

## MUSICAL EXPRESSIVENESS

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*(First published May 31, 2020)*

It. *Espressività musicale*; Fr. *Expressivité musicale*; Germ. *Musikalische Ausdruckskraft*; Span. *Expresividad musical*. Expressiveness indicates the faculty to show and exhibit emotional-affective states. Since the ancient world, expressiveness referring to music discloses itself as an intensive and paradoxical property at the same time: on the one hand, music would have the ability to arouse emotional states with an immediacy incomparable to other arts, while on the other hand – especially where it is not accompanied by a text – it would be unable to offer representative pretexts to emotionality. Hence, an attempt has been made to anchor the expressive-emotional potential of music to its own syntactic, grammatical and aesthetic properties, without neglecting the listener's empathic involvement. The question of expressiveness has consequently stimulated a heated debate on the nature of musical emotions which at times have been understood as real emotions and other times as a cognitively weakened and fictional reflections of our inner condition.

### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

In the context of Anglo-American philosophy, a heated debate has started since the second half of the twentieth century on the topic of musical expression. Following historical paths, to talk about the expressiveness of music means, today as in the past, to confirm the evidence of a link of close interdependence and proximity between music and emotions. Moving from this basic assumption, the question of musical expressiveness has been observed in order to understand "how it is possible to justify the idea that music can be expressive of feelings". Specifically, one wonders how "only music", 'naked' or 'pure' music (with no text, title or program), which art released from the representative dimension of the other arts, can be expressive of common emotions, such as love, hate, sadness, fear (Vizzardelli 2007; Arbo 2010; Bertinetto 2012; Lentini 2014).

The discussion begins in the sign of a downsizing of the formalistic theses supported by E. Hanslick in the mid-nineteenth century – which dismissed the relationship between music and emotions as aesthetically essential (Nattiez 2007) – and of a tribute to S. Langer, to whom the merit has been given for having brought attention to the expressive potential of music. Langer would have succeeded in freeing the field from the inadequate symptomatic theory of expressiveness, according to which music is expressive because it arouses emotions in the listener (Langer 1942; 1953). This theory is the same that has characterised – at least according to the hermeneutic recovery of some well-known representatives of today's debate – the history of musical thought, from Plato to the eighteenth century, with the theory of affects, namely the *Affeketenlhere*.

In the footsteps of Langer's proposal, a large part of the analytical community renounces the traditional dispositional theory, remodels some aspects of the aesthetic theory of Schopenhauer (1819) and Hanslick (1854), and opens up to discussion with the urgency to reaffirm the expressive value of music, by reacting with an alternative response labeled as "The cognitive Theory". The most extreme idea, defended by those who most explicitly adhere to the cognitivist turn, is that music can be defined as expressive art to the extent that emotions belong to it and are contained in it. Emotions don't belong to music because it can express them – in the way a sentient being can do it – but because they are anchored in its formal contour (*Contour Theory*), an extrinsic profile of its aesthetic physiognomy (Kivy 1980). According to the cognitivist perspective, the most radical idea of musical expressiveness is that emotions, even before they are felt, can be recognized in music. Music can certainly generate emotions in the listener, however one should not make the mistake of superimposing and/or confusing this experience level with its emotional properties (*Pathetic Fallacy*: Budd 1985). The philosopher P. Kivy is the most radical supporter of this theory. Kivy is among the first to reaffirm the need to defend the expressiveness of music, while claiming its formal autonomy at the same time. It is a matter of identifying an explanation of the expressiveness capable of supporting the *externality requirement* of music, for it is, in the end, a special object among the others of the world, ontologically independent from the contingent and ordinary experiences of life, as characterized by a marked formal vocation. This expressive dynamic is supported by a precise aesthetic theory, the Isomorphic Theory (Lentini 2011). Its original field of application is mathematical, follows the one of the *Gestalt* Psychology studies, and later seems to have changed sign in the philosophical-musical theory of C. Pratt. Its formula appears simplified like in a motto: music plays the way emotions feel (Pratt 1931). Those who resort to the isomorphic thesis point out a relationship of both similarity and analogy between the structural properties of music and the physical properties of human feelings, because of the way these feelings can be experienced/felt internally (Internalist Thesis: Budd 1985), and also because such feelings can manifest themselves on the plane of our external life – the physiognomy of the features of face, gait, posture, expressive behavior (emotion characteristics in appearance: Davies 1994). In J. Levinson's theory of the person, this isomorphic hypothesis is instead shown as an experiential definition, referable to the imaginative plane of the listener, who empathizes with music, conceived as a musical agent with undefined traits. Among the emerging theories of today's debate, Levinson's is structured (in the series of the list of *desiderata*: Levinson 1996), and cannot be traced back to the cognitive turning point nor on the side of the theorists of the *Arousal Theory*.

As a break from the theoretical line of cognitive thinkers, the theoretical supporters of the excitational theory, renamed Arousal Theory, can be mentioned here. Their explanation of musical expressiveness asserts itself as a polemical response to Kivy's theory. The most radical of the contenders is D. Matravers, who reaffirms the idea that music is expressive mainly because it has the power to arouse and sometimes excite emotions. There is a radical reversal of perspective: music is expressive because of emotions, as they are *felt* before they are *recognized* (Matravers 1998).

Bringing the explanation of musical expressiveness to a subjective polarity does not mean to incur the error of the pathetic fallacy that cognitivist theorists attribute to arousal theorists – as carried out in the ranks of minute analyses. What is most clearly stated is the idea of an intertwining, of a link of close interdependence between the listener's emotional response and the expressive dynamics of music. Musical expressiveness does not coincide – as dispositionist theorists defend themselves – with the physiological activation of the emotional response. Music can understand it, but it does not end in it. Even in this case, it would not be true that music is expressive in the same way in which, for instance, the intake of a substance – be it a drug or a digestif – can generate physiologically associated reactions. This explains the adoption, also by *Arousal* theorists, of the isomorphic thesis, here inflected in other variants (Walton 1988; Robinson 1994; Ridley 1995).

Emotions aroused by music in the listener are to be understood as emotions whose cognitive component is weakened. Such emotions are to be understood as *Fühlen* rather than as *Gefühl*, as they would be devoid of the intentional and representative component of the emotions we commonly experience (Matravers 1991; 1998). They cannot be considered real emotions as, for example, in the theory of P. Kivy (1999; 2002).

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#### HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

D. Lentini, *Musical Expressiveness*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Spring 2020 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2020/spring/XXXX.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630081.

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D. Lentini, *Musical Expressiveness*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 3, Milano, Mimesis, 2021.