

The First International Conference
Psychology and Music – Interdisciplinary Encounters
Pre-conference Program October 21–23, 2019
Conference Program October 24–26, 2019

Main Organizer

Faculty of Music, University of Arts in Belgrade

Co-organizers

Institute of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade
Psychology of Music Section, Serbian Psychological Society

How to cite this volume

Bogunović, B. & Nikolić, S. (Eds.) (2020). *Proceedings of PAM-IE Belgrade 2019*. Belgrade: Faculty of Music, University of Arts in Belgrade.

Proceedings of the First International Conference
Psychology and Music – Interdisciplinary Encounters

Editors

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Publisher

Faculty of Music, University of Arts in Belgrade, Kralja Milana 50, Belgrade

For Publisher

Dean of the Faculty of Music
Ljiljana Nestorovska

Editor-in-Chief of the Faculty of Music Publications

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Cover Design

Stefan Ignjatović

Technical Editor and Pre-press

Dušan Ćasić

ISBN 978-86-81340-20-2

PAM-IE Belgrade 2019 Conference and this publication were supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

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PROCEEDINGS

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Faculty of Music, University of Arts in Belgrade



UNIVERSITY OF ARTS IN BELGRADE
FACULTY OF MUSIC

Belgrade, 2020

Learning Preferences of the Musically Gifted

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Abstract

Around one-quarter of musically gifted students in Serbia perceive their talent as fully or largely realized, which can imply that the educational needs of the majority of musically gifted students in Serbia are not satisfied, as previously shown, but also that they see significant space for further progress. Deeming that the gifted themselves can provide a significant contribution to the process of finding possible ways to meet their educational needs, a convenience sample of 136 respondents (55 students of secondary music schools in Belgrade and 81 students of the Faculty of Music in Belgrade) was given an adapted version of the Possibilities for Learning questionnaire. The main methods of analyzing the collected data are independent *t*-test and principal component analysis (PCA). Findings indicated that younger respondents are more teacher-oriented and that the older respondents tend to take initiative and to have a deeper understanding of the content. The principal component analysis conducted on 64 items with orthogonal rotation (Varimax) showed a possible solution of five components that together explain around 43% of the variance. This solution was obtained by adding a subsample of 39 respondents gifted in the domain of visual arts. The values of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sample adequacy, $KMO = .808$, and Bartlett's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(2016) = 6039.663$, $p < .001$, confirmed that it was suitable to conduct this analysis. Due to the potential pedagogical value of this solution and the possibility of applying the inventory in the process of differentiating and individualizing teaching, it is necessary to continue adapting the inventory and carrying out further research on a larger sample.

Introduction

Research findings indicate that in young musicians in Serbia (aged 6 to 22) the expectations regarding their musical education grow and become more differentiated as the students

become older, while at the same time decreases the percentage of those who consider that their expectations are met, and the percentage of those who consider that their talent is largely or fully realized (Bogunović, Dubljević, & Buden, 2012). Additionally, a significant discrepancy between the competencies that music students expect in their teachers and the competencies that they perceive in them has been established (Bogunović & Mirović, 2014: 484). The observation that young musicians perceive the education system as traditional and not too flexible and innovative is also noteworthy (Bogunović et al., 2012). Altogether, the given findings can indicate a gap between the educational needs of young musicians and what our education system is offering them (according to Altaras Dimitrijević & Tatić Janevski, 2016; Bogunović et al., 2012; Bogunović & Mirović, 2014).

Considering that we view underachievement as a “consequence of incoherent or conflicting interaction between the needs/characteristics of the gifted student and the characteristics of . . . the school” (Altaras Dimitrijević & Tatić Janevski, 2016: 48), in order to prevent it from occurring we need to answer the question of how we can support the musically gifted on their path towards gaining expertise. Lannie Kanevsky's (2011a) research on the learning preferences of gifted students was a reminder that part of the answer to the above question can be given by the students themselves. Thus, we tried to adapt the said author's instrument (Kanevsky, 2011b), intended for testing the learning preferences of the academically gifted so that it can be applied in the domain of musical giftedness. We believed that this kind of instrument, available to teachers, school associates and researchers, could present a significant source of data for

planning the type of teaching that would meet the educational needs of the musically gifted (according to Kanevsky, 2011a).

Method

In exploratory, nonexperimental field research, we asked the musically gifted what they like to learn about, in what way and under what kind of conditions they like to acquire knowledge, as well as in what way they would like to demonstrate what they learn (according to Kanevsky, 2011b).

Research Aims

1. Determine whether there are differences between the learning preferences of secondary music school students and the Faculty of Music students.
2. Test the latent structure of the instrument used to collect data on learning preferences.

Research Tasks

RT 1: Examine whether there are differences in learning preferences among respondents of different ages.

RT 2: Examine whether there are differences in learning preferences between respondents studying at performing and those at theoretical departments.

RT 3: Examine whether there are differences in learning preferences among respondents of different genders.

RT 4: Examine in what way the items of the adapted Possibilities for Learning questionnaire are grouped.

RT 5: Test the metric characteristics of the adapted Possibilities for Learning questionnaire and individual items.

Variables

The only continuous variable in this research is the learning preferences of the respondents operationalized by the respondents' answers to each of the items of the adapted Possibilities for Learning questionnaire (Version 3b; Kanevsky, 2011b).

The respondents' age, the study program they attend and their gender are categorical variables by type. Attending secondary school or the faculty represent levels of the age variable. Based on the division into two basic study programs (Bogunović & Mirović, 2014), the respondents were grouped into those who attend vocal-instrumental/performing study programs and those who attend theoretical programs.

The students' gender was included in the research as a control variable, with the levels: male, female and other.

Participants' age and gender are included because they are among those learners' characteristics that have been, although inconsistently, associated with the instructional preferences of gifted students (Kanevsky, 2011a: 281).

Sample

The convenience sample in this research comprises a total of 136 respondents. The subsample of secondary school students comprises 55 third and fourth-grade students from three secondary music schools in the city of Belgrade. The university student subsample comprises 81 undergraduate and master level students of the Faculty of Music, University of Arts in Belgrade. Treating these groups as two subsamples is justified by the determined statistically significant difference in the average year of birth of the secondary school ($M = 2000.962$, $SD = 0.656$) and university students ($M = 1995.356$, $SD = 3.057$), $t(123) = 12.998$, $p < .001$. Our assumption is that the total sample is part of the musically gifted population since, in Serbia, attending a secondary music school or the faculty of music presents both a professional orientation and a sign of stricter selection than that carried out at lower educational levels (Bogunović, 2010; Bogunović et al., 2012).

We do not have data on the department and gender for every respondent. According to the data provided by the respondents, 89 of them are enrolled in performing, and 44 in theoretical departments. In terms of gender distribution, 37 respondents indicated they are male, and 93 female; one respondent marked the category "other".

Data Collection Techniques

To test the learning preferences of the musically gifted, the adapted version of the Possibilities for Learning – Version 3b questionnaire (Kanevsky, 2011b) was used. The original inventory, comprising 101 items organized into four subscales, was reduced to 67 items by excluding those items that could not be applied to the general context of education and the education of musicians in Serbia, and by excluding the items that related to the family of musicians. Subsequently, the content of most of the remaining items was modified in order to reflect the specificities of formal and informal knowledge and skill acquisition in the field of music in our country. As there were some similarities in the content of some of the items, those items were summarized into one. Having in mind the respondents' age, and given the desire to obtain more differentiated responses, a seven-point Likert scale was applied in place of the original five-point scale. Finally, slight changes were made in the content of certain items in order to make them more easily relatable for respondents in the two age groups, which gave us parallel versions of the inventory for secondary school and university students. Unlike with the original inventory, where respondents were told to fill it in thinking about their favorite subject (Kanevsky, 2011b), our respondents were instructed to fill in the questionnaire only having in mind their music-related subjects.

Due to the vast modifications made to the structure of the original inventory and the content of individual items, the adapted instrument is treated like a check-list.

The introductory part of the material given to the respondents also comprises questions about their year of birth (an integral part of each respondent's code), department and gender. Since the inventories were administrated on the premises of the institutions attended by the respondents, there was no need for them to note whether they are secondary school or university students.

Conducting the Research

Data collection was conducted in December 2018, it lasted around 15 minutes and it was

anonymous. Considering the conditions under which data were collected and the respondents' willingness to cooperate, the collected data are considered valid.

Presentation of Findings

All data were processed quantitatively, using the IBM SPSS Statistics 21.0 software. The main methods of data processing were independent *t*-test and principal component analysis (PCA).

Before presenting the findings in detail, we note the fact that our respondents' answers indicate a high degree of agreement with most of the claims in the given adapted Possibilities for Learning questionnaire. On the seven-point scale, an average score lower than 4 was registered only in three items for the secondary school students subsample, and only in four items in the university students subsample. Both secondary school ($M = 2.854$, $SD = 2.138$) and university students ($M = 3.237$, $SD = 1.931$) least prefer to learn/practice under pressure.

Examining Intergroup Differences in Learning Preferences

By using the independent *t*-test, the following differences in learning preferences were found.

Compared to university students ($M = 5.238$, $SD = 1.407$), secondary school students, on average, prefer to a greater degree to have the teacher decide how they should demonstrate what they learned ($M = 5.800$, $SD = 1.471$). The established difference is statistically significant, $t(133) = 2.240$, $p = .027$. The other statistically significant differences are in favor of the Faculty of Music students.

When comparing the arithmetic means of the secondary school and university students' responses, it was found that university students, on average, prefer to choose their work partner themselves ($M = 6.475$, $SD = 0.779$) to a greater degree than secondary school students ($M = 6.018$, $SD = 1.408$), $t(133) = -2.416$, $p = .017$. University students on average like to gain experience outside faculty ($M = 6.512$, $SD = 0.914$) to a greater degree than secondary school students ($M = 5.854$, $SD = 1.715$), $t(133) = -2.889$,

$p = .005$. On average, university students like to explore music-related topics on the internet too ($M = 6.375$, $SD = 1.048$), to a greater degree than secondary school students ($M = 5.854$, $SD = 1.638$), $t(133) = -2.252$, $p = .026$; and also to recognize the connections between topics/ideas ($M = 6.338$, $SD = 0.841$), more than their younger colleagues ($M = 5.764$, $SD = 1.598$), $t(133) = -2.714$, $p = .008$. Finally, on average, university students like to know about the feelings of others ($M = 5.848$, $SD = 1.252$) to a greater degree than secondary school students ($M = 5.236$, $SD = 1.742$), $t(132) = -2.366$, $p = .019$.

When observing the average answers of respondents attending different departments, only two statistically significant differences were determined. On average, the respondents who chose to study theory like to have the teacher who encourages them to test out a new way of work that they devised themselves ($M = 6.182$, $SD = 0.896$) to a greater degree than the respondents from performing departments ($M = 5.786$, $SD = 1.143$), $t(131) = -2.008$, $p = .047$. Furthermore, respondents from theoretical departments, on average, like to be familiar with the grading method before they start working ($M = 5.773$, $SD = 1.710$) to a greater degree than the respondents enrolled in performing departments ($M = 5.022$, $SD = 2.000$), $t(131) = -2.132$, $p = .035$.

When it comes to the question on the respondents' gender, out of 136 respondents only one selected the option "other". As it would not be justified to treat this respondent as a separate group, the answers provided by this respondent were excluded from the analysis of data based on the respondents' gender. On 25 items of the adapted Possibilities for Learning questionnaire, we have determined statistically significant differences between the average answers of male and female respondents. All the determined differences are in favor of the female respondents. Due to space limitations, we will not present these findings in detail. On average, the female students reported to a greater degree than their male counterparts that they like to know about the feelings of others, to get support and guidance from a teacher or expert, to gain knowledge from and about famous people in their

field, but also to have the opportunity to gain knowledge in different ways, through projects, in extracurricular contexts, by dealing with complex, unusual topics that do not have to be part of the study program, and by considering familiar contents from a new angle. They also, to a greater degree, like to figure out how or why something happens, to change ideas/themes from one form to another, to choose how they will demonstrate what they learned, and to participate in group discussion. On average, more so than their male counterparts, the female students like to get feedback on how they can improve their work/performance even when they get a good grade, and after a competition, they like to know their relative standing in comparison with other colleagues. Additionally, on average, the females in the sample like to learn a lot of new content quickly, to remember facts and definitions, to a greater degree than the males. On these 25 items, differences between the arithmetic means of females' and males' responses range from 1.035 to 0.535 points of Likert scale, and the significance levels range from .049 to .001. Considering inconsistent findings about the relations of learner's gender and instructional preferences (according to Kanevsky, 2011a), researches on larger samples are needed.

Latent Structure of the Adapted Possibilities for Learning Questionnaire

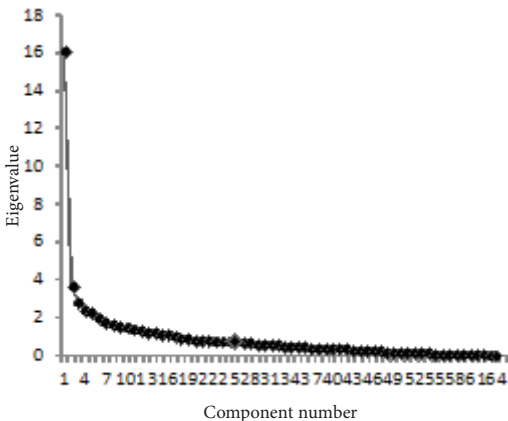
Due to the size of the sample of musically gifted respondents, a more stable factor solution was obtained when a group of 31 students from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Belgrade and 8 students from the Art History Department of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade were included in the sample. Because of the low anti-image correlations, three items were excluded from the analysis. The principal component analysis with orthogonal rotation (Varimax) was conducted on 64 items of the adapted Possibilities for Learning questionnaire. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure confirmed that the sample is adequate for conducting the analysis, $KMO = .808$ (according to Field, 2009), while Bartlett's test of sphericity $\chi^2(2016) = 6039.663$, $p < .001$, indicated that the correlations between the items

are large enough for principal component analysis. The initial analysis was conducted in order to obtain eigenvalues for each of the components. As many as 17 components had eigenvalues above 1 (Kaiser’s criterion; according to Field, 2009), and together explained 69.589% of the variance. Graph 1 shows a curve that can justify retaining five components. As the respondent sample is small, and the number of components according to Kaiser’s criterion is extremely large, in the final analysis, we retained the five components observed in the graph. These five components together explain 42.892% of the variance. Due to space limitations, it is not possible to present the rotated structure matrix; thus, data from the matrix is presented in Table 1, including the highest and lowest factor loadings for each of the components, after rotation.¹

The items grouped at component 1 indicate that it represents a focus on the process of knowledge acquisition. The content of the 23 items grouped at this component, e.g., “I like to understand how ideas/topics are mutually connected” and “Even when I get a

Table 1. Summary of principal component analysis results for the adapted Possibilities for Learning questionnaire (N = 174).

Component	Eigenvalue	% of variance	α	Highest and lowest rotated factor loadings
Focus on the process of knowledge acquisition	16.104	25.163	.908	.720 – .404
Mentorship	3.691	5.767	.876	.625 – .422
Independence	2.866	4.479	.721	.584 – .410
Cooperativeness	2.438	3.809	.745	.702 – .418
Focus on the outcome	2.351	3.673	.610	.636 – .433



Graph 1. Presentation of eigenvalues for each of the components.

¹ Table of the rotated factor loadings of all items from the adapted Possibilities for Learning questionnaire is available at the following link: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QXmTEA_hDnToFxdgc-sUjME9irp7ET8kSaYAdl-Ecya0/edit

good grade, I like to get feedback on how to improve my work/performance”, indicate a need to master the content, to consider and understand certain topics on a deeper level, with the focus being on the search for a solution, and not the solution itself. The 15 items grouped on component 2 (two items also have loadings on component 1) indicate that it represents mentorship, and these include items such as: “I like to gain knowledge by listening to experts” and “When I am working on a larger learning project, I like to be directed by the teacher”. On component 3, 12 items are grouped (two of which also have loadings on component 1), and they indicate independence. Among these items are: “I like it when the teacher allows me to continue working on a topic that I find interesting/to choose the compositions that I find interesting” and “I like to assess my work/performance myself”. Only six items are grouped on component 4 and they indicate that it represents cooperativeness. Among these six items are: “I don’t mind asking for additional help” and “I am happy to hear the opinion of other students about something

that is causing me difficulty”. Six items are also grouped on component 5 and they indicate that it represents a focus on the outcome. The following two items are among those grouped on component 5: “I like to discuss the grade I got with the teacher” and “I like to decide how my work/performance will be assessed”.

Discussion of the Findings

Intergroup differences in learning preferences. Examining the learning preferences of musically gifted students, we found that secondary school students, on average, to a greater degree like to have the teacher decide how they will demonstrate what they learned, while university students are more inclined to express initiative, both when it comes to choosing the conditions of work/knowledge acquisition, and when obtaining information. Additionally, the university students report that they strive for a deeper understanding of the content at hand, to a greater degree than secondary school students. Although the observed differences are small in number, it seems that they resonate with claims of a greater focus on the teacher among the musically gifted at younger ages, and greater independence as they progress on the path towards gaining expertise (Subotnik & Jarvin, 2005).

Finding idiosyncratic ways to solve problems in the domain of one's gift is one of the inherent characteristics of giftedness, according to Winner (1996/2005). Still, it seems that respondents from theoretical departments like to have the teacher support them in order to apply what they discovered to a greater extent than their colleagues from performing departments. Considering the difference in the dominant way learning is organized in these departments (group versus individual; Bogunović & Mirović, 2014), it is possible that the respondents from performing departments already have that kind of support and thus they do not perceive it as especially important. The fact that we found statistically significant differences in only two items when observing the average answers of respondents from different departments implies that there are no big differences in the learning preferences of respondents from performing and those from theoretical departments.

On the other hand, when we examined the answers of males and females, differences were observed in as many as twenty-five items. In females, the affinity towards acquiring knowledge and skills through guided experiences, towards dealing with the emotions of others, as well as towards participating in discussions, was observed to a higher degree. Although this seems like an expression of the characteristics of a dominant socio-cultural model of gender identity where traits such as submissiveness, sensitivity, and tenderness are more desirable in women (Bogunović, 2017), there were also groups of items that indicate that the female more so than the male respondents prefer to master knowledge at an expert level in the domain of their gift, to deal with complex topics, and to go deeper into the essence of the material at hand. As there is no empirical basis to assume that there are systemic differences in the abilities or intrinsic motivation among our respondents of different genders (Bogunović, 2010; Kemp, 1996; Radoš, 2010, all according to Bogunović, 2017), a potential explanation relies on the findings related to the personality of female musicians, which affirm the existence of more pronounced traits of openness for experiences and agreeableness (Bogunović, 2012, according to Bogunović & Bodroža, 2015).

Latent structure of the adapted Possibilities for Learning questionnaire. Firstly, we must emphasize that considering the number of items in the adapted inventory and the sample size, the adopted solution is treated only as guidance for further research. In addition, we note that the value of the component reliability coefficient is influenced by the number of items (Cortina, 1993, according to Field, 2009) and that, since this is exploratory research, reliability coefficient values of 0.7 are acceptable (according to Field, 2009). The content of the items with high loadings on the first component is related to a focus on the process of acquiring knowledge, and as a contrast to that, we see the content of the items with high loadings on the fifth component, which is related to a focus on the learning outcome. The stated orientations also provide a pedagogical justification for retaining this solution, because these pupils' orientations

and guidelines for teaching practice are well described in pedagogical literature (e.g., Brofi, 2010/2015). Also, open-ended activities were one of nine thematic categories developed by Lannie Kanevsky (2011a) in order to present her results.

On the other hand, the items with high loadings on the third component indicate independence in the process of acquiring knowledge in the domain of one's gift, which is, according to some authors, an inherent trait of giftedness (Altaras Dimitrijević & Tatić Janevski, 2016; Winner, 1996/2005), while the items with high loadings on the fourth component indicate gaining and deepening knowledge through cooperation with others, regardless of whether they are colleagues or teachers.

Finally, the content of the items with high loadings on the second component is related to a need for guidance by a mentor, who can be a teacher or an expert in the field. The oblique rotation (Oblimin) showed correlations of this component with all other components, implying that it is not an independent component. In other words, it is possible that both the students focused on the process and those focused on the outcome have a need to be guided by a mentor in the process of acquiring knowledge. This brings to mind the importance of the mentor on one's path towards expertise (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tech-Römer, 1993, according to Hambrick et al., 2013) and it is in accordance with the finding that the musically gifted rely on the help of competent and engaged teachers (Bogunović et al., 2012) and that they assign to them a great deal of importance and responsibility for their own progress (Bogunović & Mirović, 2014: 469).

Limitations of the findings and recommendations for further research. Considering the convenience sample, the presented findings relate only to this sample of respondents and it is not justifiable to generalize them. Due to the sample size, the findings obtained through principal component analysis indicate a possible latent structure of the questionnaire, which needs to be empirically verified on a much larger sample, taking into consideration the number of items. Further steps in adapting the inventory

would include excluding items with low loadings and creating subscales with an even number of items.

Conclusion

The finding that only 28% of musically gifted students perceive their talent as fully or largely realized can imply that the educational needs of the majority of musically gifted students are not satisfied, but also that the students themselves see significant space for further progress (Bogunović et al., 2012). Both assumptions provide cause for examining the ways in which the educational needs of the musically gifted can be met. This research is an effort to give the musically gifted an opportunity to say what they like to learn about, in what way and under what conditions they like to acquire knowledge and skills, and in what way they like to demonstrate the acquired knowledge and skills (according to Kanevsky, 2011b).

By examining learning preferences on a convenience sample of musically gifted respondents, we obtained results that indicate that, on their path towards excellence and the highest achievements, university students tend to take initiative and gain a deeper understanding of the content to a greater degree than secondary school students. The observed differences in the educational preferences of male and female respondents were interpreted as a potential consequence of the empirically confirmed greater openness for experiences and cooperativeness' of female musicians (Bogunović, 2012, according to Bogunović & Bodroža, 2015).

When considering the structure of the adapted Possibilities for Learning questionnaire, five components were observed. Aware of the limitations of findings stemming primarily from the characteristics of the sample, we see the obtained solution as a first step in the further adaptation of the used inventory, which is currently being treated as a check-list. The strongest argument for continuing work on this questionnaire is the potential pedagogical value of the obtained factor solution and we believe that with further perfecting this instrument could be applied in the process of differentiating

and individualizing the learning process. Therefore, the next steps involve testing the obtained solutions on a larger sample of the musically gifted.

Acknowledgments. This research was carried out as a part of the scientific projects (No. 177019 and No. 179018, supported by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia (2011–2020)).

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