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VISUAL

RHETORIC

visual *rhetoric*

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Are psychologists musical?

SLOBODA, Davidson and Howe (*The Psychologist*, August 1994) clearly believe there is a unitary folk psychology of musical ability. We musicians form a sort of homogenous brain mass. Because we do not all have the privilege of a psychology degree, we are psychological ignoramuses, nurturing innocent and misleading beliefs. Part of our folk psychology is our notion that musical talent is innate and is thus either present or absent. Scant evidence is provided for this account. Studies by Howe and Sloboda (1991) on young musicians' beliefs and an ethnographic study by Kingsbury (1988) are the only direct evidence. They also admonish Davies that he should 'try talking to some musicians' in their commentary. This strongly implies that they have spent a long time talking to musicians and therefore we should have faith in their viewpoint about what musicians believe. We believe their folk psychology of musical talent is a straw person. Our experience is that musicians form a varied and heterogeneous group and that they have a variety of beliefs and explanations about their abilities. The one thing that all skilled musicians agree on is that no one becomes a competent musician without a huge amount of dedication and hard work. Indeed musicians are obsessed with how to develop their talent, not with where it came from.

Sloboda *et al.* also make an extraordinary claim in their commentary 'there is no compelling evidence to suggest that more than a small minority of people lack the potential to acquire the skills necessary to, for instance, be a proficient orchestral player'. This statement is so lacking in precision as to be meaningless. What is a proficient orchestral player? Proficient in the Academy of St Martins in the Field or the semi-professional orchestra playing for the local amateur operatic group? Playing the first violin part or the viola part? Playing the Rite of Spring or the Simple Symphony? There is not even the opportunity to be a professional orchestral player if you cannot give a solo performance of a major concerto in an audition.

There are many thoughtful intelligent musicians who could give a far greater insight into musical talent and how it can be developed than can be derived from this issue of *The Psychologist*. Perhaps Sloboda *et al.* would benefit from some professional insight into

Letters

their own folk psychology?

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References

Howe, M.J.A. & Sloboda, J.A. (1991) Young musicians' accounts of significant influences in their early lives: 1. The family and the musical background. *British Journal of Music Education*, 8, 39-52.

Kingsbury, H. (1988) *Music, talent and performance: A conservatory cultural system*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

IN 1988 I conducted a survey at a school for the visually impaired in London. I observed 50 children who had been born blind or had lost their sight shortly after birth. Of this group, 19 (38 per cent) had what I describe as a good sense of Absolute Pitch (AP) - being able to distinguish or reproduce

notes to the accuracy of a semitone or better.

While the possession of AP is no guarantee of a wider musicality, it is certainly a positive factor in its make up, and its great rarity in the population as a whole frequently leads musicians (and music psychologists) to treat it as an innate gift. Yet among the children in the sample, there were no known physiological causes for their heightened aural abilities, and one can only attribute their atypical musical development to growing up in a world dominated not by sight but by sound.

Clearly, this finding lends weight to the view that AP is largely a learnt phenomenon and, in a broader sense, to the notion that everyone may indeed be more musical than is customarily thought to be the case - if only we could provide the appropriate early intervention.

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Study and music

WE READ with interest the letter by Kenealy and Monsef in *The Psychologist*, August 1994, in which they ask if our study on music and IQ, summarized in the June issue, may have two limitations. Firstly, they ask if we administered the APM to the same subjects in all of the three music conditions (Mozart, silence and pop). As Rauscher, Shaw and Ky (1993) argued that their music-IQ effect lasted for a short period of time (10 minutes) we divided the 36 item, 40 minute APM into three 12 item subtests of equal difficulty rated by information from a recent Australian standardization study (Stough, Nettelbeck & Cooper, 1993). Subjects in each condition were allowed 13.3 minutes to complete each 12 item version of the APM. They further argue that with '... a test such as the APM one would expect no significant differences upon repeated testing beyond a small practice effect'. We ask if this statement is clinical intuition or does it have some grounding in science? Secondly, because we tested 30 subjects, Kenealy and Monsef suggest that we did not balance subjects across the conditions. To make our methodology clear, we wish to point out that the order of music conditions was perfectly balanced in a Latin square. A more detailed report of this experiment is in press (Stough, Kerkin, Bates & Mangan, in press).

Letters are welcome, and should be addressed to the Editors at the Society Offices in Leicester. Brevity is an advantage: the Editors reserve the right to shorten letters, and if major editing is necessary, this will be indicated.

Letters "in reply" may be treated as urgent and every effort will be made to publish them as quickly as possible. However, the volume of correspondence has increased so markedly, we cannot publish every letter received, and delays in the appearance of those accepted will inevitably occur. Letters to the Editors are not normally acknowledged.