

Changing Tastes in Music Styles

Rock or *Schlager*? Classical or country? Pop or techno? Musical taste reveals quite a lot about an individual's personality and status. However, listening habits are changing. Dyed-in-the-wool rock fans are dancing to German *Schlager* singer Dieter Thomas Kuhn, classical fans put Johnny Cash on while washing the dishes, and ravers listen to Chopin to chill. **Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann** and her team at the **Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics** in Frankfurt am Main are investigating the essence and roots of musical preferences and tracking shifts in musical taste.





Photo: Corbis

There may be no accounting for taste, but it can certainly be researched. Since ancient times, aesthetics has focused on the question of what people find beautiful and why.

TEXT **MECHTHILD ZIMMERMANN**

Who listens to particular styles of music and what is individual musical taste based on? For decades it was thought that a satisfactory general answer had been provided to this question: The elite attend classical concerts and play classical instruments, the middle class takes direction from the stratum above it by listening to light classical musical and other sophisticated easy listening, and the lower classes listen to pop and folk. This categorization derives mainly from the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In *Distinction*, his influential work from 1979, he suggests that taste is not individual but is influenced by society, particularly through socialization in the family. Comprehensive studies carried out in the 1960s and 1970s formed the basis for this analysis.

Particular stereotypes are still associated with people's tastes in music today. Musicologist Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann makes use of this phenomenon when she lectures about her research to the public: "If I were to confess to you that my favorite music is that of *Schlager* singer Helene Fischer and the pseudo-folk duo Wildecker Herzbuben, you would form a certain image of me – and probably not a positive one." This is greeted with laughter from the audience – nobody would seriously believe that the Max Planck Director really has such listening habits. Most people associate a liking for pop and folk music with low educational attainment and lower social strata. In contrast, classical music listeners tend to be viewed as educated and intelligent.

In addition to using a sociological approach to explain this phenomenon, it is also possible to use a psychological one. The idea behind the latter involves

» There are situations in which sophisticated German listeners find *Schlager* songs suitable and fun to listen to, but they would never put a checkmark next to this category in a survey of musical tastes

the linking of musical preferences with personality traits, as Paul Elvers, a doctoral student and academic staff member at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, explains: “For example, there are studies that have tried to establish a link between sensation seeking and a preference for rock music. And that classical music and jazz fans, in contrast, tend to be associated with quiet or contemplative activities. The results of this research are mixed. Some studies show that such links exist, while others tend not to find any.”

What is clearly proven, in contrast, is that, for most people, musical taste formed in childhood and youth remains a formative influence. Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann compares musical so-

cialization with language acquisition. “It’s like a musical mother tongue. Most people remain true to the musical taste of their childhood and youth because it’s simply a lot of fun to engage with something that you know very well and can embed within your horizon of experience.” However, it is also possible to observe that listening behavior can change with social advancement. That is how Wald-Fuhrmann explains why some people only discover classical music later on in life. “So you have 55-year-old CEOs who attend the Rheingau Music Festival and listen to a Handel oratorio despite having experienced a very different music socialization.”

At the Music Department of the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, such knowledge forms the basis for research projects that delve deeper into the causes of taste formation while at the same time aiming to analyze the variance in musical tastes. Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann and her colleagues are therefore seeking new answers to a very old problem that has preoccupied humanity since Plato and Aristotle – namely the basic question of aesthetics: what do people find beautiful and why? On the other hand, they can also be said to be working on a very current topic: the fundamental transformation our society has been undergoing for a good two decades – described by sociologists as a “second modernism” – and that is also reflected in music listening habits. The characteristics of this transformation include the globalization of the economy and culture, the loss of significance of traditions and social forms that are being re-

placed by an increasing diversity of lifestyles and values, and a constantly changing supply of education, culture, and goods and services, which is also driven by the Internet. This gives rise, in turn, to the phenomenon of individualization, meaning that each individual can and even must design his or her own life story and lifestyle in our pluralized society.

EXPERT LISTENERS AS MUSICAL OMNIVORES

But little research has been carried out on the change in musical tastes, and the data available on this phenomenon is sparse, regrets Wald-Fuhrmann. “Studies that began only in the 1990s, originating in the US, indicate that the hierarchical classification of music styles on the basis of social class is no longer valid. This appears to be particularly applicable to the social elites, who are increasingly including styles of music in their taste repertoires that are or were usually linked with connotations of middle or lower class tastes. People whose tastes reflect this phenomenon are described as omnivores: their tastes incorporate many styles of music – including very divergent ones.”

To date, however, hardly any research studies have been carried out that document the change in musical taste in Europe, and specifically in Germany. Because of this, a current study published in the journal *FRONTIERS IN PSYCHOLOGY* by Paul Elvers, together with two of his colleagues at the Max Planck Institute and a musicologist from the University of Vienna, is timely and relevant. The researchers evaluated the musical tastes of groups described as expert listeners and average listeners. Expert listeners, people who



Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann heads the Music Department at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics. Her insights into musical taste also document social change.



Musical taste brings people together: 75,000 heavy metal fans meet every August in Schleswig-Holstein at Wacken Open Air, the world's biggest heavy metal music festival.

engage professionally with music, are of particular interest for research on musical taste – and for the question as to whether their preference for a particular musical repertoire owes to their musical knowledge and training rather than their social origins.

Using an online survey, Paul Elvers collected data from around 1,000 students, a quarter of whom were studying musicology as a major or minor subject. The participants were requested, among other things, to specify how often they listened to pieces involving different styles of music. The frequency of their listening habits was divided into five levels ranging from “never” to “daily.” A total of 22 musical styles were provided for selection, ranging from rock, pop and classical to punk, heavy metal and emo/screamo, to gospel, reggae and world music. In addition, the participants were asked to provide information about their social status, musical background and personality traits. When evaluating the survey data, Elvers used factor analysis to summarize the large number of musical styles in five categories: classical, jazz, house,

folk and rock. He didn’t simply investigate how often these categories are listened to by the experts and non-experts. Instead, irrespective of which of the two groups the listeners belonged to, he formed three sufficiently homogeneous clusters from the results: engaged listeners, ordinary listeners and rock listeners.

As the designation suggests, rock listeners are characterized by the fact that they listen to music from the rock and folk categories far more often than average, and to particularly little music from the classical and jazz repertoires. Ordinary listeners indicate that, in general, they listen to music only moderately often and tend to listen mainly to classical, house and pop. Engaged listeners, in contrast, listen to music considerably more often than the other groups, and display a clear preference for classical and jazz; however, they also frequently listen to folk and rock. Accordingly, the engaged listeners correspond more or less exactly to the phenomenon of the omnivore: they cover not only many different styles of music in their musical tastes – with a particu-

lar focus on sophisticated styles – but overall, they tend to listen to music intensively and often.

ROCK FANS – A GROUP APART

The central question for Paul Elvers is: How are these groups represented among the expert listeners and the control group? He discovered that half of the musicology students could be classified as engaged listeners. However, he also discovered that 36 percent of them were ordinary listeners, and 13 percent rock listeners. In the control group, in contrast, a normal (or Gaussian) distribution emerged: one quarter were engaged listeners, around half were ordinary listeners, and the remaining quarter were rock listeners. To explain why more of the students didn’t display a preference for classical music in their listening habits, Elvers and Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann refer to the change in the subject of musicology in recent years. At the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, in particular, where the majority of the survey participants were recruited, pop and rock music are an in-

tegral component of musicology studies. Thus, the survey findings were largely in line with expectations in this regard.

Far more insightful for the researchers is the information provided by other aspects of the study, such as the fact that rock listeners formed a cluster of their own and classical fans displayed the greatest openness to different styles. "The fact that we discovered this tendency toward 'omnivorousness' is the most striking difference between our study and earlier ones," says Paul Elvers. "It had already been established that people who study musicology have a preference for classical music. But the fact that they now also tend to

engage with other styles is something completely new."

Another striking outcome of the study is that it failed to demonstrate any significant link between social status and musical taste. Of the surveyed students, around one-third came from the lower classes and lower-middle classes, a bit more than half from the middle classes, and 10 percent from the upper-middle classes. Thus, a broad cross-section of the population was represented: "The survey participants were young people," stresses Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann. "So it's entirely possible that their responses reflect a trend. And it would be a truly interesting development if musical taste is relinquishing its

links with social identification." Elvers and Wald-Fuhrmann are aware that the study has its limits: based on their age alone, students don't represent the overall population. Moreover, it's possible that the students who come from lower social classes are already shifting toward a more elevated social status in terms of the orientation of their listening behavior.

THE RIGHT MUSIC AROUND THE CLOCK

Furthermore, there are differences between what people say in surveys and what they actually listen to. It is much easier to access very different types of

» Provide children with the experience of live music, let them play instruments, expose them to as much music as possible! Then everyone will have a key experience and perhaps find a style of music that becomes a truly great passion.«



Photo: fotolia

music today than ever before. Wherever they are, people can now access the right music to listen to day and night on their mobile devices. It's very possible that musical tastes and listening behaviors differ as a result of this, says Wald-Fuhrmann: "We choose to listen to very different pieces depending on our mood and activity. For example, there are situations in which sophisticated German listeners find *Schlager* songs suitable and fun to listen to, but they would never put a checkmark next to this category in a survey of musical tastes." The researchers are now attempting to pinpoint real listening behavior using the "experience sampling method," which documents the music people actually listen to. As a first step, the test subjects' musical taste is determined using a questionnaire. They then download an app to their cell phones to record what music they listen to and when they listen to it. In addition, they

occasionally receive spontaneous requests to specify the situation they find themselves in: at home or out and about, jogging or in the subway, with friends in the park or at home in the kitchen washing dishes. Using the data obtained in this way, the researchers can compare the participants' musical tastes and situation-related behavior.

However, many questions remain open in relation to musical taste itself. The researchers are also working on new studies in this regard that will enable them to place the results in a broader context. "We would like to obtain a more multi-dimensional understanding of musical taste," says Wald-Fuhrmann, explaining their objectives. "To do this, we must ask not only about content, but also the range of musical tastes and the intensity of people's engagement with music. We want to understand the dependency on socialization and peers, and the ways in

which people inform themselves about music and find out about new music. It is also interesting to establish, for example, what other family members are listening to."

A corresponding survey incorporating such criteria was recently posted on the website of the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics. Anyone with an interest in music is invited to participate. To recruit participants, Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann's team is using a wide range of channels, such as ads in classical music magazines, social media, and groups that are organized in the context of music streaming services. It is also important for the taste researchers not only to survey a general framework of styles, but to differentiate between them in greater detail. Wald-Fuhrmann has identified another trend here: "The individual styles – whether classical or metal – are subdivided into numerous sub-styles. There are cases involving very dedicated fan groups of a sub-style that don't identify in the least with another sub-style. This is something that isn't always easy for outsiders to understand, but that is completely obvious and important to the individuals involved. In the area of classical music, for example, there is the type of fan who is interested in new music but who is completely different than the fan with a preference for Haydn and Beethoven, not to mention the fans of early music."

SUGGESTIONS FOR MUSICAL EDUCATION

Which factors are responsible for tastes within a given style being so widely divergent? And how does it happen that some people move away from the musical influence of their homes and families and develop a completely different taste in music? The psychological approach could be relevant here – in oth-

Classical music is traditionally considered to be the style of music favored by society's elite. However, this association is becoming increasingly tenuous – probably one of the reasons why audiences at classical music events are composed mainly of older people.





Musicologist Paul Elvers discovered his love of Johann Sebastian Bach at an early age while playing the piano. Such key musical experiences can have a long-term impact on musical taste.

er words, it's possible that personality traits play a role in musical taste.

Paul Elvers also examined this correlation in his study. His survey participants were asked to characterize themselves on the basis of the so-called Big Five personality traits – an established model in personality psychology. This involves the allocation of characteristics to five factors ranging between corresponding extremes: self-confident or sensitive, introverted or sociable, cautious or curious, careless or conscientious, and compassionate or detached. However, based on his findings, Elvers was able to establish only very weak links between personality and musical taste.


Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann has developed a different explanatory approach, according to which key musical experiences could play a central role in the shaping of taste. The musicologist is also collecting data for this research. “We are trying to establish, first, that it makes sense to introduce the construct of key experiences into the research on musical taste. To do

this, we are underpinning it with autobiographical histories.”

Histories like the one Paul Elvers can relate about himself: “My parents don't belong to the academic elite and didn't play classical music to me every morning. For example, my father was a big Pink Floyd fan and played music himself. That was my early experience. As a teenager, I discovered a love of classical music. I can remember one experience that had a particularly forma-

tive influence on me. When I started to learn the piano, at some stage I was able to play Bach's two-part inventions. And suddenly I understood this music. I understood the parts and everything fit together. It was a wonderful moment. I played this same invention repeatedly for two or three hours and was completely fascinated by it. Since then, Bach's music has been part of my repertoire and enabled me to gain access to that world.”

Based on everything Wald-Fuhrmann has discovered up to now, playing music often triggers key experiences, as does hearing music live at a concert. An important role in this process is also played by people in the immediate environment who introduce young people to previously unknown music styles – for instance friends, teachers, relatives or trainers. “If you really wanted to,” says the musicologist, “you could deduce suggestions for musical education from this: provide children with the experience of live music, let them play instruments – it doesn't have to be limited to classical music – expose them to as much music as possible so that an inner response is triggered! Then everyone will have a key experience. And that might result in people not having to content themselves with socialized musical taste, which may give them only an average fondness, but in being able to find a style of music that becomes a truly great passion.◀

Participants sought:
 www2.unipark.de/uc/Musikgeschmack

TO THE POINT

- Musical taste is traditionally considered to be class-dependent: the elite listen to classical, the middle classes to sophisticated easy listening, and the lower classes to pop and folk.
- This categorization appears to be gradually disappearing. In particular, people who engage intensively with music are developing broader tastes.
- At the same time, it is possible to observe a strong fixation on sub-styles among many people, such as a preference for early music among classical music fans.
- Research is looking for factors that play a role in the formation of taste apart from social background, such as personality traits and key experiences.

Karriere

zukunftsorientiert

Die auflagenstärkste hochschul- und
wissenschaftspolitische Zeitschrift Deutschlands.
Leseprobe unter: www.forschung-und-lehre.de
oder per Fax 02 28 902 66-90

**Forschung
& Lehre**

ALLES WAS DIE WISSENSCHAFT BEWEGT