

Can Music Portray Happiness or Sadness?

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In his lecture “Can Music Portray Happiness or Sadness” Stephen Johnson stated that music itself can express nothing. Aspects of happiness and melancholia are constantly changing throughout our lives and are therefore difficult to define. Following the stream of thought of previous speakers, Stephen Johnson’s talk finally brought some sound into the conference, showing that there is no better way to try and explain these emotional responses than to actually experience the music itself - in this case performed by musicians Ian Brown on the keyboard accompanied by the Sacconi Quartet.

From the outset we found this to be the most interactive talk of the conference. In posing the question of which art forms inspire greater emotional response a show of hands made it quite clear that, while other arts can stir deep emotions, music was the form that most induced an emotional response amongst the majority of the conference delegates. According to Stephen Johnson, there are many composers who are quite aware of the emotional response to certain harmonic structures and intuitively play with this in creating their music with the intention of leading listeners through a well thought out emotional journey.

While the minor keys seem to induce feelings of sorrow and sadness, major keys appear to convey happiness and lightness of spirit. To illustrate the different “moods” attributed to some of these forms of musical compositions, Ian Brown played pieces by Beethoven, Bach, Wagner and Haydn. The latter served as an example of how, along with specific keys, tempo can also impact upon musical “mood”: while his pieces, mostly performed in the major key, are thought of as “happy”, when played slower they sound quite melancholic.

Yet, just as Stephen Johnson was making a clear point that there are tonal shifts and specific notes that we unconsciously associate with negative or positive feelings, he also mentioned the issue of musical ambiguity and how a composer’s emotional state during a period of inspiration can be simultaneously reflected back in the music. This ultimately brings the piece back to the artist and makes it difficult perhaps for listeners to pinpoint their own specific emotional responses.

The use of actual melodies to “illustrate” the talk was quite refreshing, making it more accessible to the audience and showing that music is indeed more sensorial than logical. Communicating about it, or putting it into words, will never have the same effect as actually hearing (and feeling) it. At the same time, this was a conference about the neurological aspects of music and we felt Stephen Johnson could have made more reference to neurological research to complement the views expressed. Our impression, not only from this talk but the conference as a whole, was that rather than combining neurological and philosophical aspects of the theme to illustrate a broad understanding of music’s effect on the listener, speakers were adopting an “either/or” approach and on occasion were perhaps overly concerned with refuting contradictory views.

Along with a perceived lack of neurological information there was also a failure to investigate any music other than classical; apart from a passing reference to a Prince song, no other contemporary music was addressed. If anything, Stephen Johnson’s talk could have shone a light on other popular music forms; in this time of musical mass production and the utilization of computer software in music creation this might have been considered. For example, what are the key ingredients in the apparent recipes for pop genres and what are

the emotions tapped by them? Is there a neurological study behind the apparent formula used to produce this kind of music and the widespread acceptance of it by the public? We also missed references to non-western music which also raises some very important questions. Are these responses to certain keys and tempos universal or do they vary according to cultural differences? And in a more global context, are happiness or sadness in music synonymous with crying or laughing, fear or desire?

Given the time constraints for each speaker the conclusion we reached was that, while extremely interesting and thought-provoking, the talk could only scratch the surface of a much deeper subject. While music induces feelings of happiness or sadness and can also be a reflection of the artist's emotional state we are still left wondering what the neuroscience behind this phenomenon is and if there will ever be a clear and objective answer to the question: 'Can Music Portray Happiness or Sadness?'