



Reply to comment

Kinds, mechanisms, contents and origins of musical empathizing

Reply to comments on “Music, empathy, and cultural understanding”

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We would like to thank all six commentators for their generous-spirited and thought-provoking commentaries. Coming as they do from different disciplinary approaches, the commentators have enriched the discussion by offering a variety of perspectives on the topic of music and empathy. The commentaries have also identified and highlighted some of the important larger questions in this highly interdisciplinary field. In what follows we respond to some of the issues and observations raised by Greenberg [1], Krueger [2], Launay [3], Dibben [4], Overy [5] and Rabinowitch [6].

Greenberg [1] proposes that ‘cognitive empathy’ (i.e., the ability to understand another’s thoughts and feelings) and ‘affective empathy’ (i.e., the ability to respond to another’s mental and emotional states with an appropriate emotion and behavior) may be involved in different ways in listeners’ empathic engagement with music. Specifically, he suggests that cognitive empathy may be more strongly involved in what we call ‘mimetic resonance’ in our model of musical empathic engagement, while affective empathy may be more closely linked with ‘affective resonance’. By contrast, we characterize ‘mimetic resonance’ as occurring on a pre-reflective level of consciousness, constituting processes such as motor simulation and mimicry (involving the mirror neuron system) rather than the ability to understand how other minds work. ‘Affective resonance’, on the other hand, may – in addition to emotional contagion and other pre-reflective processes – also involve mentalizing and imaginative perspective-taking, which would arguably utilize Theory of Mind abilities. In other words, we agree that cognitive and affective facets of empathy may be differently involved in the processes of mimetic and affective resonance, but in ways that diverge somewhat from the account offered by Greenberg. However, it should be kept in mind that empirical studies have actually linked activity in the mirror neuron system to self-report measures of *both* cognitive and affective empathy [7,8], suggesting that the functional distinction between the two components might not be so clear-cut.

Greenberg [1] also discusses the possibility that music preferences might moderate the relationship between empathy and the affiliation-inducing effects of music listening. This might indeed be the case, but in our empirical

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experiment the musical pieces received such high ratings of liking overall that no such effects were observed. It may be that the potentially moderating effects of music preferences would become apparent in a setting where the musical pieces evoked more varied preference ratings. Greenberg also mentions the potential role of the personality trait ‘Openness to Experience’ in listeners’ empathic engagements with music. Indeed, Openness has previously been associated with just such a pattern of music preferences as would be predicted for empathy [9], and people scoring high on Openness should arguably be more open to change and new ways of thinking. It is thus possible that Openness to Experience may also contribute to the affiliation-inducing effects of music listening – possibly by interacting with empathy – and should be investigated in future studies on the topic.

Krueger [2] rightly points out the tendency to address the question of music’s empathic potential from an unduly individualistic, and perhaps an overly embodied perspective, and argues for the value of adopting what he identifies as the Hypothesis of Extended Cognition (HEC). It has taken some time for research in music properly to ‘take the bodily turn’, but it is also true that in the enthusiasm to embrace embodiment, there is the risk of overlooking the explanatory power of cognitive extension. Krueger draws attention to the functional gain (to use his term) that music may afford, seeing empathy not as the behavioral manifestation of internal, body-bound capacities (whether these are driven by dispositions, neurohormonal changes, the operation of mirror neurons, or processes of entrainment) but as a kind of behavior that *emerges* from, and is sustained by music’s prosthetic and person-extending potential. We enthusiastically share this view. As we acknowledge, one of the limitations of the model proposed in the paper is its apparently rather ‘body-bound’, un-extended and un-embedded portrayal of the human subject. Nonetheless, we also argue for the need to acknowledge the potential for musicking to be both a scaffolding (or medium) for empathy and the proximate cause of significant somatic changes – including neurohormonal changes. In this sense, therefore, we acknowledge the need to keep in view the kind of knowing (cf. Dibben’s commentary [4]) that musicking can enact for individuals and groups, and the type of empathizing that this may constitute; as well as the effects of musicking on people’s embodied minds, and the resulting consequences for their empathic engagements.

Launay [3] takes up the debate surrounding music’s role as a survival strategy, namely, as a means for necessary social bonding. He points to musically induced synchronization as a mechanism for the release of hormones linked to bonding, and to music’s capacity to facilitate coordination and shared meaning. While other activities may also offer these social bonding elements, music, as Launay observes, is often associated with, and has the capacity to invoke, emotion and social experience, even in the absence of other people. Launay comments particularly on music therapy, ‘as a practical method to utilize the empathy that comes from social music making’ and suggests that, ‘many of the beneficial impacts music can have on health and wellbeing occur through a sense of social inclusion’. We believe that this point is profound. It illuminates a conception of health as a social phenomenon, and pain as ‘total pain’ by which is meant a complex admixture of physiology and psycho-cultural experience [10]. Might the very ‘worst’ form of pain be, as some social commentators have suggested, anomic experience, that is the manifestation of being distanced from social norms and from, therefore, communal practices and values? And is it no wonder that ‘healing’ is often largely about the restoration of social ties [11,12]?

At the same time, as we have described in our review, and in particular in our discussion of the listening study, music’s empathy enhancing capacities may arise from ‘passive’ forms of listening, and in ways that point out the reciprocal link between predispositions to being empathic, liking of musical examples, and empathy for people whom we associate – often pre-consciously – with that music. In these cases, music’s connection to empathy involves something different from ritual or embodied and entrained activity; it involves also the inculcation of shared sensibility through the un- or pre-conscious appropriation of gesture, stylistic and emotional tone, or symbol. The production via music of shared or new forms of sensibility is, moreover, an important component of much music therapy, where it is part of the music therapist’s craft to help people to engage with music so as to work things out in, and as, music, and in ways that empower music to take the lead in processes of self- and situation-definition [13]. As Launay describes, musical experiences may offer the means for conflict resolution and for new forms of association. These forms of what might be termed musically assisted accord may result from multiple modes of musical engagement, and small-scale interactions (one-on-one, as in traditional music therapy, private musical listening, and small group performances, as in community music therapy work) [14,15], to larger scale encounters between conflicting or conflicted social groups [16].

Dibben [4] raises some important limitations regarding the implications of our empirical study. As she acknowledges, the likelihood that the differences in implicit attitudes between the two experimental groups – as well as the symmetrical relationships between dispositional empathy and implicit attitudes in the two groups – are the result of

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