

The rise of the musical omnivore

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Musical taste has traditionally been viewed as class-related: the elite attends classical music concerts, the middle classes prefer highbrow easy listening, while the lower classes enjoy pop and folk music. However, the accuracy of these categorizations appears to be increasingly on the wane. Research in the US has shown that the upper classes, in particular, are increasingly adding different styles of music to their tastes that were previously associated with the middle and lower classes. A study by the

Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics has now determined for the first time that tastes are also changing here. The survey, which was carried out among students, also shows that taste can become more independent of social background through an intensive engagement with music.

They are referred to as "omnivores": a new type of listener whose musical taste includes a lot of different styles despite being predominantly focused on "sophisticated" genres like classical and jazz. While such omnivores were previously found almost exclusively among the higher social classes, a recent study also observed such broad tastes among people with a high level of musical expertise. Omnivores are particularly common among musicology students, with every second member of this group being classified as one. However, every fourth student of other subjects also listens to [different styles](#) of music, depending on their mood and the occasion. These are the findings of a study published by Paul Elvers, an academic staff member at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, together with two other colleagues from the institute and a musicologist from the University of Vienna.

In the article just published in the magazine *Frontiers in Psychology*, the researchers analyze the musical tastes of what are termed expert [listeners](#) and average listeners. Expert listeners, such as musicology students, are particularly interesting as subjects for research into musical taste, primarily in relation to the question of whether their musical knowledge and training leads to them favouring a different musical repertoire than the rest of the population.

Using an online survey, Paul Elvers collected data from around 1,000 German and Austrian students, a quarter of whom had musicology as their major or minor degree subject. The participants had to state, among other things, how often they listen to songs from different

musical genres based on a range of five categories spanning from "never" to "every day". They were able to choose from 22 genres ranging from rock, pop and [classical music](#) to punk, heavy metal, emo/screamo, gospel, reggae and world music. The respondents were also asked about their social status, musical background and personality traits. In his evaluation of the data, Elvers was able to use factor analysis to group the various musical styles into five main categories: classical, jazz, house, folk and rock. In doing this he did not simply examine how frequently these categories are listened to by the experts and non-experts. Instead, irrespective of the group they belonged to, he formed three sufficiently homogenous clusters from the results: i.e. engaged listeners, conventional listeners and rock listeners.

Rock fans hardly listen to any other type of music

As the names suggest, rock listeners are characterized by the fact that they listen to rock and folk music more frequently than average, but hardly ever listen to any other type of music, particularly classical and jazz. Conventional listeners generally state that they listen to music moderately often, and usually classical, house and pop. In contrast, engaged listeners consume music substantially more frequently than both of the other groups and display a preference for classical and jazz; however, this group also listens to folk and rock on a regular basis. As a result, the engaged listeners can be likened to the omnivore type and their generally higher intensity of music listening emerges as a new aspect of their listening behaviour.

The central question for Paul Elvers is therefore: How are these groups of listeners represented among expert listeners and within the control group, the average listeners? Half of the musicology students were able to be classed as engaged listeners. The scientist also discovered, however, that 36 percent of the students were conventional listeners and 13 percent rock listeners. In contrast, the distribution in the control

group was relatively normal: a quarter was engaged listeners, around half were conventional listeners and another quarter were rock listeners. According to Elvers, the fact that more musicology students did not display a preference for classical music can be explained by the change that has taken place within the discipline in recent years. Pop and rock music are an established component of the musicology curriculum at the Humboldt University Berlin where the majority of the survey participants were recruited.

Other aspects of the study have proved much more insightful for the researchers: for example, the fact that rock listeners form their own cluster while classical music lovers demonstrate the greatest openness to other genres. "The biggest difference between our findings and those of two previous studies on musicologists is that we discovered this trend towards "omnivorism," emphasizes Paul Elvers. "We were already aware that people who have studied musicology have a preference for classical music. But the tendency to engage in other styles is something quite new."

Moreover, it is interesting to note that, unlike almost all previous studies, this research did not demonstrate any significant correlation between social origin and musical taste. Of the students surveyed, around one-third came from the lower and lower-middle classes, a bit more than half from the middle classes, and ten percent from the upper-middle classes. As a result, a broad cross-section of the population was represented in the study. It emerges that rather than social origins, musical knowledge and education resulted in the reception of a broad musical repertoire by the survey participants. "The participants were mainly young people," stresses Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann, Director of the Music Department at the MPI for Empirical Aesthetics. "So their answers could be indicative of a trend. And it would be a really interesting development if [musical taste](#) loses its connection with social identification – at least among people with who engage with [music](#) independently and intensively."

The researchers are aware that the study was somewhat limited. Based on their age and level of education alone, students are not representative of the population at large. The researchers at the MPI for Empirical Aesthetics have already launched a new survey in order to gain broader and more detailed findings.

More information: "Exploring the musical taste of expert listeners: musicology students reveal tendency toward omnivorous taste." *Frontiers in Psychology*, 20 August 2015. [dx.doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01252](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01252)

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