



Do We See Good Music Better Than We Hear It?

BY PAUL BISCEGLIO [[HTTP://WWW.PSMAG.COM/AUTHOR/PAUL-BISCEGLIO/](http://www.psmag.com/author/paul-bisceglio/)] · March 07, 2014 · 9:45 AM

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Listening may not be the best way to judge an orchestra's chops.

When it comes to musical performances, it's perfectly reasonable to assume that our ears do a better job of judging quality than our eyes. We are listening to music, after all, right?

But according to a new study

(<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0749597813000861>), our ears may not be as reliable as we think. At classical performances at least, what we see apparently tells us more about the music we're listening to than what we hear.

The study, conducted by Chia-Jung Tsay (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/msi/profile/chia-jung-tsay>) at University College London, tested people's abilities to differentiate between the world's best orchestras—including the London Symphony Orchestra, the Berlin Philharmonic, and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—and less prestigious regional and university-based ensembles. Participants were shown short audio, video, and combined audio-video recordings of the two classes of performers, then asked to guess which groups were superior, in terms of world rankings or competitive victories.

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Participants across the board were better at identifying the more accomplished groups by watching them, not by listening to them. In fact, even when music and video were combined in clips, it was actually harder for participants to identify the top groups than by video alone.

Crucially, both casual music listeners and professionally-trained music experts were tested, which accounted for the possibility that the average person simply doesn't have a refined enough ear to pick up on subtle musical differences. While the experts fared slightly better than everyone else, statistically their rate of success still wasn't any better than chance guessing.

“This research suggests that the ultimate music ensemble astounds not its listeners, but its viewers,” Tsay says in a press release (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/news-articles/0314/030314-orchestras-sight-not-sound>). She speculates in the study that the degree to which physical performance influences our opinions of music—including those of top critics and judges—is largely unappreciated.

The findings imply that when we think we're judging live music, we're actually just judging how well its performers are convincing us it's good. But music's actual quality and what its performers look like aren't disconnected, of course. As Tsay writes, "Given that the production of music is necessarily mediated by physical behavior, and given that this is particularly the case when ensembles and group coordination are involved, visual information should contribute to and be predictive of outcomes."

The best musical groups, in other words, generally should be the ones that look best, because great music demands impeccable physical coordination between its players. But that doesn't stop dramatic performers from grabbing our attention better than their more technically accomplished peers just by hamming it up.

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