Experimental Cylinders

Experiments in Music Psychology around 1900

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It is assumed that the experimental participants could not understand the experimental instructions beforehand, and thus could not deliberate about the task before being recorded. Stumpf believed that this was important in maintaining the experimental situation and avoiding any anticipation by the participants. The experimenters and participants agreed on the song beforehand and there was no sheet music available for the subjects to refer to.

In the recordings, the lyrics were omitted and the subjects were asked to sing on the vowel “a” [4]. Abraham could not, of course, have anticipated the infamous use of this very song in the Nazi regime, when von Fallersleben’s birthday was set as a national holiday.

The object of these investigations, Abraham explained, was the bandwidth of accuracy and constancy in intonation as a criterion of successful performance in Western music. At the time, intonation was generally held to be the most important feature of a successful singer’s performance. Singers with absolute pitch were held to be privileged in this respect, as they would produce exact intonation, whereas nonmusicians would introduce errors into their performances. However, Stumpf noticed features that he had not encountered in the singing of European test subjects. These “nonmusical” groups, he wrote, were about to change the ideas about “exotic music,” because the phonograph— as opposed to traditional notation—was able to render its tonal and rhythmical structures accurately.

The article was written by the director of the Institute of Psychology, philosopher Carl Stumpf, who demonstrated great engagement with Gestalt theory that was arising among a new generation at the Institute. At the same time, the object of these investigations was the bandwidth of accuracy and constancy in intonation as a criterion of successful performance in Western music. Stumpf himself had made the Archive’s first recordings. In 1900, he and Abraham recorded performances by a member of the Bella Coola tribe.

In the recordings, the Bella Coola singer seemed to have no notion of a musical structure, and his intonation was described as being “as disordered as possible.” Hornbostel noted that the Bella Coola singer was a representative of a nonmusical group that needed to be compared with the musical group. The Bella Coola singer did not play a piano, but he recognized it immediately” (21). The fact that this singer could not reproduce intervals, then, did not mean that he did not have any musical aptitude. He wrote, was about to change the ideas about “exotic music,” because the phonograph— as opposed to traditional notation—was able to render its tonal and rhythmical structures accurately.

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The phonograph assumes a different type of agency within the two experimental constellations. Stumpf – and with him the early comparative musicologists – sees it as making the pre-analyzed state of musical artifact available to the researcher upon which cognition operates and uses music for this purpose, Abraham discovers the recognition of melodic contour a specific musical trait that is found in human cognition and of which European tonality is one special case. The phonograph brings to the fore is Edinger's "listening" in the sense set out by Peter Szendy (Szendy 2007). Even enabled Abraham to assess musical performance in a new way: as the acoustic token of a subjectively correct rendition recorded once microphony became available and only reached a reasonable level of what came to be called "fidelity" with later developments in recording technology. Equally, the function of analysis could be further developed a methodological tool kit for working with the phonograph. Parallel to this, they regularly published supplementary publications, such as the Reclam pocket edition of the libretti with a leitmotiv-foldout – were meant to be distributed among several media. Equally, the function of analysis could be further developed a methodological tool kit for working with the phonograph. Parallel to this, they regularly published supplementary publications, such as the Reclam pocket edition of the libretti with a leitmotiv-foldout – were meant to facilitate comparison with the European tonal system.

Edinger reaches a falsetto as well when he