



The aural face: social cognitive dimensions of timbre perception

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The timbre of a sound can disclose the identity of its source. We rarely take notice of the constant elision of sound/source that accompany our everyday lives, but in certain musical contexts—when the sonic source is not just an object but a specific person, with implications of gender, race, region, musical genre affiliations, etc.—the seamless indexicality of timbre takes on an ethical weight that warrants closer scrutiny. Scholars have carefully elucidated the psychophysics of timbre, but the social implications of timbre perception remain underexplored. This talk examines the role of timbre in social evaluation and engagement using tools from the cognitive sciences and philosophical ethics. I argue that timbre can function as an “aural face”: in sonifying the particular, embodied presence of others, it can act as a virtual other. Perceiving timbre is a social cognitive process as much as it is a purely auditory one. I share neuroimaging results from my lab suggesting that individual differences in trait empathy can affect how people process timbre: higher empathy people engage premotor areas in response to musical tones with “distress” timbral markers (e.g., high noise content) to a greater degree than lower empathy people. Drawing upon these empirical findings and others, I theorize split-second judgments of musical timbre and explore the ethics of perceiving others through the musical sounds they make.

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