

PRIVATE LIVES



How much do we know about the everyday, private musical lives of the young people we teach? Ruth Herbert introduces a new research project designed to lift the lid on how children and teenagers engage with music outside the classroom

WITHOUT MUSIC

Without music the world would always be silent and I'd feel like something had been taken away from me.

Tom, 10

I wouldn't like die without it or anything, but the world would be quite straightforward and black and white... and culture would sort of go away really.

Callum, 14

I don't know what I'd do! Cos I just listen to music every day. If I didn't have music I probably wouldn't be interested in clothes – wouldn't be interested in YouTube and blogging and those kind of things... I would be more conscious of things, self-conscious and wary of the people around me. **Lena, 15**

It would be quite dark and sad and I would just be miserable... having music there... it brightens me up and makes me braver. **Lola, 11**

Music is incredibly important to young people, regardless of whether or not they learn an instrument. Research highlights listening to music as one of the most popular activities among children, overtaken only by shopping (in the case of girls) and computer games (boys). And yet, attitudes displayed towards music inside and outside school are very different.

At a girls' grammar school in Kent known for its strong music provision, just one student opted to take A level music last year. The only way the school could accommodate her was by sharing tuition with the boys' grammar school at the other end of town. Yet, at the same school, over 100 students opted to take A level psychology, with media studies not far behind. It's tempting to blame the current economic climate for this – how easy is it to earn a living in music these days? But the strong take-up for A level history and other non-vocational subjects

suggests that other factors might be at play.

Ever since music appeared on the curriculum, questions of what should be taught, why and how – not to mention whether it should feature at all – have been hotly debated. The government's National Plan for Music Education and the ongoing review of music's place on the national curriculum are but the latest chapters. Music education researcher Susan Hallam believes that one reason for music's lack of appeal is that classroom music focuses on the acquisition of skills and intellectual understanding, rather than on music's emotional effects. Writing in *Handbook of Music and Emotion* (OUP, 2010), Hallam argues that 'understanding emotion in music [and] learning to express oneself through music [will lead to] greater interest, motivation, enhanced self-concept', and ultimately to an enhanced sense of health and wellbeing across the lifespan.



“ DAYDREAMS AND IMAGINATIVE FANTASIES ARE COMMON, WITH YOUNGER CHILDREN MORE LIKELY TO MAKE UP COMPLETELY FICTIONAL STORIES TO ACCOMPANY MUSIC. ALL AGES USE MUSIC TO ‘TRY OUT’ LESS FAMILIAR EMOTIONS ”

OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

So how do children and teenagers use and experience music outside school? Plenty of questionnaire studies have focused on function; fewer have examined the nature of the listening experience. Top-scoring functions are enjoyment, passing the time, habit, creating the right atmosphere, reflecting mood or creating emotion, and relaxation. Thanks to computers, access to a vast array of music has never been easier, and the widespread use of iPods and mp3 players means that music is rarely out of reach.

As a music lecturer, music psychologist and instrumental teacher, I have an interest in how people integrate and experience music within their daily lives. I know how I respond to music and why it's important to me, but I can't be sure what other people get out of music – what it feels like to be *them* listening to or playing music. This interest has manifested itself in various ways, including an extensive diary and interview research study of music listening, which tapped into the normally private, easily forgotten everyday musical encounters of individuals ranging from teens to octogenarians, across a broad range of backgrounds and occupations. (The results of this research became a book entitled *Everyday Music Listening*, reviewed in February's MT).

THE YOUNG PEOPLE AND MUSIC PROJECT

Here I want to give a snapshot of findings from the pilot stage of a new research study, run in conjunction with the University of Oxford, focusing on music listening practices of young people aged 10 to 18. I'd also like to invite MT readers to contribute to the next nationwide phase of this research – see the 'get involved' section at the end of the article.

Currently, relatively little is known about how children and teenagers use and experience music. It's a topic with the potential to inform not only the work of music education professionals but also those involved in music therapy and the health and wellbeing of young people in general.

Entitled *Young People's Use and Subjective Experience of Music Outside School*, the project runs until 2015 and aims to:

- » Explore psychological characteristics of the subjective experience of young people hearing music in everyday, 'real-world' scenarios in the UK
- » Pinpoint whether the ways of listening are age-related
- » Explore the extent to which young people use music as a form of escape (dissociation) from self, activity, or situation
- » Assess the effect of digital technologies on ways in which music is experienced
- » Examine whether a high level of involvement in making music affects the subjective experience of listening to music

In the pilot phase, participants aged 10 to 18 were interviewed. They then kept diaries of their music-listening experiences for two weeks. The main phase of the project, which will run from September 2012, will involve a further period of interviews and diaries. Results will be used to construct an online survey, available nationwide to both schools and individuals. A laboratory-based study of music listening, resembling a computer game, is also planned.

HIDDEN MUSICAL WORLDS

So, what are the findings so far? Unsurprisingly, younger children are less consciously aware than older teenagers of the ways they engage with music. Diaries describe episodes involving the use of music to create a sense of momentum and excitement to mundane scenarios, to detach or 'zone out' from aspects of self and/or situation, to feel energised, relaxed or 'connected' to others, and to articulate moods. Daydreams and imaginative fantasies are common, with younger children more likely to make up completely fictional stories to accompany music. All ages use music to 'try out' less familiar emotions, perhaps rehearsing future emotional experiences, and experiences are frequently multi-sensory, as illustrated by the following diary entries.

Escape

I had a falling out with [x]. And so I put on this track by James Galway (Pachelbel's canon). I put it on because I thought to myself, 'I know I'm angry but I don't want to make myself into the wrong by being angry,' so I put on some calm music and just thought about it... I pictured water fountains, meadows, flowers – all that kind of stuff and then I thought about it as well: 'Why should I be angry when there's so much beauty out there to be seen. Why am I focusing on this rather than just getting away from it and experiencing the beauty?'

It's easier to listen [to music] than to pay attention to a book. It's from the good part of me – a way of getting in touch with the nice bit

Lily, 12

Concentration

In a history lesson and I put on music on my phone (nearly every lesson someone will ask if we can listen to music, and it is only the language lessons where it is completely prohibited, although people do secretly listen to music if they can, which shows how people prefer it when they are working). When I had it on I felt much more comfortable and relaxed, and was able to do the work easier and quicker, especially because you're not tempted to talk or look around – a surreal atmosphere in which you are isolated.

Jack, 14

Soundtracking

For that moment you can be absorbed by imaginations that are so perfect you could be in a movie, and the song becomes the soundtrack to that movie. I think that is why a lot of young people listen to music, because it makes the world seem so different, as though it is a story and you get to decide the plot.

Phoebe, 17



THE POWER OF MUSIC

Research making the case for the importance of music has often focused on its academic value, stressing the so-called cognitive 'transfer' effects – doing music may improve your reading, maths, language skills and IQ. Such music-makes-you-smarter literature forms the bulk of the research cited in the National Plan, tucked away in Annex 3. Such findings are exciting and provide an invaluable bargaining tool for keeping music on the curriculum. At the same time, it seems odd not to emphasise music's power as a means of communication, together with the many ways it can affect people.

In fact, the opening paragraph of the National Curriculum document for music at Key Stage 3 does promote music's affective and communicative power: 'Music is a unique form of communication that can change the way pupils feel, think and act. Music forms part of an individual's identity... Music brings together intellect and feeling and enables personal expression, reflection and emotional development.' The same document provides supporting notes for two important Key Stage 3 concepts – cultural understanding and communication – which encourage the exploration of how ideas, experiences and emotions are conveyed and expressed. The

missing link would seem to be practical resources to enable teachers to connect all these themes to the central Key Stage 3 processes of listening and evaluation.

This missing link is one of the things my current research study is designed to address. Above all, the central aim of the project is to promote the study of music's use and effect within the secondary music curriculum. Evidence suggests that young people are motivated and intrigued by the suggestion that learning about music means not just understanding 'the music', but also their personal, subjective responses to it. Getting this right at Key Stage 3 might just have an impact on the take-up for music at Key stages 4 and 5.

The final word goes to Ella, aged 12: 'Music is my best friend. It's always there and never criticises me. Without it life would be empty and I'd be lonely.' **MT**

GET INVOLVED

We are keen to hear from individuals (between the ages of 10 and 18) and secondary schools who might wish to participate in the national phase of this research project. For more information please contact Dr Ruth Herbert:

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READER OFFER

Ruth Herbert's book **Everyday Music Listening**, reviewed in February's issue, is available for MT readers to purchase for the price of £30, a discount of £25 on the normal price of £55. Simply order online at ashgate.com/music, quoting the code **A12GQG**, before 1 September. This offer is not redeemable in the USA.

