Do adolescent and specialist music teacher interpretations of creativity influence the criteria they consider important when evaluating musical composition?

FREDERICK A. SEDDON
The Open University
Abstract

The aim of the study was to examine criteria regarded as important for evaluating musical compositions by specialist music teachers and adolescents, with and without prior experience of formal instrumental music tuition (FIMT). Q-Methodology was used to investigate the criteria considered important by both teachers and adolescents. The respondents’ viewpoints were modelled through a Q-sort. The data produced was analysed by inter-correlations with the Q sorts as variables. The next stage was to Factor analyse the person x person correlation matrix. The resulting Factors represented points of view and the strength of the relationship between those points of view and the respondents was indicated by the size of their loading on the Factors. Interpretation of each Factor was made based on the rank ordering of the statements in each Factor. Support for the interpretations was provided through statements made by respondents during pre and post Q-sort interviews. The majority of adolescents were represented by three factors, which were interpreted as ‘composing an appealing piece to a pre-conceived formula’, ‘composing a novel and abstract piece’, and ‘composing an inventive and imaginative piece to a pre-conceived formula’. These interpretations raised issues of ‘appeal’, ‘originality’ and ‘appropriate construction’, which were shown to have links with the prior musical training of both the adolescents and the teachers. Appropriateness of construction was related to aesthetic appeal, which was linked to the prior musical experience of both teachers and adolescents. A higher level of ‘originality’ was related to a more ‘open’ approach to both appeal and construction. In other words, an individual’s interpretation of the relative importance of ‘appeal’, ‘originality’ and ‘construction’ to their interpretation of creativity may influence their evaluation of musical composition.
Introduction

Two previous studies revealed that although teacher evaluations of pupil compositions did not differentiate between the compositions of pupils with and without FIMT, pupils without FIMT were more likely to rate their own compositions lower than pupils with FIMT (Seddon & O'Neill, 2000 & 2001). One interpretation of these results was that the pupils and teachers were applying different criteria when evaluating the compositions. It was speculated that these differing criteria might be linked to the prior musical experience of the pupils and the teachers.

The aim of the current study was to reveal the criteria adolescents with and without FIMT regard as important for evaluating musical compositions. Comparisons were made between this criteria and evaluation criteria regarded as important by specialist music teachers.

Q-Methodology

Q-Methodology was used as it provided a systematic means by which ‘subjectivity’ (or a person’s point of view) may be examined and understood (Mckeown and Thomas 1988). In short, a set of Q-items were formulated from a wide range of composition evaluation sources to form the Q-sample which the adolescent participants rank ordered during a Q-sort. The resulting Q-sorts were analysed through a process of inter-correlation and Factor analysis resulting in model Q-sorts for each Factor with participants being associated to one of the Factors. The resulting factors were then interpreted. For this study, support for the interpretations was sought in statements made by the adolescent participants during pre and post Q-sort interviews.

Q-item formulation

The Q-items were formulated from statements collected from four sources: (1) Teacher interviews, (2) Adolescent focus group discussions, (3) Teacher advisory documents, and (4) Research articles. The formulation process resulted in 46 Q-items that the adolescent participants placed on the Q-Response grid during the Q-sort.
A good composition:

1) has sounds that go well together
2) has a catchy/memorable tune
3) is likeable
4) is worth hearing again
5) has sounds that create a mood
6) is original (not copied)
7) has a mixture of sounds
8) is inventive and imaginative
9) is for an occasion
10) is different and unusual
11) is surprising/unexpected
12) is interesting
13) sounds the way you wanted it to
14) sounds like a particular style
15) has chords in it
16) sounds like the title/story
17) is pleasing to your friends
18) is pleasing to your teacher
19) is simple
20) is complicated
21) has a shape or plan
22) is long
23) is short
24) has musical ideas that link together
25) has loud and quiet sections
26) has a main tune
27) has flow without big leaps
28) repeats over and over
29) is like professional music
30) is technically good
31) is organised
32) is musically skilful
33) has some repeats
34) uses musical patterns
35) has a strong beat
36) has a feel for rhythm
37) has a pulse
38) has different beats
39) is random/aimless
40) has tidy start and finish
41) is like a sandwich – ABA
42) has a steady beat to hold tune together
43) is fast and slow at different points
44) uses different sounds
45) fits together in time
46) has a strong ending

Method

Participants
Thirty-two adolescents from year 9 (aged 12-13 years) formed two groups. Group one consisted of sixteen adolescents (8 Males, 8 Females) with between 2-4 years prior experience of FIMT and group two consisted of sixteen adolescents (8 Males, 8 Females) without prior experience of FIMT.

**Procedure**

Prior to the Q-sort, each participant was asked ‘Can you tell me in your own words what you think goes towards making a good composition?’ and responses were audiotaped for transcription. Instructions for the Q-sort were: ‘Place the cards containing the items you think are really important in making a good composition on the right hand side of the Q-response grid’ (see Figure 1 for an example of the Q-response grid). ‘Place the cards containing the items you think are not really important in making a good composition on the left hand side of the Q-response grid’. Participants were told ‘There is no right or wrong way of arranging the cards; we want to know what you really think. Just place the cards where you think they should go’. Once the Q-sort was completed the participants were asked about the placements on the extremes of the Q-response grid (+4, +3, -3, -4) and their responses were audiotaped and transcribed.

(Cf. Figure 1)

**Analysis**

The Factor analysis produced 8 factors (A-H) but the majority of the participants loaded onto 3 factors (A-C). The remaining factors (D-H) represented idiosyncratic differences of small groups or individuals rather than overall trends. Due to word length restrictions, this paper focuses on the interpretation of two contrasting Factors (Factor A and Factor B) and overall trends.

**Interpretation**

Factor A was interpreted as ‘composing an appealing piece to a preconceived formulae’ and Factor B was interpreted as ‘composing a novel and abstract piece’.

**Factor A**

The interpretation of Factor A as ‘composing an appealing piece to a preconceived formulae’ was in part based on the placement of the following items in its model Q-sort. At +4 on the Q-response grid items 02 ‘Has a catchy/memorable
tune’ and 05 ‘Has sounds that create a mood’. At +3 on the Q-response grid, items 04 ‘Is worth hearing again’, 13 ‘Sounds the way you wanted it to’, 26 ‘Has a main tune’ and 45 ‘Fits together in time’. The placements of these items on the Q-response grid indicated the relative importance the participants gave to them. It was interpreted that these items indicated an emphasis on appeal and structure.

Support for this interpretation was found in pre and post Q-sort interviews. Below is an example of a statement made in a pre-Q-sort interview by a Factor A associated participant in response to the question: ‘Can you tell me in your own words what you think goes towards making a good composition’
‘A good like melody, and sort of like backings that like keeps you all in time, like if you have the drums like keeping beats and stuff erm…like all in the same key so you weren’t playing in different keys. Erm…repeats like at the end of bars like choruses, and linked to the piano and lyrics are there. Can’t really think of anything else.’ (Female, FIMT, pre Q-sort).

The importance of applying a preconceived formula, rather than aiming for originality in composition, is also indicated by the relatively low placement (+1) of item 06 ‘is original (not copied)’ in the model Q-sort for Factor A. The unimportance of originality for Factor A associated participants is supported by this post Q-sort interview response to being asked to explain the placement of items on the response Q-response grid.

‘Well something original might appeal to some people but not to others so it’s not really important whether it’s kind of original or not because there’s quite a lot of songs that are around now that have been copied but they’ve been made like different so they’re more appealing to our sort of age group, so I don’t think it is really important whether it is original or not.’ (Female, FIMT, post Q-sort).

A combination of the model Q-sort and supporting statements resulted in the interpretation for Factor A as ‘composing an appealing piece to a preconceived formulae’

**Factor B**

The interpretation of Factor B as ‘composing a novel and abstract piece’ was in part based on the placement of the following items in the model Q-sort for Factor B. At +4 on the Q-response grid, items 04 ‘Is worth hearing again’ and 13 ‘Sounds the way you wanted it to’. At +3 on the Q-response grid, items 07 ‘Has a mixture of
sounds’, 08 ‘Is inventive and imaginative’, 11 ‘Is surprising and unexpected’ and 12 ‘Is interesting’. The placements of these items on the Q-response grid indicated the relative importance the participants gave to them. It was interpreted that these items indicated an emphasis on novelty and originality with less emphasis on structure or concern for appealing to others.

Support for this interpretation was found in pre and post Q-sort interviews. Below is an example of a statement made in a pre-Q-sort interview by a Factor B associated participant in response to the question: ‘Can you tell me in your own words what you think goes towards making a good composition’

‘Well I think you’ve got to have erm…lots of inspiration first because you can’t really make a good composition out of no ideas really and you just really have to just try some things out and not be afraid to make some mistakes and just go back and keep going over it till you are really happy with it. And it’s not really what anyone else thinks. It’s really what you think about what you’ve done rather than whether it’s like what everyone’s gonna be in to ’cos you can’t expect everyone to like everything that you’ve done. And you just have to really experiment and try different things that you wouldn’t normally try like maybe using different instruments together that you might not think would sound together like an electric guitar maybe with a violin that you might never have tried before.’ (Female FIMT, pre Q-sort).

This statement suggests a desire for independent thought and novelty and is supported by the negative placements on the model Q-sort for Factor B. At –4 on the Q-response grid, items 18 ‘Is pleasing to your teacher’ and ‘Is like professional music’. At –3 on the Q-response grid, items 09 ‘Is for an occasion’, ‘Sounds like a particular style’, ‘Is pleasing to your friends’ and ‘Is musically skilful’. The placement of these items at the negative side of the Q-response grid indicated the relative lack of importance placed on them by the participants in this Factor suggesting the rejection of pre-conceived formulae. This combination of the Q-sort placing and supporting statements led to the interpretation for Factor B as ‘composing a novel and abstract piece’.

**Overall Trends**

An examination of the relationships between the original sources of the statements and the 46 Q-items derived from them, revealed items that were regarded as ‘teacher orientated’, ‘adolescent orientated’ and ‘joint teacher/adolescent orientated’.
orientated’. Links between the orientations of the items, their original sources and prior experience of FIMT revealed interesting trends. Many of the items originally sourced from teacher interviews and advisory documents were concerned with notions of fulfilling the brief while displaying appropriate musical expertise (e.g. items 09 ‘is for an occasion’, 13 ‘sounds the way you wanted it to’, 21 ‘has a shape or plan’, 31 ‘is organised’ and 34 ‘uses musical patterns’). Many of the items originally sourced from adolescent focus group discussions were concerned with notions of experimentation and appeal (e.g. items 03 ‘is likeable’, 06 ‘is original (not copied)’ and 11 ‘is surprising/unexpected’. Initially, this suggested overall disagreement between teachers and adolescents about which criteria were important for the evaluation of musical composition. However, some items related to the notion of fulfilling the brief while displaying appropriate musical expertise were sourced from statements made by adolescents with prior experience of FIMT (e.g. items 14 ‘sounds like a particular style’, 29 ‘is like professional music’ and 30 ‘is technically good’). This indicated that a level of agreement existed between teachers and adolescents with prior experience of FIMT about which criteria are important for the evaluation of musical composition. In summary, it was concluded that teachers and adolescents may employ different evaluation criteria when evaluating compositions but adolescents with prior experience of FIMT are more likely to use criteria similar to that of specialist music teachers.

**Summary**

Based on the findings of this study, adolescent and teacher interpretations of what constitutes creativity in musical composition may influence the criteria they consider important when evaluating compositions. Their individual interpretations of musical creativity may be linked to their prior musical experience, with FIMT being linked to preferences for displaying musical expertise in construction and a lack of FIMT being linked to preferences for originality.
Address for correspondence:
Dr. Frederick A. Seddon
Psychology Discipline, Faculty of Social Sciences
The Open University, Walton Hall
Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK.

E-mail address: f.a.seddon@open.ac.uk
References

