SEMPRE Autumn 2020 Conference: The Role of Music Psychology Research in a Complex World

Melissa L. Kirby

Abstract
Each year, the Society for Education, Music and Psychology Research (SEMPRE) hosts two conferences, covering a range of themes within music education and psychology research. The Autumn 2020 conference took place on September 9–11. The theme of the conference was ‘The role of music psychology research in a complex world: Implications, applications, and debates’; a particularly appropriate theme given the complex and challenging nature of 2020. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, this conference was hosted virtually by the University of Leeds. This report provides an overview of the conference, reflects on its key themes, and discusses the opportunities and challenges of online conferencing.

Keywords
Conference report, COVID-19, Music psychology, Online conference, SEMPRE

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SEMPRE Autumn 2020 Conference
It is safe to say that 2020 has been a particularly complex year. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a number of additional unexpected challenges, impacting all of us in one way or another, and triggering changes to our lives that we could not have predicted. The theme for the Society for Education, Music and Psychology Research (SEMPRE) Autumn 2020 conference therefore seemed to be even more appropriate. Delegates were encouraged to consider the place of music psychology research in our complex world and the opportunities within the field to address and understand current societal, cultural, and environmental challenges.

Approximately 130 delegates from across the globe virtually attended the conference, which was organized by a team from the University of Leeds, led by Karen Burland and Emily Payne. A total of 19 papers, including live and prerecorded presentations, were delivered across 3 days. Presentations covered a wide range of topics, including social justice, music education and training, methods in applied contexts, health and well-being, technology, and COVID-19. The keynote presentation was given by Alexandra Lamont from Keele University.

Keynote Presentation
Day 2 of the conference was concluded by a highly engaging keynote presentation given by Alexandra Lamont, entitled ‘Making a difference with music psychology research: Strategy and serendipity’. In this creative prerecorded presentation, Lamont discussed the opportunities within the field to produce research with impact potential in the real world. Noting that music is a fundamental part of our lives, Lamont suggested that music psychologists are in a predisposed and privileged position to make a difference through their research. Lamont exemplified this by introducing one of her latest research projects: ‘DIY Desert Island Discs’. Based on the UK BBC radio program Desert Island Discs, Lamont’s work explores musical preference and how it connects to people’s lives, by encouraging people to pick their eight favorite pieces of music and reflect on what they mean to
them. This project builds on Lamont’s previous work on musical preferences (see Greasley et al., 2013; Lamont, 2019; Lamont & Loveday, 2020; Lamont & Webb, 2010).

Lamont described the practicalities of adapting the DIY Desert Island Discs project to meet the current research environment, including the process of building an international interdisciplinary team and the development of a DIY toolkit. With engaging examples from the rich data already collected in this project, Lamont presented preliminary themes and discussed the benefits of reflecting on musical experiences for participants. Overall, Lamont’s message that music psychology research should make a difference to people’s lives was a poignant one. Evident in her own research, and across the papers presented at this conference, the opportunities for music psychology research to have impactful implications and applications in the real world are clear.

Presentations

Presentations were split across 3 days, and organized into 7 themes, with regular 30-min breaks built into each day. The social justice session on Day 1 demonstrated the potential for music psychology research to explore a number of societal challenges and to amplify the voices of communities who have been subject to oppression. Papers in this varied and interesting session included: Maruša Levstek’s (University of Sussex) study on the psychological experiences of marginalized young people attending inclusive music programs; Clarke Randolph’s (Royal College of Music) exploration of the impact of racial discrimination on Black American musicians; and Helen Prior’s (University of Hull) paper on the potential for music psychology research to address the climate crisis. Additionally, David Greenberg (Bar-Ilan University) presented findings from three projects, utilizing social neuroscience, social psychology, and big data (Greenberg & Retfrow, 2017), to suggest that music has the potential to bring people together and promote cross-cultural bonding and feelings of empathy.

Papers in the COVID-19 session of the conference also addressed the potential for music to bring people together during periods of extended isolation. The presentation by Lauren Fink (Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics) and Claire Howlin (University College Dublin) illustrated how colleagues have turned the challenging nature of the global pandemic into an exciting opportunity for socially applicable research. This paper was an excellent example of global interdisciplinary collaboration, which aimed to understand how music has been used as a socio-emotional coping tool during lockdown. Also relating to COVID-19 and the use of technology in music psychology research was Dana Swarbrick and colleagues’ (University of Oslo) presentation on virtual concerts during lockdown. This project investigated how people can feel socially connected, while apart, through online concert experiences.

Across the second and third days of the conference, three papers were delivered on the theme of methods in applied contexts. One such paper was Claire Howlin’s (University College Dublin) work on how the illusion of choice can increase participants’ pain threshold (see Howlin & Rooney, 2020). This paper initiated some interesting conversations on the role of agency in musical interventions. Additionally, in the education session, Kate Cameron’s (University of Leeds) paper introduced a new creative method of capturing children’s social experiences within Opera North’s ‘In Harmony’ project, demonstrating the potential to use adaptive methods to involve children in research.

Finally, several papers addressed ways in which we may be able to better support the development and well-being of musicians and music students. Notably, Elizabeth Macgregor’s (University of Sheffield) paper, which introduced the notion of ‘musical vulnerability’, indicated the importance of acknowledging both the positive and negative effects of music education. Additionally, Kate Blackstone’s (University of Leeds) paper explored the ways in which conservatoire graduates are ‘(un)prepared’ for life beyond the conservatoire. Blackstone’s presentation was praised for having the most creative title at the conference, which was based on a quote from one her participants (‘Tosca or Tesco: Exploring the career-building process for conservatoire graduates’).

During the plenary session, all delegates were invited to submit their work to a Music & Science special collection, ‘Music Psychology Research in a Complex World’, which is guest-edited by Karen Burland and Emily Payne.

Conferencing in a Complex World

For many, the concept of online conferencing is still a relatively new one, with many scheduled conferences having to quickly adapt their delivery within the past few months. The online format of the SEMPRE conference, which was hosted using Zoom, was very successful. The combination of live and prerecorded presentations worked well, and all ran without technical difficulties, thanks to a dedicated technical support team. All presentations were followed by a Q&A session, which allowed for live questions and comments contributed verbally or through the chat function. The online format of the conference attracted a larger and more global audience than in previous years. Not only was the conference more accessible to those who would ordinarily have to travel but the event was also free, resulting in a large number of students and even interested members of the public attending. Reaching a wider and more varied audience therefore appears to be a benefit of online conferencing.

However, replicating the social and networking opportunities that are usually enjoyed at SEMPRE conferences proved to be more challenging. Delegates commented on missing face-to-face social interactions and casual
discussions over tea and coffee. Nevertheless, randomized breakout rooms provided delegates with the opportunity for small group discussions, with many reporting that they had made new connections and had valuable follow-up conversations in these groups. Feedback from the conference indicated that larger groups proved to be a more popular structure for these breakout rooms, to ensure that rooms were populated with delegates with a range of interests. While many delegates took advantage of these smaller discussion groups, many also used the breaks in the program as an opportunity to take a break from their screens; something that the conference organizers emphasized the importance of throughout. In addition to breakout rooms, a contact sheet with delegates’ email addresses was circulated at the start of each day, and attendees were encouraged to connect with each other outside of the conference.

**Summary and Closing Remarks**

More than ever, the need for research to be socially applicable and adaptable to the challenges we face is evident. The conference highlighted work in music psychology that is doing just that, with emerging themes through the conference of collaboration, agency, and adaption, or, in the words of Alexandra Lamont, ‘strategy and serendipity’. Overall, the SEMPRE Autumn 2020 conference demonstrated that while sitting behind a screen will never fully replace the experience of in-person conferences, the music psychology community can and will still come together to share work and ideas, and to form new connections and collaborations.

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**ORCID iD**

Melissa L. Kirby @ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1095-1008

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