

Attending to musical action: the psychology of music performance in the early 20th century

Abstract:

In the “short history with a long past” of psychology (Ebbinghaus 1908), attention only recently achieved the status of a central topic. It emerged as a fundamental concept and began to be systematically discussed in the nascent field of scientific psychology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the behavioral paradigm came to dominate the field, however, the topic of attention was significantly depreciated in the psychological discourse. It was with the cognitive revolution in the 1950s and 1960s that attention was *revived* as a legitimate and principal concern of psychology (e.g., Cherry 1953, Broadbent 1958, Deutsch and Deutsch 1963, and Treisman 1964). Nearly all scholars who contributed to this revival of attention were involved with listening rather than seeing, and they had reasons. Auditory attention, which, unlike in vision, is generally not accompanied by motor activity that re-orientates the sensory receptors. The selection process for auditory attention seemed to rely on central rather than peripheral processes; therefore, auditory attention was deemed an “internal sense” or “wholly cognitive act,” and this attribute served well for making it a popular subject of cognitive psychology. This conceptualization conforms to the classical view of attention concerning limited capacity, often characterized as “selection-for-perception” within the framework of information processing. Subsequent studies in music psychology further extended the view by focusing on attention in music perception and cognition, including auditory scene analysis, streaming, segregation, and selective and divided attention. However, attention plays a significant role not only in perception but also in action (Norman & Shallice 1986; Allport 1987). How can we discuss the role of attention in action in the context of music psychology in the broader sense, embracing performing and making music, as well as listening?

This paper examines the close relationship between attention and musical action in the psychological and pedagogical discourse of the end of the long nineteenth century. Attention was discussed apropos of the actual motor movements (Bain 1888; Ribot 1903), muscular sensation (Delabarre 1892), and production of behaviors (James 1890). Notably, a comparable conceptualization of attention as the dynamic action selection mechanism is also found in the contemporaneous discourse on piano playing pedagogy (Caland 1903, 1905, Breithaupt 1909, Matthay 1903, 1908, Steinhausen 1913). Many of these treatises on piano playing were marginalized both in the history of music psychology and pedagogy, but they were much more than didactic instructions. Here, music performance was viewed as a kind of goal-directed action composed of controlled sequences of motor activities, and attention was considered agency rather than a quality of experience. Various aspects of attention in action were discussed in the context of music performance, including attention to muscular senses, automaticity, bodily efforts, proprioception of the performing body, and “unlearning to attend” to achieve the state of the effortless attention. In this historical intersection between psychology and pedagogy, where musical performance is viewed as willed and automated control of behaviors, a broader, multimodal notion of musical attention emerges beyond auditory attention.