

Enjoying classical music: how reading influences our hearing

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When listeners read a well-written CD booklet or program before listening to a piece of classical music, they usually like the music better. This is the result of a study by the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics. The emotions triggered by the text might play a role in this. Credit: MPIEA / Felix Bernoulli using a photo by Nikolai Kashirin/flickr

A recent study puts the influence of a composer's prestige on the evaluation of classical music into perspective and shows that the enjoyment of music is promoted by lively texts.

Listening to [classical music](#) is often accompanied by information about the pieces: In concerts and operas, programmes are distributed, every good classical CD comes with a booklet and on the radio, classical pieces are usually introduced. A study at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics examined the influence of different information on the evaluation of the music by the listeners.

The researchers investigated two questions: Does the prominence of the composers have an influence on the liking of the pieces? And how do

stylistically different introductory texts influence the assessment of the music? All participants heard a Sinfonia by Josef Mysliveček (1737–1781) as part of the study. While one half of the participants received the correct information about the composer, the other half were told that it was a piece by Wolfgang Amadé Mozart (1756–1791). One group read a [text](#) that described the expressive significance of the Sinfonia in a lively, rather emotive way, while the text of the second group described the formal features of the Sinfonia. After listening, all participants rated the Sinfonia according to how much they liked the music.

Lively texts have a positive effect, prestige [influences](#) young people

The results, which were recently published in the journal "Psychology of Music", confirm the obvious assumption that preliminary information has a lasting influence on the listening experience of music: "However, contrary to common assumptions, the so-called prestige effect plays a lesser role than expected", explains Michaela Kaufmann, musicologist at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics and co-author of the study. The team of researchers, which also included Timo Fischinger and Wolff Schlotz from the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, observed an age effect on prestige: In contrast to older participants, younger participants liked the piece better when it was attributed to Mozart. In this respect, this result confirms observations from earlier studies. Yet for older listeners who also took part in the study, the attribution to Mozart had no effect on how well they liked the piece. The apparent immunity of the older participants – mostly experienced music lovers – indicates that stylistic experience in music can protect against external influences on the evaluation of music.

However, across all ages, the style in which the text was written had a strong effect: The participants in the group who had read the expressive text liked the same music better than those whose text

presented factual, musicanalytical information. "It is known from earlier research that the degree of emotional stimulation of the listener is a reliable indicator of the pleasure and enjoyment of experiencing art", says Kaufmann. A lively and imaginative language in accompanying texts may therefore promote an intensive empathy with the music on the part of the listener. For [music](#) education, for instance, the conscious design of accompanying texts offers the opportunity to inspire listeners of all ages.

More information: Timo Fischinger et al. If it's Mozart, it must be good? The influence of textual information and age on musical appreciation, *Psychology of Music* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0305735618812216](#)

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