

The Music Cognition Group competed for the prestigious popular science award 'De Academische Jaarprijs'. Group leader Henkjan Honing reports.

Why bother to battle?

The *Academische Jaarprijs* (promoted under the title 'The Battle of the Universities') is an initiative of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) and the newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*. The competition is intended to highlight the social importance of scholarly research for a broad public. In this year's edition the music cognition team from the ILLC competed with a proposal that was entitled 'No music without a listener' (*Zonder luisteraar geen muziek*). The team-members were Olivia Ladinig (PhD student at the ILLC), Vivienne Aerts (Psychology student) and Shane Burmania (Musicology student), Leigh Smith (Postdoctoral researcher at the ILLC), and Henkjan Honing (team leader, music cognition researcher at the ILLC).

The plan

Our project aimed to show that all listeners play an active role when listening to music, that most people are more musical than they might think, and to make a general audience aware that cognitive science can actually say something about our listening experience. On the basis of existing research in music cognition (including that of our own team published in the last few years), we proposed to develop an exploratory online listening environment: an advanced website (with the title *jewetnietwatjeboort.nl*, 'You won't believe your ears!'), that does not test how well you can make or read music, but shows you what your (hidden) skills are as a listener. The visitor could explore its capabilities around theme-questions like 'do I have a sense of timing?' or 'do I

have a sense of rhythm?', as well as getting feedback on how cognitive science addressed and sometimes found answers to some of these questions. Next to a website we designed a 50-minute TV show around the same theme, and with the same title.

The whole trajectory from registration to the finals took about one year. This year eleven teams made it into the nomination stage. All of them had to submit an elaborate communication plan that, together with the presentation to the jury -consisting of chair Rick van der Ploeg, Piet Borst, Adriana Esmeijer, Leo Halvers, Rob van Hattum and Marja van der Putten-, would form the basis on which the jury would decide for the winner.

We were nominated in November 2007 by the ILLC, the faculty of Humanities, and, consequently, by the rector magnificus of the UvA as 'fulfilling the criteria', that is, having a preliminary plan that showed we might be able to communicate novel (not older than three years) and innovative research to a larger audience. So the nomination in itself was already quite a reward.

After half a year of meetings, brainstorming, lobbying, talking to TV producers, web-designers and the press, we had formed a solid consortium in support of our ideas. In the end of April 2008 we could submit nine beautifully printed copies of our communication plan, nine interactive DVDs (showing mock-ups of our plans), and a letter of intent from Pvh Tv/Film productions and the NPS. That was actually my most optimistic

moment. Unfortunately, it turned out not to be as simple as that.

The Finals

The finals itself were sheer fun. In the Muppetshow-like surroundings of the Leidse Schouwburg the eleven nominees presented their ideas in 15-minute presentations, followed by ten minutes of serious, and often tough questioning by the jury, most notably by Piet Borst.



Addressing the question to the audience: Who does not care about music?

Our presentation had a false start: the Apple-laptop couldn't get its signal through to the beamer. Jokes about the 'special behavior' of Apple were quickly made by the chair of the day. However, in the time that the technical staff needed to figure out what was wrong (it turned out to be a loose cable), team member Shane Burmania thought of doing the 'silent disco' opening in our second try behind the screen, instead of in front of it (much like an Apple iPod commercial), Vivienne Aerts insisted we should adapt the

coloring of the first slide, and Olivia Ladinig thought of an alternative choreography. All this was decided in less than a minute. At that moment my energy levels lifted by at least 50%. This was a team!



Second try of our presentation, paraphrasing an iPod commercial.

We didn't win. Nevertheless, it was certainly worth all the extra (not typically academic) effort. We certainly won lots of attention for the field of music cognition, my main motivation for participating.

If you are thinking of participating in the next edition of the Academische Jaarprijs, and feel you have enough extra resources to take some risks: go for it! Participating is fun, it helps you focus your research, grow a real team, and at worst, you might attract a few new students.

Henkjan Honing

For more information see www.jeweetnietwatjehoort.nl