

Informal English for Talking about Music: Sound VS. Noise VS. Music

Is your favorite music mainly art, entertainment, or both? Is it “serious music” or primarily a product for people to purchase (or be used as background music in video advertisements)? Do these distinctions matter, or do they “overthink” the subject of music? Why?

Are songs, tracks, and other pieces of music themselves “good” or “bad,” or do we just appreciate some more than others in certain situations and periods in our lives? Are there situations when even our favorite music becomes “noise”?

Does popularity (as measured by the “pop charts,” our peers 平辈, and “teenyboppers” 少女流行音乐迷 generally) mean that that a song or musician is good? Why/why not? Some “music snobs” and trained musicians think that the most popular songs are just the most accessible or “broadly appealing” and not actually “good music.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Are you less Chinese than your parents and grandparents, who may (have) listen(ed) to more traditional Chinese music (i.e. Chinese opera) and dislike Western pop music? Do lyrics sung in Chinese make Western musical styles like R&B, hip-hop, jazz, and rock & roll just as Chinese as Chinese opera? Why/why not?

Heard of VS. heard before: Often, people will ask us if we've listened to/heard a particular song, artist/band, or entire genre of music, but we've only heard of it (or maybe have never even heard of it, which is the same as saying we didn't know it existed before someone asked us about it). Try asking your classmates and instructor if they've *heard* your favorites, *heard of* them, or *never heard of* them. i.e. Q: Have you ever heard Mozart? A: Yes, his ringtone 手机铃声 is all over China. A: No, I've heard of Mozart, but I've never actually heard any of his music. I wouldn't recognize it as Mozart if I (have) heard it.

Why like a song? Commonly used phrases: “It's got a good beat, and you can dance to it.” “It's catchy.” “It's an earworm. (Once you hear it, you can't get it out of your head.)” “It speaks to me personally.” “I feel like it was written just for me.” “It reminds me of...” “It makes me feel...” “It puts me in a good mood.” “It's good background music for **V-ing**.” “It's within my vocal range, so I can sing to it.” “Whenever I hear that song, I'm really moved 感动(emotionally).” “**Sb.** is really talented.” “The lyrics are (deep, poetic, meaningful to me, etc.)” “It is a good composition/melody/chord progression. It has innovative harmonies.” “Nobody else could have written/play it.” “My friends like it.” “My parents *don't* like it/It annoys my parents.” “I just like it (and can't explain why).”

Why not like a song? Commonly used phrases: “**Sth.** Sucks.” “That's not music.” “That's just noise.” It sounds... boring, cheesy, canned, derivative (basically copies another artist), obnoxious, pretentious, contrived, soulless. “I'm not into that kind of music.” “I'm not in the mood (for that kind of song).” “It's out of fashion/out of style.” “They don't know how to play (their instruments).” “S/he can't sing.” “S/he can't carry a tune.” “I don't like **Sb.'s** voice.” “**Sb.'s** voice is too affected, course, screeching, etc.” “The lyrics are (stupid, cheesy, overly dramatic, meaningless, etc.)” “Nobody listens to that.” (Not true!) “I've never heard it before.” (← probably both the worst and most common reason not to like Sth.!)

Incitement to Action! This song makes me want to... ·dance, “shake it,” “cut a rug,” “get down,” “get my groove on,” move to the rhythm ·fall asleep ·cry ·sing along ·hum along ·lip-sync ·learn to play an instrument ·play “air-guitar” ·scream ·break things ·mosh ·hurt myself ·blast the volume/turn it up ·turn down/off the stereo ·cover my ears ·go somewhere quiet ·appreciate silence more ·have a party ·think deeply ·be romantic with my boy/girlfriend

What instruments do you hear? Electronic/Digital (played via a computer, i.e. sampler pad) VS. Electric VS. Acoustic (played without electricity)

Instrument Families: ·**brass** 黄铜乐器 ·**percussion** 打击乐器 ·**reed** 簧乐器 ·**string** 弦乐器 ·**WOODWIND** 木管乐器

·**accordion, bandoneon, concertina** 手风琴 ·autoharp 自鸣箏 ·balalaika 俄式三弦琴 ·bagpipes 风笛 ·banjo 班卓琴 ·bass guitar ·bassoon 低音管;巴管
·bongos 小鼓;邦邦一种 ·bouzouki 布祖琴 ·bugle 军号 ·castanets 响板 ·cello 大提琴 ·chimes 鸣;钟;和办 ·clarinet 单簧管 ·clavinet ·cornet ·cymbals 铙钹;钹
·DIDGERIDOO 迪吉里管 ·double-bass/stand-up bass ·drumset/drum kit ·FIFE 横笛 ·flugelhorn 粗管号 ·FLUTE 长笛;凹槽 ·French horn ·gong ·guitar
(varieties could take up a whole page!) 吉他 ·harmonica 口琴 ·harp 竖琴 ·harpichord 大琴 ·hurdy-gurdy ·jingle bells 铃铛 ·JUG (as in a “jug band”)
·kazoo 卡祖 ·key-board/electric piano ·kytar ·lute 鲁特琴 ·lyre 里拉 ·mandolin 曼陀林 ·maracas 沙球 ·oboe 双簧管 ·OCARINA 陶笛 ·omnichord ·organ
(calliope, church/pipe, Hammond, jazz, Mellotron, pump, etc.) ·oud 乌德琴 ·PANFLUTE ·piano 钢琴 ·PICCOLO 短笛 ·rainstick ·RECORDER ·sackbut 低音喇叭
·saxophone 萨克斯管 ·SLIDE WHISTLE ·sitar 锡塔琴 ·soprano saxophone ·“singing” saw ·Sousaphone ·steel drums 钢鼓乐器 ·synthesizer 合成器
·tabla 手鼓 ·theremin 铁耳明式电子乐器 ·timpani/kettle drum 定音鼓 ·triangle ·trombone 长号;伸缩喇叭 ·trumpet 喇叭 ·tuba 低音大喇叭 ·turntable 转盘
·ukelele 尤克里里琴 ·vibraphone/vibes/sylophone 铁琴 ·viola 中提琴, violin/fiddle 小提琴 ·washtub bass ·zither 齐特琴

Note that although Chinese changes the verbs for (sports and) musical instruments, English keeps the same verb “play” for all of them. “The” is optional, as in “Can you play (the) Whamola?” You can ask if someone plays an instrument by asking, “Can/do you play an(y) instrument(s)? What instrument(s) can/do you play?” By adding the suffix “-ist” (or sometimes “-er”) to the name of the instrument, we describe a person who plays that instrument (sometimes professionally).

How do we get or listen to music? How has the **medium** changed over time? ·live performance 现场音乐会 VS. recorded ·vinyl record/LP ·cassette tape 磁带 ·compact disc/CD ·MP3 VS. “Lossless” digital file ·radio broadcast ·streaming service ·music video ·single (& “B-sides”) VS. Maxi-single/EP VS. LP/album (how many songs packaged together?) ·mixtape/mixdisc/mix/playlist

Other Vocabulary: ·aesthetics (standards by which we judge art, music, etc.) 美学 ·audiophile (Sb. who values high fidelity 高保真 in recorded music)
·Autotune (electronic production method to correct singers who sing “out of key”) ·beatboxing ·cultural appropriation (“The West” or another geographic cultural unit takes other, ethnic instruments & styles of music as its own, such as calling the hammered dulcimer a *yangqin* 扬琴) ·DJ (disc jockey) ·dissonance 不协和音 ·guilty pleasure (Sth. you know is not good, but you still like it) ·hit (song) VS. **Sb.'s** “greatest hits” ·jingle 广告歌 ·lead vocalist VS. backup singer(s) ·“leading horses to water” ·muzak (酒吧、饭店等)录音助兴音乐 ·“Music soothes the savage beast.” ·obscure VS. popular/famous ·one-man band 唱独脚戏 ·overproduced
·pageantry singing competition TV shows (i.e. American Idol, The Voice, 超级女声, etc.) ·scat (singing) ·singsong 节奏单调的 (there's no accounting for) taste
·throat-singing ·virtuoso 艺术能手;演艺精湛的人 ·vocal VS. instrumental song ·yodeling

This handout is intended to be paired with “A Preferential Introduction to Western Music for EFL Students,” which lists styles and examples of Western music with some more vocabulary. Vocal techniques and non-Western styles have admittedly been neglected for space & lack of knowledge on both.
And remember: “Information is not knowledge. Knowledge is not wisdom. Wisdom is not truth. Truth is not beauty. Beauty is not love. Love is not music. Music is THE BEST.” -Frank Zappa