PhD Proposal

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Do you still know all the words to the songs on your favourite CD from high school? Have you ever heard part of a song and immediately remembered where you were the last time you heard it? These are just some examples that anecdotally show how robust memory for music can be. The robust nature of musical memory is especially apparent in patients with Alzheimer’s disease, a disease that results in memory deterioration. Even when other memories are lost, long-term familiarity for melody and music lyrics can be present in severe Alzheimer’s disease (Cuddy et al., 2012). What makes memory for music so special? It is this question that I aim to answer with my PhD research. With my first project, I will more clearly define the brain areas involved in music memory. Based on the results of the first experiment, I will explore what makes musical memory distinct from other forms of memory and why it is selectively spared in patients with Alzheimer’s.

The initial evidence for a distinct memory for music comes from a number of case studies. In 1996, Peretz described patient CN who suffered bilateral temporal lobe damage leading to a severe, music specific agnosia. CN could recognize lyrics from songs, but did not recognize previously familiar melodies. Her normal performance on tests of music perception (melody or tone discrimination) indicated that her agnosia was in fact music specific and was not a deficit in the processing of melodic information. In contrast, Patient PM (Finke, Esfahani, & Ploner, 2012), who had been a professional cellist until he contracted encephalitis, had severe semantic and episodic memory deficits but performed like a healthy musician on a music recognition test. These case studies indicate that memory for music can be dissociated from other types of memory. In fact, Peretz & Coltheart (2003) proposed that humans have a ‘musical lexicon’ that contains representations of all the musical phrases one has ever heard, and that this musical lexicon is separate from the verbal lexicon, where representations of phonological sounds are stored.

Neuroimaging techniques have allowed researchers to uncover the neural basis for the separate musical lexicon described by Peretz and Coltheart. Using PET, Groussard et al. (2009) showed that the musical lexicon, and musical semantic memory in general, is sustained by a temporo-prefrontal cerebral network. They hypothesized that the right-sided regions are mainly responsible for holding the melodic traces of familiar tunes, whereas the left-sided regions are responsible for the semantic and associative memories involved in recognizing a musical piece as familiar. The left-sided activation occurred in areas common to those classically shown to be involved in verbal semantic memory (Groussard et al., 2009). In 2010, Groussard et al. conducted a follow-up study using fMRI and showed a clear dissociation between the neural patterns elicited by musical and verbal stimuli. These neuroimaging results supported the theory of Baird and Samson (2009) who suggested that musical memory in Alzheimer’s patients is spared because of the intact functioning of the necessary and specific brain regions that are relatively unaffected by the disease. In 2015, Jacobsen, Fritz, Stelzer, and Turner showed that the caudal anterior cingulate and the ventral pre-supplementary motor areas are involved in the processing of both unknown and known music and that these areas, responsible for encoding musical memory, were relatively spared in a sample of patients with Alzheimer’s disease. Together, theses results indicate that not only is memory for music separate from other types of memory, but this dissociation can be seen with neuroimaging techniques.

**Study 1: Neural Correlates of Music Recognition**

*Will begin collecting data in July 2017*

In previous studies the dissociation of memory for music has been shown using long-known music chosen by the researchers. There is very little control for the amount of exposure participants have had to each song during their lifetime. In my study I will train participants to become familiar with a set of musical stimuli and therefore I will be able to track each participant’s exposure to the stimuli and more accurately determine the neural correlates of musical memory.

Participants will undergo an fMRI scan while listening to 16 unfamiliar musical pieces. They will then train on half of the music (8 pieces) by listening to them regularly over the course of two-three weeks. Listening will be done through an online music player that will track the number of times the song was listened to. Throughout the training period, participants will come to the lab for intermittent behavioural testing to track how familiar they are becoming with the stimuli. This will be done using a forced-choice paradigm that asks participants to identify a correct lyric out of a pair of lyrics where one is correct and one lyric has been modified. Once participants reach a particular threshold of familiarity with the stimuli they will undergo a second fMRI scan while listening to all 16 musical pieces. The difference at the second scan is that the participants are now very familiar with half of the stimuli. No other study to date has explored the neural correlates of music recognition by training participants on a set of stimuli. The stimuli used in this study are 16 unfamiliar songs that fall into four groups: instrumental music only (no lyrics), a cappella singing (no instruments), lyrics and instrumental music, and spoken word. Varying the stimuli within the lyric and music categories will allow me to identify how the presence of lyrics interacts with the music to affect recognition.

The BOLD contrasts between the first and second scans will allow me to identify which brain areas are involved in music recognition. I hope to replicate the results from previous papers (Groussard et al., 2010; Jacobsen et al., 2015). A PCA analysis may be able to identify a network of brain areas that are critical for music recognition. I would like to compare how these networks differ for known and unknown music and how the networks change or differ as exposure to the music increases and as a function of the presence of lyrics.

**Potential Next Steps**

**Follow up study.** My first experiment will explore the neural correlates for musical memory during an intense listening period of 2-3 weeks. One striking characteristic of musical memory is a person’s ability to remember a song many years after they last listened to it. I would like to bring back some of the participants from the first experiment 12-18 months after their second scan for a third scan. Comparing the active brain areas between scan two and scan three may give insight into why music can be clearly remembered for so long.

**Musical background.** In the first experiment, I will collect musical background information from participants. This includes whether participants play any instruments, how long they have been playing, and whether they have had formal training. It is possible that the amount of musical training a person has had affects the way they listen to music and subsequently the way they remember music. It will be interesting to see if there are differences in the music recognition networks isolated in the first experiment as a function of musical training. Any differences could then be related to the work on neural correlates of musical memory in Alzheimer’s in order to determine whether musical training early in life affects a patient’s ability to remember music.

**Marker of consciousness.** Previous work has found that brain networks activated by suspense filled audio clips can be used to assess consciousness, but musical stimuli did not produce a robust enough signal elicit activation in a similar network (Sinai, 2015). In this experiment, participants listened to theme songs from popular television programs. It is possible that familiar music may provide a more salient signal allowing music to be used as a marker of consciousness. The brain areas that are active in response to familiar music include areas beyond primary auditory cortex. These areas are active because a participant is engaging with the music and triggering a memory or sense of recognition. Presumably, the participant has to be conscious in order to recognize the music. If a robust network of brain areas that responds to familiar music can be identified in healthy participants, then maybe such a network could be used as a diagnostic tool for minimally conscious patients. Families could supply music that is well known to the patient. If the patient shows similar activation in the music familiarity brain networks then perhaps this is an indicator of their consciousness.

Before bringing such a paradigm to patients, the effects of differing levels consciousness on the musical familiarity network could be investigated using healthy participants under anesthetic. Data from anesthetized patients would help us to understand how auditory information is processed at varying levels of consciousness and how it differs as that auditory information becomes more familiar.

**Alzheimer’s patients.** Post-doc Dr. Lucy McGarry is interested in collecting data from the first experiment that will allow us to determine whether there is inter-subject synchronization (ISS) while participants listen to the musical stimuli. The ISS analysis will show whether activation in brain areas is similar across listeners. We will be able to compare whether synchrony increases as familiarity increases or as a function of lyric presence. Based on the results from this experiment in healthy participants, I will explore whether similar synchrony patterns are present in patients with Alzheimer’s disease. Understanding the synchrony patterns may provide insight into why these patients are able to remember music when other areas of memory are disturbed or why music triggers autobiographical memories that were otherwise forgotten (El Haj, Fasotti, & Allain, 2012).

**Summary**

Through my PhD research I will more clearly define the brain areas that are responsible for musical memory. No study to date has controlled music exposure during an experiment to determine the neural correlates of musical memory. With my first experiment I will investigate how characteristics like lyrics, degree of familiarity with the music, and participant’s musical experience affect musical memory. Based on the results from my initial experiment, I would like to explore the feasibility of using known music as a diagnostic marker of consciousness in patients with disorders of consciousness and in healthy anesthetized participants. While investigating musical memory there is the potential to learn about memory related diseases such as Alzheimer’s and to understand why musical memory seems to be spared even at late stages in the disease. My central objective is therefore to better understand how memory for music occurs in the brain and how it is dissociated from other forms of memory.

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