

Music topics in a long dream series

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Summary. Music is a very important part of human life in all known cultures. Within a series of 2,025 dreams recorded over more than 30 years by a female dreamer, the frequency and content of music dreams were analyzed. About 6% of her dreams included references to music, the high percentage of singing dreams compared to dreams with playing and instrument reflecting the dreamer's daytime musical activities as she sang very often in church choirs but never learned to play an instrument. Moreover, about 9% of her music dreams were creative, that is, included genuinely new melodies the dreamer had never experienced before in her waking life. It would be very interesting to study whether dream incubation techniques (visualizing prior to sleep onset the intent of dreaming about new melodies/lyrics) can increase the frequency of creative music dreams.

Keywords: Dream series, music dreams, creative dreams, continuity hypothesis

1. Introduction

In the archeological record, there is evidence for musical activity in humans for over 40,000 years (Upper Paleolithic); since then music plays an important role in every human culture (Bohman, 2013). Based on the continuity hypothesis of dreaming (Schredl, 2003), it is plausible that music, being an integral part of waking life, also shows up in dreams (Olbrich & Schredl, 2019). Dream diary studies (König & Schredl, 2021; Schredl, 2015) and retrospective surveys (König et al., 2018; Schredl, Berres, Klingauf, Schellhaas, & Göritz, 2015) indicate that about 5% to 8% of all remembered dreams include a reference to music. Music students (Vogelsang, Anold, Schormann, Wübbelmann, & Schredl, 2016) and musicians (Uga, Lemut, Zampi, Zilli, & Salzarulo, 2006) dream more often about music than persons not involved professionally with music. Overall, the time spent with musical activities in waking life has been shown to be correlated with the percentage of music dreams (Kern et al., 2014; König et al., 2018).

From a methodological viewpoint, it has to be noted that sample selection strategies (e.g., recruiting participants specifically for a study on music and dreams) and including probing questions (asking after every written diary dream report whether music was present or not) can increase music dream percentage. As an example, in the study of Uga et al. (2006), the non-musicians reported 18.20% music dreams, a considerably higher percentage compared to studies with unselected student samples (König & Schredl, 2021) or population-based samples (Schredl et al., 2015). This indicates that analyzing dream samples that were collected within other contexts might provide more valid estimates for the percentage of music dreams. Musical preferences (pre-

ferred music style) is also reflected in music dreams (König et al., 2018) and, if the dreamer plays an instrument in waking, this instrument shows up in dreams, for example guitar, in Schredl (2015).

A very interesting aspect of music dreams is that the dreamer can create completely new melodies (Barrett, 2001; Grace, 2001; Webb, 2017). A famous example was reported by Paul McCartney in whose dream the melody of "Yesterday" appeared (Webb, 2017). Musicians who are also lucid dreamers can also create new music in their dreams (Schädlich & Erlacher, 2018). These findings support the notion that dreams not only reflect waking-life musical activities but can be creative on their own.

The present study analyzed the frequency of music dreams within a dream series of 2,025 dreams recorded by a female dreamer over a period of thirty-one and a half years. The major aim of the study was to determine the frequency of music dreams and whether the musical activities the dreamer is engaged in in her waking life, in this case singing, is the most frequent musical dream topic.

2. Method

2.1. Dream diary

The participant kept an unstructured dream diary from the age of 38, beginning in 1990 through 2021. For the present analysis, all 2,025 dreams from that period were included.

2.2. Participant and procedure

The female participant dreamer lived at home until 1970, and then one year in a different household. Since 1971 she lives as a nun in a Benedictine convent in Germany. She never learned to play an instrument but was engaged very early on in singing, joined a church choir in adolescence and often sang as a nun. Unfortunately, singing was impaired due to a larynx paralysis caused as a side effect of a surgery (in 1982). Although she could retrain her voice afterwards, her singing voice was lost as she grew older.

The author provided a brief explanation what can be included as a music dream (general music-related topics, listening to music, singing, playing an instrument, and musicians). The dreamer compiled a list of music dreams in-

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Submitted for publication: October 2021

Accepted for publication: February 2022

DOI: 10.11588/ijodr.2022.1.83829

cluding brief description of what happened within the dream, e.g., listening to a choir singing. In a second step, the author grouped the reports based on these descriptions into four categories: listening to singing, singing herself, playing an instrument, and creative music dreams. The analysis was carried out using the SAS 9.4 for Windows software package (SAS Institute, Cary, North Carolina, USA).

3. Results

Dreams including the mother occurred more often than Overall, 113 dreams included at least one reference to music (5.58%). Almost half of the dreams included some form of singing (see Table 1). In addition, dreams included listening to music, seeing instruments and/or musicians, e.g., the cantor of her church, and dancing. Interestingly, the frequency of singing dreams (dreamer sings herself) declined from the period between 1990 and 2007 compared to the period between 2008 and 2021 (see Table 2). Only two dreams were related to playing an instrument by the dreamer. In the first dream, the dreamer was asked to play the church organ, but the dream ended prior to her playing. Within the second dream, she took a zither and wanted to accompany a pianist, however she soon realized in the dream that she cannot play the zither.

Within ten dreams, new melodies never heard by the dreamer in her waking life occurred. The dreamer reported the exhilarating emotion, especially within three dreams, while the music was flowing from within her. Unfortunately, not being a musician, she was not able to notate the melodies; after one dream, though, she was able to record the lyrics. Although not analyzed quantitatively, the dreamer states that most of her music dreams, including actually listening to music or singing, were positively toned.

4. Discussion

Overall, the analysis indicate that music topics play a role in dreams and reflect the musical activities the dreamer engaged in in waking life (singing). Moreover, music dreams demonstrate the dreams can be creative, that is, include experiences – in this case unheard and new melodies – that the dreamer never experienced before in her waking life.

From a methodological viewpoint, one must take into account that the present findings are based on a single dreamer and, thus, the generalizability is limited. However, the frequency of music dreams (about 5.5%) is comparable to previous diary studies (König & Schredl, 2021; Schredl, 2015) and population-based surveys (König et al., 2018; Schredl et al., 2015). It is important to note that the dreamer was not aware of this study's aim to analyze music topics within her dream series; that is, she was not biased towards recording music dreams. As mentioned above, recruiting participants specifically for a study on music dreams and including probing questions about music within the dreams each morning can increase music dream frequency: 18.20% in non-musicians (Uga et al., 2006). The coding was carried out by the dreamer herself and not by external judges; however, previous research has indicated that identifying specific topics (present vs. not present) typically exhibit high interrater reliability (Schredl, Burchert, & Grabatin, 2004).

In a previously published dream series of a male dreamer (Schredl, 2015), 14.74% of the 563 dreams with music topics included playing an instrument (most often a guitar), reflecting his playing the guitar in his leisure time, whereas

Table 1. Selected topics of music-related dreams (N = 113)

Theme	Frequency	Percent
Listening to singing	31	27.43%
Singing herself	20	17.70%
Playing an instrument	2	1.77%
Creative music dreams	10	8.85%

only in 6.39% of the dreams was the dreamer actively singing. In contrast, playing an instrument was rarely a topic in the nun's dream series, reflecting again the waking life of the dreamer - as this dreamer never learned to play an instrument. On the other hand, she engaged very often in singing in waking life (if her health allowed) and, thus, the percentage of singing dreams (dreamer actively sings) was much higher (17.70%) compared to the male dreamer who sang for a few years once a week in a choir (Schredl, 2015). Within the dream series, the percentage of dreams with active singing decreases, reflecting the health problems not allowing the dreamer to sing actively in her waking life. Dividing the dream series into two parts (1990-2007 and 2008 to 2021) was arbitrary as the health problems affecting the voice developed gradually with no clear cut-off point. Overall, studying the content of music dreams in detail provided support for the continuity hypothesis of dreaming (Schredl, 2003). Taking a closer look, the present dream series supported a thematic continuity between waking and dreaming (cf. Schredl, 2012), that is, singing in waking life and singing in dreams. A more detailed analysis would answer the questions whether the singing dreams included the setting, the context and the songs the dreamer actually sang in her waking life. Another very interesting topic for future research is the way listening to music is experienced within the dream, are there actual musicians playing instruments, is it a radio, smartphone, MP3 player, or is the music experienced internally without any external source. In the dream series reported by Schredl (2015), about 50% of the listening to music dreams included life music, the other half so kind of electronic device (radio etc.) playing the music.

In line with previous studies (Kern et al., 2014; König et al., 2018; König & Schredl, 2021; Schredl et al., 2015), the dreamer reported that dreams including actual listening to music or singing are positively toned – reflecting the joy that is associated with music in the dreamer's waking life. It would be very interesting to study whether frequency music dreams have an overall healing/uplifting effect on the dreamer in her/his waking life; similar to the effect of music heard in waking state (Theorell, 2014).

Table 2. Music-related dreams before and after the end of 2007

Variable	1990-2007	2008-2021
Number of dreams	1644	381
Music dreams	5.96%	3.94%
Listening to singing (Percentage of all music-related dreams)	27.55%	26.66%
Singing herself (Percentage of all music-related dreams)	19.39%	6.66%

Given the countless number of anecdotes of gifted musicians creating new melodies in dreams (Barrett, 2001; Olbrich & Schredl, 2019; Schredl, 2019; Webb, 2017), it is interesting that persons with no musical training but a strong love for music can also experience creative music dreams, that is, creating original music. In a population-based sample (König et al., 2018), about 29% of the participants of the sample reported that they experienced at least one creative music dream. As this sample included many high dream recallers, the figure for a representative sample is presumably considerably lower but also clearly indicates that creative music dreams can occur in “normal” persons but might never become as well-known as the dream with the melody of “Yesterday” that Paul McCartney had. The percentage of about 9% of the dreamer’s music dreams being creative is comparable to the 7.8% of creative dreams (not limited to music but included all kinds of creative inspirations in dreams, e.g., solving a problem, arts et.) reported by Schredl and Erlacher (2007). Regarding the theoretical concepts about dreaming, studying music dreams clearly indicate that dreams not only consist of memory fragments but can also be genuinely new – like creativity in waking life.

To summarize, the analysis of music dreams in this dream series clearly demonstrate that dreams reflect waking life and that dreams can also create something new. Studying music dreams help to understand that dreams are not simple replays of waking life but a very creative mixture of waking-life topics and emotions (Malinowski, 2021). For songwriters like Craig Webb dreams are a treasure trove for writing new songs (Webb, 2017). From a scientific viewpoint, it would be very interesting to learn whether or not dream incubation (aiming for dreams with new melodies and/or lyrics) increases the number or creative music dreams. A second interesting question is whether music dreams (dreaming about musical skills acquired in waking life) might reflect sleep-dependent memory consolidation processes (Wamsley, 2018), having music dreams are indicative for increases in performance.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the dreamer for coding her dreams and providing the data for the present analysis.

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