

Senses-crossover makes for tasty music

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- Duncan Graham-Rowe

Life, according to the British band *The Verve*, is a bittersweet symphony. But for one musician in Switzerland who can "taste" sounds the symphony is also disgusting, and tastes of mown grass and low-fat cream.

The musician, known as ES, is a synaesthete, a person who involuntarily experiences a crossing over of the senses for certain types of stimuli. But not only does ES see certain colours when she hears specific notes - which is quite common among synaesthetes - but she also associates specific tastes with different pairs of notes, or intervals.

The fact that a minor second tastes sour to her and an interval of a fifth tastes of pure water gives ES a definite advantage in her profession, say Lutz Jäncke and colleagues at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. In tests where different tastes such as salty, sweet, cream and even low fat cream, were placed on the musician's tongue she was able to identify the correct interval faster than five musician non-synaesthetes.

Intense relationship

It is difficult to tell whether synaesthesia was the driving force for ES becoming a musician because she started when she was just five. Either way, she believes that because of it she has a more intense relationship with music.

But while this helps her in the complex cognitive task of accurately identifying tone-intervals, which is useful for transcribing music, there is a drawback - it affects her taste in music. Both her visual and gustatory synaesthetic experiences are more vivid when the notes and intervals are more pronounced.

Most modern forms of music have so few clear and distinct tones and intervals that the colours and tastes they evoke are somewhat muted. So ES tends to prefer simple harmonies such as renaissance music. Bach, for example is particularly creamy, she says.

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