were asked to comment on their imagery during different musical experiences such as thinking, listening, score reading, and performance. Their written and spoken answers were collated and compared to search for similarities and differences. The investigation became a sequential and in-depth search, as participant responses raised more and more issues and areas for enquiry. Research Questions were developed progressively, subsequent to the initial two-part theory having been operationalized. This stated that (a) the musician-participants would be able to generate the impression of sound internally (i.e., *inner sing*), and (b) they would agree that there is more than one type of sound imagery.

Although unable to generalise results due to the limitations inherent in research of this nature, the findings shed new light on previous inconsistencies in the literature, provide new knowledge and conceptualisations, clarify terminology, and have implications for the teaching of music in its various forms. The two main findings to emerge from the study are that musicians are likely to employ a variety of imagery types when they work and that they do so in significantly different and individual styles. The results demonstrate that the musicians relied on a wide variety of imagery, including imagery of movement and sound as well as visual imagery of instruments, hands, written music, and analytical representations of the music. The results further revealed the wide range of terminology used when musicians talk about their inner musical worlds. Where

one musician may inner sing music, another may *inner hear* or *inner perform*, and the next may do something entirely different.

These findings lead to several conclusions. It is incorrect to assume that any two musicians will think the same thoughts or use the same imagery when they hear or perform a piece of music. Moreover, differences that professional musicians display when imagining music may well be evident in students. Expecting students to conform to one way or another when listening, performing, or thinking about music may be unrealistic or damaging. In gaining a more precise understanding of the inner voice of musicians, it becomes possible to set clear goals for the teaching of hitherto hidden skills. An accentuated awareness of individual differences in this regard holds within it the exciting prospect of full potential being reached by student musicians.

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Preface

Driving in our car with the radio on, I asked my two sons what they imagined when they listened to music. They both imagined, in a visual way, the contour of the melody. My elder son reported imagining it as a continuous line graph, the younger imagined someone jumping up and down over the houses as the melody rose and fell.

A special moment; to glimpse the developing minds of children.