A review of the effect of background music on psychological functioning should start with a definition of background music. What is it and how does it differ from music and/or environmental noise?

The review proceeds from the assumption that disparate effects reported in the literature can be reconciled. However, the diversity of musical variation raises questions whether music can/should be treated as a unitary stimulus category. For example, presence or absence of lyrics, fast versus slow tempi, preferred versus non-preferred styles, and so on are all fundamentally different forms of variation: some represent variability in psychological and physical space (native vs non-native language), some only physical space (slow vs fast tempi), and some only in psychological space (subjective liking). Given this, it is difficult to image music exerts one isomorphic effect on cognition. There is an equal plurality of cognitive outcome measures. Does it have to be the case that the effect of background music is isomorphic across cognitive outcome measures? Perhaps findings appear contradictory because of a tacit assumption in the literature is that measures of “cognitive performance” are largely interchangeable. This hardly seems to be a safe assumption. As such, statements like music might be able to “help bolster learning in children” come across as superficial.

One hypothesis proposed in the review is that “the key factor in the amount of distraction by environmental sound is the degree to which both the task and the sound involve seriation (maintenance of an order in memory).” This is certainly a step up from the more general hypothesis that background music has an effect on cognitive performance. However, I think it requires greater precision and could be critically evaluated against the literature in more detail. What is meant by the serial nature of a sound or a task? Presumably, serial refers to the precise temporal sequencing of events in a series. However, where does this begin and end? Spoken word comprehension involves serial processing, as “dog” and “god” do not mean the same thing, but I am not sure this is quite what you are driving at. Syntax introduces a whole other level of complexity here, especially in languages where word order has important syntactic implications. And notice how the hypothesis is stated in terms of environmental sounds: what is the relation between music and environmental sounds? Is music a particularly potent form of distraction because of the sheer degree of serial order in music stimuli? This idea needs to be tested against the literature more closely too. So, Salamé and Baddeley (1989) find vocal music and foreign language interferes with serial recall, but not instrumental music. The review draws a somewhat circular conclusion that this might be attributable to greater demands on serial processing imposed by foreign language and vocal music. But what about instrumental music – isn’t there serial processing going on here to support phrase boundary and cadence perception? And why would a foreign language impose demands on serial processing?

Stylistically, the writing is fine but certainly not outstanding. Be sure not to assume the reader knows as much about the literature as you do. For example, you indicate that many aspects of music and cognition were reviewed by Schellenberg and Weiss so you will focus on things they didn’t look at. Well, I have no idea what Schellenberg and Weiss reviewed. Better to just be explicit here. Here is what they reviewed; I will focus on these other things. Be careful using the word “you.” In the first paragraph, you write “music can influence the type of wine you buy.” Well, no actually. I don’t drink wine. I think you want to say something like “background music impacts consumer decisions.”