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THE QUESTION OF SEEKING SADNESS: EXPRESSIVENESS AND EMOTIONAL EFFECT IN MUSIC

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Abstract: The paper aims to broadly touch on the topic of emotion in music, with a focus on the age-old question of why humans continuously seek out, listen and enjoy an aesthetic experience that, at first sight, brings nothing but emotional pain. In other words, why do we listen to sad music? In the first part of the paper I discuss a few topics regarding what it means for music to express emotion. I introduce the Expression theory and touch on how music and the emotions it expresses translates back to us, the listeners, as well as what the origins of this theory are. Next, using the framework from authors such as J. Levinson and P. Kivy, I draw a distinction between “life-sadness” and “music sadness”, and question whether the emotions aroused by the musical experience are of the same nature as the ones we experience in our lives. Lastly, I mention a few possible explanations for our overarching question: is it the beauty of the musical experience, the cathartic properties, the lack of real-life consequences, or perhaps something more?

Keywords: emotions, music, sadness, expression theory, negative feelings, catharsis, aesthetic experience.

PROBLEMA CĂUTĂRII TRISTEȚII: EXPRESIVITATE ȘI EFECT EMOȚIONAL ÎN MUZICĂ

Rezumat: Lucrarea își propune să adreseze subiectul emoției în muzică, încercând să răspundă la întrebarea de ce oamenii continuă să caute, să asculte și să se bucure de o experiență estetică care, la prima vedere, nu le aduce decât durere emoțională. Cu alte cuvinte, de ce ascultăm muzică tristă? În prima parte a lucrării discut câteva subiecte referitoare la ce înseamnă faptul că muzica exprimă emoții. Introduc teoria

expresivității și abordez modul în care muzica și emoțiile pe care le exprimă se întorc înapoi către noi, ascultătorii, precum și care sunt originile acestei teorii. Apoi, folosind contextul teoretic propus de autori precum J. Levinson și P. Kivy, fac o distincție între „tristețea din viață” și „tristețea muzicală” și mă întreb dacă emoțiile trezite de experiența muzicală sunt de aceeași natură cu cele pe care le experimentăm în viața noastră de fiecare zi. În cele din urmă, menționez câteva răspunsuri posibile pentru întrebarea noastră inițială: este vorba de frumusețea experienței muzicale, de proprietățile sale catartice, de faptul că lipsesc consecințele din viața reală sau este vorba de ceva mai mult?

Cuvinte-cheie: emoții, muzică, tristețe, teoria expresivității, sentimente negative, catharsis, experiență estetică.

1. Introduction

One of the central questions that seems to arise when approaching the broad subject of philosophy of music is that regarding the connection we inevitably find between music and the deeply human experience of emotion. Music is defined in many ways by its ability to translate into an universal language the individual experience of existing, and what that entails from an emotional standpoint, without sacrificing the authenticity of said emotions.

This is perhaps what makes the study of philosophy of music less intimidating than other fields of philosophy; the arousal of emotions caused by music is a universal experience, and although most people simply take this experience at face-value, simply listening to the music and accepting and immersing themselves in whatever emotions it may cause, it is not far-fetched to be provoked into further inquiry about this phenomenon: why does music often bring about deep, sometimes troubling emotional shifts in the listener? Is this impact greater and more rapid than other forms of art, or is music special in the way it strikes our affections? I will focus here mostly on the questions that have been discussed time and again, particularly because it poses an interesting paradox that enhances the sheer peculiarity of what it means to be human: Why do humans, intelligent creatures self-situated at the top of the trophic chain, seek and seem to enjoy an aesthetic experience that seems to bring us great turmoil, deep emotional pain, a plethora of feelings that bring us in a state of great disturbance? In other words, why do we enjoy sad music?

2. Discussing the expression theory

Before diving into the issue of negative emotions being correlated with an enjoyable experience people seek out, we must first briefly discuss what it means for a piece of music, a non-psychological agent, to express emotion. A way to look at it is considering the artwork not

as itself actively expressing an emotion, because of its innate inability as non-living thing to produce emotion, but as *an expression of emotion*, more precisely as the artist's outward manifestation, be it composer or performer¹. This Expression theory is largely discussed in the world of aesthetics, and it entails in some of its variations the direct transfer of emotion between the artist and its art, in such way that the listener is able to quickly and clearly recognise and emulate said emotions - this way, the artwork, in our case, the piece of music, metamorphosizes itself into a window that allows us to see the emotional state and labor involved into the process of creation, an otherwise deeply intimate and inaccessible view - here we may mention the otherwise popular but cliché notion that music is "the language of emotions".

One philosopher that formulates this theory in his work *Art as Experience* is John Dewey, who believes art cannot be separated from the process in which it was created or from the individuality of the artists. An objection that is relevant to our discussion regards the private nature of this very process - how are we, the audience, to know with certainty that the musician expressed itself, its true emotions, into the piece of music, the only medium we have access to?

What is crucial here is the perspective from which we look at the end result - the artwork is not meant to perfectly and accurately convey an emotion that might immediately be recognised and emulated by the listener. Michael H. Mitias calls it "a reality invested with powers, relations, and potentiality for a form, a form that can appeal to the human imagination in a certain way"². The expression theory therefore can be stretched farther than considering the art - the music - as a piece of media which informs us of the artists emotions, but as a crucial part of an organic process in which every step is interconnected with the next.

And so it is no surprise that when a piece of music is invested with great passion, deep sorrow or ecstatic joy, it translates back to us, the listeners, and it resonates so greatly that we find ourselves filled with mirroring emotions. In that particular aesthetic experience, we are both disconnected from all other external stimuli and engagements, receptive only to whatever emotion the music is feeding

us, but also deeply engaged in it, processing it organically alongside our own experiences, traumas, memories, and drawing parallels on what has made us feel the same way the piece of art we are currently admiring is also making us feel.

3. Origins of the expressiveness discourse

The idea that music induces emotion is in no way a breakthrough - it has been postulated since the beginning of philosophy. We know from the platonic dialogues that we learn different emotional movements and whether not they are beneficial to us through music. Music becomes a means to an end in achieving, or coming closer to what Plato calls virtues. His writings are the blueprint as far as music shaping the individuality of a human is concerned. Aristotle too proposes that musical movement can be identified with emotional movement, the soul and music almost overlapping in some cases³.

The platonic conceptualization of music involves both body and soul, and how it affects the psyche, the main receptor for music. Music becomes a significant tool in treating the soul, particularly by using sensation to counteract on the disturbance harming the soul by introducing it to a new, different “disturbance” or movement, and penetrating the space in which body and soul meet, in order to cure⁴.

4. The emotional effect and its doubtful nature

In order to grasp the essence of how music evokes an immersion of the listener in whatever emotion the piece is impregnated with, we must delve into different perspectives and standpoints on the veracity of said emotions - are they mere simulacra of genuine, human emotional movements that are sparked in our internal dimensions by external factors?

Some deny the nature of this effect altogether, more inclined to view it as a series of memories and “images” of emotion that are triggered in sequence, dependant on the piece of music being listened to. One argument in favor of this stance would be the swiftness with which a song brushes through multiple states of emotion, and

consequently the inability of a person to keep up with this brisk pace - listening to music becomes rather a nostalgic experience, where past experiences are evoked as memories that bring along the emotional aspect of them⁵.

That is not to say that the emotions we feel when listening to music are make-believe, but rather that the medium of music is the one that doesn't belong to our physical world and doesn't share the same characteristics. Our emotions are born and molded within the logistic confines of this newly-created world. We are both aware of the thing that is causing our emotional turmoil and also attached to it by our own doing⁶.

Bringing this back to our question - why does our habit of actively seeking sad music keep prevailing despite the obvious lack of common sense behind it - we might observe that from welcoming the sad emotions of sombre music to possibly welcoming painful memories that are embedded with said emotion is only a small, insignificant step. If we were to believe that music doesn't express, or better well isn't an expression of sadness (or any other emotion for that fact), the argument of an irrefutable connection between music and emotions is not brought to a halt. In a phenomenological sense, the memories evoked are brought along into our present being not only as a linear sequence of past events, but also having the affective layer draped over them, forcing us to relive them as a slightly dimmer intensity.

In *Music and negative emotion*, Jerold Levinson states that "the standard emotional response to a musical work (...) is not in truth a case of full-fledged emotion"⁷. He calls this phenomenon the sadness-reaction, and at the crux of his argument he places the notion that music can't be an object "for an emotion to be directed on"⁸, while also lacking other elements that define and are necessary for an emotion to occur. In other words, music shortfalls in inducing a bona fide sadness, owing to the fact that said sadness isn't anchored in the context of real events, but comes close, at least when it is extraordinary in quality, to mimicking the characteristic feeling of that emotion.

John Hospers makes an important topic distinction that may be helpful when trying to separate the three agents: the music, the

emotion, and the listener. Hospers talks about a so-called “music-sadness” and a “life-sadness”. The first is “depersonalized” and carefully curated to resemble the second in great detail, without occurring organically, in a situation we may encounter life-sadness, be it a tragic event or personal hardship⁹.

5. The question of seeking sadness

Peter Kivy argues against any reasoning that may fall under the umbrella of the expression theory – that music causes in its listeners an emotion by expressing said emotion – and brings to attention an interesting and quite obvious criticism. If said theory would be universally applicable, why would sad music still exist? Who would listen and voluntarily put themselves through feelings of misery, despair, fear? Despite that, people have listened and will continue to listen to ballads, tragic operas, and sombre choirs as long as music as we know it continues to exist.

One way to explain this phenomenon is by following Kivy’s argument: what motivates us to seek out and enjoy sad music is the musical beauty behind it – more so than the emotion it evokes, we are moved by the aesthetic experience of listening to a great piece of music, beautifully crafted, even if the general tone of it is melancholic. Schopenhauer talks about music as the “liberating” art, where this characteristic becomes defining to it. It is liberating in a sense that pain and other reality-induced woes cease when entering the world created by music. Kivy paints the musical experience as a pleasurable one, in the same way the shift between an intense feeling of pain to sudden relief can be full of joy¹⁰.

Music allows us to temporarily leave our known plane of being and enter the one created by the mere existence of music, despite its lack of tangible, visible content – unlike literature, painting, film, there is no visual element to cling to and help bring the art closer into our known experience, thus making it easier to digest and catalogue into the confines of our own comfort zones. In some senses, we could adventure to say that music leaves us impaired when it comes to all other senses except hearing. Though that sounds like a negative trait,

that might be precisely why we turn to music for comfort, and why we welcome the experience of sad music particularly in times when our disposition already matches that melancholy. By throwing us into the unfamiliar, music liberates us from what we were trying to escape from in the first place.

What makes life-sadness so much more harrowing are the “associated beliefs”¹¹ that it inevitably brings about. The momentary, familiar state of emotional distress is only the surface, the tip of the metaphorical iceberg. One could make use of the classic platonic cave allegory to create an image in which life-sadness represents the real world outside the walls of the cave and the music-sadness is simply the shadows being painted by the flames. With this type of emotion comes along the realisation that whatever factors are causing it – a broken heart over a lost love, the poignant absence of someone’s early departure from earth, a person or group of people with malicious intent hurting us deliberately – are in fact out there, and not a simple thing of fiction. This emotion goes existing beyond the present in which the intensity of the effects are at their peak; it also tends to have real-life consequences, shape characters and lives in ways we might not desire them to, making us more guarded, prone to difficulties in trusting those around us.

Music gives us the opportunity to “appreciate negatively toned feelings”¹², by stripping itself of all other implications, and therefore allows us to better understand them. The experience of music-sadness, or “the feeling involved in some recognized emotion”¹³, becomes desirable and extends itself to giving this experience a literacy not available otherwise. Listening to sad music may help us understand better why we are sad, as well as help us explore the depth and facets of that sadness, and by making it familiar, also making it easier to cope with.

Levinson brings up the catharsis aspect of the musical experience, understood here as the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotions. This manner of purging allows us to give our emotional grievances a means of release by choosing voluntarily to engage with them when listening to anguish-inducing music. It is however not sensible to assume that the cathartic

effect has such an important role when it comes to understanding humans' everlasting attraction to music. An argument that has been brought up against this praised cathartic value of music is one similar to what Alan Goldman draws attention to. In order to appoint music with this type of healing quality, one must assume first that said negative emotions exist and need releasing in the first place¹⁴, which is not always necessary the case. One could point in the crowd of a recital of Mozart's *Lacrimosa* and manage to find plenty of perfectly happy, fulfilled people, simply enjoying the music rather than using it as some sort of method of releasing.

6. Conclusions

Throughout this paper we have briefly discussed the most widely discussed philosophical question concerning music – the emotion behind it, how it expresses it and how we, the listeners, receive it, and in which form. The overarching question that we chose to focus on was “Why do people listen to sad music?”, and we tackled it by first discussing a few key elements needed when approaching the subject; the expression theory, the emotional effect and whether the effects aroused by music are of true nature or simple imitation, the distinction between “life-sadness” and “music-sadness”, and lastly, possible explanations for the paradox of deliberately seeking out negative emotions.

The pleasurable experience of listening to a sad, heart-wrenching song late at night is about more than “enduring” the gruesome aspects of it, the minor key chords, the melancholic atmosphere it creates, all just for the sake of enjoying a beautiful piece of art. Similarly, it is more than a sort of masochistic exercise of seeking out controlled amounts of emotional pain as a patch for our internal struggles. Humans seem to never fail maintaining their reputation as the weirdest species on this planet – perhaps that is the inexplicable reason why we have and we will continue to enjoy sad music, while also embracing the emotionally painful aspect as a pivotal part of it.

Notes:

- ¹ Andrew Kania, 2017, "The Philosophy of Music", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition).
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/music/#Bib>.
- ² Michael H. Mitias, 1992, "Dewey's Theory of Expression", *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* Vol. 26 (No. 3): 47.
- ³ Mary B. Schoen-Nazzaro, 1978, "Plato and Aristotle on the Ends of Music", *Laval théologique et philosophique* vol. 34: 264-266.
- ⁴ Francesco Pelosi, 2019, *Plato on music, soul and body* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press): 19.
- ⁵ Jerrold Levinson, 1982, *Music and negative emotion* (Maryland: Pacific Philosophical Quarterly): 330.
- ⁶ Alan Goldman, 1995, "Emotions in Music (A Postscript)", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 53 (No.1): 66.
- ⁷ Jerrold Levinson, 1982, *Music and negative emotion* (Maryland: Pacific Philosophical Quarterly): 332.
- ⁸ Jerrold Levinson, 1982, *Music and negative emotion*, 332.
- ⁹ John Hospers, 1954, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 314.
- ¹⁰ Peter Kivy, 2002, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press): 260.
- ¹¹ Jerrold Levinson, 1982, *Music and negative emotion*, 332.
- ¹² Jerrold Levinson, 1982, *Music and negative emotion*, 339.
- ¹³ Jerrold Levinson, 1982, *Music and negative emotion*, 338.
- ¹⁴ Alan Goldman, 1995, "Emotions in Music (A Postscript)", 68.

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