Narratives to Music by Chinese Students: Preliminary Results

Leland van den Daele and Peter Lin
California Institute of Integral Studies and City University of Macau

Introduction

The *Music Apperception Test* (MAT) requests that respondents "tell a story to the music". The test has been administered to a wide range of participants, including hospitalized schizophrenics, patients in psychoanalysis, and village children and adults in India (van den Daele, 2007). The MAT is designed to represent basic emotions described in theories of emotion (de Rivera, 1977; Izard, 1971). Thirty second silent periods demarcate compositions. The music, written for the MAT, is based upon templates that specify tempo, rhythm, number of voices, melodic line, consonance, and dissonance for the expression of emotions (van den Daele, 2007). The compositions are titled: *Interest, Joy, Love, Desire, Shame, Excitement, Anger, Distress, Fear, Guilt, Terror,* and *Disgust*. For example, the MAT's musical portrayal of guilt suggests anguished self-blame. The felt quality of this emotion is conveyed by a slow ponderous, repetitive tempo, minor key, lower notes, marked by occasional dissonance, and melodic descent. In contrast, joy is a quicker tempo, major key, and harmonious piece, with a rising melodic line. As the MAT progresses through compositions, music becomes more atonal, arrhythmic, and strident. Thereby, the MAT functions as a "stress test" to evaluate how well a respondent copes with increasingly cacophonous representations of affect.

The MAT was written in accord with Western conventions of music different from Eastern traditions. However, music and the moods and feelings music portrays have been circulated across cultures by modern media. Do Chinese students' narratives to music embody emotions conveyed by Western conventions? Do Chinese students display similar or distinctive response styles to music? How do they compare with Westerners?

Methods

A total of 19 students at a Chinese University were individually administered the Standard version of Music Apperception Test with Chinese instructions. The Standard version is comprised of ten compositions in order of presentation: *Interest, Joy, Love, Desire Shame, Guilt, Excitement, Anger, Distress, and Fear*. The protocols were translated into English and coded for *fluency, response latency, content, the emotional fit of story to music, and narrative style Fluency* is the number of words spoken to the MAT and is divided into words spoken during the music, and words spoken after the music during the 30 second silent period. *Response latency* is how long it takes once the music has begun to begin a narrative. Content is coded into major categories as human, animal, or inanimate. *Emotional fit* is based upon pleasant or unpleasant affect, the use of emotion words, theme, type of interaction, and setting. *Narrative style* is judged either "logical", "imagistic", or balanced depending upon how a story is organized (van den Daele, 2007).

A comparison group consisted of 28 women and 28 men to total 56 participants who ranged in age from 21 to 45 years old from the San Diego area (Quinn, 1999). Professional musicians were excluded and approximately 40 percent had completed college or an advanced degree. Seventy five percent of subjects were Caucasian; 7 percent, Hispanic; 7 percent, Asian; 1.7 percent African American; and the remainder, "other".

Results

Chinese students displayed a large range of individual differences. The sample evidenced significantly more variability of response across all categories than the Western comparison sample. Some subjects were highly fluent and others awkward or inhibited. Some were relatively quick and others very slow. Some easily told a story to the music. Others were inhibited, cautious, careful, or unable to respond as the music played. Content and type of interaction varied over a wide range. Tangential responses related to the music were common. Affective fit ranged from acceptable to poor. Narrative styles among Chinese students were characterized by patterns of response rare in the comparison sample.

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Fluency, response latency, narrative content, interaction, emotional fit, and narrative style co-varied among Chinese students. Three "types" of response among Chinese students were evident:

Impoverished. Impoverished respondents (n = 7) show commonalities. The most important features were less than average fluency, difficulty in responding in real-time to the music (high post-compositional fluency), a "detached" approach to story-telling and narrative action, poor affective fit, and a predominantly "classificatory" approach to the narrative. Among this group this is supported by their poor articulation or absence of human interaction in stories. A classificatory approach says what the music is "about", or what it "reminds one of", or its merits. Classificatory narratives are not true narratives or stories. Such commentaries are unusual in the US sample, perhaps less than 1% of MAT responses. Telling what a composition is about is a way of distancing from the music and its import. Difficulty in responding during the music is similarly rare in the US sample, except among diagnosed schizophrenics where the incidence is more common. Detachment coupled with poor affective fit suggests aloofness and poor empathy.

Productive. Productive respondents (n =10) were highly fluent, responses occurred with the music, content was human, interaction was largely mutual, affective fit was good to excellent, and the response style was imagistic or balanced. Mythic themes were frequent. Sacrifice for the group or self-sacrifice were common motifs. Common to members of this group was their fluency, human focus, mutuality of interaction, good affective fit, and imagistic style narratives. Human group content was found to a greater extent than in the US sample. Within this group, respondents differed for the "originality" or uniqueness of stories. The stories of some subjects arose from personal experience and were genuinely creative wile the stories of other subjects were derived from movies, games, or media.

Intermediate. Two subjects fell into this "middle type". They varied for fluency, content was largely human, interaction was mutual, but affective fit varied. This group did not match the criteria for the above types for one or more criteria, but fell into an intermediate domain.

Discussion

The MAT requires spontaneous engagement in a task very different from the usual "performance" test of "right" and "wrong" answers. The test requires impromptu readiness and availability of imagination. These are important life skills, but not necessarily taught in any traditional sense. More likely these skills reflect basic individual differences, early interpersonal experience, the exercise of play, and undirected mental activity.

The results so far are quite striking with the almost bipolar distribution of "types". The Impoverished respondents were impoverished in the sense that their narratives were constricted, judgmental, stereotypical, and altogether bland. The MAT evoked a "deer caught in the headlights" reaction. One wondered if these respondents were victims of socialization that was overly demanding and unyielding about "right" answers.

Within the Productive group, about half the persons based their narratives on "video games and anime" while others based their narratives on life experience. Video games and anime yield stereotyped characterizations and plots. The difference is important if persons negotiate interpersonal relations and their understanding of motivation upon such schema, yet "video game" mind set seems preferable to the paralysis associated with the Impoverished style.

The results thus far raise questions about the antecedents and corollaries of these contrasting styles of narration. Child-rearing, early play experience, rural or urban residence may be important determinants for these individual differences. Clearly the exploration of these styles (Impoverished versus Productive), defensive patterns and associated personality differences, and requires more and continuing research.

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