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Musical Daydreaming and Kinds of Consciousness

Ruth Herbert

Below are excerpts from two accounts of music listening, separated by almost a century. The first is from what's perhaps one of the earliest empirical studies of music listening experiences, dating from the early 20th century. The second is drawn from my own research on the phenomenology of everyday music listening.

... one is not under ordinary conditions; one is not only day-dreaming, but day-dreaming to music ...visions of superhuman creatures, of Elysian loveliness and cosmic grandeur; visions also of longings fulfilled in a vague future or a past no less imaginary and interesting. Such things are wafted into mind when ... "under music".
(Lee, 1933, pp. 278-279)

You know just before you properly wake up in the morning ... you're not asleep but you're not really back in the land of the living? Sometimes I can get like that with music. It's taking you away somewhere isn't it?' [David, 51] (Herbert, 2011, p. 64)

Lee highlights content (fantastical visual mental imagery), clearly modulated by musical characteristics. By contrast, David describes a process where awareness of musical characteristics recedes; music affords a platform for consciousness transformation – specifically, to a stage between sleep and wakefulness (termed the hypnopompic state in sleep research). Both accounts emphasise inwardly directed attentional awareness and both could be conceptualised as examples of *mind-wandering/daydreaming*, broadly understood as phenomena “characterized by spontaneous emergence of internally oriented images and thoughts largely unrelated to the present, external sensory environment” (Taruffi & Küssner,

2019, p. 64). But do *all* listening episodes involving internally oriented images involve a decoupling of attention from external surroundings?

This chapter examines first-hand reports of subjective experiences of listening to music I've accumulated over more than a decade, from several UK-based research projects centring on the phenomenology of everyday music listening.¹ I begin by considering definitions of music-evoked mind-wandering and musical daydreaming, explain my adoption of the latter term, before exploring emergent characteristics of musical daydreaming episodes apparent in verbal and written reports of subjective music-listening experiences, including sequential versus fragmented experience; absorption (“an effortless, non-volitional quality of deep involvement”, as opposed to effortful attentional engagement; Jamieson, 2005, p. 120) and detachment (cutting off from self, task or environment; Herbert, 2011); repetitive daydreams; perceiver perspective (e.g., first or third person); multimodal experience; age-related differences in content and structure of experiences. I link examples to conceptualisations of kinds of consciousness (here understood as qualitatively different forms of awareness, including self-consciousness [awareness mediated by associations, memories and awareness of self], and a present-centred awareness [centred on sensory qualities of stimuli such as visual, auditory etc.]) to phenomenological properties of non-musical mind-wandering/daydreaming identified in cognitive psychological literature (see Stawarczyk, 2018, for an overview).

Defining the Territory: Musical Daydreaming

Definitions of mind-wandering and daydreaming in music research centre on an internally directed attentional focus, as illustrated below:

- “Mind-wandering is a form of self-generated thought which involves overcoming the constraints of the ‘here and now’ by immersing in one’s own stream of consciousness” (Taruffi et al., 2017, p. 1).
- Daydreaming and mind wandering “occur when attention is directed to internally generated thoughts and drifts away from the actual sensory environment” (Martarelli et al., 2016, p. 28).

Internally generated mental imagery is most often visual and auditory (visual and auditory imagery are the key focus of this chapter), but may be multimodal, including gustatory, olfactory and tactile percepts (Taruffi & Küssner, 2019, p. 62). There is no consensus regarding terminology relating to classification of mental experiences (for a review relating to music see Taruffi & Küssner, 2019). However, many researchers support the notion that the terms “mind-wandering” and “daydreaming” are interchangeable and refer to the same broad construct.

From a conceptual perspective, I adopt the term “daydreaming” in recognition of Jerome Singer’s seminal reframing of daydreaming (1966) as a normative process, possessing creative and restorative potential (McMillan et al., 2013). Real-world studies of musical daydreaming are inclusive of episodes attaching to broad ranges of tasks/activities, such as travelling, exercising, relaxing/just “being”. Music and mentation can intertwine throughout, or music may provide an induction to daydreaming, then fade from awareness.

Musical daydreams are frequently multimodal: they may feature a simultaneously distributed attentional focus (encompassing experiential blending of internal and external phenomena) or be marked by fluctuation between internal multimodal mentation (i.e., including visual imagery, verbal and non-verbal thought) *plus* awareness of external sensory environment.

The multimodal nature of musical daydreaming accords with an ecological model of perception where experience is systemic – the sum of the interaction between individuals, stimulus attributes and environment (Clarke, 2005).

Multimodal Listening and Kinds of Consciousness

Musical daydreams reflect a heteronomous, multimodal model of listening, sometimes called “hearing as”: subjective experience is informed by extra-musical factors, including socio-cultural sources and autobiographical memories and aspects of external environment. Visual imagery (spontaneous or volitional) constitutes one potential modality, alongside verbal and non-verbal mentation and multisensory perception. Heteronomous listening is frequently distinguished from autonomous listening, where music is sole focus of attention (deriving from Western Classical tradition, informed by notions of music as absolute, possessing immanent, intramusical meaning via its structural properties; Scruton, 1997). Empirical evidence suggests division between these modes is artificial; they may operate in tandem or fluctuate (Clarke, 2005; Herbert & Dibben, 2018). This was acknowledged by Vernon Lee in her pioneering qualitative listening study, earlier referred to:

...moments of concentrated and active attention to the musical shapes are like islands continually washed over by a shallow tide of other thoughts: memories, associations, suggestions, visual images and emotional states ... they coalesce, forming a homogeneous and special contemplative condition ...Musical phrases, non-musical images and emotions are all welded into the same musical day-dream... (Lee, 1933, p. 32)

Lee highlights the processual nature of heteronomous listening episodes, with distributed attentional focus, fluctuating between awareness of musical attributes and extra-musical associations. Such episodes involve shifts of consciousness away from what individuals

perceive as base-line “norm” towards a “special contemplative condition”, the sum of interweaving webs of experiential phenomena. Multimodal music-listening may afford subtle shifts of consciousness precisely *because* it simultaneously mobilises and synthesises different modes of experience.

I’ve suggested elsewhere (Herbert, 2011) that such interactions between music and consciousness may be usefully conceptualized as a form of musical trancing, “characterised by decreased orientation to consensual reality, decreased critical faculty, selective internal or external focus, together with changed sensory awareness” (p. 5). Trancing may be marked out by the presence of two psychological processes: absorption (non-volitional, effortless involvement) and dissociation (detachment). In addition, such listening episodes can be framed in terms of kinds of consciousness, from phenomenal consciousness, marked by “direct” sensory awareness, engaged with raw, ineffable qualities of subjective experience (qualia), to core (present focused) and extended (autobiographical) consciousness, informed by memory (Damasio, 1999). Conceptualisations of consciousness are – to greater or lesser degrees – theoretical constructions, but emphasise aspects of subjectivity highly relevant to music and mental imagery research, including the role of unconscious perception (non-verbal, preconscious processing) and the processual nature of unfolding, lived experiences of music.

Phenomenological Features Identified in Extant Literature

Temporal orientation and goal-relatedness have been key phenomenological foci of cognitive psychological research on mind-wandering/daydreaming. Other identified phenomenological features have received significantly less research attention, for example, frequency of sequential versus fragmented experiences, perceiver perspective (first- or third-person view, about self or “other”), repetitive daydreams and relationship to context (Stawarczyk, 2018, p.

207-8). Research on music-evoked mind-wandering (most of which centres on visual imagery) has tended to focus on particular characteristics such as frequency and type of visual imagery (Küssner & Eerola, 2019), relationship between visual imagery and musical attributes (such as tempo, valence) plus neural correlates (e.g., the Default Mode Network; Taruffi et al., 2017). Far fewer studies have addressed phenomenological content of music-evoked mind-wandering and musical daydreams in terms of overall (holistic) subjective “feel” of lived experience or considered (in accord with systemic [ecological] understandings of experience) the potential impact of mediating factors such as age, context, personality characteristics. I next discuss five excerpts from first-hand reports of subjective experiences with and of music to illustrate key phenomenological characteristics, relating them to kinds of consciousness².

Musical daydreams in daily life

Sequential versus fragmented experience³

On train listen to Shostakovich *Leningrad Symphony*. Always loved this for describing war horror – very filmy to me. Really feel hate and pain inside the music. Stare out of window, book unread, but probably not relating the views to music much. Internal mental images that I was getting were of horror of war from news footage. Lots of slow motion for some reason. Lots of thoughts and pictures about death and destruction mostly, but include frequent images of Shostakovich’s face with square framed bakelite glasses and suit and tie and thinking how his appearance and the music seemed so opposite. [Max, 46] (Herbert, 2011, p. 70)

This episode possesses both narrative/sequential and fragmented qualities (apparent in dream-like tangential images/thoughts concerning Shostakovich's appearance). Max is a film recording mixer and professional musician, factors that serve to mediate subjective experience. In interview he stated "if you have an emotional response to music *it will lead to images, whether you like it or not*" (2011, p. 70). His developed, habitual mode of response to music is listening visually, inward focus on imaginative involvement - even in eyes-open contexts. The influence of film is evident in his reference to slow motion sequences – a technique frequently used to heighten emotional involvement at dramatic/disturbing points in films. Cross-comparison of Max's reports revealed that self-chosen, familiar music appeared crucial to triggering involvement.⁴ In terms of kinds of consciousness, the episode involves an extended awareness drawing on previous associations and memories. Diminishing connection from surroundings, and spontaneous increase in mental imagery indicates increasing absorption. Reports from my real-world studies of musical subjectivity (Herbert, 2011) highlight travel as a key context for musical daydreaming.⁵ Functionally, rather than relating to future planning or enhancement of creativity, such episodes appear self-regulatory - zoning out providing respite from mundane concerns.

“Hearing-as”: Music as Virtual Person

I am sitting still for this extract- I feel that it wants me to listen. The music symbolises a nasty shock which has hurt someone very much. It sounds like an innocent being has been hurt by something or someone dreadful. [Female, 14] (Herbert & Dibben, 2018, p. 384)

This quote is from a female student with high level musical training (post-diploma) taking part in a lab-based listening study, where participants aged 10-18 were asked for free text responses to 20 extracts of experimenter-selected music.

The student is reacting to the atonal opening of Webern's *String Quartet op. 5 number 2*. Her description suggests she experiences this as projecting person-like, frightening presence, possessing both intent ("it wants me to listen") and agency ("which has hurt someone"). Levinson (1997) proposes that hearing music this way correlates with empathic capacity; there is some evidence that empathic individuals experience higher levels of neural activity in the primary visual cortex (Taruffi et al., 2021). Musical attributes clearly connect to meaning-making (dissonance specifying fear/shock), demonstrating extended conscious awareness, informed by prior associations. Cross-comparison of reports indicates participants consistently associated dissonance with fear/shock, suggesting influence of musical codes encountered in film/TV. One main advantage (and purpose) of this lab-based study was that it facilitated assessment of shared levels of cultural understanding and meaning-making in relation to music across a sizeable sample of individuals, with different levels of exposure to music/musical training and socio-demographic backgrounds (N=90). Intercultural consensus regarding types of visual imagery was evident across 90% of extracts (Herbert & Dibben, 2018, p. 385). However, the experimental setting and brief (up to 30s) experimenter-selected extracts limited tapping of phenomenological detail of music-evoked imagery episodes. Findings should be considered alongside first-hand accounts of experiences of music in naturalistic contexts.

Age and autobiographical fantasy

In one piece – something by 'Basshunter' ... I see myself in some random road ... floating in the air, moving stuff with my mind [...] sort of controlling the weather ... And as the music progresses [it's] sort of a bit like a sci-fi movie. The actions and the drama gets more intense as the music gets to its climax ... 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 so you can get very strong feelings from it and ... if the volume's at a certain pitch I find it a lot easier to access that path. I can't do it with classical music. Just really big sounds. I can get really into my imagination. I have got a bit of an over active imagination!

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.

Q. And is access only through music?

R. Only through music.

[John, 17] (Herbert, 2019, p. 242)

Musical daydreaming is frequently equated with spontaneous, non-volitional thought, yet may equally be volitional (Christoff et. al., 2016; Taruffi & Küssner, 2019). John, an "A" level music student planning a class music teaching career, engages in simultaneously absorbed and dissociative music-evoked mind-wandering daily, a practice identified in non-musical daydreaming literature, as particularly likely when episodes are autobiographical, relating to personal goals (Stawarczyk, 2018) in addition to being prominent for young people aged 17-24 (Giambra, 2000).

John's habitual use of music to trigger repetitive imaginative autobiographical fantasies dissociates him from mundane concerns, allowing him to explore a powerful, autonomous

identity. Musical qualities (musical attributes and extra-musical associations) tightly link to mental imagery. Loud volume and bass-dominated features of techno style specify power, plus associations with sci-fi films. Musical structure (building to climax) supports filmic, generally linear (albeit dream-like) visual narrative, in terms of perceiver perspective seen from third person viewpoint. As with Max, inwardly directed attentional focus, diminished awareness of surroundings and upsurge of mental imagery point to extended conscious awareness. John clearly perceives this as a shift from his ordinary state of consciousness, an “alternate world”, accessible only via music.

Age, visual imagery, musical attributes and musical codes

I have a big habit of having daydreams, and when I'm listening to music ... all the daydreams seem to come out ... When I was listening to 'Astor Piazzolla'⁶ in the car there was this rather creepy track and I imagined there was someone being murdered – a small child actually, and there was this evil killer who we don't know of – no-one's ever seen their face as it's hidden under a black hood. And they're the one killing all these children. And it leaves. And it sees a little poor baby. It's had some trouble with being a child in its previous life and it thinks that all children are horrible due to what's happened to it. It looks at the child and it starts to feel sorry for the child. Then it forgets, throws it into the river and starts murdering a whole load of other kids...that's one of the stories. I can't really remember all of the stories I dream about. It's usually quite dramatic. [Lily, 11] (Herbert, 2017: 154)

Reports from my study of young people's music-listening experiences (Herbert, 2019) suggest age impacts upon experience. From mid-adolescence, musical daydreaming with self-

chosen music seems increasingly “about” the individual (i.e., autobiographical), involving imagined actual, idealised self, personal goals, and aspirations. By contrast, experiences from prepubescence through early adolescence (ca. age 10-13) more likely feature fictional scenarios and characters, a sequential, narrative quality – a mode of engagement I term “storying” to music, as evident in Lily’s description above. Similar to John, music affords an inductive platform to consciousness transformation, characterised by absorbed, imaginative involvement, informed by extended conscious awareness.

There is a relationship between visual imagery and structural properties of music (here an extended work in *nuevo tango* style, incorporating jazz and classical genre elements). By eleven years old, Lily (a formally trained pianist) is familiar with various musical codes (from a semiotic perspective, these would be termed “signifiers”) through enculturation. It is not individual musical attributes – tempo, mode, valence - prompting imaginative involvement, but combined attributes heard holistically (semiotician Philip Tagg terms this a “museme stack”; Tagg & Clarida, 2003, p. 94)⁷. Crucially, the piece features sound attributes closely prescribing sonic, kinetic and tactile qualities of extra-musical sources (Tagg defines these as “anaphones”, customising the word “analogy”; Tagg & Clarida, 2003, p. 99). These include sinister bass drum ostinati, perhaps signifying hitting/thumping, plus rapid upward violin glissandi (reminiscent of Bernard Herrmann’s use of strings in the famous shower scene from *Psycho*, 1960) suggesting rapid knife movements.

Both John and Lily’s accounts show that music listening affords access to fantasy worlds, but there is a difference in attitude to musical daydreaming. John’s account indicates awareness of *function*; a deliberate, repeated use of music to escape to “an alternate” world. Although

Lily is aware of the term “daydream”, such episodes occur spontaneously, as part of her everyday experience.

Multimodal daydreaming, distributed external/internal attentional focus

It feels like I’m almost inside the video—not really participating in it, although I’m moving to it ... I can see all of the dancers, and all the things that I can remember from the video. As I can’t remember it exactly, I also start to make bits of it up in my mind, but I can still see it all happening in front of me as well, they’re all in different costumes ... throughout all of this I can still look at the street—brick walls and green wheelie bins—things I wouldn’t normally home in on—and not trip or bump into anything. [Alice, 16] (Herbert, 2019, p. 240)

In contrast to the previous reports, Alice’s description highlights distributed external and internal awareness. Alice has no formal musical training and does not play an instrument. She walks to a friend’s house, listening to *Bad Girls*, by M.I.A, triggering memories of the video. The experience is multimodal (including sight, sound, mental visual imagery, movement). The virtual, imagined world of the video (exotic visual images of Ouarzazarte, Morocco), sound of the track (Middle Eastern/Worldbeat) and external reality intersect; they are present in consciousness simultaneously, yet no experiential “blending” occurs, although heightening of external sensory awareness is evident in perception of small environmental details, normally unnoticed. This episode suggests interweaving of core (present centred) and extended kinds of consciousness. Alice had never reflected on her engagement with music prior to completing a listening diary. In interview she revealed that doing so had highlighted a default approach to music listening dating back to childhood, unconsciously used to regulate mood/heighten energy levels.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Music-evoked daydreaming is commonly understood as involving inwardly directed focus on perceptual information accessed from memory or imagination and diminishing awareness of external non-musical phenomena. However, evidence from subjective reports of lived experiences of music demonstrates that sometimes attentional focus may fluctuate, inwards and outwards, or be simultaneously distributed between internal and external phenomena. A key characteristic is their multimodality, whether manifest in experiential blending of internal and external phenomena, or in fluctuation between internal mentation (including visual imagery, verbal and non-verbal thought) and awareness of external sensory environment. This systemic interaction between environment, perceiver and affordances of music accords with ecological models of perception where subjective experience is modulated by a network of internal/external variables, including age, training, context, personality and intention (daydreaming as deliberate or spontaneous).

I have highlighted age as an important mediator of musical experience, particularly during transition from early to late adolescence. Young people in the industrialised West appear particularly prone to “hearing-as”, that is, heteronomous listening appears as default mode. Visual imagery is especially prevalent, with specific content influenced, in part, by gradual enculturation through repeated exposure to film, TV and computer games, where musical attributes are repeatedly paired with extra-musical stimuli (Herbert & Dibben, 2018, Schubert & McPherson, 2016). Specifically, cross-comparison of first-hand reports of musical daydreaming suggests a move towards autobiographical fantasy during mid-adolescence, although further research is needed to confirm this finding.

Another variable receiving limited research attention is the relationship between time of day and frequency/qualities of musical daydreams. I have argued that musical daydreaming affords subtle shifts of consciousness: modes of experience are synthesised in ways distinct from individuals' perceived baseline state of functioning (for example, the replacement of one temporal frame (clock time) with another (a dream-like alternation between sequential and fragmented experience), or the alteration of perceiver perception to a dissociative third-person position). Musical daydreaming appears to privilege extended conscious awareness, albeit on occasion with core and extended kinds of consciousness interweaving. Findings from chronobiological literature indicate that conscious functioning is modulated by biological rhythms (both circadian [24 hour] and ultradian [recurrent short cycles throughout 24-hour periods]), with a small body of evidence supporting increase of mental imagery during recuperative "rest" phases of the ultradian cycle (Kleitman, 1982; Kokoszka, 2007). Chronobiological understanding of musical experience remains speculative (Bailes, 2019), but the hypothesis that musical daydreaming may function as a self-regulatory process affording respite from the vicissitudes of daily life – a space for simply "being" - merits further exploration.

Notes

¹ My study of everyday music listening predominately focused on subjective experiences in real-world contexts, tapped via diary and interview methods. Purposive sampling was the main participant identification method, with age, level of involvement and formal/informal training the main criteria. Participant quotes appear in previous publications but analysis and discussion (utilising the concept of musical daydreaming) in this chapter is new (interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed to reveal key themes).

² Twenty-five reports were analysed utilising IPA. According with IPA aims, frequency *and* phenomenological richness were factors in the selection process. The five excerpts were selected as best representing emergent themes identified across the reports.

³ Subheadings are intended to highlight single themes that are particularly integral to each experience, not to represent all emergent thematic characteristics.

⁴ In an empirical study of narrative experiences of music, individuals were shown to be 6 times more likely to generate visual imagery when hearing familiar music (Margulis, 2017).

⁵ According with the findings of Jakubowski and Ghosh (2021) that music-evoked autobiographical memories most often occurred while travelling.

⁶ “Sextet”, from *Luna* (1992) by Astor Piazzolla.

⁷ Tagg drew on Seeger’s (1960) term *museme* (minimal unit of musical meaning), understood as equivalent to morpheme (minimal unit of linguistic meaning).

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