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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.

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