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Authors

Orr, Mark G.

Ohlsson, Stellan

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Effects of Music Expertise on Evaluative Judgments

Mark G. Orr (morr@uic.edu)

Stellan Ohlsson (stellan@uic.edu)

University of Illinois, 1007 West Harrison Street
Chicago, Illinois 60607 USA

Performers Versus Connoisseurs

Expertise research has to date focused on the type of expertise that is expressed in temporally extended, complex performances. However, there is a class of experts -- commonly referred to as connoisseurs -- whose expertise is not expressed in complex, temporally extended performances but in evaluative judgments.

Do the cognitive mechanisms that are responsible for performance expertise -- e.g., chunking -- also suffice to explain connoisseurship. In one of the few systematic studies of connoisseurship, Solomon (1997) found that experts' descriptions of wines were more complex than those of novices. This finding suggests that wine tasting practice triggers an increase in perceptual subtlety, as common sense would suggest, rather than a decrease in subjective complexity via chunking.

Music straddles the distinction between performance and judgment. On the one hand, musicians are performance experts. On the other hand, the quality of music can only be measured through an evaluative judgment. We are interested in the connection between performance expertise and evaluative judgment in music? Performance expertise should lead to reduced stimulus complexity. However, it is unclear how this will effect evaluative liking judgments.

The purpose of this study was to determine how musical expertise influences liking of music within and across styles. We asked novices, jazz musicians and bluegrass musicians to judge short jazz improvisations with respect to both complexity and liking. We also asked participants to describe the reasons for their judgments.

Method

Sixty-four undergraduate students (musical novices), 12 jazz musicians and 8 bluegrass musicians rated 40 jazz improvisations for complexity and likability on 7-point scales in two sessions. At the end of the second session the subjects were asked to describe what makes one piece of music more or less likable than another.

Results

Liking ratings were regressed onto the complexity ratings for each group of listeners. As shown in Table 1, complexity predicted liking for the novices but not for either expert group.

Table 1: Regression analyses (liking regressed onto complexity) for novices and expert listeners.

Listeners	F	R ² _{Linear}	R ² _{Quadratic}
Novices	35.02	--	.65
Jazz	3.31	--	.15
Bluegrass	ns	--	--

Further analyses indicated that experts (jazz and bluegrass) did not perceive the improvisations as less complex compared to novices, $F = .94$, $p > .30$. However, there was a marked increase of liking with increased expertise, $M = 3.4$, 4.0 , and 4.8 for the novices, bluegrass and jazz listeners, respectively, $F = 15.65$, $p < .05$.

We coded both novice and expert responses to the question of what makes one piece of music more or less likable than another. As Table 2 shows, novices and experts are both concerned with whether they understood the music, but otherwise they differed in that the novices focused primarily on the music itself, while the experts focused primarily on how well it was performed.

Table 2: Verbal responses of novices and experts.

Category	Novices ^a	Experts ^b
Listener	115	59
Performer	2	72
Misc.	19	0

Discussion

The data do show that liking was systematically related to complexity for our novice listeners but not for experts. Furthermore, musical training does not lower the subjective complexity of jazz improvisations, but it changes the relationship between complexity and liking. Liking increases, but it becomes more independent of complexity. Furthermore, these effects transfer from one style of music to another. Although chunking certainly has to be a part of any complete theory of music expertise, the chunking hypothesis cannot, by itself, explain these training effects.

References

- Solomon, G. E. A. (1997). Conceptual change and wine expertise. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, *6*(1), 41-60.