

## BOOK REVIEW

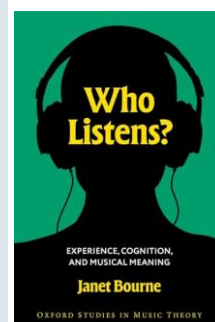
### Who listens? Experience, cognition, and musical meaning (Bourne)

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#### Book information

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Janet Bourne's *Who Listens?* is a provocative and ambitious contribution to music theory, cognition, and interdisciplinary listening studies. Its central aim is to challenge the tacit assumption that there is a single "ideal" listener, offering instead a framework that foregrounds the diversity of listening shaped by culture, cognition, and identity. By "ideal listener," Bourne refers to the implicit analytic figure—often assumed in formalist and structural accounts of Western art music—whose responses are treated as structurally fluent, culturally unmarked, and broadly representative.

At the heart of the book is analogy. Drawing on cognitive psychology, Bourne adapts Gentner's Structure–Mapping Theory (1983) and Holyoak and Thagard's Multiconstraint Theory (1995) into a three-step process of mapping, inference transfer, and retrieval. She distinguishes between framing analogies, which shape the overall lens for listening ("Music as Language," "Music as Cinematic Narrative"), and lower-level analogies, which link specific features (e.g., musical succession as physical motion). This model explains how listeners build understanding by importing inferences from familiar domains into unfamiliar ones.

Her Iterative Spiral Model extends this framework into a dynamic cycle, in which listeners shift between structural, narrative, associative, and emotional modes of attention. Each new interpretation enriches conceptual repertoires that in turn guide future listening, situating musical meaning as cumulative and evolving rather than fixed.

Bourne develops composite listeners: Eileen, a media-savvy student; Henrietta, a nineteenth-century salon participant; and Franz, her connoisseur husband. These figures are not caricatures but evidence-based composites, grounded in ethnography, pedagogy, and historical sources. Although situated within Western musical cultures, they function less as culturally exhaustive types than as methodological demonstrations of perspectival plurality. Bourne's aim is not to catalogue global diversity, but to show that even within a single tradition, listening positions are internally differentiated and historically situated.

Case studies show how interpretive outcomes diverge across listeners. In the finale of the *Quartetto Serioso* (Op. 95/iv), connoisseurs drawing on a "Music as Language" analogy hear irony in the comic coda, while Eileen hears a filmic "happy ending." In the *Marcia funebre* of Op. 26/iii, one student likens the march to Darth Vader, while a Viennese salon-goer hears heroic ritual mourning. In the piano sonatas Op. 90/II and Op. 101/I, Henrietta hears maternal lullabies, while Franz hears pastoral lyricism. These juxtapositions make Bourne's central point concrete: musical meaning emerges through lived experience, cultural context, and identity.

Bourne also incorporates empirical vignettes. In one study, 81 participants imagined film stories for Op. 95/iv. Most resolved their narratives positively in the coda, showing strong alignment with cinematic schemas. In another, 76 students heard major and minor marches, producing clusters such as "Military Victory" and "Villain vs. Hero". These studies are modest in scope but illustrate that pluralism in listening is not just anecdotal but empirically observable.

The book closes with appendices detailing the psychological constraints on analogy (e.g., one-to-one correspondence, parallel connectivity, systematicity), grounding Bourne's claims in cognitive rigour. An online companion site ([www.oup.com/us/wholistens](http://www.oup.com/us/wholistens)) adds further value, with colour illustrations, score examples, and specially recorded audio clips. Bourne's open release of her materials via OSF enhances transparency and usability for research and teaching.

## Critical evaluation

The strength of *Who Listens?* lies in its ambitious synthesis. Bourne integrates music theory, cognitive psychology, historical contextualisation, and empirical study in a way few works achieve. In doing so, she directly unsettles analytic habits that treat musical meaning as structurally immanent and listener-independent. The Iterative Spiral Model offers a persuasive account of listening as recursive and dynamic, while composite listeners provide a powerful pedagogical device for illustrating diversity in musical meaning.

The empirical vignettes, though innovative, remain limited by small sample sizes and exploratory analysis. Large-N studies by van der Walle and colleagues (2025a; 2025b) provide important context. The MUSIFEAST-17 dataset (2025b) benchmarks listener responses across seventeen genres with validated measures of familiarity, valence, arousal, and thought types. The related Thoughtscapes paper (2025b) shows how genre, familiarity, and enjoyment predict whether listeners imagine fictional stories, autobiographical memories, or media scenes. These studies offer far greater ecological validity, but together with Bourne's vignettes they point toward a layered agenda: one that values both the thick description of individual interpretive acts and the broad statistical mapping of thought types across populations.

Bourne's model also invites enrichment from cognitive science. It aligns with Event Segmentation Theory (Zacks & Swallow, 2007), which explains how listeners perceive boundaries in unfolding events, shaping memory and narrative coherence. Similarly, 4E approaches to music cognition (Embodied, Embedded, Enactive, Extended) emphasise how bodily simulation, affordances, and socio-cultural scaffolding structure musical narratives (Krueger, 2014; Maes et al., 2014; Schiavio et al., 2017).

Recent work complements Bourne's approach by classifying music-evoked thought types (Jakubowski et al., 2024; van der Walle et al., 2025) and exploring memory–imagination recombination (Margulis & Jakubowski, 2024). Curwen (2025) extends this through synaesthesia, showing how concept-driven cross-modal anchors shape narrative imagining. Together, these perspectives expand the inclusivity of the composite listener framework and highlight applications in music therapy. For example, therapists might introduce alternative framing analogies—encouraging a passage to be heard as movement, dialogue, or memory—to shift emotional interpretation. Thought-type profiling could identify tendencies toward autobiographical recall, fictional narrative, or abstract imagery, guiding repertoire choice. Likewise, simple segmentation tasks (e.g., marking perceived turning points) may reveal how an individual structures emotional or narrative change across a musical episode.

## Conclusion


*Who Listens?* is a bold and innovative book demonstrating that musical meaning is not the property of an abstract “ideal listener” but emerges through historically and culturally situated acts of listening. Bourne offers a rigorously articulated and methodologically grounded plural account of musical meaning-making that will interest music theorists, psychologists, therapists, and interdisciplinary scholars of listening.

While the prose is occasionally dense and the empirical designs exploratory, these reflect the book's experimental ambition. By combining theoretical imagination, empirical grounding, historical sensitivity, and methodological transparency, Bourne has produced a work that will stimulate debate and provide practical tools for research and teaching.

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**Dr Caroline Curwen** is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in Music at Durham University, researching music cognition, musically evoked narrative imaginings, and music–colour synaesthesia. Her work explores how listeners construct imagined stories and experiences through music, combining experimental psychology, phenomenology, and interdisciplinary approaches to musical perception. Her research focuses particularly on the role of imagination, narrative, and cross-modal experience in musical listening

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### Author contributions

The author contributed to conceptualisation, writing, reviewing and editing.

### Artificial Intelligence (AI) usage

The author used ChatGPT for language editing and is solely responsible for the content of the review.

**Conflict of interest**

The author has no conflicts of interest to report.

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