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Analysis on the Attitudes and Listening Habits of Music Students Toward Classical Music

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the attitudes and listening habits of music students towards classical music. Through questionnaires and in-depth interviews with music students, this paper analyzes music students' knowledge of and interest in classical music as well as their listening habits and preferences. The research results show that there is diversity in attitudes towards classical music among music students, but more than half of the music students do not like classical music. Given that conservatory training is based on classical music, it seems that most music students may not like their major. In order to explore the reasons involved, the author summarized their listening habits through interviews. Meanwhile, the listening habits of music students are influenced by many factors, including personal cognition, personal interests and so on. This paper also offers suggestions on how to enhance music students' interest in and appreciation of classical music.

Introduction

Classical music, broadly defined, encompasses the tradition of Western art music spanning from the Middle Ages through the early twentieth century. As a cornerstone of cultural and artistic heritage, classical music plays a significant role in cultivating aesthetic sensibilities and intellectual depth among its audiences.

In recognition of the educational value of the arts, the Chinese Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Finance, has been implementing the annual "Fine Arts Entering the Schools" initiative since 2006. This government-sponsored program involves the provision of cultural services, particularly symphonic performances, to institutions of higher education. Its primary objective is to enhance aesthetic education and to foster the humanistic and artistic development of university students (Xinhuanet, 2017). Classical music, with its rich history and expressive complexity, is particularly well suited to this mission.

The transformative potential of classical music has been widely acknowledged. According to Che Wenbo (2003), music offers individuals the opportunity to experience profound "peak experiences," through which they may attain an intuitive understanding of life's values, personal fulfillment, and the nature of existence (pp. 122–127). Franz Liszt similarly reflected on the transcendental qualities of music in his writings on Berlioz and Schumann. Beyond emotional satisfaction, music fulfills both physiological and psychological human needs, and serves as a medium through which individuals may gradually pursue and realize higher values.

The philosophical significance of beauty in music has also been emphasized by scholars. Zhao Songguang, for instance, argued that beauty functions as an intermediary form, allowing for the application of objective laws (truth) toward achieving socially beneficial ends (goodness). The appreciation of beauty thus enables the integration and harmonization of truth and goodness, contributing to the ethical and intellectual development of individuals (Cai & Huang, 2008, p. 217).

In this context, classical music education not only nurtures aesthetic sensitivity but also supports the cultivation of moral and cognitive faculties. To further understand how these theoretical benefits translate into student attitudes and behaviors, this study employs a questionnaire-based survey to examine music students' perceptions of and listening habits related to classical music.

This research seeks to empirically investigate the reception and appreciation of classical music among music students. By analyzing their attitudes and listening practices, the study aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of classical music in promoting aesthetic and humanistic development. Such findings may offer valuable implications for the future direction of aesthetic education in higher institutions and for optimizing the implementation of cultural initiatives like the "Fine Arts Entering the Schools" program.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1. Benefits of listening to classical music

Music has multi-faceted value, which not only satisfies human physiological and psychological needs, but also enables human beings to gradually realize the pursuit of the highest value. Mr. Zhao Songguang once pointed out that beauty is the form of intermediary

structure for the free application of objective laws (truth) to ensure the realization of social purposes (goodness). The establishment and appreciation of beauty can mediate the confrontation and conflict between truth and goodness, so that the two sides can mingle and unify, which is an important way for human beings to further grasp the truth and develop the goodness.

Xunzi said, "Music, which is favored by the sages, can make the hearts of the people turn to the good, and its sound is so touching that it changes the customs of the people; therefore, the early kings used rites and music to guide the people and make them harmonious." (Annotated and translated by Cai Zhongde, 2004, 175) The ancient Greek philosopher Plato also believed, "We have always employed education for the body and music for the mind." (Plato, 1963:21). According to the ideas of Chinese and foreign philosophers, we can know that the beauty of music enables the gradual and firm formation of a positive mental attitude towards the love and pursuit of beauty, as well as a keen discernment of beauty and ugliness in the process of human growth and in the construction of human psychological structure.

2. Specificity of music

"The form of music is the constitutive style of musical sound." (Zhou Haihong, 2004, 213-214) The form of music is the compositional style of sound that renders the content of music manifest.

There is a Chinese legend of "Mountain and Flowing Water (referring to the harsh reality that talent and ability can rarely meet people who can really appreciate them)" legend, giving people a stereotyped impression: Music has always been about expressing emotions, philosophies, stories or a scene or something like that. From that, hearing music that "gets it", being able to hear and speak clearly what the music expresses, means understanding the music, while those who can't hear, can't speak the content, neither can listen to the music. Taking radio, television, and We-Media as the stage, the listener often hears many musical interpretations, we call them "music interpretations", which tell the listener that what a certain work expresses, such as "death", "creek", "love", etc. is a certain idea, a certain storyline, and so on. Guided by the interpretation, there is a certain resonance in the listener, vaguely evident in the fact that the content of the interpretation is derived from the music, and once again the listener is at a loss as to what to do with the music they are listening to without being guided by the interpretation.

The method of music interpretation is to use words and pictures to guide the listener to listen to the music, however, music has acoustic attributes, which determines that it does not have semantic, visual, or other attributes. Therefore, without the guidance of interpretation, many listeners can not understand what the music means, which is not the responsibility of the listener, but is mostly determined by the acoustic attributes of the music. The long-standing work of music promotion centers on the adoption of music interpretation as a means of guiding the listener to understand the specific piece of music. Researchers believe that this approach not only reinforces stereotypes in the listener, but also leads to a gradual rejection of classical music.

Concept framework

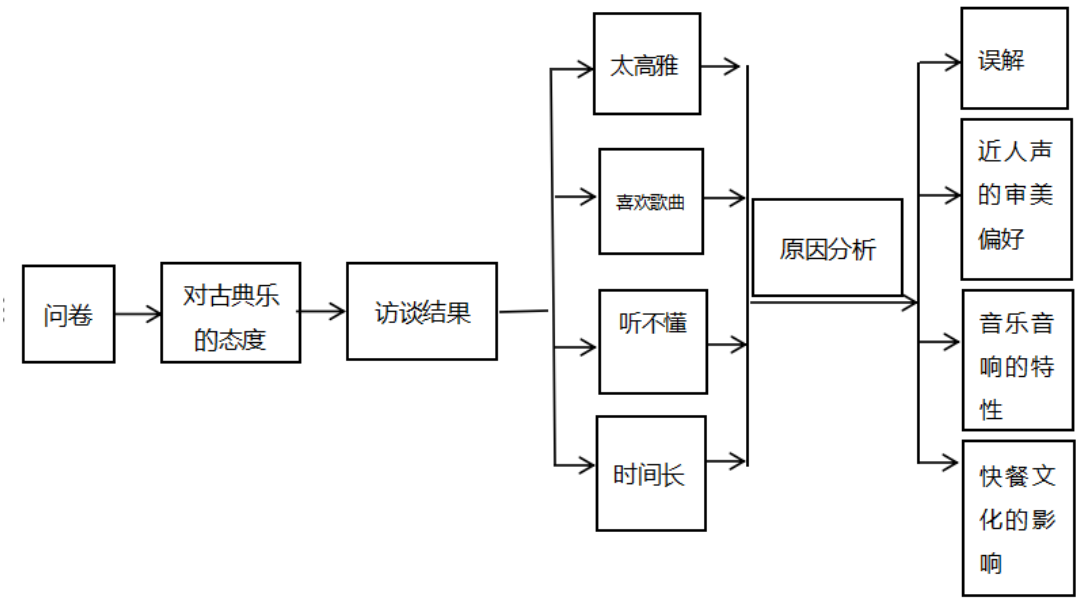


Figure 1 Concept framework

Objectives

1. To study the attitude of music students towards classical music.
2. To analyze the factors affecting the listening habits of music students.

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to explore the aesthetic preferences and listening habits of college music students with regard to Western classical music. The research was conducted in two phases: a structured questionnaire survey and semi-structured individual interviews.

1. Quantitative Method: Questionnaire Survey

To obtain comprehensive data on music students' attitudes and habits related to classical music, an online questionnaire was distributed via the "Chaoxing Xuexitong" platform. The survey period began in mid-March 2023 and continued for one month. A total of 413 participants were recruited from 11 music-major classes at the university. These participants were selected using a convenience sampling method based on their availability and enrollment in music-related programs.

The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions designed to gauge students' general attitudes toward classical music and their listening behaviors. Key questions included:

"Do you like Western classical music?"
"Do you have a daily habit of listening to classical music?"
"What kind of music do you like?"

Respondents were given multiple-choice options, including symphonic music, opera, European and American pop songs, and Hong Kong and Taiwan pop songs. The inclusion of diverse musical genres allowed for the identification of personal preferences and listening patterns. The data collected were used to quantify trends and individual differences in musical tastes, providing a statistical foundation for the subsequent qualitative inquiry.

2. Qualitative Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

To further explore the reasons behind students' disinterest in classical music, qualitative interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 10 students who indicated in the questionnaire that they did not like Western classical music. These interviews aimed to gain deeper insight into students' perceptions, emotional responses, and potential barriers to engaging with classical music.

Interview questions included:
"How do you feel about classical music?"
"Why don't you like listening to classical music?"

The interviews were conducted in an open-ended and conversational format, allowing participants to express their thoughts freely. Responses were transcribed and thematically analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns in attitudes toward classical music.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the frequency and distribution of preferences among respondents. Qualitative data from the interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, which involved coding responses and identifying common themes related to emotional, cognitive, and cultural factors influencing students' engagement with classical music.

Results

1. Music students do not like classical music

In order to find out whether or not the current generation of music students like classical music, thus the author made a questionnaire survey to 413 music students, which consisted of three questions, the first of which was: 'Do you like classical music'? (The results of the survey are shown in Figure 1). The second question was, "Do you have a daily habit of listening to classical music?" The questionnaire helped the author to find out whether music majors have the habit of listening to classical music (The results of the survey are shown in Figure 2). The third question was, "What kind of music do you like?" There were 16 types of music included, namely: symphony, opera music, European and American pop songs, etc., which appeared in the form of multiple-choice questions to help the author understand the individual differences, and the data obtained may have an impact on the results (The results of the survey are shown in Figure 3).

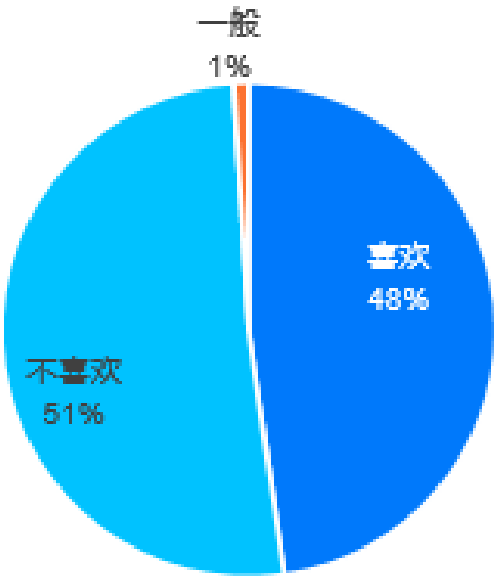


Figure 2 Whether music students like classical music

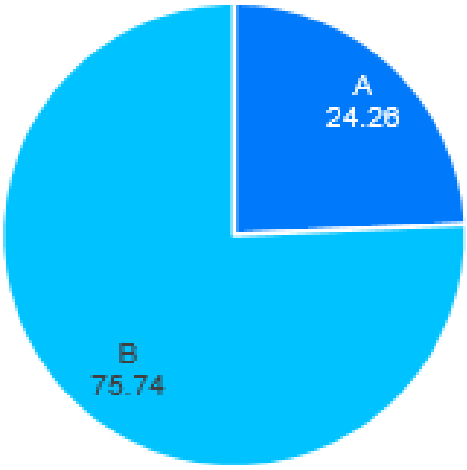


Figure 3 Whether music students listen to classical music every day

As can be seen from the data in Figure 2, 51% of the 413 music students dislike classical music, 48% like classical music, and 1% expressed a neutral attitude, neither liking nor disliking it. This is a rather strange result, because in Chinese conservatories, for the most part, students study the Western system of music and are exposed naturally more to classical music. Albert Einstein once said, "Interest is the best teacher." As music students majoring in the field, 51% of them do not like classical music. Since they are not interested in classical music, how can they learn the profession well? Their future development in the professional field will also be somewhat limited.

The data in Figure 3 shows that 75.74% of the students do not have the habit of listening to classical music on a daily basis, and only 24.26 students keep this habit, which also shows that most of the professional music students do not listen to and appreciate classical music daily, which in turn proves that these music students are not interested in classical music.

From the data in Figure 3, it can be seen that among the many types of music, the preferences of music students are as follows: European and American pop music > Opera music > Symphony > Mainland popular songs ..... It can be seen that among these music, more music students chose the more popular European and American pop music rather than classical music, and the principle behind it is worth analyzing specifically.

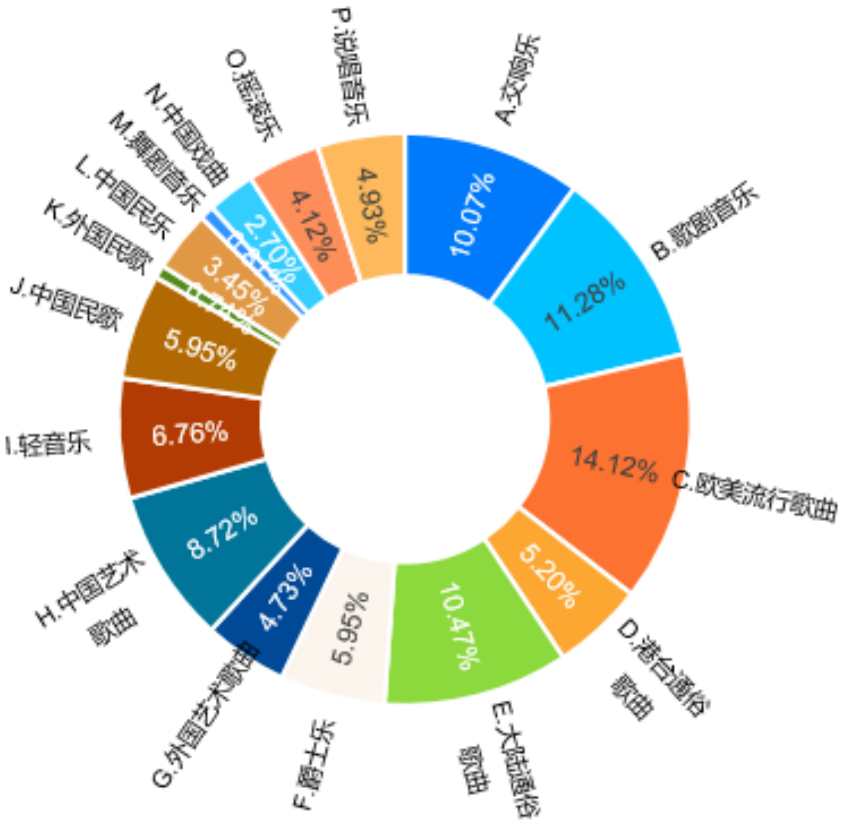


Figure 4 Types of music preferred by music students

The reason why music students don't like classical music needs to be interviewed to find out what they really think. So the author conducts an interview survey with 10 of them who do not like classical music as a way to understand the attitude of music students towards classical music. The interview covers two questions, Question 1: How do you feel about classical music? Question 2: Why don't you like listening to classical music?

For the first question, six of the respondents thought that classical music is elegant music, serious music and highbrow music, which shows that music students have a wrong understanding of classical music, which leads them to reject classical music. Five respondents found classical music boring and preferred European and American pop music, indicating that classical music does not meet their aesthetic expectations.

For the second question, why don't you like listening to classical music? 9 music students thought that they could not understand it. Not being able to understand music is an aesthetic problem and requires an explanation of the reasons for this, which is a major problem that constrains listeners from listening to music. Six music students thought that classical music took too long. Long listening and appreciation time is another issue that needs to be analyzed.

2. Analysis of factors affecting the listening habits of music students

With the results of the interviews, it is then possible to analyze what factors influence the listening habits of music students, in order to suggest improvements and measures for the promotion of classical music.

2.1 Misconceptions about classical music

In response to the interviewee's answer, the author organizes the information and gives an explanation. First of all, classical music represents the highest artistic achievement of Western music, and after the test of time, it still has a group of advocates who love it and pass it on in today's age. In the process of inheritance, classical music is also known as "elegant music", music students do not like classical music is often turned off by the name of "elegant music". There was no such thing as classical music before the term "pop music" was coined. For Europeans, what is classical music today was the popular music of its day before the 20th century, and the number of its enthusiasts is no less than that of pop music enthusiasts today. In the process of promoting classical music, many people regard classical music as the highest representative of refined artistic interests, thus forming a kind of music contempt chain. The chain of contempt is based on some standard recognized by society at large, and the solidity of this standard is positively correlated with its popularity; the more popular it is in people's minds, the more solid and sturdy the chain will be. These chains connect people on the basis of their recognition of the identity of the social group they are in (e.g., occupation, profession, geographical origin), allowing them to believe that the in-group they are in is superior to other groups, and the higher the level of the chain one is in, the prouder one will be of one's group identity. The contempt chain of music categories is: classical > jazz > metal > rock > folk > electronic music > pop > rap > MC. (Ren Haofa, 2020: 222) In fact, most social phenomena reflect human psychological activity, and the reason for the existence of the contempt chain is actually identification with the in-group and resistance to the out-group. This kind of thinking is not right. The "high" of elegant music is reflected in the difficulty of creation and performance, not being highbrow. Many people are prejudiced in their understanding of classical music, and this concept influences their judgment of classical music, thus mistakenly believing that classical music is a mountain they cannot climb.

2.2 Tone aesthetic preference analysis

The Chinese aesthetic psychology of tone is a very important point is the characteristic of close to the human voice. "String music is not as good as wind music, wind music is not as good as people's songs," the first and most direct reflection of the Chinese aesthetic concept of tone is that the tone of string instrument (here refers to plucked instruments) is not as good as the tone of wind instrument (wind instruments that emit a continuous tone). Wind aerophone instruments are closer to the human voice than granular sounding plucked instruments with their long tones. "String music is not as good as wind music, wind music is not as good as people's songs", which has been a category of aesthetics in China for thousands of years, the more internal reason is that Chinese culture is essentially sensual and life-

oriented, and attaches great importance to people's physical body, and tries its best to capture people's inner feelings and experiences. It is believed that only the real voice can express the inner feelings more completely and truly, and that only the "close to the human voice", "close to the natural" true tone, "can evoke a direct feeling, and can make you enter a state of life, can make the music have a kind of engraved effect." (Liu Chenghua, 1998: 51) Only the human voice can serve as man's own natural musical instrument, closest to man's inner emotions, and a direct medium for the externalization of man's inner emotions; therefore, it appears to be the most direct and natural in expressing man's inner emotions." (Huang Hanhua. 2002: 7) As man-made musical instruments, "strings" and "winds" are far away from nature and human life and inner feelings. Therefore, they are far less direct and genuine than the human voice, which is a natural instrument, in expressing their inner feelings. However, although "wind instruments" and " string instruments" are both man-made musical instruments, because wind instruments are played with the "Qi" of human life, and plucked instruments are played with human hands, the "Qi" is closer to the inner life essence of a human being than the "hands" . Therefore, in terms of expressing one's inner feelings, "wind instruments" is more direct and natural than "string instruments". This is "String music is not as good as wind music". European and American pop music is often presented as songs, and I think this is one of the reasons why music students like it the most.

Compared to the Chinese " close to the human voice ", the Western view of tone in general tends to be far away from the human voice, so that the effect of tone obtains a kind of commonality, which is manifested as "close to the instrumental voice". This is not only reflected in the mainstream instruments in the Western orchestra, but also concentrated in the most representative American vocal method: the use of effective combination of vocal organs and resonance organs, that is, away from the unnatural state of daily human voice pronunciation, but to obtain a kind of "instrumental" sound coloration that can be said to be scientific, standardized, unified and common; on the contrary, in almost all the arts of vocal singing in China, it is common to maintain the natural state of the voice in order to obtain a voice that is first and foremost authentic and truly natural in the human physical sense. Regarding the difference between the "close to instrumental sound" and "close to human voice" between Chinese and Western tones, Mr. Liu Chenghua believes that in the final analysis, it is still governed by the different cultural consciousness of the two sides: "Western culture is rational and knowledge-based, so it is bound to emphasize logic and pursue a system, and then this system requires that the music under it must transcend the specific and the unique in order to obtain a kind of universality and commonality. Therefore, Western instruments are designed to be far from the human voice and close to the instrumental voice." (Liu Chenghua. 1998: 51) Classical music has a vast array of instrumental pieces. Whenever classical music is talked about, people are more likely to associate it with instrumental pieces than vocal music. This is one of the reasons why people don't like classical music according to the aesthetic preference of closing to human voice.

2.3 Incomprehensible classical music

The method of music interpretation is to use words and pictures as a guide for the listener to listen to the music. However, music has an acoustic attribute, which determines that it does not have semantic, visual attribute. Therefore, without the guidance of interpretation, many listeners can not understand what the music means, which is not the

responsibility of the listener, but is mostly determined by the acoustic attributes of the music. The long-standing work of music promotion centers on the adoption of music interpretation as a means of guiding the listener to understand the specific piece of music.

Music students can't understand classical music, and the author shares the same feeling. In fact, it is a very normal phenomenon to not be able to understand music, because music is abstract, and the expression of music is the process of sound movement, which exists within the range of hearing, resulting in their lack of a clear point of view, and the listener tends to want to listen to the picture from the music, and the content, which is indeed very abstract. Failure to hear the content of the musical performance will also frustrate the listener, who will find it boring, mistakenly thinking that he or she does not have the ability to appreciate music, has no musical talent, and is unable to get satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment in his or her heart. In the long run, the listener will dislike classical music even more.

2.4 Impact of fast-food culture

The author agrees with the answer that listening to classical music takes too long. For example, symphonies and concertos, which are large-scale instrumental genres, take between half an hour and an hour to listen to in their entirety, and some, such as Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 and Mahler's Symphony No. 3, even take nearly two hours. Opera works are much longer. A couple of hours is indeed rather long. The ancients had relatively fewer entertainments and ways of entertaining compared to us today, so they had more time to enjoy these longer pieces of classical music. There is a reason why contemporary entertainment is so abundant and there are more choices available to everyone, so they don't really want to spend more time listening to classical music.

Another reason is that modern people are deeply influenced by "fast-food culture", which leads to the fact that listeners do not have the ability to listen to large-scale works in their entirety, and that they are prone to drifting off when listening to a long piece of music, or worse, they may lose their concentration or become drowsy.

Fast-food culture is a term that has emerged along with the entry of Western fast food into the Chinese market, representing a cultural phenomenon of pursuing speed for anything without paying attention to quality and sedimentation and accumulation (Wang Chunni, Xiao Runyu, 2020: 135).

If fast-food culture is a must in this era, then the love for short videos also reflects the general anxiety from all walks of life in the era of time fragmentation. The fragmentation of time comes from the diversification of audience needs, reflecting the progress of the times and people's pursuit of spiritual life in the context of a greatly enriched material life. However, too much fragmented time does not lead to higher effectiveness, and excessive fragmentation can lead to higher overall conversion costs thereby reducing overall efficiency.

Discussion

This study set out to explore the attitudes of music students toward classical music and analyze the factors influencing their listening habits. The results paint a nuanced picture of a

generation of music students who, despite professional exposure, demonstrate a marked disinterest in classical music, with deeper cultural, aesthetic, and psychological factors at play.

Attitudes Toward Classical Music

The findings reveal that a slight majority (51%) of music students do not like classical music, and an even larger proportion (75.74%) do not engage with it daily. These results are surprising given that classical music remains central in the curricula of conservatories and professional music training in China. This phenomenon may reflect a broader generational shift away from traditional genres toward popular and more emotionally accessible music forms. This aligns with previous research suggesting that young listeners prefer music that offers immediate emotional gratification, familiarity, and relevance to their daily lives (Greenberg et al., 2016).

Moreover, the interviews with students highlighted a prevalent misunderstanding of classical music. Many respondents viewed it as "elegant," "serious," or "highbrow," indicating that classical music has become socially coded as elitist. This misperception may stem from the cultural "contempt chain" proposed by Ren (2020), which places classical music at the top of a hierarchy of musical genres. Such social constructs discourage students from engaging authentically with classical music due to fears of inadequacy or irrelevance.

Aesthetic Preferences and Cultural Influences

The preference for European and American pop music over classical music reflects broader cultural aesthetic inclinations, particularly the Chinese preference for tones that resemble the human voice. As Liu (1998) and Huang (2002) have argued, Chinese aesthetic traditions value expressiveness and emotional immediacy, qualities that are often conveyed more directly through vocal music than instrumental compositions. Pop music, often centered around vocals, better meets these aesthetic expectations and emotional needs.

Conversely, Western classical music, especially instrumental works, may seem distant and abstract. Western tonal aesthetics favor systematized, rational sound production designed to transcend individual expression in favor of structural and formal beauty (Liu, 1998). This cultural dissonance may cause Chinese students to feel emotionally disconnected from classical music, perceiving it as rigid or inaccessible.

Comprehensibility and Musical Abstraction

Another significant factor is the abstract nature of classical music. Unlike language-based media, instrumental music lacks direct semantic content, making it difficult for some listeners to comprehend without prior knowledge or guided interpretation. This finding echoes the ideas of Meyer (1956), who emphasized that musical understanding relies heavily on stylistic familiarity and learned listening strategies. Without sufficient exposure and interpretative support, students may feel alienated from classical music, leading to a cycle of disinterest and disengagement.

Influence of Fast-Food Culture

Finally, the impact of "fast-food culture" cannot be overlooked. As digital technologies shape listening behaviors, contemporary audiences increasingly favor short, accessible content over lengthy, complex works. This shift is emblematic of broader cultural changes that emphasize speed, convenience, and instant gratification (Rosa, 2013). Classical music, with its long durations and structural complexity, stands in contrast to these tendencies. As a result, students may lack the attention span or patience to engage with classical forms, especially operas or symphonies that demand prolonged focus.

This phenomenon is especially problematic for conservatory education, which presumes a foundational appreciation for classical repertoire. As Einstein noted, "interest is the best teacher," and a lack of intrinsic motivation among students suggests an urgent need to rethink how classical music is introduced and contextualized in music education.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore music students' attitudes toward classical music and the factors influencing their listening habits. The findings reveal a surprising disinterest among music students in classical music, with 51% expressing dislike and 75.74% reporting no daily listening habit. Despite being immersed in an academic environment that emphasizes Western classical training, many students show a clear preference for contemporary genres such as European and American pop music.

The investigation highlights several key factors behind this phenomenon. Firstly, students hold misconceptions about classical music, associating it with elitism and seriousness, which alienates them from engaging with it meaningfully (Ren, 2020). Secondly, aesthetic preferences rooted in cultural psychology play a significant role; Chinese aesthetic tradition values tones that are closer to the human voice, making vocal-driven pop music more emotionally resonant than instrumental classical works. Furthermore, many students struggle to comprehend classical music, finding it abstract and lacking immediate emotional clarity, which leads to feelings of inadequacy and disinterest. This difficulty stems from the semantic ambiguity of instrumental music and the lack of interpretive guidance, as well as the inherently abstract nature of musical form and expression. Lastly, the influence of fast-food culture contributes to the preference for shorter, more accessible music experiences. The length and complexity of classical compositions demand extended attention spans, which are often at odds with the media consumption patterns of today's students.

Overall, the findings suggest that to foster appreciation for classical music among music students, there needs to be a transformation in both pedagogical methods and cultural framing. Classical music should be presented not as an exclusive art form but as a dynamic, emotionally rich tradition that students can relate to, understand, and enjoy.

Recommendations

To address these issues, educators and institutions must actively dismantle the elitist framing of classical music and promote a more inclusive and accessible understanding. Integrating music interpretation strategies, such as guided listening and multimedia explanations, may help bridge the gap between abstract sound and listener meaning. Additionally, curriculum designers might consider blending classical music with contemporary styles or using crossover genres to foster greater emotional and cultural resonance.

1. It is recommended that classical music promoters should not treat classical music as unattainable, thus scrutinizing other music in a superior manner and forming a chain of contempt. There is no distinction between good and bad music, only between simple and complex. The elegance of classical music lies in the fact that it is more difficult to compose and perform. The high of classical music is not a highbrow song or a high position, the music is not selective, anyone who likes it is qualified to enjoy classical music.

2. It is suggested that music students need to know the characteristics of musical sound. Music has no semantic or visual attributes and should not be listened to in a viewed, storytelling way; the emotional experience that music provides is much more interesting. At

the same time, music does not have the attribute of being a standard answer; it is the freest form of art, and the listener who listens to music makes associations, his or her own associations being the most interesting, and does not have to pay attention to the so-called standard answer.

3. It is suggested that music students can listen to vocal works in classical music, such as the art songs of Schubert and Schumann. The human voice is the tone that music students prefer, and thus they may gradually like classical music.

4. It is impossible to change the trend of the influence of fast food culture, so we should conform to the change of the times. Music students can go to listen and enjoy those beautiful themes in classical music, these themes are often relatively short, in line with the concept of modern people's fast-food culture, perhaps they will like these short themes and thus like the whole work, until they like classical music.

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