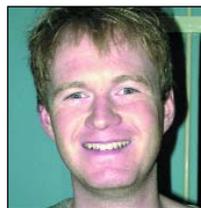


# Is music important?

**P**ERHAPS, before starting to read this article, you thought 'Is it worth my while, since it's only about music?' Like millions, you may like to listen to the car radio on the drive home from work, but stand by idly as funding for orchestras is cut, as musicians have to 'pay to play' in their local bar, or as pressure is put on music to justify its position and funding in the school curriculum relative to literacy and numeracy, particularly at secondary and tertiary levels (Bray, 2000;



**ADRIAN C. NORTH and DAVID J. HARGREAVES** on two common misconceptions.

Campaign for Music in the Curriculum, 1998; Harland *et al.*, 2000). Music may be entertaining, but most people's commitment to it goes little further.

Or perhaps you think that music *is* important, but only because it represents a potential source of harm to young people. The same societies that refuse to accept the

importance of music are also slowly introducing legislation and other de facto forms of censorship based on the premise that rock, rap and the like can damage listeners.

These are two frequently heard yet contradictory arguments about music in modern Western society. But recent research in the social psychology of music shows that although music has much psychological importance to people, censorship is perhaps not justified by the evidence.

### 'Music doesn't matter'

First let's consider the argument that music is unimportant, such that we should allow attacks on the funding of live music and music education. This claim can be refuted by several lines of research. One of our recent studies, on the prevalence of music listening, shows just how common music is in everyday life (North & Hargreaves, 2002b). Over two weeks 346 people were sent one text message a day to their mobile phone asking them to complete a short questionnaire. Responses showed that participants could hear music on 38.6 per cent of those occasions when a text message was received. Of those participants who could not hear music at that particular moment, 48.6 per cent had heard music since they received their text message the previous day. It could be argued that music was so commonplace only because it had been foisted upon people against their will in shops, bars, restaurants, or any of the other public places where piped music is employed.

**TABLE 1** Some examples of musical controversies, suggesting widespread belief that music will have important effects on behaviour

<b>1950s</b>	Elvis Presley's 1956 concerts filmed by Florida police looking for evidence of movements below the waist. One TV show forces a tuxedoed Elvis to sing <i>Hound Dog</i> to a basset hound sitting next to him.
<b>1960s</b>	John Lennon's misinterpreted 1966 comment that The Beatles were 'more popular now than Jesus' leads to record burnings. Various bands advocate drug use and liberal sexual attitudes.
<b>1970s</b>	The Sex Pistols' 1977 single <i>God Save the Queen</i> causes such uproar that packers at the pressing plant threaten industrial action. Music industry conspiracy theorists argue that sales evidence suggests the song should have reached No. 1 in the charts rather than the No. 2 spot that it was actually credited with.
<b>1980s/1990s</b>	Court cases based on the claim that heavy metal records can cause youth suicide; Madonna's concerts, featuring faked masturbation, leads to threats to arrest her by several police forces worldwide; gangsta rappers release anti-authoritarian songs such as Niggaz with Attitude's <i>F*** tha Police</i> .
<b>Present day</b>	One well-known band is subjected to allegations that they carried out various misdemeanours on stage such as smoking dried human excrement, having oral sex with one another, and handing out cocaine to the audience. Religious groups picket their concerts and distribute a 'protest prayer'. Same group is the subject of similarly unproven allegations that they encouraged a school shooting massacre.

This was not so. Instead, 50.1 per cent of music listening episodes occurred within participants' own homes, and a further 11.8 per cent of episodes occurred in a car. In both locations the participants presumably had some choice over whether music could be heard. Furthermore, there is a (perhaps diminishing) tendency to regard pop music as particularly unimportant relative to other 'more serious' genres. However, the data showed that pop music accounted for 67.1 per cent of all music listening episodes, whereas classical music for example

accounted for only 3 per cent. Of all the musical styles in Western society it seems that we should regard pop music as especially important.

The social psychology of music can also provide some tentative explanations as to why music should be so common in our everyday lives. First, experimental work shows that people's decisions concerning the music they choose to listen to in a given situation are far from arbitrary. People deliberately select music to help them achieve particular psychological states that complement particular listening environments. For example, people exercising choose to listen to loud, fast music to help them achieve the highly aroused state they desire (North & Hargreaves, 2000). Other work suggests that music is so prevalent because it provides a means for people to define their identity and manage interpersonal relationships (MacDonald *et al.*, 2002). For example, Tarrant *et al.* (2002) employed social identity theory, finding that participants favour musically defined ingroups at the expense of musically defined outgroups.

As a consequence of research such as this it is possible to justify the importance of music in everyday life without reference to any physical or material benefits that accrue to the listener. Nevertheless, the social psychology of music has also demonstrated that such benefits do exist. For example, Standley's (1995) meta-analysis showed that music can be

People deliberately select music to help them achieve particular psychological states

employed beneficially in the treatment of several medical and dental problems, particularly those involving pain and anxiety. Other work suggests that music may have the potential to improve the functioning of the immune system (e.g. Brennan & Charnetski, 2000). Research over the past 20 years has also indicated that music has the potential to influence a range of commercially relevant variables, such as the amount of time customers spend in a particular store (Milliman, 1982; 1986), the amount of time callers will wait on hold (North *et al.*, 1999a; Ramos, 1993), the products that customers will choose (Areni & Kim, 1993; North *et al.*, 1999b), which parts of a commercial environment customers will visit (North & Hargreaves, 1996), the amount that customers are prepared to spend (North & Hargreaves, 1998), and the effectiveness of advertising (North & Hargreaves, 1997). This medical and commercial research highlights the importance of music in terms of variables that are readily observable and that have obvious implications for practitioners.

**‘Of course music matters – it’s corrupting our adolescents!’**

The second common misconception concerning music is that it can be a source of social malcontent, particularly among young people. Of course, the potentially deleterious effects of listening to pop music have been an issue since the very inception of rock ‘n’ roll. As early as 1951 many radio stations banned Dean Martin’s *Wham! Bam! Thank You, Ma’am* for its apparently sexual content. However, it is arguable that the nature of pop stars’ scandalous behaviour seems to have become more salacious over time, leading to ever more vociferous protests: Table 1 contains some of the more headline-grabbing examples.

The situation came to a head at precisely 9.40 on the morning of Thursday 19 September 1985 when the USA’s Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and

DAVE ROBERTS

**Music can influence the products that customers choose**

Transportation met to consider morality in pop music. On the agenda was ‘the labelling of records so that at least the whole family knows what is in them, and not just the child who buys the record.’ The hearing led to the famous ‘Parental Advisory’ sticker that can now be seen attached to many recordings in CD shops across the world. Rap and heavy metal have become particular targets for these, with one record store survey finding that they were attached to 59 per cent of rap CDs and 13 per cent of heavy metal CDs.

However, the introduction of the Parental Advisory sticker marked just the thin end of the wedge. For example, in the 1990s one of America’s largest music retailers, Wal-Mart, began refusing to stock CDs with lyrics and artwork it deemed contradictory to its family-led marketing policy. Numerous American states have passed or are currently considering legislation that would outlaw the sale of stickered albums to minors and restrict or eliminate young people’s access to certain live concerts. Following from this, numerous independent music retailers have refused to stock stickered CDs at all, since the accidental sale of one to a minor could result in legal action. Neither did American interest in the issue end at federal level with the 1985 Senate hearing: in his 2000 State of the Union address President Clinton called for a voluntary ratings system for the entire entertainment

industry, and the Federal Trade Commission has recently considered whether formal regulation might be preferable (especially regarding material marketed towards children), calling on the entertainment industry to regulate itself more forcefully. It is also worth noting that in June 1997 the then Governor of Texas, George W. Bush, signed into law a measure that required all state pension funds to get rid of investments in companies producing questionable music. Similarly, at the time of writing, Australia is about to consider labelling system that would prevent under-18-year-olds from buying certain CDs.

This level of censorship would of course be desirable if there was evidence that pop music has deleterious effects on young people. This is where the social psychology of music is able to make a considerable contribution to the debate. There is abundant correlational evidence linking a preference for forms of ‘problem music’ such as rock and rap with various problem behaviours among young people, such as suicide, delinquency, sexism, permissive sexual attitudes, and tolerance of violent conduct (for example see Zillmann and Gan, 1997). Findings such as these are extremely disturbing. The social psychology of music has shown that pop music really might have a case to answer. Without evidence such as this it would be

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**Madonna’s Blonde Ambition tour led to threats**

**WEBLINKS**

Adrian North’s homepage:

[www.le.ac.uk/pl/acn5/acn.html](http://www.le.ac.uk/pl/acn5/acn.html)

David Hargreaves’ homepage:

[www.roehampton.ac.uk/staff/davidhargreaves](http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/staff/davidhargreaves)

The World Forum on Music and Censorship:

[www.freemuse.org](http://www.freemuse.org)

Rock Out Censorship: [www.theroc.org](http://www.theroc.org)

easy for the music industry to label protestors merely as middle-aged conservatives who do not understand and who overreact to the self-promoting motivations of musicians.

However, several authors have also pointed out that this evidence of a relationship between listening to 'problem music' and carrying out 'problem behaviours' is correlational, and does not provide firm guidance regarding the direction of causality. For example, perhaps suicidal teenagers choose to listen to musical genres that deal with themes of isolation and hopelessness as a means of working through their problems. Consequently, the main contribution that can be made to the debate comes from experimental work that allows some inferences regarding cause and effect.

A limited number of experimental studies have found evidence that exposure to problem music can indeed lead to subsequent problem behaviour. Hansen and Hansen (1990) found that exposure to antisocial music videos increased participants' tolerance of antisocial behaviour (i.e. an obscene hand gesture). Peterson and Pfost (1989) found that males' exposure to violent videos led to more aggressive attitudes towards women. Johnson, Jackson *et al.* (1995) found that participants exposed to violent rap videos

expressed greater acceptance of the use of violence described in a vignette, and reported a higher probability that they would engage in violence. Johnson, Adams *et al.* (1995) found that females exposed to rap music videos were more accepting of 'teen dating violence' (see also Hansen and Hansen, 1988).

But several other experimental studies have reached quite different conclusions, and challenge key assumptions upon which pro-censorship protests are based. First, there is evidence that far from detracting from adolescents' problems, censorship campaigners might actually be worsening the situation further. In one recent experiment (North & Hargreaves, 2002a) adolescents were played one of four pop songs chosen because the lyrical messages they contained were ambiguous in terms of being 'suicide-inducing' or 'life-affirming'. Prior to listening, one group of participants were told that their song was the subject of censorship campaigns because it had been implicated in the suicide of several young fans, telling them that there was no solution to the problems they faced. The second group of participants was told that their song had helped many suicidal young fans to work through their problems and had been consequently praised by health professionals. When asked about the song afterwards, those who had been told that it was 'healthy' reported that it had had a positive impact on them. However, those who had been told that the song was bad for young people reported negative effects. In other words, it was not the song itself that had deleterious effects on listeners: it was the labelling of the song as one that had negative consequences that was necessary for the latter actually to occur. Consistent with this, Ballard and Coates (1995) examined the effect of variations of lyrical content (non-violent, homicidal, suicidal) and musical style (rap, heavy metal) on participants' mood. There were no effects of either on participants' levels of suicidal ideation, anxiety or self-esteem. More simply, when problem music was not labelled as

such to listeners, it did not have deleterious effects.

The findings of Konečni (1984) also question the activities of pro-censorship campaigners. Print media interviews with pop stars were used to determine the true meanings they intended in the lyrics of several songs. For each song, the true meaning was then presented to participants along with three other, unintended, possible interpretations of the lyrics. After being shown the lyrics, participants simply had to say which of the four meanings was the one intended by the lyricist. In fact, people only got the correct answer 28 per cent of the time. Given that there were four options to choose from, this means that participants did hardly any better than chance. In a similar vein, Greenfield *et al.* (1987) found that although the ability to understand lyrics improves with age, younger children are particularly prone to misinterpreting them. The researchers attributed this to young people lacking the relevant knowledge of the world that is required in order to make the inferences intended by the lyricist. Similarly, Wanamaker and Reznikoff (1989) found that teenagers carrying out a Thematic Apperception Test were not influenced by listening to aggressive rock music lyrics, and argue that these results 'support the hypothesis that many teenagers do not attend to rock music lyrics and that lyrics do not affect aggression' (p.561). Findings such as these leave pro-censorship campaigners with a big problem: how can licentious lyrics cause problem behaviour? The research suggests that licentious lyrics will be incorrectly interpreted or ignored by listeners. Consequently, there may be no need for censorship.

Finally, some pro-censorship campaigners have claimed that musicians insert subliminal messages into their recordings and that these can somehow cause problem behaviours among adolescents (see Litman and Farberow, 1994). However, research by Walls *et al.* (1992) fails to support this claim. The researchers inserted subliminal messages about its tempo into a piece of music and asked participants to gauge the tempo of that same piece. The messages had no effect on participants' responses, and it is difficult to see how listeners could be influenced by subliminal messages concerning more important issues such as drug use and devil worship.

In short, correlational and experimental evidence from the social psychology of music allows a much more sophisticated conclusion regarding censorship than might

to arrest her by several police forces

otherwise be possible. Correlational evidence shows that problem music is part of a problem lifestyle. However, the experimental evidence is much more equivocal. Some of this evidence does point to a causal relationship between problem music and problem behaviour, and as such constitutes appropriate grounds for concern. Nevertheless, several other experimental studies suggest instead that listening to problem music does not cause problem behaviour. Consequently, it could be argued that the equivocal nature of the experimental evidence means that parental advisory stickers attached to CDs are acceptable as a source of guidance, but that there is insufficient evidence to justify legislation or other acts of censorship that actually restrict access to particular pieces of music.

**Play on**

In summary, the research described above (and see Hargreaves & North, 1997, for another overview of the field) leads us to two conclusions that perhaps run contrary to the flow of current popular opinion. The

first conclusion is that music is important. It is prevalent in everyday life, a tool we use to achieve desired psychological states, and a means of defining our identity. In practical terms the extent of its utility can be measured by research on its medical and commercial uses. Consequently, music budgets should not be cut, and music education deserves space in the curriculum. Secondly, although there are some grounds for concern, the existing evidence concerning the deleterious effects of pop music falls short of justifying censorship of the extent that has arisen in the US. Consequently, one of the main tasks facing the social psychology of music at present is to communicate its findings to decision makers so that previous mistakes can be corrected and new ones avoided.

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**Pretty vacant?**

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