40 The Expression of Emotion in Music

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We think that music can express emotions without the help of words or pictures. In the most striking case, we say that purely instrumental music in an abstract tradition, such as the classical symphonic one, can be happy or sad. Sometimes a consistent expressive mood pervades a whole movement, as is the case with the exuberant sunniness of the last movement of Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony*. At other times, the mood shifts back and forth, as in the third movement of Mozart's *Fortieth Symphony*, where the tense, restless, nervous drive of the minuet is replaced in the central "trio" section by calm serenity.

Yet music cannot feel emotion, does not clearly point to or characterize objects apt to elicit emotions, and does not depict or involve behaviors, such as weeping, frowning, skipping, and yelling, that are naturally expressive of emotions. In song, it is appropriate to think of the music and words as joined to give expression to the feelings of the character represented by the singer, though it would remain to explain what the music's contribution is. In the case of purely instrumental music, though, it is not clear that *anyone's* emotion is expressed; yet we experience the music as emotionally expressive.

It might be held that musical expressiveness is subjective in the sense that different people can quite properly attribute different expressive properties to a musical piece without disagreeing. According to this view, it can be true for me that the music is sad and true for you that it is happy. If this position is correct, music's expressiveness is not an objective property of it, and a philosophical account of the nature and basis of that expressiveness will have to focus as much or more on what is distinctive to the individual listener as on what is distinctive to the music.

We should begin, then, by considering whether musical expressiveness is subjective or objective.

The evidence usually brought forward for the subjective nature of attributions of expressiveness to music draws attention to the lack of coincidence in different people's judgments about the expressiveness of individual pieces. Is this evidence conclusive?

For a start, we should discount as uninformed the judgments of people who are unfamiliar with the style of the music in question, or who are otherwise not well placed to appreciate the music. When the responses of listeners who are not appropriately experienced with music of the kind in question have been put aside, how much variety in judgment remains?

If music is very fine-grained in its expressiveness, slight contrasts in the emotional qualities attributed to the music will be indicative of disagreement. Those who think the expressiveness of purely instrumental music is fine-grained argue that this accounts for its ineffability; that is, for the difficulty we sometimes experience in trying to say precisely in words what it expresses. The opposing position maintains that music expresses only broad categories of emotion, in which case there is no substantive difference indicated by judging variously that the music is sad, morose, grief-laden, gloomy, downcast, or miserable. It continues: what makes for the expressive uniqueness of individual works is not the specificity of the emotion expressed but the particularity of the musical means used to achieve its expression. There are many ways of expressing a given, general emotion in music. Therefore, differences between works by no means entail that those works express diverse, very specific emotions.

If we adopt the first view and regard music's expressiveness as fine-grained, we have to admit that listeners disagree among themselves about what it expresses. But if we take the second, the level of agreement is much higher, which may be a reason for favoring it.

As just observed, when the emotions expressed by music are identified at a rather general level, there is a great deal of intersubjective agreement about the expressiveness of musical works (as well as about emotions they could *not* be expressing). That observers with good eyesight agree in daylight that healthy grass is green suggests that their experience of its color depends no less on objective properties or powers of the grass than on the (shared) nature of human perceptual capacities. I suggest that something similar holds for music's expressiveness. If one person thinks the music is sad and another hears grief in it, they do not really disagree. But if one person thinks the music is sad and another hears happiness in it, they do genuinely disagree and, unless a quite complicated story can be told—perhaps they are listening to very different performances of the same piece—at least one of them is wrong.

So, we are seeking an account of how music's expressiveness can be an objective property of it.

One view attempts to explain music's expressiveness as *associative*. Through being regularly associated with emotionally charged words or events, particular musical ideas become connected with emotions or moods. Some of these associations can be individual, as when a song becomes linked for me to an emotionally significant but personal event. Other associations are more widely shared. Trumpets and drums, or snare drums and fifes, are associated with the excitement and danger of war, certain hymns go with funerals, protest songs evoke the 1960s, and so on. When they use appropriate tunes or instruments, composers can rely on such shared associations to impart a predictable, widely recognized expressiveness to their music.

There is no doubt that music can often invoke former contexts in which it was heard and the emotions with which they were infused. It seems very unlikely, though, that music's expressiveness is always associative in this way. As well as with war, trumpets and drums can be associated with many other things, such as smoky jazz cafés. Anyway, thoughts of war surely do not always recall a specific set of emotions: for some they occasion nostalgia, for others sadness. The associations invoked are likely to tie the music to an era or movement, rather than to an emotion as such. Songs connected with wartime, such as *We'll Meet Again* (composed in Britain by Albert Parker and Hugh Charles in 1941), might instantly transport the hearer to the past, but that does not mean they are correlated with any particular emotion.

A more obvious point is that the most powerful connections between music and other contexts seem to rely on an expressiveness that the music contributes in its own right. Instead of music's being emotionally neutral but inheriting a tinge of expressiveness from its social setting, more often it adds its own affective character and thereby strengthens or

complements the context's emotional profile. But in that case, the expressiveness it contributes is something it already possesses, not something it acquires by association. Music taken from Gustav Mahler's *Fifth Symphony* deepens the sadness of Luchino Visconti's film of Thomas Mann's story *Death in Venice*, while part of one of Mozart's C major piano concertos sets the tone (pastoral calm tinged with sad yearning) for Bo Widerberg's Swedish film *Elvira Madigan*. Surely the music was selected not because the directors thought it was charged with appropriate associations—after all, a majority of the audience's members would not have known these classical works—but rather because its expressive character chimed with the emotional effects the directors were trying to create in their films. In fact, where an association is produced, it can be to the music's detriment. When classical music is appropriated for its cheerfulness and joined to words advertising toothpaste, or when Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* is used in Stanley Kubrick's movie of Anthony Burgess's novel *A Clockwork Orange*, it is the music and its expressiveness that suffer from the connection.

At this stage, the familiar move of identifying this or that person as the one whose emotions are given expression in the music can be tried. One view, known as the *expression theory*, holds that, if music is sad, this is because it stands to its composer's sadness as an expression of it.

Objections to this position are easy to come by. Compositions can take months or years to complete, and their composers no doubt ran the full gamut of emotions over the period. Composers have not been inhibited in writing sad requiems by their glee at receiving the commission for the work. Also, the act of expressing sadness by writing a symphony is a very sophisticated one, and while it is easy to see how an audience might read off the composer's feelings from the tears to which she gives way under the force of those feelings, the assumption that they do something similar when they hear sadness in the symphony requires more discussion. In other words, the act of musical composition is not expressive in a basic and transparent way, as tears are, and so the manner in which the act of composition becomes expressive by resembling natural and easily understood forms of expressiveness is not obvious or clear.

Rejecting the expression theory does not entail denying that composers sometimes express their emotions in the music they write. They can deliberately set out to create a work that expresses their feelings by matching them. The act of expression, then, is closer to that of expressing one's feeling of sadness by carving a sad-looking facemask than by bursting into tears. The adjective *sad* is applied to the mask, not the carver, and it would remain appropriate even if the carver were happy, but where the mask has been made to mirror what the carver feels, it thereby expresses her emotion. What is rejected is the expression theorist's proposed analysis of musical expressiveness, according to which what makes it true that the music is expressive is that it presents an emotion the composer felt.

A third view, called *emotivism* or the *arousal theory*, argues that what makes it true that the music is sad, say, is that it moves the hearer to sadness. To deal with cases in which conditions are not conducive or the listener is not able to follow the music, the theory could be revised to say that the music is sad if it *should* arouse such feelings in a suitable listener under appropriate conditions.

Again, objections come easily. Even when the auditor and conditions are ideal, the response is not inevitable. The listener might hope to cheer her mood by listening to happy music and fail, though she attends appropriately to the music. In another work, the listener might recognize and appreciate the music's sadness yet remain unmoved, or might instead feel admiration for the composer's skill in creating the expressive effects. Meanwhile, the arousal theory seems to get things back to front. We would normally think it is because the music is sad that it moves the listener, not that the listener's being moved is our basis for

calling it sad. The response is not merely caused *by* the music, it is a response *to* the music and, specifically, to an expressive character we recognize in it.

Peter Kivy denies that sad music makes people feel sad, or that happy music makes them feel happy. Holding to this position entails claiming that many listeners are deeply confused about their responses to music, because they are inclined readily enough to describe their reaction as echoing the music's expressiveness. We need not go so far before rejecting the arousal theory, however. It can be accepted that audiences can be moved to feel what the music expresses. (It remains, though, to explain how music can be sad.) What is rejected is the arousal theorist's proposed analysis of musical expressiveness, according to which what makes it true that the music is expressive of an emotion is that it moves the listener to that emotion (or to another, which is an especially apt response to that emotion).

Here is a fourth tack. According to Jerrold Levinson and Jenefer Robinson, we hear expressiveness in music by experiencing the course of the music as a "story" about events or experiences undergone by a *hypothetical persona*. That is, we make believe of the unfolding of the music that it is an episode in the life of an imaginary person and on this basis judge what emotions that person must undergo. To aid us, the waxing and waning of tensions in the fabric of the music establish the *pattern* of the events that we imaginatively fill out.

One objection to this theory observes that many competent listeners who are sensitive to music's expressiveness are not conscious of playing this imaginative charade as they listen. Another is that the patterning of the music is insufficiently complex or precise to constrain the listener's imaginative engagement with the music. Of course, what is required is not that all listeners make believe the same story, but that they agree in their judgments about the music's expressiveness as a result of imagining whatever they do. But even then, there is reason to doubt that this coincidence in judgments should occur. One listener might hear anger expressed where another detects happiness and a third hears sexual ecstasy, because losing one's temper might be dynamically very like bursting with joy or sexual release. And again, one listener perceives changes in the moods of a single persona and tries to integrate them, where another hears irreconcilable differences between the emotions of a series of distinct personas, and a third imagines the case of a mother who thinks about the divergent personalities of her children.

It can be accepted that listeners sometimes adopt such modes of hypothetical listening in coming to grips with music's expressiveness. What I reject is the proposal that what makes it true that the music is expressive of an emotion is that the listener hears that emotion in it as a result of making believe that the music's progress tracks episodes in the life of an imagined persona.

The theories just considered seek an owner who feels the emotion to which the music gives expression—the composer, the listener, or a hypothetical persona. Perhaps we should focus more on the idea that the expressiveness resides in the music, without depending on anyone's feelings. In that case, we might regard talk of music's expressiveness as *metaphorical*, since music is not literally capable of feeling sadness and the like. But this is not a promising path to take. Even if we were convinced by analyses of *linguistic* metaphor, it is not clear how they could be applied to the idea that *music* is sad in a metaphorical way. And whereas metaphorical descriptions of music—for instance, as stormy, cold, or hard-edged—usually can be eliminated in favor of different ways of saying the same kind of thing, there are no adequate substitutes for expressive predicates. Technical analyses might explain how expressiveness is realized, but they do not mean the same. How, except with *sad* and its cognates, can we capture the feeling-tone of the slow movement of Mahler's *Fifth Symphony*? Finally, it is a characteristic of live metaphors that they are not recorded in dictionaries, but under *expression* one will find among the meanings listed "the

depiction of feeling, movement, etc., in art; conveying of feeling in the performance of a piece of music." If the metaphor once was live, it died long ago, so talk of the musical expression of emotion is no less literal than talk of a home key, of notes being high and low, of melodic movement and pace, or of rivers having mouths, and bottles necks.

The primary use of terms such as *happy* and *sad* is in relation to the experiences of people. Secondary uses of the same terms are common. These secondary uses may derive historically from the primary one but have become established so that they are no less literal. Where there is no question of sentience, such terms are used to attribute an expressive character to the appearance that something presents. In this vein, we describe willows as sad, some rock formations as exuberant, house and car fronts as presenting faces that are happy or sad, and facemasks as happy or sad. For that matter, we also talk of the expressive character of the appearance of creatures that are sentient and capable of experiencing emotion, but in the use under discussion we do so without regard to what they actually feel. We note that the basset hound has a sad-looking face and make this attribution as a description of the face's appearance, implying nothing about what the dog might be feeling (particularly so, given that dogs do not reveal sadness, when they feel it, through their facial expressions). We can also concern ourselves in a similar way with the expressive appearance of human faces, bodies, and comportments. A person's face can be sad-looking without her feeling the way her face looks, and we can be interested in describing her face's expressive character without inferring from that anything about what she feels. There is no contradiction expressed by saying, "He always looks miserable but take no notice; usually he is in a happy mood." So the claim here is that, when we describe music using terms that designate emotions, we are attributing *an expressive character to the sound it presents, without regard to what anyone feels*. If the attribution is justified, it is literally true in this secondary use of terms like *happy* and *sad* that the music's sound has a happy or sad character, just as it is literally true that the mask of comedy presents a happy appearance.

On what basis is this secondary use derived from the primary one in which emotional terms refer to experienced emotions? As was explained earlier, sometimes we can identify others' emotions in their behavior, bodily attitudes, and facial expressions, because these can be symptomatic of the inner, affective states they betray. The flavor of expressiveness lingers, however, when relevantly similar behaviors and bodily bearings occur in the absence of the appropriate feeling or emotion. In that case, the expressiveness attaches to the character of the behavior's appearance, though no felt emotion is expressed or betrayed. The face of a basset hound looks the way a person's face would look if that person were sad and showing it.

In the case of music, what resemblances might be relevant? One possibility is that the form of music maps the dynamic structure of the physiological patterning of emotions. Another is that music is experienced as resembling expressive human utterance or vocalizations. A third, I think more plausible, suggestion is that the movement of music is experienced in the same way that bodily bearings or comportments indicative of a person's emotional states are. And when music is experienced as like behaviors presenting characteristic appearances of emotion, it is experienced as similar to the behaviors not only in its dynamic profile but also in its expressive profile. Just as happy people move in a fashion that is energetic, fast, and sprightly, so does happy music, and just as sad people move slowly, as if weighed down with care, so does sad music. Harmonic and textural clarity go with happy music, while harmonic density and unresolved tension go with sad music, and again, these are experienced as resembling the outward-directed openness and enthusiasm with which happy people greet the world and the inward self-absorption and gloom that misery brings on.

Though I take this account to be the most credible of those considered in this section, it also faces objections. Some people deny experiencing the resemblances just mentioned, though they recognize the music's expressiveness. Also, this account replaces expressiveness as such with the presentation of expressive appearances, and it might be doubted that these are as compelling or valuable as music's expressiveness is usually thought to be. One option for addressing this last concern is to emphasize the role of the composer in the process. Whereas human appearances that have an expressive character without giving expression to an experienced emotion are thoughtlessly fallen into on most occasions, music's expressiveness is deliberately contrived by its composer. As such, it may play a role in a communicative act, and it is always appropriate to consider if the music tells us anything about the emotions whose expressive appearances it presents. The composer harnesses music's expressive potential and what she does with it is likely to be significant, whereas the sad aspect presented as an accident of nature by willow trees calls for little by way of response or appreciation.