

JENEFER ROBINSON

Music and Emotions

Ever since Plato people have thought that there is an especially intimate relationship between music and the emotions, but in fact there are several such relationships. In this essay I explain how music can *express* emotions and *arouse* emotions. And although strictly speaking, music cannot *represent* emotions, it can tell psychological stories that lend themselves to expressive interpretations. As a philosopher, my main aim is to analyze these different relationships between emotion and music, but I also illustrate my arguments with an array of musical examples.

Some people have claimed that music can *represent* the passions. According to the Baroque doctrine of *Affektenlehre*, different movements of a suite or concerto should ›represent‹ distinct emotional states such as gaiety or melancholy. The emotion ›represented‹ was often a principal means of unifying the movement. Some Baroque composers also wrote ›character pieces‹ that portray different

characters or temperaments, sometimes illustrating that of their friends or the notabilities of the day.

But ›representation‹ in music is not strictly representation at all. A picture can identify a specific person or thing or event, but with some minor exceptions music without the aid of a title or program or the words of a song cannot do this. All it can do is present qualities, including emotion qualities such as »cheerful« and »melancholy«, that may or may not be attributed to or characterize some specific individual.

In the Romantic era, it became a commonplace that music can *express* emotions, whether the emotions of a character or protagonist in the music or the emotions of the composer himself. Some theorists believe that musical expressiveness is a matter of the listener's experiencing music as resembling expressive human gestures such as vocal intonations and expressive movements and behavior. On this view when we say that a piece of music is expressive of sadness, we are not saying that there is anybody around who is actually expressing any sadness. It's just that the music is experienced as sounding like or moving like a person who is sad. Others believe that when we hear music as expressive of emotion, we hear or imagine an agent or persona in the music, the ›owner‹ of the states expressed. Even some ›pure‹ instrumental music – especially some music from the Romantic era – can be heard as containing a persona who is expressing emotions. My own view is that expressing emotion in music in the full Romantic sense should be thought of as in essentials very much like the expression of emotion in ordinary life: it is primarily something that a composer or a persona in the music *does* or achieves, rather than primarily something detected or experienced by listeners.

Finally, I turn to the question of whether and how music can arouse emotions in its listeners. In Book III of *The Republic*, Plato argued that the musical mode known as the »Lydian« mode should be banned from the education of future governors of the state on the grounds that it makes people lascivious and lazy, whereas the Dorian mode should be encouraged because it makes people brave and virtuous. There is now ample evidence that Plato was right to think that music affects the emotions of its listeners. There are several ways in which it does this. As Peter Kivy has remarked, listeners often get pleasure from the beauty and clever craftsmanship of a well-constructed piece of music. Leonard Meyer has shown how having certain emotions is a mode of understanding certain music. Thus when listening to a piece in sonata form, we might feel anxiety at the delayed return of the tonic, bewilderment when the keys modulate further and further from the tonic and relief when finally the tonic returns. Another way in which music arouses emotions is by getting us to respond sympathetically to emotions expressed in the music by the composer, or his surrogate in the music. Finally, there is good evidence that music arouses emotions and moods in a more direct bodily way as well, influencing the autonomic system and the motor activ-

ity of listeners. These various mechanisms of emotional arousal often function simultaneously so as to produce powerful, complex, ambiguous emotional states.

References

- Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music*, Princeton 1991.
- A. J. Blood/R. J. Zatorre, Intensely Pleasurable Responses to Music Correlate with Activity in Brain Regions Implicated in Reward and Emotion, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA* 98 (2001), 11818–11823.
- R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, Oxford 1963.
- Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice*, Berkeley 1974.
- , Schubert's Promissory Note: An Exercise in Musical Hermeneutics, in: Walter Frisch (ed.), *Schubert: Critical and Analytical Studies*, Lincoln 1986, 13–30.
- Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, New York 1994.
- Stephen Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression*, Ithaca 1994.
- , Artistic Expression and the Hard Case of Pure Music, in: Matthew Kieran (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, Oxford 2006, 179–191.
- Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed*, New York 2003.
- Phoebe Ellsworth, William James and Emotion: Is a Century of Fame Worth a Century of Misunderstanding?, *Psychological Review* 101 (1994), 222–229.

³² My thanks to Cathryn Long for very useful comments. All the issues I address in this paper are discussed in more detail in Robinson 2005.

- Charles Fisk, *Returning Cycles: Contexts for the Interpretation of Schubert's Impromptus and Last Sonatas*, Berkeley 2001.
- Nico Frijda, *The Emotions*, Cambridge 1986.
- Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, Indianapolis 1968.
- Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation*, Bloomington 1994.
- Edward Higginbottom, François Couperin (*le grand*), in: Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. 4, London 1980, 868.
- John Hospers, The Concept of Artistic Expression, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1954/55), 313–344.
- Wolfgang Iser, The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach, in: Jane P. Tompkins (ed.), *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, Baltimore 1980, 50–69.
- William James, *The Principles of Psychology* in: Frederick H. Burkhardt (ed.), *The Works of William James*, Cambridge, MA 1981.
- Patrik N. Juslin, Communicating Emotion in Music Performance: A Review and Theoretical Framework, in: Patrik N. Juslin/John A. Sloboda (eds.), *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research*, Oxford 2001, 309–337.
- Gregory Karl/Jenefer Robinson, Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony and the Musical Expression of Cognitively Complex Emotions, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995), 401–415. Reprinted in: Jenefer Robinson (ed.), *Music and Meaning*, Ithaca 1997, 154–178.
- Peter Kivy, *The Corded Shell: Reflections on Musical Expression*, Princeton 1980. Reissued with additional essays as: *Sound Sentiment: An Essay on the Musical Emotions*, Philadelphia 1989.
- , *Sound and Semblance: Reflections on Musical Representation*, Princeton 1984.
- , *Music Alone*, Ithaca 1990.
- , *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, New York 2002.
- Carol L. Krumhansl, An Exploratory Study of Musical Emotions and Psychophysiology, *Canadian Journal of Experimental Psychology* 51 (1997), 336–352.
- Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, Cambridge, MA 1976.
- Joseph E. LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*, New York 1996.
- Jerrold Levinson, Musical Expressiveness, in: J. L., *The Pleasures of Aesthetics*, Ithaca 1996, 90–125.
- , Musical Expressiveness as Hearability-as-expression, in: Matthew Kieran (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, Oxford 2006, 192–204.
- Daniel Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, New York 2006.
- Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, Chicago 1956.
- Sam Morgenstern (ed.), *Composers on Music: An Anthology of Composers' Writings from Palestrina to Copland*, New York 1956.
- Anthony Newcomb, Once More »Between Absolute and Program Music«: Schumann's Second Symphony, *19th Century Music* 7 (1984): 233–50.
- , Action and Agency in Mahler's Ninth Symphony, Second Movement, in: Jenefer Robinson (ed.), *Music and Meaning*, Ithaca 1997, 131–153.

John Reed, *The Schubert Song Companion*, New York 1985.

Jenefer Robinson, Music as a Representational Art, in: Philip Alperson (ed.), *What is Music?*, Pennsylvania 1994, 165–192.

–, Emotion: Biological Fact or Social Construction?, in: Robert C. Solomon (ed.), *Thinking about Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotion*, New York 2004, 28–43.

–, *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*, Oxford 2005.

–, Can Music Function as a Metaphor of Emotional Life?, in: Kathleen Stock (ed.), *Philosophers on Music: Experience, Meaning, and Work*, Oxford 2007 (Robinson 2007a).

–, Expression and Expressiveness in Art, *On-line Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics* 4 (2007) (Robinson 2007b).

Klaus R. Scherer/Marcel R. Zentner, Emotional Effects of Music: Production Rules, in: Patrik N. Juslin/John A. Sloboda (eds.), *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research*, Oxford 2001, 361–392,

John A. Sloboda/Patrik N. Juslin, Psychological Perspectives on Music and Emotion, in: P. N. J./J. A. S. (eds.), *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research*, Oxford 2001, 71–104.

Fritz Strack/Leonard L. Martin/Sabine Stepper, Inhibiting and Facilitating Conditions of the Human Smile: A Nonobtrusive Test of the Facial Feedback Hypothesis, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54 (1988), 768–777.

Tzvetan Todorov, *Le Grammaire du Décaméron*, The Hague 1969.

Susan Youens, *Retracing a Winter's Journey: Schubert's Winterreise*, Ithaca 1991.

Full-length article in: JLT 1/2 (2007), 395-419.

How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Jenefer Robinson, Music and Emotions.

In: JLTonline (19.03.2009)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-000466

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-000466>