

Conservatism, sensation-seeking and music preferences

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Summary—Wilson-Patterson Conservatism (C) and Zuckerman's Sensation-seeking (SS) scores were investigated in relation to music preferences in a group of 43 students. High C scorers preferred familiar pieces of music relative to low C scorers ($r = 0.30$, $P < 0.05$). A tendency for conservatives to prefer simple music just failed to reach significance. Relationships between SS scores and music preferences were non-significant with the present sample, though SS scores were inversely related to C scores ($r = -0.48$, $P < 0.01$).

INTRODUCTION

Wilson (1973) has theorized that a conservative constellation of attitudes reflects a personality predisposition that may be described as a generalized dislike of uncertainty. High C scorers are conceptualized as people who seek familiarity, simplicity and safety in preference to stimuli that are novel, complex and threatening. Studies supporting this proposition have been reported in the sphere of art preferences (Wilson, Ausman and Mathews, 1973), poetry preferences (Gillies and Campbell, 1985) and response to humour (Ruch, 1983).

Zuckerman (1979) conceives the dimension of sensation-seeking (SS) in similar terms. High sensation-seekers are supposed to require a greater amount of excitement from the environment to maintain their optimal level of cerebral arousal. Among the evidence Zuckerman cites to support this theory is the finding that high SS scorers chose to listen to complex musical selections more often than low SS scorers.

This study was designed to examine the power of conservatism and sensation-seeking to predict preferences in music varying along the dimensions of simplicity vs complexity and familiarity vs unfamiliarity. The hypothesis was that high C scorers and low SS scorers would prefer simple and familiar music, relative to low C scorers and high SS Ss, who would prefer complex and unfamiliar types of music.

METHOD

Eight pieces of classical music were chosen on a *a priori* basis to represent each of four categories: simple familiar, simple unfamiliar, complex familiar and complex unfamiliar (see the Appendix for a list of the selections used for each category). The two dimensions of music involved in this four-way classification were conceptualized as independent. Simplicity-complexity referred to the number and concentration of elements present within the musical selection (viz. tonal qualities, consonance and dissonance, melodic and chordal predictability). Familiarity of each selection was judged by the researchers prior to inclusion in the study, though a check on the designation of the musical selections as familiar or unfamiliar was provided by having the Ss indicate whether or not the piece of music just heard was familiar to them.

Subjects were 26 females and 16 males aged between 18 and 69 yr, all of whom were students at the University of Nevada-Reno (mostly in social sciences and humanities).

Music selections were presented to Ss in a random series of eight taped segments, each of which was 2.5 min in duration. After each segment, Ss were asked to indicate their enjoyment of the piece by selecting one of the following statements on a 7-point scale: dislike extremely (1), dislike moderately (2), dislike slightly (3), indifferent (4), like slightly (5), like moderately (6), like extremely (7). The eight pieces of music were presented in a fixed random order, after which the Wilson-Patterson Attitude Inventory (Wilson, 1975) and the Sensation Seeking Scale-Form IV (Zuckerman, 1979) were administered. The personality tests were given last because it was believed that C scores and SS scores were less likely to be influenced by the music judgements than vice versa.

RESULTS

C scores ranged from 13 to 66 with a median of 38.9. Splitting the 43 Ss at the median yielded two groups designated as liberals and conservatives. Mean ratings of these two subgroups on each of the four music categories are shown in Fig. 1. There was an overall tendency for Ss to prefer simple types of music, and although this relationship was steeper for conservatives than liberals (giving rise to the same cross-over effect found with art and poetry preferences in the studies cited above) the difference between conservatives and liberals just fails to reach significance. Adding together the scores on the two 'simple' categories and subtracting those for the two 'complex' categories produced a 'simplicity' index which correlated 0.24 with conservatism (almost exactly equivalent to the level required for a one-tailed 0.05 significance).

A similar score calculated for familiarity produced a non-significant correlation with conservatism (0.06). However, inspection of the data revealed that the *a priori* judgement of what music would be familiar was considerably in error and when a new index of familiarity was calculated, based on Ss' own reports of whether or not the musical excerpts were

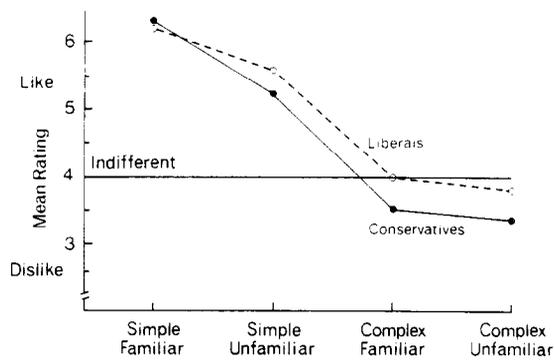


Fig. 1. Mean ratings on the four categories of music for conservatives and liberals.

familiar to them personally, a correlation of 0.30 was obtained ($P < 0.05$). This new index of familiarity was obtained by subtracting the mean rating of pieces reported by Ss as unfamiliar from the mean rating of pieces reported as being familiar.

Scores on the General subscale of Zuckerman's SSS Form IV ranged from 29 to 66 with a median of 51.6. Correlations between Ss' scores and musical preferences were in the predicted direction but failed to achieve statistical significance within the present sample.

Conservatism and sensation-seeking showed a moderate inverse correlation (-0.48 , $P < 0.01$) which is consistent with previous research (Kish, Netterberg and Leahy, 1973) as well as the theoretical overlap between the two concepts. Although age would normally need to be taken into account in a study of this kind it showed negligible correlations with both personality factors and musical preferences in the present sample.

DISCUSSION

These results are generally in accord with previous findings on art and poetry preferences showing that, relative to liberals, conservatives prefer simple, familiar and 'safe' stimuli. Sensation-seeking emerged as a less powerful predictor of musical preferences, though it did show a substantial inverse correlation with conservatism, and given a sufficiently large sample would almost certainly correlate with musical enjoyment as well.

In a broader context, these results support the general notion of music as supplying optimal stimulus input such that we are neither excessively bored nor subjected to stressful information overload (Wilson, 1985). The degree of stimulation that is optimal for a given individual depends partly on his or her personality, conservatism appearing as the more relevant factor in this study.

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APPENDIX

Musical Selections According to Category

<i>Simple familiar</i>	
Pachelbel—	Canon in D
Beethoven—	Fifth Symphony
<i>Simple unfamiliar</i>	
Mozart	Concerto No. 24 in C Minor Piano & Orchestra Allegro
Mozart—	Concerto No. 24 in C Minor Piano & Orchestra Allegro con brio
<i>Complex familiar</i>	
Stravinsky	Firebird Suite
Stravinsky	The Rite of Spring
<i>Complex unfamiliar</i>	
Prokofiev	Concerto for Piano & Orchestra No. 5 in G Major Allegro con brio
Stravinsky	Concerto for Two Pianos Con moto