ATTENTIONAL FACTORS IN MUSICAL COMPOSITION: THEIR IDENTIFICATION AND REPRESENTATION

by

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ABSTRACT

The thesis was concerned with differences in what individuals attend to as a function of domain knowledge. “Attention” in this thesis is premised on the construction of “meaning”: an active process driven by the quality of prior knowledge and underlying intention. It was argued, that observation of compositional behaviours (what the composer ‘does’), would be reflective of different qualities of internal decisions made as compositional goals are selected, implemented and evaluated. To access composer’s internal concerns, a unique multi-method design was developed. Concurrent verbal protocols made available current cognitive concerns in working memory while retrospective protocols were seen as accessing metacognitive dispositions and affective thoughts held in long-term memory. By triangulating videos and transcribed verbal protocols, seven categories of Attentional Foci were observed.

The verbal categories were converted to step-graphs to visually represent the attentional processes of real-time composing. The resulting graphs provide two data sources – firstly, a measure of time devoted to each category before shifting to another category of activity, and secondly, the number of instances devoted to each category. Variations in Attentional Focus were argued to reflect different layers and qualities of intention. This in turn implied different qualities of knowledge use and strategic behaviours.
Study 1 explored between group differences in the composing behaviours of five novice and two professional composers. Behaviours were coded and converted to step-graphs to give a profile of Attentional Focus for each composer. The graphs were grouped into three clusters. The graphs of Attentional Foci reflected differences along the novice-expert continuum. The professional composers shifted attention over all the categories, whereas the novice composer’s attention was limited to the central categories. Further analysis revealed differences in the underlying cognitive complexity driving the processing concerns of each group. Professional composers were able to draw on extensive prior knowledge and mindfully regulate the composing process. Novices with less developed schemas and regulated the composing task with less efficiency. Also noted were individual differences in patterns of Attentional Foci and individual differences in motivations of task engagement.

Study 2 investigated individual differences within a common cohort of fourteen tertiary music students. Measures of individual differences of beliefs in control over task (Strategic Flexibility Questionnaire Cantwell & Moore, 1996); approach to task (Study Process Questionnaire Biggs, 1987) and beliefs in self-efficacy (developed by the author for this study) were linked to different patterns of Attentional Foci and in turn linked to quality of compositional outcome. Maladaptive dispositions were linked to central categories of Attentional Foci and low SOLO scores for their musical compositions. Adaptive dispositions were linked to a wider spread of Attentional Foci and high SOLO scores for their musical compositions.
The implication of this thesis is that musical composition is conceptualised as much an intellectual process as a musical process. A metacognitive account of musical composition provides a necessary but not sufficient condition for an account of process in musical composition. The thesis implies that the process of musical composition is multi-dimensional. For example, even if there are special musical abilities that underpin the process of musical composition then how that ability is enacted can be explicated through metacognitive theory.