

**AN INFORMATION PROCESSING STUDY OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN
PERCEPTION OF PITCH FLUCTUATIONS IN MUSIC**

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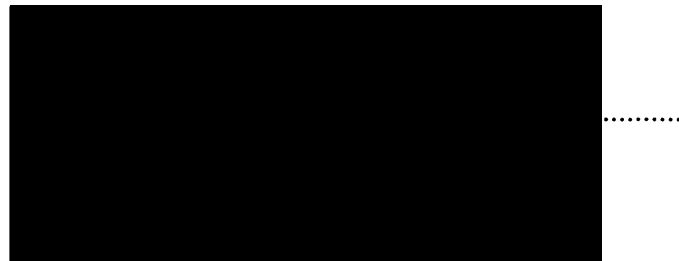
A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of the University of New England.

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CERTIFICATE

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.



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ABSTRACT

Although extreme individual differences in the music abilities of children have been celebrated from long before Mozart, satisfactory cognitive models of such precociousness have been less forthcoming. This research program employed an information processing model based on the neuropsychological work of Alexander Luria to investigate individual differences in the perception of pitch sequences with various degrees of structural coherence, with particular attention to children who appear to be musically gifted.

The Luria model used in this study has three orthogonal dimensions of information processing: successive and simultaneous synthesis for encoding information, and executive synthesis which involves attentional and integrative processes. Psychometric operationalisations of the model have been used extensively in investigations of individual differences in mathematics and language performance of children at school. The model had not previously been applied to the domain of music. It was hypothesised that music perception involves the cooperative interaction of these three information processing dimensions.

This research focussed on the perception of fluctuations in pitch - the attribute of music which is most strongly predictive of music ability. Evidence from studies in the cognitive sciences suggests that musical elements such as pitch are hierarchically chunked to form meaningful musical Gestalts. Other studies in psychophysics suggest that these cognitive processes may exploit the fractal or self-similar form of fluctuations in musical attributes. Fractional Brownian motion (fBm) tone series have proved a valuable tool in studies of perceptual responses to pitch fluctuations. To this end, the autocorrelation function is particularly salient.

Three psychometric studies were conducted with 10 to 13 year old children as subjects. Multivariate analyses were undertaken where appropriate. The first study (N = 151) investigated relationships between abilities on simultaneous, successive and executive synthesis, and individual differences in pitch pattern discrimination, pitch contour inversion, and responses to algorithmically generated fBm tone series as a replication of an earlier study with adults. Success on the contour inversion test was partly accounted for by abilities on both

simultaneous and successive synthesis. The replication study showed that fractal music is preferred to either random or highly correlated fBm tone series. Significant sensitivity to structural differences in algorithmic music was related to abilities on successive synthesis by subjects with criterion scores on the pitch pattern discrimination tests.

Two instruments were developed to measure sensitivity to the autocorrelation structure of algorithmically generated fBm tone series: one required an estimation of the strength of structural coherence, the second sought detection of a change in structural coherence. Study 2 (N = 135) investigated relationships between abilities on simultaneous, successive and executive synthesis, and individual differences in pitch pattern discrimination, sensitivity to autocorrelation structure, music education experience, and school academic performance. Abilities on the Luria model dimensions were measured by a new computer-based adaptive instrument. There were significant relationships between performance on the discrimination of pitch pattern tests, the perception of the two autocorrelation structure tasks, and the three Luria model dimensions. There were significant relationships between success at the two perception of autocorrelation structure tasks and performance levels of school mathematics and language studies, suggesting that common information processing dimensions underpin both musical and general cognition.

The third study (N=29) involved children with demonstrated musical precocity. They were also tested with the Luria model and sensitivity to autocorrelation structure batteries. The abilities of the musically gifted children on each of simultaneous, successive and executive synthesis were superior, especially on executive synthesis, to those of the normal sample of children in Study 2. High ability on executive synthesis, the processing dimension with responsibility for the integration of the two coding dimensions and for the evaluation of information redundancy, can explain the remarkable facility for music learning shown by the musically gifted subjects. Their scores on both tasks of sensitivity to autocorrelation structure were also superior to those in Study 2, suggesting that the perception of coherence in pitch fluctuations is an attribute of music ability. It was also shown that for musically gifted children, perceptual preference for fractal structure in pitch fluctuations is related to individual differences in abilities on simultaneous synthesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
LIST OF TABLES	xii
LIST OF FIGURES	xvi
 CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Rationale for the research program	1
1.2 Structure of the thesis	9
 2. THE LURIA MODEL OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES	13
2.1 Introduction	13
2.2 Description of Luria's model	14
2.3 Music information processing within the Luria model	20
2.4 Neurological mechanisms	25
2.5 Operationalisation of the Luria model.....	27
2.6 Psychometric operationalisation with two factors.....	31
2.7 Psychometric operationalisation with three factors.....	36
2.8 Psychometric operationalisation with four factors	39
2.9 Psychometric operationalisation in a computer adaptive format	41
2.10 Relationships to other models of individual differences	42
 3. INFORMATION PROCESSING IN MUSIC PERCEPTION	49
3.1 Introduction	49
3.2 Successive synthesis in music perception	50
3.3 Simultaneous synthesis in music perception	54
3.4 Simultaneous synthesis and long term music memory	57
3.5 Executive synthesis in music perception	60
3.6 Hierarchical information processing in music perception.....	65

CHAPTER	page
3.7 Information redundancy in music perception.....	70
3.8 Information processing in music experience.....	72
3.9 Individual differences in music abilities.....	76
3.10 Definitions of terminology.....	83
4. PERCEPTION OF AUTOCORRELATION STRUCTURE.....	87
4.1 Overview of fractal geometry.....	87
4.2 Temporal fractal form.....	91
4.3 Perception of fractal form.....	105
4.4 Sensitivity to autocorrelation structure.....	113
5. THE FIRST STUDY.....	123
5.1 Formulation of the research questions.....	123
5.2 The <i>Music Evaluation Kit</i> test battery.....	125
5.3 Instrumentation to measure the perception of musical contour inversion.....	127
5.4 Instrumentation to replicate the Voss study.....	129
5.5 The Luria model battery.....	135
5.6 Experimental situation.....	136
5.7 Experimental validity.....	137
5.8 Experimental hypotheses.....	139
5.9 Data analysis.....	140
Preliminary analysis.....	140
Hypothesis 1.1.....	142
Hypothesis 1.2.....	143
Hypothesis 1.3.....	146
Hypothesis 1.4.....	147
Hypothesis 1.5.....	149
Hypothesis 1.6.....	149
Hypothesis 1.7.....	150
5.10 General discussion.....	152

CHAPTER	page
5.11 Recommendations for a second study	157
6. THE SECOND STUDY.....	159
6.1 Formulation of research questions	159
6.2 Instruments for perception of autocorrelation structure	161
6.3 Experimental situation.....	172
6.4 Experimental validity	174
6.5 Experimental hypotheses.....	175
6.6 Data analysis.....	175
Preliminary analysis.....	175
Analysis of Contrasts	178
Hypothesis 2.1	179
Hypothesis 2.2	184
Hypothesis 2.3	188
Hypothesis 2.4	188
Hypothesis 2.5	191
Hypothesis 2.6	192
6.7 General discussion.....	198
6.8 Recommendations for a third Study	204
7. THE THIRD STUDY	207
7.1 Formulation of the research questions.....	207
7.2 Experimental situation.....	211
7.3 Qualitative data.....	213
7.4 Experimental hypotheses.....	217
7.5 Analysis of quantitative data	217
Preliminary analysis.....	218
Hypothesis 3.1	221
Hypothesis 3.2	224
Hypothesis 3.3	229

CHAPTER	page
Hypothesis 3.4	232
7.6 General discussion	236
8. REVIEW AND CONCLUSIONS	242
8.1 Overview of the research results	243
8.2 General discussion and conclusions	249
8.3 Strengths and limitations of the research	257
8.4. Recommendations for further research	260
8.5 Concluding remarks	261
BIBLIOGRAPHY	262
 APPENDIX	
A. MUSIC EVALUATION KIT (MEK).....	285
Part I <i>Pitch Discrimination</i>	286
Part V <i>Pattern Recognition</i>	290
B. PITCH CONTOUR INVERSION TEST	294
Taped Instructions For Subjects	295
Answer Sheet	297
Probe phrases for items 1 - 15	298
C. 1/f ALGORITHM	301
QBASIC listing of fractal music algorithm	302
QBASIC listing of white music algorithm	303
QBASIC listing of brown music algorithm	304
Autocorrelation function of fractal music algorithm	305
Fourier analysis of 1/f algorithm outputs	306
Spectral density plot of 1/f algorithm	307
Algorithmic music.....	308

APPENDIX**page**

Percentage occurrences of intervals in algorithmic and real music	309
D. SEMANTIC EVALUATION OF SPECTRAL DENSITY TEST	310
Subject answer booklet	311
E. THREE-COMPONENT LURIA MODEL BATTERY	313
Tests of Simultaneous Synthesis	314
Tests of Successive Synthesis	320
Tests of Executive Synthesis.....	324
F. SPSS-PC© OUTPUTS FOR STUDY 1 DATA ANALYSIS.....	330
Preliminary analysis.....	331
Hypothesis 1.1	333
Hypothesis 1.2.....	334
Hypothesis 1.3.....	340
Hypothesis 1.4.....	341
Hypothesis 1.5.....	342
Hypothesis 1.6.....	342
Hypothesis 1.7.....	344
G. SCALE ESTIMATION OF SMOOTHING TEST	346
QBASIC listing of <i>Can You Describe It?</i>	347
H. CHANGE OF SMOOTHING TEST	352
QBASIC listing of <i>How Are Your Reflexes?</i>	353
QBASIC listing of <i>When Does It Change?</i>	356
I. SPSS-Windows© ANALYSIS OF STUDY 2 DATA.....	361
Preliminary analysis.....	362
Analysis of contrasts	366

APPENDIX	page
Hypothesis 2.1	372
Hypothesis 2.2	374
Hypothesis 2.3 and Hypothesis 2.4	375
Hypothesis 2.5	377
Hypothesis 2.6	378
J. SPSS-Windows© ANALYSIS OF STUDY 3 DATA	381
Preliminary analysis	382
Hypothesis 3.1	384
Hypothesis 3.2	386
Hypothesis 3.3	389
Hypothesis 3.4	393

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	page
5.01 Contingency table analysis of differences between real melodies and fractal, brown and white musics	132
5.02 Component structure of Luria model marker tests for Study 1	141
5.03 Multivariate effects of 3-way partitions of Luria model components on <i>Pitch Contour Inversion Test</i> item scores	144
5.04 Univariate effects for 3-way partitions of Luria model dimensions on <i>Pitch Contour Inversion Test</i> items.....	145
5.05 Means of <i>Pitch Contour Inversion Test</i> scores for MEK criterion	146
5.06 Means of <i>Pitch Contour Inversion Test</i> item scores for MEK criterion	147
5.07 Combined-scale means for ratings of fractal, white and brown music	147
5.08 Scale means for ratings of fractal, white and brown music.....	148
5.09 Correlations between Luria model component scores and <i>Semantic Evaluation of Spectral Density Test</i> scores	149
5.10 Correlations between successive synthesis and scale ratings of fractal and brown music for subjects who reached MEK criterion	150
5.11 Correlations between simultaneous synthesis and scale ratings of white music for subjects who failed to reach MEK criterion.....	151
5.12 Summary of Study 1 hypothesis testing	152
6.01 Relationship between smoothing coefficient and spectral power function exponent.....	165
6.02 Relationship between smoothing coefficient and the autocorrelation function of Turner algorithm outputs.....	166
6.03 Principal components structure of Luria model marker tests for Study 2.....	176
6.04 Coefficients of skewness and kurtosis of sensitivity to autocorrelation structure variables	177
6.05 Significant univariate effects of School Year for Study 2 variables	177

TABLE**page**

6.06 Correlations between age of subjects and component scores and test variables	178
6.07 Significant multivariate effects for linear contrasts of 3-way partitions of Luria model component scores on Study 2 variables	179
6.08 Correlations between Luria model component scores and <i>Scale Estimation of Smoothing Test</i> scores.....	180
6.09 Significant univariate effects of Luria model component scores and <i>Scale Estimation of Smoothing Test</i> scores	181
6.10 Means of <i>Scale Estimation of Smoothing Test</i> scores for high-medium-low partitions of simultaneous and successive synthesis	181
6.11 Selected responses to <i>Scale Estimation of Smoothing Test</i>	182
6.12 Component structure with <i>Scale Estimation of Smoothing Test</i> scores	183
6.13 Correlations between Luria model component scores and <i>Change of Smoothing Test</i> scores.....	184
6.14 Univariate effects of Luria model component scores and <i>Change of Smoothing Test</i> scores for correct response	185
6.15 Univariate effects of Luria model component scores and <i>Change of Smoothing Test</i> scores for early response	186
6.16 Means of correct response scores on the <i>Change of Smoothing Test</i> for high-medium-low partitions of successive and executive synthesis	186
6.17 Means of early response scores on the <i>Change of Smoothing Test</i> for high-medium-low partitions on executive synthesis	187
6.18 Mean smoothing coefficient for <i>Change of Smoothing Test</i> control items perceived and missed	187
6.19 Correlations between MEK scores and measures on the <i>Scale Estimation of Smoothing Test</i> and the <i>Change of Smoothing Test</i>	188
6.20 Correlations between MEK scores and measures of simultaneous, successive and executive synthesis.....	189
6.21 Univariate effects of Luria model component scores and MEK Part I scores	190
6.22 Univariate effects of Luria model component scores and MEK Part V scores.....	190

TABLE	page
6.23 Univariate effects of Luria model component scores and MEKTOT scores	190
6.24 Means of MEK test scores for high-medium-low partitions of successive x executive synthesis	191
6.25 Means of MEK total scores for high-medium-low partitions of successive x executive synthesis	191
6.26 Correlations between school performance and <i>Scale Estimation of Smoothing Test</i> scores	193
6.27 Correlations between school performance and <i>Change of Smoothing Test</i> correct response scores	193
6.28 Multivariate effects for school performance and sensitivity to autocorrelation tasks	194
6.29 Univariate effects for school performance and sensitivity to autocorrelation tasks	194
6.30 Means of <i>Scale Estimation of Smoothing Test</i> and <i>Change of Smoothing Test</i> scores for school performance in mathematics	195
6.31 Means of <i>Scale Estimation of Smoothing Test</i> and <i>Change of Smoothing Test</i> scores for school performance in English language	197
6.32 Univariate effects of Luria model component scores and school performance	197
6.33 Summary of Study 2 hypothesis testing	198
7.01 Component structure of combined Luria model marker tests for Study 3 and Study 2	218
7.02 Coefficients of skewness and kurtosis of sensitivity to autocorrelation structure variables	219
7.03 Instrumental music examination performance by age	220
7.04 Rates of progress through AMEB Grades for Study 3 subjects	221
7.05 Significant univariate effects of Study 3 membership and sensitivity to autocorrelation structure variables	221
7.06 Comparison of Study 3 with Study 2 means of sensitivity to autocorrelation structure variables	221

TABLE	page
7.07 Responses of Study 3 subjects to <i>Scale Estimation of Smoothing Test</i>	222
7.08 Comparison of Study 3 with Study 2 responses to AZERO item	223
7.09 Correlations between music experience and sensitivity to autocorrelation structure	224
7.10 Univariate effects of Study 3 membership and Luria model component scores	225
7.11 Comparison of mean Luria model component scores between Study 3 and Study 2	225
7.12 Correlations between sensitivity to autocorrelation structure and Luria model component scores for Study 3.....	226
7.13 Correlations between sensitivity to autocorrelation structure and Luria model component scores for the matched Study 2 sub-sample and the Study 3 sample	228
7.14 Scores of Study 3 siblings as percentiles of the combined Study 2 and Study 3 scores of the sensitivity to autocorrelation structure tasks and the Luria model components	228
7.15 Stepdown effects and comparison of means between Study 3 and Study 2 for <i>Scale Estimation of Smoothing Test</i> learning	229
7.16 Comparison of means between Study 3 and Study 2 for <i>Change of Smoothing Test</i> learning.....	231
7.17 Means of <i>Scale Estimation of Smoothing Test</i> scores grouped for high, middle and low values of smoothing coefficient, with correlations between means and smoothing coefficients and suggested perceptual models	234
7.18 Mean component scores on simultaneous synthesis for fractal and bipartite perceptual models	235
7.19 Summary of Study 3 hypothesis testing	236
8.01 Summary of Study 1 results	245
8.02 Summary of Study 2 results	246
8.03 Summary of Study 3 results	248

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	page
3.01 Relationships of terminology concerned with music ability.....	85
4.01 Graphical representations of white noise, 1/f noise and brown noise.....	93
4.02 Three fBm series with different degrees of correlation	95
4.03 Power spectra for pitch fluctuations of four FM radio stations	97
4.04 Power spectra for pitch fluctuations of various samples of music.....	97
4.05 Music scores for examples of white, 1/f and brown music.....	98
4.06 Power spectral curves for selections of music	101
4.07 Discrimination acuity (D') vs power spectral slope of visual and auditory fractal contours.....	109
6.01 Spectral power exponent vs. smoothing coefficient plot	164
6.02 Tone series for three different smoothing coefficients	167
7.01 Comparison between Study 3 and Study 2 subjects on learning on the <i>Scale</i> <i>Estimation of Smoothing Test</i>	230
7.02 Comparison of Study 3 with Study 2 subjects on learning on the <i>Change of</i> <i>Smoothing Test</i>	232