

MUSICAL PREFERENCES OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

Heiner Gembris & Gabriele Schellberg

Institute for the Research on Musical Ability and
Advancement of the Gifted (IBFF)
of the University of Paderborn, Germany

ABSTRACT

The subject of this empirical study is the development of musical preferences during the elementary school years. A total of 591 children (300 m, 291 f) between the ages of 5 and 13 evaluated their likes or dislikes of eight short excerpts of music (approx. 80 sec.) of different styles (classical music, pop music, 20th century art music and ethnic music). The results show highly significant ($p = .000$, Kruskal-Wallis) age-related changes in preferences regarding all types of music. Pop music received the most positive ratings. The younger the children, the more positive were the ratings for classical, avantgarde and ethnic music. With increasing age, ratings for these types of music dramatically changed into negative. The results suggest that especially the first years of elementary school as well as the preschool years are important time windows to provide manifold musical experiences, including a wide range of musical styles.

1. BACKGROUND

Children start to develop individual musical preferences already prior to puberty. In elementary school age, an openness for different styles of music can (still) be observed, which has been called "open-earedness" (Hargreaves 1982). Empirical studies demonstrate that younger children are less likely to reject classical music or music of an unfamiliar style (LeBlanc 1991).

2. AIMS AND METHODS

This paper deals with the following questions: To which extent does open-earedness still exist with elementary school children? How does it change in the course of the elementary school years? By means of a questionnaire specially developed for elementary school pupils, a total of 591 children (300 m, 291 f) between the ages of five and thirteen rated their likes or dislikes of eight short examples of music (approx. 80 sec.), which were representative of different music styles (classical music, pop music, 20th century art music and ethnic music).

3. RESULTS

The results show that age-related changes in preferences regarding all types of music are highly significant ($p = .000$, Kruskal-Wallis). With increasing age, all examples of music were judged more negatively. All in all, pop music received the

most positive evaluation (Fig. 1). As for the examples of classical music (Bach, Mozart, Mendelssohn), similar patterns emerged: Most of the younger pupils up to 9 years of age liked this music, only a smaller part (sometimes very small) of them disliked it. Depending on the music and with growing age, this relationship reverses. At the age of ten and older, there is a strong rejection of classical music. A Mozart Aria ("Voi, che sapete" from "Le Nozze di Figaro") was liked by only 52% of the 5-6 year olds; and with every further year, both positive and neutral ratings diminished while the dislike grew strongly (Fig. 2).

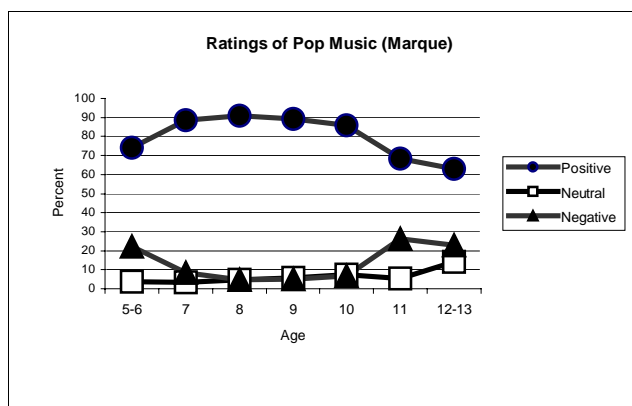


Fig.1

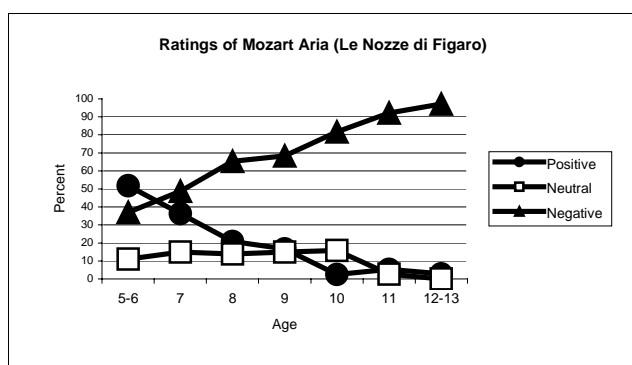


Fig.2

A similar structure becomes evident with 20th century art music and ethnic music: up to 9 years of age, positive ratings clearly overweigh the negative ones, but from that point on, the relationships turns into the opposite (Fig. 3 and 4).

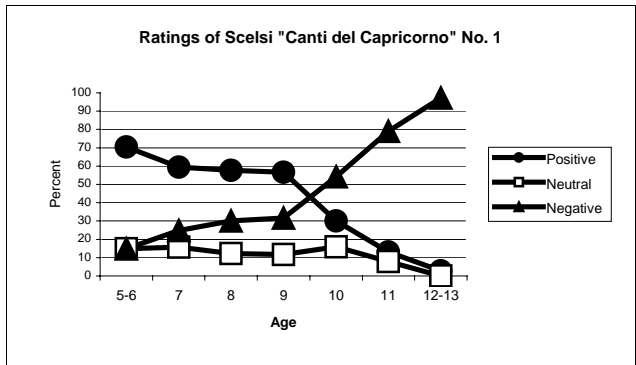


Fig.3

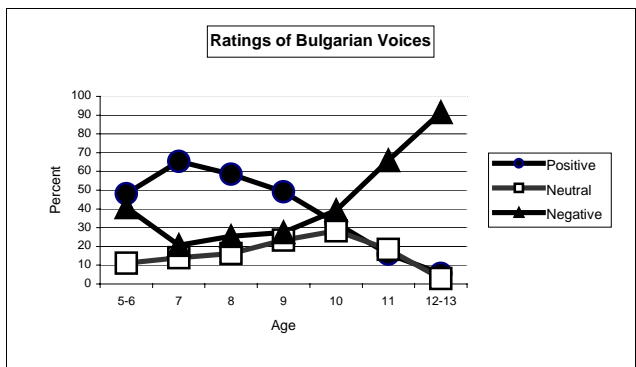


Fig.4

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results confirm that there is definitely an open-earedness for unfamiliar styles of music with the younger children, declining gradually with increasing age. At the latest at the age of 9, the open-earedness has disappeared in most children. In the case of the Mozart Aria, already at the age of 7 there are more negative than positive ratings. This early dislike corresponds with a general dislike of belcanto-voices, which can be observed in most school-age children (Brünger 1984). With regard to music education, the results show that especially the first years of elementary school as well as preschool education should be used for manifold music experiences so that children become acquainted with the widest possible range of music.

5. REFERENCES

1. Brünger (1984) Geschmack für Belcanto- und Pop-Stimmen: Eine repräsentative Untersuchung unter Jugendlichen in einer norddeutschen Großstadt. Diss. Univ. Hannover
2. LeBlanc, A. (1991) Effect of maturation/aging on music listening preference: A review of the literature. Paper presented at the Ninth National Symposium on Research in Music Behavior, School of music, Michigan State University, Cannon Beach, Oregon, March 7 – 9
3. Hargreaves, D. J. (1982) The development of aesthetic reaction to music. Psychology of Music, Special Issue, 51-54