

Narrative meaning-making in pleasant musical imagery

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Research on everyday musical imagery has typically conceptualized its study object as “involuntary musical imagery”—as something that simply appears in a person’s consciousness on an involuntary basis. However, people may also engage with their imagery in an active manner, which might be taken to suggest that such imagery could acquire a personal meaningfulness in their lives. Most research on everyday musical imagery has nevertheless relied on questionnaire or experience sampling methodologies that do not allow in-depth narrative accounts of what imagining music means to the participants.

The aim of the present interview study is to offer an exploratory account of what sorts of personal meaning-making are constructed around everyday musical imagery. The study is based on 50 individual interviews in which higher-education music students were asked to “listen” in their minds to a self-selected piece of their favorite music. In this paper, we focus on semi-structured parts of the interviews in which the interviewees talked about how the music had come to their lives as something they hear in their head.

A thematic analysis of the interview material suggests two kinds of personal meaning-making. In *narratives of situated comfort*, musical imagery was experienced to bring feelings of warm, peaceful relaxation, or a sense of security, trust, acceptance, or solace. Such experiences were always situated, i.e. anchored to certain locations or times, or intertwined with episodic memories of significant life events. Second, we found *narratives of identity*—accounts imbued with a sense of commitment, pride, ownership, or even expertise regarding one’s imagined music. Such narratives gave musical imagery a role in constructing a personal sense of self-esteem. Based on these findings, it is argued that musical imagery may share in many of the key psychological functions that have been identified for musical listening.