Zebra finch introductory notes do not influence female response to song and juvenile

song learning accuracy

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Running Head: Influence of zebra finch introductory notes on female responses and juvenile

learning

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ABSTRACT

Many songbirds begin their song bouts with introductory notes (INs). In some songbird

species like rufous-sided towhees and white-crowned sparrows, INs are believed to function

in communication, to alert conspecifics about song onset or as a signal for species

identification, but it is unclear whether this function is conserved in other species. Here, we

addressed this question using the zebra finch, a well-studied songbird. Male zebra finches

begin their song bouts with several INs and the number of INs increases when males sing to

females or juveniles, suggesting a possible role of INs in female song preference and/or

juvenile song learning. To test these hypotheses, we first recorded and analyzed call

responses of female zebra finches to playbacks of different song stimuli. Female zebra

finches responded equally to songs with and without INs, even when songs were degraded or

when background noise was present. Second, we examined song learning accuracy of

juveniles and found that juveniles copied songs accurately from their fathers independent of

the fathers' number of INs. Overall, these results show that zebra finch INs do not influence

female response to song or juvenile song learning and suggest that INs might have different

functions in different songbird species.

INTRODUCTION

The song of an adult song bird consists of a stereotyped sequence of sounds (syllables) interleaved by silent gaps and is part of the female-directed courtship ritual of the male [1–5]. The song bouts of many songbird species begin with introductory notes (IN) before the actual song is produced [6–17]. Two broad categories of functions have been hypothesized for INs; (1) communicative [18,19] and (2) motor preparatory functions [20,21].

Communicative functions of INs include their possible function as an alerting signal before the main message [18] or as a signal that guides learning the correct species-specific song [19]. Songs are known to have communicative functions and adult birds often respond to conspecific songs played back through a speaker. Richards [18] tested the responses of Rufous-sided towhees (a songbird species) to modified song playbacks. He found that birds responded strongly to playback of normal songs (without INs) confirming the communicative value of song. However, if these songs were degraded, then towhees only responded if the playback includes normal INs before the degraded songs. This suggested that INs act as an alerting signal before the main message (the song) [18]. Just like adults, juvenile songbirds also respond to playbacks of songs from speakers [22]. If these juveniles have been isolated from other conspecifics early in life, they also learn songs from such playbacks [11,23]. While learning from such playbacks, in the absence of a live bird, juveniles need to decide whether the played back songs are songs of their own species or not. Soha and Marler showed that juvenile white-crowned sparrows decide whether to learn from a playback or not based on the presence of an introductory whistle that is characteristic of normal white-crowned sparrow songs [9,19]. Juveniles will even learn the songs of other species, if they are preceded by the normal white-crowned sparrow introductory whistle [19]. These two examples highlight possible communicative functions of INs.

In the zebra finch, a well-studied songbird species, INs are hypothesised to perform a motor preparatory function [20,21]. Male zebra finches begin their song bouts with a variable number of INs before producing multiple renditions of their songs. Across song bouts, the timing between successive INs becomes faster and more stereotyped as INs get closer to the last IN, just before song. Successive INs also become louder and more consistent in their acoustic properties. Along with changes in timing and acoustic properties, premotor neural activity during INs, also reaches consistent firing patterns just before the last IN. Thus behaviourally and neurally, INs progress from a variable "initial" state during the first IN to a consistent "final" state during the last IN, just before each song begins [20]. This progression

is independent of two forms of sensory feedback [21]. Given the similarities of this IN

progression to the progression of neural preparatory activity in primates and rodents, from a

variable initial state to a more consistent state just before movement initiation, INs have been

suggested to reflect the songbird brain "preparing" to produce song.

While INs have been hypothesized to function as motor preparation in the zebra finch,

previous studies have shown that male zebra finches produce more INs before their songs

when singing to a female [24] or a juvenile [25], as compared to when they sing alone.

During female-directed courtship, male zebra finches produce more INs at the start of their

song bouts [24] (Fig. 1A) and in song preference assays, female birds prefer female-directed

courtship songs over "alone" songs (songs produced in isolation). This is apparent in the

increased time spent near speakers that produce female-directed courtship songs [26]. The

increase in mean number of INs in the courtship context is not learned and is present in birds

raised without exposure to other adult males (isolates; [27]). Similar to female-directed

courtship songs, males also sing more INs at the start of song bouts directed towards juvenile

birds [25] (Fig. 1A). Juveniles that pay more "attention" to tutor songs show greater learning

as seen by their increased similarity to tutor songs [25]. These results suggest that the

increase in number of INs before song in both these contexts could serve to increase the

attention of the receiver to the song that follows. This suggests that zebra finch INs serve a

communicative function in both these contexts similar to the hypothesized communicative

function of INs in rufous-sided towhees [18] and white-crowned sparrows [19].

Here, we tested whether INs have a communicative role in the context of female-directed and

juvenile-directed songs. First, we played back songs, with and without INs, to female zebra

finches and analyzed their responses. We hypothesized that females would respond more to

songs preceded by INs (Fig.1B). Second, we examined whether the accuracy of song learning

in juveniles was correlated with the mean number of INs produced by fathers, at the start of

their song bouts.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

87 All procedures at IISER Pune were conducted after approval from the Institute Animal Ethics

88 Committee (IAEC), IISER Pune, and were in accordance with guidelines of CCSEA

89 (Committee for the Control and Supervision of Experiments on Animals), New Delhi, India.

 Experimental birds

Adult female zebra finches (>90 days post-hatch; n=27 birds, 24 lab bred and 3 bought from
outside vendor) were used for playback experiments. 8 of these birds were excluded from the
analyses as they did not respond for more than 1 day. 65 male birds and their fathers (16
fathers) from 16 nests were used for testing song learning.

Playback and experimental design

Before initiating the playback experiment, female zebra finches were isolated for 2 days in a
sound attenuation chamber in separate cages (2 birds per box separated by cardboard
partition). Playback experiments were done in a cage (dimension: 38 x 27 x 29 cm), placed in
a sound-attenuation enclosure (NewTech Engineering Systems, Bangalore, India) with the
playback speaker in front of the cage, through which all stimuli were played. For the
experiments with noise playback, an additional speaker was placed on top of the cage and
noise was played back through both this additional speaker and the playback speaker. On the
day of the experiment, birds were kept in the setup for acclimatization, 15-30 minutes prior to
starting stimulus playback. Following this acclimatization, playback started using a custom
MATLAB script. We conducted 1 session per day, where each session consisted of two trials
separated by 10 minutes (for the first set of 4 birds, we conducted 3 sessions per day
separated by 6 minutes and then changed this as there seemed to be fewer responses for the
2nd and 3rd session). For all experiments, each trial consisted of the different stimulus types
played in random order with an inter-stimulus gap of 90 seconds and each stimulus type
consisted of 3 repeats of the stimulus with 1.5 seconds silence in-between successive repeats.
For the second set of experiments with background noise, we randomly chose one of the trials
in the session to play background noise; the other trial was without background noise.
Background noise began 10 minutes before the first stimulus and ended after the last stimulus
type was played. We recorded sounds from our zebra finch colony and played back these
sounds as background noise to mimic a noisy zebra finch colony environment. We used a
decibel meter to measure the sound pressure levels for the noise and the stimulus. Over a 60
second period, the maximum sound pressure level at the centre of the cage was 76.4 dB when
we played the song and IN stimulus and the background noise had a maximum sound
pressure level of 68.4 dB, keeping the stimulus just audible over the background. Noise was
played back through both the speakers (to provide an illusion of noise from everywhere)
whereas only the second speaker was used to playback stimuli (to provide an illusion of a
localized playback).

For a given bird, playback experiments were conducted for 3-5 days (5 days for experiment 1

and 3-4 days for the background noise experiment), interleaved by one day, to prevent

habituation (different birds were used for the two experiments). Calls produced by the female

and songs played back were recorded by placing an omnidirectional microphone (AKG

C417PP) on top of the bird's cage, towards the front. Signals from the microphone were

amplified, band-pass filtered (Behringer Xenyx 802), digitized, and recorded on a computer

at a sampling rate of 44100 Hz using a custom Python program. We also used a webcam to

record videos of the behaviour of the female (30 frames per second, 1280 x 720 resolution)

during the experiment with background noise. The webcam was placed above and behind the

playback speaker in front of the cage. For these experiments, the timing of playback stimuli

were determined from the webcam recording as the microphone recording was not very clear

due to the background noise.

Stimuli used for playback

Songs from one adult male zebra finch (randomly chosen from our colony) was used to

generate different stimuli for the playback experiments. For the first experiment, we used five

different stimuli (Fig. 1C) namely, (1) normal zebra finch song (7 INs followed by a song),

(2) only the song, (3) only 7 INs, (4) reverse song (song followed by 7 INs) and, (5) white

noise. The white noise stimulus had the same temporal pattern as the normal song (7 INs and

motif) but the acoustic features were replaced with white-noise generated using the MATLAB

(MathWorks) function wgn (White Gaussian noise). Reverse song and noise were used as

controls; reverse song was a control for the duration of normal INs + normal song, while

noise was used as a negative control. For the background noise experiment, the song of a bird

from another colony (recorded at UCSF) was used to make different stimuli. A total of five

stimuli were used (Fig. 2A) namely: 1) Normal IN – normal song, 2) Only normal song, 3)

Degraded IN – degraded song, 4) Normal IN – degraded song and 5) Only degraded song.

Each stimulus consisted of two repeats of the song. The degraded part of the song was

generated by randomly shuffling the frequencies of the normal recorded song. To do so,

MATLAB function stft (short-time fourier transform) was used to calculate frequencies of the

signal at each time point (which depends upon the sampling rate of the song). Frequencies

were randomly shuffled for a given time point to preserve the amplitude envelope of the

original song. MATLAB function istft (inverse short-time fourier transform) was then used to

convert the frequency data back to a time-varying signal. This signal was converted to an

audio playback using MATLAB function audiowrite.

Analysis

All analysis was done using custom-written scripts in MATLAB (MathWorks, panel function

was used for plotting [28]). Playback syllables and calls produced by the females were

manually segmented and annotated using custom written MATLAB scripts. For playback for

experiment 1, we annotated the first syllable of the stimulus (IN or song syllable depending

on the stimulus being played back) to mark the onset and category of the stimulus played

back. For experiment 2 with background noise, it was difficult to identify the first syllable

within the background noise and so we used the first or last IN for the normal INs + normal

song stimulus, last syllable offset for the degraded INs + degraded song stimulus, first

syllable for the normal song stimulus, last syllable offset for degraded song stimulus and third

IN or last IN for normal INs + degraded song stimulus. This was used as a marker and the

time of stimulus onset was calculated based on this for each stimulus type. The number of

calls produced by the female during the stimulus period was counted as a measure of the

response. The number of calls produced over each repetition of the stimulus were normalized

to the duration of the stimulus and then averaged across all repetitions across all of the

playback days. Response latency was calculated as the interval between the onset of the

stimuli and the onset of the first call produced by the female zebra finch. For birds that did

not call for any of the trials for a particular stimulus type, we used the maximum duration of

the stimulus as the latency for the repeated measures ANOVA statistical test. Response

percentage was defined as the percentage of trials with atleast one female call. Birds that did

not call for more than one session were excluded from the analysis and in some cases, we did

not continue more sessions with such birds.

Comparisons between father and son

Data for the mean number of INs and mean song similarity for fathers and their sons was

collected as part of an older study (n=65 birds from 16 nests; [29]). Here, we only used this

data to compare the mean number of INs produced by fathers to the accuracy of song copying

as measured by the song similarity between son and father [29].

Statistics

Statistics was done using MATLAB and Python package statsmodels. Repeated measures

ANOVA (MATLAB function ranova) was used for the comparison across groups with a

significance threshold of 0.05. When the ANOVA comparison was significant, a Tukey-

Kramer post-hoc test was used to compare between groups (MATLAB function

multcompare). For stimuli, where the birds did not respond on any of the trials, the mean

response latency was considered to be the duration of the longest stimulus (maximum

latency). For correlation of song copying by juveniles and the mean IN number of the father,

Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated (MATLAB function corrcoef). For the

background noise experiments, we used a linear mixed effects model (python package

statsmodels) with number of calls, or response latency, or percentage of trials with a

response, as the response variable and song quality (degraded or normal), IN quality

(degraded, normal or absent) and background noise (present or absent) as predictor variables

(separate tests were run for each response variable). All statistics were run on the group data

with average values representing each bird.

RESULTS

The presence of INs before male zebra finch song does not influence females' preference

To determine the influence of INs on female song preference, we used a call-response assay

(n=12 female zebra finches). In this assay, different song stimuli were played back through a

speaker to a female zebra finch and the total number of calls produced by the female during

the stimulus was recorded as a measure of preference. Calls produced are known to be a

reliable measure of preference [30,31]. In addition, in female birds implanted with estradiol,

the number of calls produced are correlated with the number of courtship solicitation displays

(CSDs) produced, further validating calls as a good measure of song preference [32,33].

Here, we used 5 different stimuli, namely, (1) a normal zebra finch song preceded by 7 INs,

(2) a song without INs, (3) 7 INs alone without the song, (4) reverse song, i.e. the song

followed by 7 INs, and (5) a noise stimulus where the temporal structure of a normal INs

followed by song was maintained, while the spectral structure was changed into white noise

(see Methods for details). Across the four different song stimuli, the average number of calls

normalised to the duration (Fig. 1D), the response latency (Fig. 1E) and the fraction of trials

with a response (Fig. 1F) were similar with only minor differences between specific subsets.

When compared to the four song stimuli, noise received fewer calls, longer response latencies

and a smaller fraction of trials with responses (Fig. 1D, 1E, 1F, n=12, p < 0.05, Repeated

measures ANOVA, post-hoc Tukey Kramer Test, Table S1)

The song used in this assay was a song that the females were not familiar with and previous

studies have shown that females respond more to familiar songs, like those of their father or

their mate [34,35]. To test whether the preferences were influenced by song familiarity, we

repeated these experiments with familiar songs; i.e. the song of a father was used to test for

preference with 4 female offspring. Again, females produced equal number of calls for songs

with and without INs (Fig. S1 n=4 female zebra finches). Overall, these results demonstrate

an equal preference for songs with and without INs, suggesting that under normal conditions,

INs do not play a role in female song preference.

INs do not increase female response to degraded songs, even in the presence of background

noise

Previous studies in Anoles lizards suggest that introductory gestures might function to attract

the attention of a receiver [36]. Anoles lizards extend their dewlap (skin under the throat) as

part of their threat display and under noisy visual conditions, i.e. when light levels are low or

when there is more visual noise from plants blowing in the wind, they add more introductory

push-ups, before the dewlap extension. In response to a robotic lizard performing the threat

display, other lizards responded more to threat displays that were preceded by push-ups when

the visual environment was noisy [36]. Similar to this result, playback experiments with

rufous-sided towhees (a species of songbird) showed that towhees responded more to

degraded songs, if they are preceded by INs [18]. These studies suggest that introductory

gestures might serve to attract the attention of a receiver, especially under conditions where

the main message is harder to detect.

To test if zebra finch INs had a similar function, we repeated the song playbacks with a

different set of stimuli (Fig. 2A), in the presence and absence of background noise (n=3

female zebra finches, 3 additional birds were tested but did not call and were excluded from

the analysis). Here, we used the sounds recorded in our bird colony to simulate background

noise as zebra finches typically live in groups. In addition to the normal song with and

without INs, we also included 3 more stimuli where the song was degraded. This was

motivated by previous results showing that rufous-sided towhees respond to degraded songs,

if they are preceded by INs [18]. Specifically, the 3 additional stimuli were (1) normal INs

followed by degraded song, (2) degraded INs followed by degraded song and, (3) degraded

song without INs before it. We quantified calls produced only during the song as a measure of

female response. Females produced more calls in response to normal songs as compared to

degraded songs (Fig. 2B, Table S1, p = 0.001 for Song quality, Linear Mixed Effects Model)

and the percentage of trials with a response was also higher for normal songs as compared to

degraded songs (Fig. 2D, Table S1, p = 0 for Song quality, Linear Mixed Effects Model). The

presence/absence of INs or the presence/absence of background noise did not affect female

responses (Fig. 2B, 2C, 2D, Table S1). Overall, these results show that the presence of INs

before the song does not increase the response to song, even when the song is degraded or

when there is background noise present. These results suggesting that zebra finch INs do not

serve as an alerting signal in the context of female-directed courtship song.

The presence of introductory notes does not influence the accuracy of motif copying.

As mentioned earlier, male zebra finches also increase the number of INs when singing to a

juvenile bird [25]. We next examined if increased IN number is correlated with the accuracy

of song copying by juvenile finches. We found no correlation between the mean number of

INs produced by a father and the accuracy of song copying by a son (measured as the

similarity between the song of the son and the song of the father) (Figure 3A, n = 65, r =

0.08, p= 0.524, Pearson correlation coefficient). Infact, sons even copied songs accurately

from the rare zebra finch fathers without any INs before their songs and the copying accuracy

was not different from the accuracy of copying songs from fathers with INs before their

songs (Fig. S3, p=0.94, Wilcoxon ranksum test). These results suggests that the presence of

INs does not affect the accuracy of song copying by juvenile zebra finches.

DISCUSSION

Song bouts of many different songbird species begin with introductory notes (INs).

Communicative or motor preparatory functions have been hypothesized for these INs, albeit

separately in different songbird species [18–21]. In the zebra finch, a well-studied songbird, a

motor preparatory function has been hypothesized for INs [20,21]. However, male zebra

finches increase the number of INs when singing to a female or when singing to a juvenile,

suggesting a communicative function for INs in these two contexts. Here, we addressed this

question using song playback assays with the female zebra finch and by analyzing the

accuracy of song copying in juveniles. First, using a song playback assay we showed that

female zebra finches produce equal number of calls in response to songs with and without

INs (Fig. 1). While females called less to degraded songs, their response was not influenced

by the presence of INs, even if there was a noisy background (Fig. 2). Second, we showed

that the song copying accuracy of juvenile birds was not affected by the number of INs (Fig.

3). Juveniles also copied songs accurately when tutored by zebra finches that did not produce

INs before their songs. These two results demonstrate that zebra finch INs do not function as

a communicative signal in the context of female-directed and juvenile-directed songs.

Function of INs in female-directed courtship songs

Our results show that female zebra finches responded equally to songs with and without INs,

suggesting the females do not show greater preferences to songs with INs (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).

Why do males increase the number of INs before female-directed songs? One possible

explanation involves INs functioning as motor preparation. In addition to having more INs at

the beginning, female-directed songs are also faster and less variable [24,37]. If INs reflect

motor preparation for song, it is possible that more INs before female-directed song reflects

more preparation for producing faster and less variable songs. Given the preference of female

zebra finches for female-directed songs [26], more preparation could result in songs that are

more preferred by the female. Future analyses examining the correlations between the

number of INs before song and song stereotypy could help test this hypothesis. Alternatively,

negative reinforcement paradigms [38] could be used to train birds to increase the number of

INs; if birds can increase the number of INs, the song that follows should also be less

variable.

Another possible reason for more INs before female-directed songs could be to delay the

decision to sing. Producing song involves a little more oxygen consumption than most other

activities [39–42] and male birds might decide to sing only if the female is responsive. INs

are short duration syllables that are also lower in amplitude and the cost of producing a few

INs would be less than the cost of producing a full song. Experiments with strobe light

perturbations have shown that birds can only interrupt their songs at the boundaries of

syllables [43]. Given that INs are typically shorter than song syllables [11,29], INs might

allow birds to quickly stop singing if the female is not responsive. Previous studies have

shown that birds sing more motifs if the female responds [44,45], but whether the IN to song

transition is dependent on female response is not clear. A more careful examination of the

dynamics of courtship song performance along with female response would help to determine

if the IN to song transition depends on female response. Alternatively, one could allow male

zebra finches to interact with virtual female birds [46–48] and control the response of the

virtual female bird to see if progression to song depends on a response from the female.

Function of INs in juvenile-directed song

Our results suggest that the number of INs sung by a male do not play a role in attracting the

attention of the juvenile. While our experiments did not control for variation in songs

between fathers, the fact that differences in IN number did not influence copying suggests

that INs do not play a role in helping the juvenile pay attention and copy song accurately.

Artificial tutoring experiments [49] with the same song, with and without INs, could confirm

that INs do not have any role to play in influencing the accuracy of song copying. A recent

study using such artificial tutoring experiments has shown that the mean number of INs

before a song bout and IN acoustic properties are learned by young zebra finches from a tutor

[29]. This suggests that juveniles treat INs as another syllable and learn the statistics of the

entire bout.

INs could play a role in male-male competition

In frogs, INs have been suggested to function in male–male competition [50]. It is possible

that INs produced by male zebra finches also have similar functions. If it is true, one would

expect, male zebra finches to produce more INs in the presence of another male and one

would expect other adult male zebra finches to respond more strongly to playbacks with

greater number of INs. It would be interesting to see if the number of males in the vicinity

also influences the number of INs produced. Currently it is difficult to record the

vocalizations for multiple individuals without interference. Recent studies have used head

implanted microphones [45] or wireless mics [51] to record interacting birds and such an

approach could be taken to check if INs have a role in male-male interactions.

Our results rule out two important hypotheses related to the function of INs in the zebra finch

and suggest that INs could have other communicative / non-communicative functions. Given

that our results are different from the proposed function of INs in other songbird species

[18,19], a systematic study of the presence/absence of INs in other songbird species would

help understand whether INs are a common feature of the song bouts of all songbirds. The

presence or absence of INs could then be correlated with habitat and life history traits of the

specific species to make better hypotheses about the function of INs. Overall, our results

suggest that INs in the zebra finch do not have a communicative function in the context of

female-directed and juvenile-directed songs and suggest the possibility that INs have different

functions in different songbird species.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

Supplementary information includes 3 supplemental figures and 1 supplemental table.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

COMPETING INTERESTS

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FIGURE LEGENDS

FIGURE 1 <u>Female zebra finches respond with equal number of calls to playback of songs with and without INs before them</u>

(A) Cartoon summarizing previous research that shows that male zebra finches sing more introductory notes (represented by 'i') when they sing to a female (female-directed song) and when they sing to a juvenile (juvenile-directed song), compared to songs produced when the bird is alone. (B) Cartoon summarizing our hypothesis that female zebra finches produce more calls in response to songs preceded by INs as compared to songs without any introductory notes ('i' represents introductory notes, 'a', 'b', and 'c' represent song syllables and

'z' represents female calls). (C) Spectrogram showing the 5 different stimuli that were played back. Scale bar - x-axis - 150ms; y-axis - 1 kHz. (D), (E) and (F) Response of female zebra finches to the different playback stimuli. Mean number of calls normalized to stimulus duration (D), latency of response (E) and percentage of trials with a response (F) are plotted for each stimulus. Each circle represents one bird and lines connect data from the same bird. Bars represent mean and s.e.m across all birds (n=12). 'e' represents significant difference from noise, 'b' represents significant difference from only IN stimulus and 'd' represents significant difference from only song stimulus, $p < 0.05$, Repeated measures ANOVA followed by post-hoc Tukey Kramer test. Note: for the latency (E), there are no points for birds that did not call during any of the trials of a particular type.

FIGURE 2 <u>**Female zebra finches respond more to normal songs as compared to degraded songs independent of IN number and background noise levels**</u>

(A) Spectrogram showing the 5 different stimuli that were played back in the absence of noise. The same stimuli were also played back in the presence of noise. Scale bar - x-axis - 150ms; y-axis - 1 kHz. (B), (C) and (D) Response of female zebra finches during the song part of the different playback stimuli. Mean number of calls produced only during the song (B), latency of response (C) and percentage of trials with a response (D) are plotted for each stimulus in the different conditions. Shaded region represents normal song, while region without shading represents degraded song. Black lines represent presence of background noise and red lines represent absence of background noise. Squares and whiskers represent mean and s.e.m across all birds (n=3). Black and red circles represent data from individual birds (red for trials with no background noise and black for trials with background noise). * represents significant difference between normal song and degraded song ($p<0.05$ for Song quality, Linear Mixed Effects Model)

FIGURE 3 <u>**Accuracy to song of the father is not correlated with mean number of INs produced by the father**</u>
(A) Mean similarity to song of the father for juveniles (n=65 birds from 16 nests). Each circle represents one bird.

A

Alone song
i i a b c

Female directed song
i i i i i a b c

Juvenile directed song
i i i i i a b c

B

Hypothesis

a b c   Z

Female zebra finches prefer song starting with high IN

i i i i i a b c   Z Z Z Z

C

IN - Song

Song - IN

Only Song

Only IN

Noise