

Music and Emotion : A Survey of Some Central Problems

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In thinking about the nature and value of music, quite generally, there is no greater mistake one can make than to invoke emotion. To put the point provocatively, music as such has no more to do with emotion than mathematics or buses. However, there are still some thinkers about music who are attracted to emotion theories; and so I aim to help them overcome this.

We need to set the scene and have a good sense of the variety of emotion theories and the apparent motivations for holding them.

I engage in the negative campaign because of the positive view I want to protect and nurture, and that is the great Eduard's Hanslick's vision of music as a designed structure of sound on which aesthetic properties, above all beauty, depend. This is a purist view, which might in some senses be called 'formalist', and it implies a range of negative views concerning extraneous matters, such as emotion, knowledge, politics, and so on. Formalism can be more or less strict. Formalism is at least the insistence that music, or at least many central cases of music (it is allowed that music can take variety of forms) does not essentially involve anything extraneous. Much music is for shopping, praying dancing and so on. That cannot be denied. But much music, the music I focus on here, does not involve such purposes. There is impure music, but there is also pure music too. One could give example (musicologists like real examples) but where would one start? In almost all music traditions, there is instrumental music, music without song, which is for listening rather than listening while doing something else. Some music, much music, is just the art of sound, and understanding and appreciating it only involves understanding and appreciating what is achieved by "tones and their artistic combination" (Hanslick 1986, chapter 3), and does not involve knowledge of extraneous matters such as emotion, knowledge, politics and so on. Musical experience, in many cases, is just the experience of beauty, embodied in sound. A relatively relaxed version of formalism allows that music has its specifically musical traditions, which must be understood. Music evolves and understanding some item of music means locating it in the his story of music. A stricter version of formalism would say that the beauty of any item of music is self-contained and makes no reference to, or connection with, anything beyond itself, including other items of music. On both views music is not to be sullied with non-musical matters.

People often speculate about the connection between music and emotion. But this is too vague. The issue, if it is interesting, cannot be about the mere existence or non-existence of *any* connection between music and emotion. There are obviously many kinds of causal and dispositional-causal connections between them. Music may remind someone of some joyful event even if the music itself is not at all joyful. Music may cause pride, even though no pride can be heard in the music. For example, one might be a friend of the composer. Perhaps my neighbour's loud music makes me angry even though it is not angry music. These causal connections are uninteresting.

To focus the issue, we need to deploy the essential/accidental distinction. An interesting view—one worth debating—would be that music *essentially* involves emotion. But how exactly might music be essentially related to emotion?

Here we need the notion of function or purpose. An interesting view would be that the *function* of music involves emotion in some way. Music is made. It is an artifact. The question is: what is its purpose? Or—so as not to beg any questions—: what are its purposes? Without the idea of the essential function of music, the variety of actual relations between music and various emotions will make it impossible to raise any interesting philosophical issue about music, about what it is and why we value it as music. What is at issue is whether music's function or one of its main functions involves emotion in some way.

What are the possible ways? These ways would give us variables in possible emotion theories of music? Two prominent candidates are: the purpose of music is (A) the expression of emotion, or (B) the arousal of emotion. These we may call 'direct theories'.

By contrast, 'indirect theories' posit a functional connection between music and intentional states that have emotion content. On the most prominent of such theories, music has the function not of having a real connection (of kinds (A) or (B)) to emotion, but music has the function of (C) causing us to imagine emotion or relations to emotion. Such theories are indirect theories since the emotion figures in the intentional contents of thoughts, which it is the function of music to provoke or express. (Examples are Scruton 1997, 2009, Levinson 2006, Walton 1988.) These theories seem more plausible than direct theories.

Another possibility is (D) that music has the function of *representing* emotion. On this view—which I find the most implausible of all emotion theories of music—music is a representational art, and music somehow represents emotions. The exact shape of that theory will turn on the theory of representation that is assumed. But, when the details are filled in, I predict that the representational theory will fall out to be an indirect theory (iii) above—one that connects music with imagining emotions. This is because most plausible theories of representation involve the imagination. (See for example Wollheim 1987.)

Thus far I have laid out a kind of intellectual geography of the various emotion views that are available. Let us now step back and reflect on their rationale. Why are people interested in or tempted by emotion theories of music? Why are they thought to be candidate theories to be taken seriously?

(A) *Linguistic descriptions?*

I suspect that one source is the observed fact that we offer linguistic descriptions of music in emotion terms. This cannot be denied. However I take it that that an emotion theory of music hopes to *explain* that observed fact by positing a connection between music and emotion or thoughts about emotion.

The controversy over the connection between music and emotion is not itself *about* the fact that we describe music in terms of emotion, for such descriptions may be metaphorical and hence have nothing to do with real emotions or thoughts about real emotions. The question is whether there is a real connection between music and emotion or between music and thoughts about emotion, and this issue does not in itself concern descriptions of music using words that in their literal senses refer to emotions. Instead, the emotion theorist is arguing *from* emotion descriptions to a view of the connection between music and emotion. However, other theories may be able to explain the facts about emotion descriptions as well as or better than emotion theories. Given the prevalence of non-emotion descriptions of music, in terms of the sea, or weather, or traffic, and so on endlessly, which are uncontroversially metaphorical, one would need a special reason for treating the emotion descriptions in a different way, one that takes them more literally. In the absence of such a reason, a unitary treatment is preferable. If so, the rejection of emotion theories should be the default option. Certainly, the linguistic description of music in emotion terms does not point in the direction of emotion theories of music.

(B) *Phenomenology?*

It might be said that one factor that speaks loudly in favour of emotion theories of music is that they are phenomenologically accurate as a description of our experience of music. Does not music move us? And is not an emotion of theory of music a good explanation of that? This is a common line of thought. But I cannot do better than to reply as Peter Kivy has done. It is true that we feel *something* when we listen to music, something wonderful if we are lucky. But it is not at all obvious that we feel the emotions corresponding to the emotion descriptions that we give of the music. Call what we feel ‘arousal’ or ‘appreciation’. I take it that such feelings often happen when we listen to music, and that it is uncontroversial and theoretically neutral that they occur. The question is over which theory gives a good explanation of those feelings. What is utterly controversial is describing these feelings as emotions. Of course listening to music involves feeling in a broad sense. We are moved by musical beauty (Kivy 1990 chapter 8, and 2001, chapter 6). But that feeling is quite different from emotions such as pride, grief, anger etc. It is not just controversial but also very implausible that that musical experience involves such feelings in standard cases. We *could call* arousal by musical beauty ‘emotion’—a special musical emotion—as the great Hanslick is always at pains to concede (Hanslick 1986). But the question is about the *ordinary* emotions that music is alleged to embody. It is this that has *no* phenomenological support. (See also Kraut 2007 chapter 4.)

Jerrold Levinson denies this. He says that it is “empirically incredible” that we can ascribe expression in music dispassionately—a cold cognition of sorrow in the music, for example (Levinson 1990, pp. 317-18). But while we may agree that ascriptions of emotion terms are done on the basis of feelings of some sort or another, the question is whether they are done on the basis of feelings that correspond to the emotion terms. It is this that has no empirical plausibility. When I talk of emotions in what follows I shall assume we are talking about ordinary emotions—emotions such as anger, which do not have music as their intentional objects. It is these emotions that emotion theorists of music have

in mind.

I concede that music *can* make a person angry or proud. But, as I mentioned above, in these cases, someone might be proud of music that is not at all proud and someone can be angry about music that is not at all angry. No doubt composers are sometimes proud or ashamed of their musical works. And the volume of my neighbour's music may make me angry. One could be made angry by sentimental or serene music. But these emotions do not correspond to qualities of the music. So we may put these emotional reactions to one side. We might call these 'extra-musical' emotions. Emotion theorists are not centrally concerned with such extra-musical emotional reactions to music.

A different kind of case is this. We might be surprised by things that happen in the music. Or we might be pleased that the music is resolved in a certain way. Both these kinds of emotions are what we might call 'intra-musical emotions'. But these are also not what emotion theorists have in mind. Emotion theories of music appeal to extra-musical emotions like anger, which are not conceived as anger *at* the music. Compare: we might have emotions while following a mathematical or logic proof. One might be surprised or disappointed or pleased in a mathematical resolution, and so on. Those are mathematical or logical emotions, emotions directed towards mathematical or logical proofs. But the point of mathematics does not lie in provoking emotions! We may put such intra-musical emotions to one side.

What about moods? The crucial thing about emotions, or at least about the ordinary emotions that are often invoked to explain music and musical experience, is that they have intentionality: in Brentano's terms they are directed to an 'intentional object', a state of the world, or at least an imagined state of the world. Someone may be afraid of a crocodile, even if there is no crocodile there. Emotions have *content*. Given this, perhaps a somewhat stipulative move, it means that moods are not emotions, since they lack content. It is true that music affects moods. And people report deliberately employing music to change their mood. But mood is changed as a *consequence* of musical experience; the change of mood is not the immediate musical experience but is something caused by immediate musical experience. Even if moods were somehow central to music experience, it is difficult to see how that would encourage emotion theories of music, where the emotions in play in those theories are ordinary intentional emotions, such as anger, grief and pride, and not moods.

(C) *Value and Negative Emotion*

So the usual reasons that people think they have for accepting emotion theories of music are illusory. Furthermore, emotion theories of music have a number of difficulties, foremost among which is that emotion theories are not well placed to explain our producing or consuming music and our valuing these activities. One aspect of this general issue is what is known as the problem of negative emotion. Many emotion descriptions of music include descriptions in terms of negative emotions, such as grief or sadness. But it is hard to see why we should value or take pleasure in listening to or creating such music if the music produces or derives from such unpleasant emotions. We would have to be crazy to

want to be sad. There are replies to this objection, but they tend to make the value of the experiencing the negative emotion implausibly extrinsic. And they make it implausible contingent on various supposed causes or effects of experiencing negative emotions. To take one example, Levinson seeks to explain why we might want and value having negative emotion responses to music by claiming that we can separate the feeling of emotion from the belief part of it. Thus one is free to savour the pure feeling part (Levinson 1990, pp. 323-26). But this suggestion misses the value-tending aspect of most if not all emotion ascriptions. The feature of the music that is described in negative emotion terms is a positive value in itself. But why would even the abstracted feeling that is part of the negative emotion be something we want and value in itself? Levinson seems to be forced to entirely disconnect the supposed emotional responses from the qualities of the music that are intrinsically value-tending. The problem of negative emotions most obviously afflicts direct theories, but it also carries over to indirect theories: why imagine being miserable? Furthermore, the difficulties just rehearsed for direct theory are replicated for indirect theories. In sum, in this respect emotion theories of both kinds have a point against them.

Dialectical summary: (A) Musical descriptions in terms of emotion do not favour emotion theories and indeed given the prevalence of non-emotion descriptions points away from emotion theories. (B) The phenomenology of musical experience is neutral at best. And (C) the value problem, especially that of negative emotion, points away from emotion theories.

References

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