

Background music in schools: Morning arrival.

By Michael Griffin

Background music is everywhere. The lift, the shopping centre, the restaurant, and even dentists play it during a drilling session. What next – my school?

Well, it is worth considering. After all, there is a very good reason why marketing, medicine, religion, the movie world and relaxation therapies use background or ambient music in their environments. Even if we are not consciously aware of it, music has a physiological and psychological effect on everyone. Listening to music can alter heartbeat, blood pressure and body temperature. It can stimulate us to action, or assist our retreat into slumber. A growing body of academic research asserts that background music has the capacity to influence human behaviour.

In 2008, following my masters study on this subject and with endorsement from my principal I instigated an action research *background music study* in my school.

The primary aim was to determine whether music could contribute to a scholarly ambience in the morning. The idea was that when students arrived at school, they would hear music (chosen using the principles I had researched) that would foster a mindset appropriate for a school day.

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30-minutes of music played from arrival till class.

For this experiment I chose mostly refreshing, awakening and positive music with characteristics of moderate to allegro tempo, major tonality and instrumental in nature. My playlist primarily consisted of baroque and classical music. Some selections were slower and slightly more serious to reflect a scholarly atmosphere. Many selections were well-known classics in the hope

that as a secondary benefit, some curiosity and interest from the listeners might transpire from recognition.

Response to my 'morning' playlist was very positive. Of 55 teachers who completed a post-experiment survey, 53 found the music selections appropriate for the mood we were trying to create. The overwhelming response from staff described the beauty of the music. Many teachers reported an increase in personal morale on entering the school with comments such as 'what a lovely start to the day'. Teachers believed that the music enhanced students' frame of mind prior to form class because a studious atmosphere was created around the school entrance. By and large, the teachers believed that music assisted in settling the students and lifted the general school atmosphere.

Students were less vocal in their response to the music. Some expressed a desire for 'their' music, but after a settling in period, they accepted and came to enjoy the new music. Staff reported a positive effect on student behaviour.

The feedback from both staff and students clearly showed an increase in curiosity for music, particularly among the staff. I had many requests regarding names of pieces and took the opportunity to share the personal musical joys of my colleagues. Such discussion raised the profile of music in our school. Occasional criticism centred on if the volume level was too high, and if a selection was deemed musically inappropriate.

How is music chosen to achieve different goals?

Listening to music is mainly a gestalt experience, but certain components have more effect on our mood and physiology than others. In particular, tonality, tempo, pitch and texture all play an important role in affecting our mood. For example music of a major tonality is recognised to be happier and more positive than minor music. Faster tempi raise the heartbeat and music with lyrics demand more cognitive processing resources. It is musical

constituents such as these that I have studied that help me make appropriate selections.

Setting up play-lists

I would suggest making your playlist large to ensure that the same pieces are not over exposed. CD's can be converted to mp3's so that the list can be played from a computer set on random play. People are very sensitive to volume, so it is important to get the output volume at a consistent and appropriate level across all listening areas. A soft volume level is best.

Of course, the most important factor is the choice of music, and this is where I can get you started. I have provided playlists for schools from Australia to Luxembourg, and I have recently compiled an ideal 10-hour playlist for morning arrival. Assuming you would like background music for 30-minutes each day; played on random mode, this will last for 4-weeks without a song repeating.

Should you be interested in this playlist, please contact me on griffin@musiceducationworld.com. The product can be sent to you on a CD data disc, a fee applies.

If you would like to read my masters dissertation, download freely at http://www.musiceducationworld.com/files/MG_Masters_Background_Music_in_Education.pdf

I have presented workshops on the psychology of music listening in school classrooms and during homework in around 25 countries. Navigate to 'Study, Stress and Music' on this page:

<http://www.musiceducationworld.com/workshopsforstudents>

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