Music and spatial task performance

SIR — There are correlational, historical and anecdotal relationships between music cognition and other 'higher brain functions', but no causal relationship has been demonstrated between music cognition and cognitions pertaining to abstract operations such as mathematical or spatial reasoning. We performed an experiment in which students were each given three sets of standard IQ spatial reasoning tasks; each task was preceded by 10 minutes of (1) listening to Mozart's sonata for two pianos in D major, \(K.448\); (2) listening to a relaxation tape; or (3) silence. Performance was improved for those tasks immediately following the first condition compared to the second two.

Thirty-six college students participated in all three listening conditions. Immediately following each listening condition, the student's spatial reasoning skills were tested using the Stanford–Binet intelligence scale. The mean standard age scores (SAS) for the three listening conditions are shown in the figure. The music condition yielded a mean SAS of 57.56; the mean SAS for the relaxation condition was 54.61 and the mean score for the silent condition was 54.00. To assess the impact of these scores, we 'translated' them to spatial IQ scores of 119, 111 and 110, respectively. Thus, the IQs of subjects participating in the music condition were 8–9 points above their IQ scores in the other two conditions. A one-factor (listening condition) repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) performed on SAS revealed that subjects performed better on the abstract/spatial reasoning tests after listening to Mozart than after listening to either the relaxation tape or to nothing \(F_{2,35} = 7.08; P = 0.002\). The music condition differed significantly from both the relaxation and the silence conditions (Scheffe's \(t = 3.41, P = 0.002; t = 3.67, P = 0.0008\), two-tailed, respectively). The relaxation and silence conditions did not differ \(t = 0.795; P = 0.432\), two-tailed). Pulse rates were taken before and after each listening condition. A two-factor (listening condition and time of pulse measure) repeated measures ANOVA revealed no interaction or main effects for pulse, thereby excluding arousal as an obvious cause. We found no order effects for either condition presentation or task, nor any experimenter effect.

The enhancing effect of the music condition is temporal, and does not extend beyond the 10–15-minute period during which subjects were engaged in each spatial task. Inclusion of a delay period (as a variable) between the music listening condition and the testing period would allow us quantitatively to determine the presence of a decay constant. It would also be interesting to vary the listening time to optimize the enhancing effect, and to examine whether other measures of general intelligence (verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning and short-term memory) would be similarly facilitated. Because we used only one musical sample of one composer, various other compositions and musical styles should also be examined. We predict that music lacking complexity or which is repetitive may interfere with, rather than enhance, abstract reasoning. Also, as musicians may process music in a different way from non-musicians, it would be interesting to compare these two groups.

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