

The Autistic Experience
of
Music

The Senses



Visual



Tactile



Proprioception



Auditory



Interoception



Olfactory



Vestibular



Gustatory

Auditory perception is primary in hearing music

BUT

Imagine that when each of the other senses is stimulated,
whether by pleasurable or painful triggers:

For many of us, this will dull the auditory senses
and become our primary sensation

i.e. 'My socks are scratchy'

'The saxophone is slightly flat'

'The sun is in my eyes'

'The piano is slightly off-centre on the stage'

or, my personal peeve,

'the guitarist wants me to look at them, not the message they're delivering'

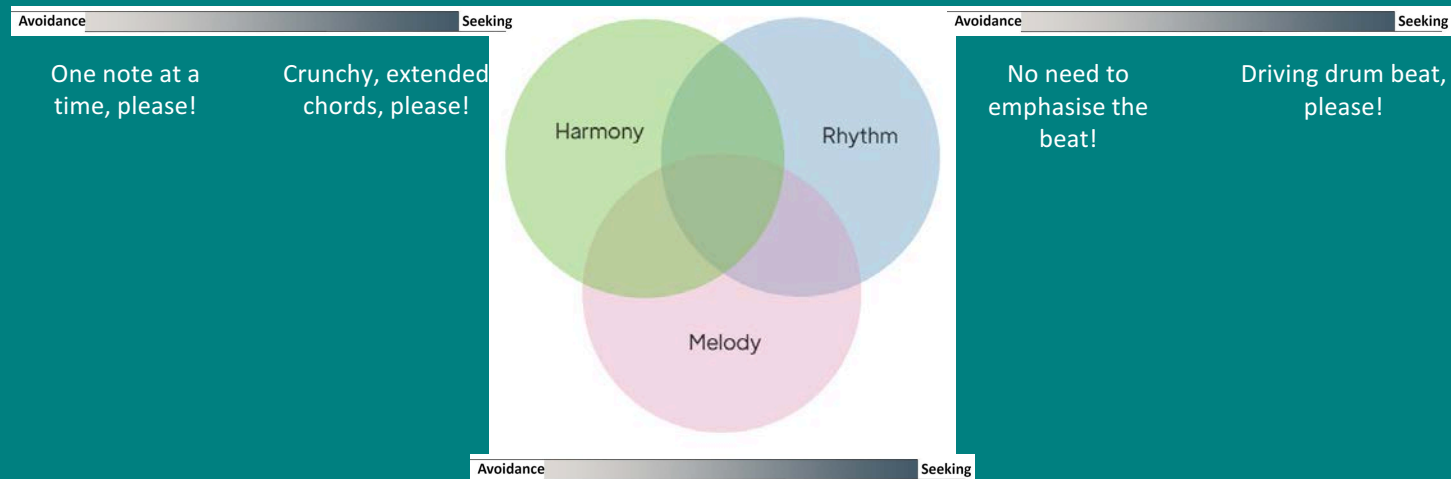
For every stimulus in music, there will be a continuum of sensory need:



When we combine the different continua, we create the musical experience spectrum of the individual.

Let's look at the variables / components of music individually:

The spectrum of experiencing music:



Smooth, no jumps
or twiddles,
please!

You can't have too
many frills and
acrobatics!

I call this a spectrum because all of us will have some sense of all its parts but each of us will fall somewhere within their combination.

The spectrum of experiencing music:

Overall 'noise' level



Loud sounds hurt me
physically
I prefer silence
Background music is annoying
or distracting
Noise-cancelling earphones
are my best friend.

I'll take the seat nearest the
loudspeaker, please
I switch off if I have to make
an effort to listen
Sound envelops me like a
comfortable cushion

Variation of noise level can also be problematic, especially when we have distanced ourselves from its source in order to manage our sensory input and then it becomes

Quieter (or vice versa)

OR we may find changes in sound level enhance our experience.

Aspects of music:

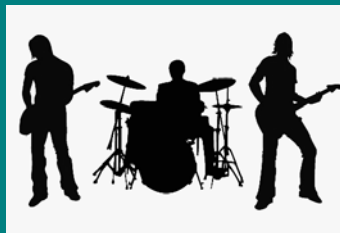


Folk, traditional & world



Plainchant

Genre & Style



Rock, pop, jazz & praise songs



Organ preludes, postludes & pieces



Choral hymns & anthems



Gospel

Aspects of music:

Form

Intro	Verse	Chorus	Verse	Chorus
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Intro	Verse	Verse	Verse
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Intro	Verse	Chorus	Bridge passage	Verse (new key)	Chorus
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Intro	Verse	Chorus	Verse	Chorus	Chorus	Chorus	Will this ever finish?
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Intro	Verse	Chorus	Verse	Chorus	Instrumental solo	Chorus
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Predictability and repetition affect each of us differently



Avoidance

Seeking

Predictability, please!

Surprise me!

Aspects of music:

Tempo and Metre

Tempo = how fast / slow

Our perception of it can be skewed by our own mental state
e.g. psychomotor agitation / retardation

Metre = pulse, how many beats in a bar

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May be regular (4/4, 3/4, 2/4, 6/8, 9/8)

(Jerusalem, Blue Danube, Marches, Greensleeves,
Debussy)

Or irregular (5/4, 7/8, 17/16 etc) (Mars, Perfect Fool etc.)

Or may change occasionally or regularly

In church music, metre can also refer to the number of

Avoidance

Seeking

Gentle / regular

Fast / getting faster / irregular

Examples:

Regular Metre:

Tallis' Ordinal

♩ = 100

4

7

Public domain

Irregular Metre:

Third Mode Melody

♩ = 100

6

12

18

Instrumentation: Timbre & Tessitura

Timbre:

What shape, colour or form does the sound take?



Example: Middle C on a flute is breathy but rounded, on an oboe it is reedy but full, on a cello it is broad, resonant and warm

Tessitura:

The same question, specifically in relation to how high or low it is in the instrument's range?

Example:

The lowest notes of the clarinet might be described as hollow, woody and dark;

Notes at the top of its range might be described as nasal, thin, harsh and bright

Articulation:

Is how an individual note or chord begins and (to a lesser extent) ends.

Harshest	→					Gentlest
Staccato	Martellato	Non-legato	Accented	Neutral	Legato	Slurred
Very short and with an attack	Notes are hammered at the start	Notes are slightly separated	Stress is placed on the note	Notes are individually started with no stress	Unbroken sound but notes are started individually	Notes flow smoothly from one to next
▶ ▶ ▶	▬ ▬ ▬ ▬	▬ ▬ ▬ ▬	▬ ▬ ▬ ▬	▬ ▬ ▬ ▬	▬ ▬ ▬ ▬	▬ ▬ ▬ ▬

Avoidance		Seeking
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I experience staccato as
pain

Hit me with it!

Tonality & Harmonic Progression:

Basic tonality = major or minor (earlier music uses modes)

Minor not necessarily sad e.g. 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen'

Major no necessarily happy e.g. 'Away in a Manger'

Harmonic Progression

May be predictable e.g. 'O Come All Ye Faithful'

Or unpredictable e.g. 'O Come All Ye Faithful' final verse harmonies

Many composers use sequences (the same harmony and / or melody repeated one note higher / lower)

e.g. 'Send him victorious, happy and glorious' & 'Gloria' in Angels From the Realms are descending sequences

The first two lines of 'Were you there when they crucified my Lord' are an ascending sequence

Avoidance

Simple, predictable

Seeking

It is not Christmas without
THE CHORD

Texture:

At its simplest, texture is monophonic – one voice singing one line
e.g. the treble solo opening of 'Once in Royal David's City'

A single line can be sung in harmony but with every voice singing (largely) the same rhythm
e.g. the second verse of 'Once in Royal' where the full choir comes in

Polyphonic texture involves two or more voices singing separate lines that each have their own rhythm
Historically, some parts of the Church have banned this in order that the text be clear to the listener.

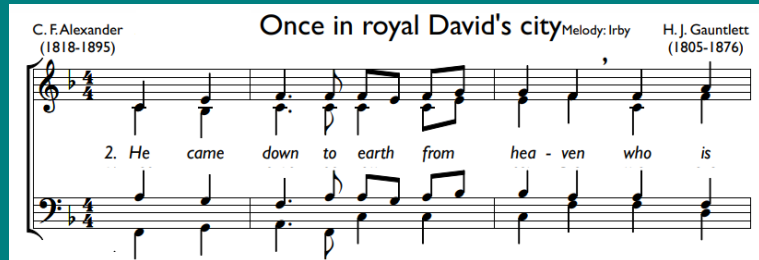
C. F. Alexander (1818-1895) **Once in royal David's city** Melody: Irby H. J. Gauntlett (1805-1876)



1. Once in roy - al Da - vid's ci - ty stood a

This image shows the first verse of the hymn 'Once in royal David's city'. It is a monophonic texture, consisting of a single melodic line in treble clef, 4/4 time. The lyrics are '1. Once in roy - al Da - vid's ci - ty stood a'.

C. F. Alexander (1818-1895) **Once in royal David's city** Melody: Irby H. J. Gauntlett (1805-1876)



2. He came down to earth from hea - ven who is

This image shows the second verse of the hymn 'Once in royal David's city'. It is a polyphonic texture, consisting of two staves: a treble staff and a bass staff. The lyrics are '2. He came down to earth from hea - ven who is'.

Avoidance

All these other notes blur the tune for me

Seeking

Without the harmonies, you might just as well be playing the melody on a brick!

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina
(1525-94)

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

(1525-94)

P Si — cut cer - vus de -

P Si - cut cer - vus de - si - de - rat ad fon -

P Si - cut cer - vus de - si - de - rat ad fon - tes a - qua - rum,

P Si -

S

A

T

B

si - de - rat ad fon - tes a - qua - rum, a - qua -

tes a - qua - rum, si - cut cer -

Si - cut cer - vus de - si - de - rat ad fon - tes

Avoidance

Seeking

This sounds tangled to me

This is exciting! Where will it go next?

Text:

Can be treated simply i.e. one note per syllable
e.g. many Taize settings, such as 'O Lord Hear my Prayer'

Or more floridly
e.g. 'Glo-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-oria' in 'Angels from the Realms'

Word-Painting can be used to enhance the text
e.g. the descant to 'All my hope on God is Founded' sings the words 'those who follow shall not fall' slightly after the rest of the choir sings the main melody and, of course, it rises.

Avoidance

Aaargh! I can't
understand the words
when they're stretched
out across many notes.

Seeking

The musical treatment of
the words gives them
more meaning (or
sometimes less!)

Perceptual aspects of music:

Meaning (of text or of the music itself)

Mood

Response

Where autistic people may struggle is if cognitive dissonance is created between any two aspects of the music, i.e.

Text, meaning, mood, tempo, rhythm, tonality, form, style, articulation etc.

Classic example from Walmisley's *Magnificat in D minor*

While the text is Mary's response to the news that she will bear God's Son, nothing expresses virginal purity quite like the full tenors and basses bellowing it out before the female voices sing a single note!

Synaesthesia:

Input sense triggers a response from a different sense

Input sense = sound

Individual note

Chord

Tonality

Rhythm

Timbre

Etc.

Or visual (e.g.
grapheme)

May create a
response in
another sense

Commonly:

Colours

Tastes or textures
on the palate

Smells

Tactile feeling

Etc.

For example:

I see colours in different tonalities, while other people see them in individual notes OR the letters associated with note names

An autistic friend can taste chord progressions

A neurotypical friend sees colours in individual written notes (and their letter-names) and is an unbelievably good sight-reader as a result

Synaesthesia:



For performers:

Discomfort with vibrations (e.g. reed or brass instruments)

Individual notes causing pain when played or sung (bottom C on the bassoon has the same resonant frequency as my head! This causes it to vibrate and my vision blurs)

May choose a voice that is atypical of their gender or gender identity

May prefer to sing a voice part in a particular part of their vocal range because it feels more comfortable

May not perceive the sound that they are making in the same way that others do

May be incredibly sensitive to notes that are even slightly out of tune

May be unable to sing / play the same piece at a different pitch because they perceive it as 'wrong'

Questions for discussion:

Where do you feel you fit in the spectrum of musical experience? (melody, harmony, rhythm)

Can you think of a musical example that fits you perfectly?

And one that just annoys you?

And is there one where you experience cognitive dissonance between any two aspects of music?

Given the diversity of sensory profiles and types of music, how do you suggest churches can better meet the needs of autistic worshippers?