

*Middle school girls' musical preference:  
Factors that impact preference for music through familiarity*

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**Abstract:**

According to experience and research, adolescents are more likely to quit participating in choir at the middle school or early high school levels. Research indicates that one of the reasons they quit is due to the lack of enjoyment with the music they are singing. The purpose of this study is to figure out how familiarity impacts student preference and how we can expand their preferences for different musics. This study was designed as a survey study, utilizing a pre- and post-test questionnaire to collect data during choir camp at a mid-sized university in the upper midwest. Participants were all in the middle school treble choir ( $N = 51$ ). The listening portion of the questionnaire included Likert-type scales for 15 songs. Participants could indicate their familiarity with the songs that were played, their preference for the music, and whether or not they would likely continue listening to this music in their free time. In order to determine what kinds of activities impact familiarity and preference, we used 15 songs in three different strategies. They rehearsed and performed four pieces from the listening questionnaire. Five of the songs were played as they entered class each day, and the remaining six were omitted from the curriculum. In the post-test, the participants assessed the same songs. There was a significant increase in familiarity and preference for each of the songs the students sang during camp. As shown in figure one, the mean scores increased much more significantly for the songs the students sang than the ones they either listened to daily or did not listen to or sing at all. There was, however a significant increase in familiarity and/or preference for song examples 6-11 – the songs that the students listened to as they entered and exited the classroom and during their breaks. These increases were significant, but they were also much lower and less than the increases for the songs they sang. Finally, the songs that the students did not sing or listen to did not significantly change in familiarity or preference. Some even decreased by the post-test, although none were a significant decrease. There was also a statistically significant relationship between familiarity and/or preference for 14/15 of the songs. This indicates as students become more familiar with a piece, they like it better. The reverse is also true – the degree to which they are unfamiliar with a piece has a negative impact on how well they like it. Using open and axial coding, the open ended questions revealed that there were some common themes. In the pre-test, common themes among open-ended questions included: 1. Initial detachment to the pieces that were in other languages 2. Students often disliked pieces that went, in their mind, high in their voice. 3. If there was a strong sense of beat in the piece, they were more likely to rate it favorably. In the post-test, we found more interesting responses and themes. For the pieces that

they sang, students were often favoring the pieces more, and listening more intently, although they did not feel as though they would listen to it in their free-time. For the pieces that the students heard while entering and exiting the classroom, many students rated them higher, although they expressed that they had never heard the piece before. For the pieces that the students only heard once at the beginning of the week and again at the post-test, their responses were similar to the first test. Results indicate that the more familiar the students were with the music, the more they enjoyed it overall. The greatest growth in preference came on those songs the choir performed or listened to, with the most significant difference in those they performed. The six pieces the students only heard on the questionnaire did not show a significant change in familiarity and/or preference. When adolescents are more familiar with different musics, therefore, they like it better and begin to expand their preferences. If music teachers strategically familiarize their students with the music they will be singing or playing, they may like it more, right from the beginning. This may even encourage students to stay involved in choir when other factors pull them away. By exposing students to different types of music more frequently, we can expand their preferences for different musics. Some strategies teachers might use to influence their students' preferences would be listening outside of class, or intentional listening in class, and things to listen for within each recording. We would like to look more into understanding and finding strategies to help students initially enjoy music that is foreign to them, and one thing that we missed in our study was the diversity of genders. If we could do this study again, and we had the resources, we would open up this study to males as well.