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# MUSIC AND DISSOCIATION: EXPERIENCES WITHOUT VALENCE? 'OBSERVING' SELF AND 'ABSENT' SELF

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## Abstract

Empirical studies of music listening in everyday life frequently frame individuals' experience of music primarily in terms of emotion and mood. Yet emotions - at least as represented by categorical and dimensional models of emotion - do not account for the totality of subjective experience. This is particularly apparent in the case of a range of so-called 'alternate' or 'altered' states of consciousness including 'flow', aesthetic and spiritual experiences. Some researchers have responded by highlighting the process of absorption (effortless attention) within significant experiences of music. To date however, the role of dissociation (detachment), the counterpart of absorption, has received little research attention outside ethnomusicological accounts of ritualistic trance. This paper explores the importance of dissociation to everyday musical experiences, drawing on findings from the author's past and ongoing empirical studies of psychological processes of everyday involvement with music in 'real-world' UK contexts. Free phenomenological reports from unstructured diaries compiled by participants aged 9-85 indicate dissociation from self, surroundings or activity in conjunction with music is a common occurrence in everyday life, particularly for teenagers. Significantly, a number of experiences appear to possess neither positive nor negative valence, instead functioning to offer a relief from aspects of self (emotion and thought). Dissociation and Absorption are accepted characteristics of trance in hypnotherapeutic literature. Results from the data discussed here suggest that moves away from a perceived baseline state of consciousness in conjunction with hearing music in daily life are a common phenomenon and that such experiences may facilitate freedom from emotion.

**Keywords:** dissociation, altered states, consciousness

## 1. Introduction

Despite widespread acceptance that emotion and mood constitute components within the broader field of affective science, and that musical effect can encompass spiritual and aesthetic experiences (Juslin & Sloboda, 2010: 8), 'real-life' studies of everyday musical engagement continue to frame the way individuals experience music primarily in terms of emotion and mood. This accords with an established tradition, traceable to the ancient Greek notion of catharsis, of conceptualizing musical experience in terms of emotion (Cook & Dibben, 2010: 47). In their consideration of the

current state of music and emotion research, Lamont and Eerola (2011), echoing Juslin and Sloboda (2010) noted the continued inconsistency in the use of terms such as affect, mood, feelings, observing the need for studies to distinguish between felt (induced) and recognized (perceived) emotion, and the utility of music-specific models of emotion and ecologically valid musical stimuli. These points have been reiterated by Eerola and Vuoskoski in their review of the field (2013). The latter authors also highlight the theoretical dominance of categorical and dimensional emotion mod-

els, calling for greater theoretical reflection and use of a broader range of data collection methods, including experience sampling and diary studies (2011: 326).

There is a danger that researchers examining experience from the exclusive vantage point of particular theoretical frameworks (in this case emotion) can end up excluding particular elements of the totality of subjective experience. Despite increasing recognition of 'music experiences that do not clearly fall within the category of emotional responses' (Juslin & Sloboda, 2010: 940), study of the phenomenology of altered states of consciousness (ASC) with music, including aesthetic and spiritual experiences, remains at an early stage of development, perhaps partly because of its inherently cross-disciplinary focus (referencing the fields of consciousness studies, hypnotherapy, music therapy etc). Notable exceptions have been the study of strong experiences with music (Gabrielsson, 2011; Lamont, 2011), everyday trancing with music (Herbert, 2011), studies of trait absorption (effortless involvement) and music (Snodgrass & Lynn (1989); Nagy & Szabo, (2003); Garrido & Schubert (2011)) and theorizing regarding music and consciousness (Clarke & Clarke, 2011).

Dissociation, unlike absorption has rarely been a principal focus of musical research. Studies including dissociation as a central focus include the present author's work (Herbert, 2011; Herbert forthcoming), Garrido and Schubert's (2011) study of the contribution of trait dissociation to enjoyment of negative emotions in music and a brief overview of music and dissociation by Becker-Blease (2004). Other work has identified the dissociative potential afforded by sound technologies (e.g. Bull, 2003, 2007; Heye & Lamont, 2010) and touched on dissociative uses of music e.g. amongst teenagers as a diversion from stress (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007:98) or means of 'suppression' or 'distraction' (Helsing et al (2012: 413-4) but these studies reference aspects of dissociation rather than the totality of the construct. In the field of ethnomusicology dissociation has long been accepted as an intrinsic component of possession trances featuring music.

The term dissociation refers to a disconnection between usually integrated mental processes, which serves to transform consciousness. Spiegel et al. (2011: 825) have observed that 'neither the DSM-IVTR of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) nor the ICD-10 of the World Health Organization (WHO) provides a comprehensive definition of dissociation'. Neither is there a consensus as to whether pathological and nonpathological (normative) dissociation are separate constructs or instead shade into one another along a continuum. Absorption is sometimes equated with normative dissociation (e.g. Butler, 2006; Garrido & Schubert, 2011), although others argue that absorption involves attentional focus on limited stimuli whereas the *exclusion* of stimuli from consciousness is key to dissociative experience. The Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES) suggests a three-factor structure, consisting of absorption, depersonalisation/derealisation and amnesia. However, because - to date - all psychometric measures of dissociation are designed for use in clinical as opposed to normal populations, they may not accurately tap nonpathological dissociation. In hypnotherapeutic literature absorption and dissociation are recognized as key components of trance, including both trances facilitated via an induction by a hypnotherapist in a clinical context and those occurring spontaneously outside such contexts (Spiegel, 2005).

In sum, the role of dissociation in musical experience merits phenomenological exploration and clarification. The current paper draws on results from two studies (past and ongoing) designed to explore the phenomenology of everyday experiences of music in naturalistic settings. The overarching aims of the first study (2005 - 2007) were: 1. to explore the psychological processes present in everyday music listening experiences and the range of consciousness they encompass; 2. to compare musical and non-musical everyday experiences. The overarching aims of the second study (2012 - 2015) are: 1. to explore the psychological characteristics of young people's (aged between 10 and 18) subjective experiences of music in daily life; 2. To assess the impact of age, musical training and personality upon musical involvement. This paper focuses on

findings from both studies relating to dissociative experiences with music. (It relates only to the first stage (of three) of the second study as this project is in its early phase.)

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

In Study 1, purposive sampling was used to recruit 20 unpaid volunteers (8 males, 12 females, ranging from 18 to 71 years (mean age 46). Level of musical involvement was assessed by interview questions drawing on Greasley & Lamont's (2006) research on musical engagement. In Study 2, purposive sampling was used to recruit 34 participants (18 males, 16 females) ranging from 9 to 18 years (mean age 14.2). Level of musical involvement was assessed using the Music USE (MUSE) questionnaire (Chin & Rickard, 2012).

### 2.2. Procedure and Materials

In Study 1 participants received an introductory letter and information sheet prior to completion of written consent. Individuals completed semi-structured interviews c. 1 hour in length. Approximately three months later participants recorded their music listening experiences over two weeks in an unstructured diary. Prior to the negotiated start date each participant received a diary information and instructions sheet. Study 2 replicated the procedure of the first study, but materials were adapted for the age range (e.g. two different age appropriate interview schedules were used, for children and older adolescents respectively). In both studies, interviews and diaries were subjected to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative, idiographically focused methodology commonly used by UK researchers in the fields of social sciences and health.

## 3. Results

Analysis of data relating to dissociation from Studies 1 and 2 highlighted three superordinate thematic categories: 1. *Changed self*; 2. *Absent Self*; 3. *Observing self*. Dissociative pro-

cesses of derealisation and depersonalisation were intrinsic to all three categories.

### 1) Changed Self

*"In one piece – something by 'Basshunter' ... I just see myself in some random road ... floating in the air, moving stuff with my mind... Well, it wouldn't be a road it would sort of... I would be randomly in the middle of the playing fields just sort of controlling the weather 'Basshunter's very techno-modern and it is easier to access it in the techno-modern music because it is very ... sort of bass dominated ...*

*Q. This is regular this accessing?...*

*R. Yes. Daily. Sort of alternate world sort of thing... because I don't really like **my** world a lot". [John, 17]*

*"I've had places I go with my mind from when I first got my iPod, which was five years ago... Listening to contemporary classical music [Einaudi] kind of takes me off into a different place where I don't think about homework - a calming place ... I'm in front of my dolls house where I used to play with my Sylvanians - and I used to spend hours and hours creating stories ... and I kind of go there. I'm not watching myself play, it's actually me there with them and the music". [Mei, 14]*

Free descriptions from the second study indicated that young people's experiences of listening to music frequently demonstrated a strongly dissociative element, allowing detachment from stressful thoughts, situations or simply (very common) boredom. Music also afforded a means of experimentation with alternative selves or identities (a particularly common practice in adolescence) facilitating a temporary relief from the 'burden of selfhood' (Baumeister, 1991). Experiences demonstrated a selective attentional focus with diminished awareness of surroundings and increase in internal imagery and possessed either a positive or negative valence. Individuals visualized themselves in fictional or fantastical contexts (as in the first extract above), or in happy, safe scenarios, often relating to childhood (as in the second extract). In both studies travel was the

most common context for dissociative experiences of this type.

## 2) Absent Self

*"On the bus listening [to metal] I start looking out and I do know I am looking out and then eventually there is just a fade where I am just unaware that I am unaware ... kind of inside the music, disappearing ... it's not positive or negative, just about an alternative space, somewhere else to go ... I am not aware of myself, I am just aware of the track, like the track is my thoughts" [Jake, 15]*

*"If I'm really tired I put on what I call my 'white noise' sort of music ...non diegetic sound like Lemon Jelly, Flying Lotus ...I have it in my ears to create a more pleasant environment ...it's not real, it's definitely not the real world, just somewhere where I've got this absent minded sort of blank non-state" ... [James, 18]*

*"A mix between opportunities within the scope of the compilation – let's say an hour and a half to escape, but also moments where you're re-engaging if you like ... it has periods of ambience which are really quite dreamy, which are the escape bits. And then there are the more rhythmic, funky tracks as well. So, the moments where it's dreamy are where I would feel most comfortable with who I am, because it's a space you've created that you can disappear into ... And the rhythmic tracks are ... kind of bringing you back into consciousness" [Gary, 33]*

*"Filling in children's assessment files. Music track finishes; I stretch and yawn. Gaze at the shadows on the wall created by chair legs . . . one spot about three metres away where my eyes came to rest. Mind quite blank. Realise that I am still tapping the rhythm of the music on to my highlighter pen – unaware of this before" . . . [Gabrielle, 27]*

A significant number of reports referred to experiences in which sense of self – both self in the moment and an 'autobiographical' self, where past experience colours or shapes perception (Damasio, 1999) – retreat from awareness. Rather than a sustained preoccupation

(absorbed focus) on stimulus properties of music or sources specified by music (e.g. associations and memories), the prime intention appeared to be to dull consciousness, either by flooding or numbing it. Music provided an initial platform or informal induction for dissociative experience then receded from conscious awareness, (fulfilling a function equivalent to the spoken inductions given by hypnotherapists in clinical contexts). Experiences often occurred when individuals were tired or bored and were characterized by a gradually narrowing field of awareness (described as 'a fade' by Jake). The subsequent absence of perceived sense of self was accompanied by a dissociation of affect - a 'nothingness' or 'void', rather than feeling of relaxation or peacefulness - resulting in experiences that were neither positive nor negative in valence. Recurring terms used by participants to describe this were 'unaware', 'disappearing' (as in experience 1), 'absent minded', 'blank non-state' (experience 2) 'escape' (experience 3). Whilst there was no causal relationship between musical characteristics and transformations of consciousness, cross-comparison of written reports suggested that for these two participant samples, certain musical features appeared to support or afford dissociative consciousness shifts of this nature e.g. repetitive loops, uniform dynamic (unchanging extremely loud or quiet dynamic) or affect, slow rate of musical change, absence or 'flat' expression. A small number of descriptions described extreme instances of spontaneous dissociation in conjunction with music (as in experience 3), marked by retrospective awareness of previous blankness William James (1890: 404) termed such shifts of consciousness 'vacancy' or 'absence.'

## 3) Observing self

*When walking home after school the music became a soundtrack to my life. I could imagine the opening scene of a film with me walking, seen from my right side. . . . I was focused on the music, the pavement in front of me and my steps . . . my body moving in time with the music . . . The street was completely empty... I think about things and my mind is empty.*

*[Jimmi, 18]*

*Translate landscapes from train window into bird's eye perspective – hard to explain really, basically seeing things from above. It's a combination of things – claustrophobia of a train, staring out of window at blurred, changing views, repetitive movement and recent music memories running through my head, altering my perception of reality a bit. Takes me away from humdrum internalized thoughts and worries and gives me a different 'bigger picture' angle on things. Hard to rationalize exactly what's going on – some sort of (slight) out-of-body experience thing . . . I'm not 'me' looking out . . . [Max, 46]*

*Steve Reich is in the CD player . . . feels risky, like driving on a glass of wine . . . feel absorbed in emotionless patterns . . . traffic slows as we approach town outskirts and I feel curiously remote . . . Pedestrians at junction look paper thin, almost alien, I have no connection with them: or rather, I do have a connection but am observing it and them. [Will, 57]*

By contrast with instances in which music was used to cut off from or block out internal or external phenomena, a number of reports from the two studies referred to situations in which music reconfigured experience of self and surroundings in unexpected or unfamiliar ways. In particular, a disjunction or conflict between musical characteristics (e.g. the mood represented by music, extra musical associations) and current listening scenario (understood as a composite of mental state, intention, immediate circumstance, patterns of response to music accumulated over time) promoted a sense of derealization. Experiences demonstrated an equanimous attentional focus, were multimodal, and heteronomous (hearing, looking, thinking) and music was perceived as indivisible from or blending with surroundings, which might take on a preternatural or dream-like quality (as in experience 3 above). Individuals described observing themselves at one remove, as if through the eyes of another (e.g. Jimi watches himself walking as if in a film, Will observes his connection with pedestrians) i.e. from a third person perspective. Free descriptions suggested that dissociative episodes of this type could be positively valenced (experience 2), negatively valenced

(experience 1) or without valence (experience 3). Some episodes featured a focus on simple awareness, as opposed to thoughts and feelings (as in experience 2) suggesting a dissociation from self via deautomatization of thought, i.e. 'an undoing of the automatic processes that control perception and cognition' (Deikman, 1982: 137). Such episodes featured a sharpening of consciousness and an inclusive sense of experiencing 'things as they are', reminiscent of the Buddhist practice of insight meditation, i.e., 'attention to, yet detachment from, the object of meditation, which may be the meditator's own stream of consciousness' (Pekala, 1991: 40). At such times a perceived 'everyday' self appeared to have been replaced by an alternative 'observing self' (Deikman, 1982).

#### **4. Conclusion.**

Music is subjectively experienced in a diverse number of ways, not all of which fall into the category of emotional response. The phenomenon of dissociation is a case in point.

The emphasis in psychological and medical literature on pathological manifestations of dissociation has served to mask its adaptive potential as a normative defence or coping mechanism that enables individuals to temporarily insulate or release themselves from stressful situations, the constraints of subjective experience (including aspects of self, identity, highly aroused emotional responses, negative rumination) and consensual reality. Free phenomenological report from two studies of the subjective experience of music in daily life in the UK suggests that music is a popular and versatile facilitator of normative dissociation. Music's portability, its polysemic potential and invisibility (in recorded form) mean that it is a particularly effective mediator of experience, a medium individuals can turn to when too distracted or tired to engage with semi-prescriptive activities such as reading.

Because dissociative experiences with music are not primarily 'about' emotion, they have not attracted as much research attention as other instances of consciousness transformation (notably peak experiences with music).

The phenomenology of such experiences merits further study.

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