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Emotions in the Listener: A Criterion of Artistic Relevance

I. INTRODUCTION

Philosophers of music and psychologists have examined the various ways in which music is capable of arousing emotions in a listener. Among philosophers, opinions diverge as to the different types of music-induced emotions and as to their relevance to music listening. A somewhat neglected question concerns the possibility of developing a general criterion for the artistic relevance of music-induced emotions. In this paper, I will try to formulate such a criterion. In whatever way music may induce emotions and regardless of the sorts of emotion music is taken to arouse, a given emotion will qualify as artistically relevant if and only if it is caused by appropriate listening, it is dependent on features of the piece of music as a work of art and is capable of further directing our attention to such features.

II. PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

The broadest approach to the issue of music-induced emotions is to consider music as a stimulus much as any other and to describe the different mechanisms by means of which music is able to arouse emotion. This is of clear interest in psychological research.[1] The philosopher of art, however, is interested in the emotions aroused by music especially if they bear some sort of relation to the piece of music as the work of art it is. For instance, the idiosyncratic association of a piece with a sad memory might result in sadness being aroused whenever the piece is played, but this fact is not artistically relevant. However intuitive this might seem, philosophers of art have not elaborated, as far as I am aware, a *general criterion* for the artistic relevance of music-induced emotions. It will be my aim in this paper to develop such a criterion.

Arousal theorists contend that musical expressiveness is of a piece with the music's capacity to arouse emotions in a listener.[2] On this account, the artistic relevance of music-induced emotions is at least partially explained by their connection with musical expressiveness. In this paper, however, I am assuming that expressiveness is independent of emotional arousal – although it might *as a matter of fact* often produce such an arousal. This is a reasonable assumption because a general criterion of artistic relevance for music-induced emotions would also be applicable to the emotional arousal that arousal theorists consider essentially linked to musical expressiveness. I should also stress that I intend my criterion to apply only to pure music, as the issue of artistic relevance is both simpler (in that it involves fewer components) and more problematic (in that it is most puzzling) in the case of instrumental music.

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (1): GENERAL INTEREST IN AESTHETIC RELEVANCE

While there has been, to my knowledge, no attempt to formulate a general criterion of artistic relevance for music-induced emotions, the same cannot be said in the case of *aesthetic* relevance, broadly construed. Such a general criterion for aesthetic relevance (extended to all arts, and potentially to non-artistic contexts) has been formulated by Marcia Eaton: she holds that "A statement (or gesture) is aesthetically relevant if and only if it draws attention (perception, reflection) to an aesthetic property."[3]

Allen Carlson claims that the question concerning aesthetic relevance is that of "what, if anything, of that which an object does not present to the senses is relevant to its appropriate appreciation."[4] He develops a model for the aesthetic appreciation of nature that is focused on information about the objects of appreciation, and especially on knowledge provided by natural science. Both Eaton and Carlson focus then on *information* that is external to the object of appreciation. (Eaton mentions both statements and

gestures, while Carlson focuses more on justified true beliefs.) Neither of them mentions emotions. It seems safe to assume that emotions, as states undergone by the appreciator, could be *brought about* by the object in question and, in turn, have an influence on our appreciation. This, as we shall see in the following section, is the bottom-line of Jenefer Robinson's take on at least *some* music-induced emotions.

Unlike Eaton and Carlson, in this paper I will speak of 'artistic relevance', *in lieu* of 'aesthetic', and I will do so for reasons that are worth clarifying. I believe that it is important to focus on musical works *as works of art*, that is, as products of a certain socio-historical context, the properties of which are tied to their position in art-historical development. In this paper I assume such a contextualist framework without further justification, as this seems widely agreed upon. The relevance of this point for my concerns will be evident when discussing appropriations and quotations of past music. What one can learn from accounts of aesthetic relevance such as Eaton's and Carlson's, however, is that, in order to qualify as aesthetically relevant to the appreciation of an object, something needs to be tied in some way to that object, either because it discloses something about the object's properties, or because it is capable of directing our attention to such properties. Call this the *objective condition* for aesthetic relevance. I shall assume that something similar also applies to the case of artistic relevance.

IV. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (2): ARTISTIC RELEVANCE OF MUSIC-INDUCED EMOTIONS

In the literature on music-induced emotions one does not find anything like a full-fledged criterion for the artistic relevance of music-induced emotions.

Peter Kivy formulates four 'rules of engagement', that is, "conditions that, I think, a successful account of how absolute music might arouse mood in listeners must satisfy".[5] Although mainly concerned with moods, he specifies that the same conditions apply in the case of full-fledged emotions. His final condition states that "the moods that the theory is concerned with must be moods relevant to our appreciation and enjoyment of absolute music as *music*; that is, as *art*."[6] This leaves open what it means for a mood (or emotion) to be relevant to our appreciation of absolute music as art, and such is the question that I attempt to answer in this paper.

Somewhat close to a criterion of artistic relevance for music-induced emotions is the psychologist Klaus Scherer's distinction between utilitarian and aesthetic emotions. This distinction, however, is based on a Kantian notion of *disinterested pleasure* that is falling out of favour and that I wish to dispense with.[7]

Finally, it should be mentioned that Jenefer Robinson has devoted detailed observations to the topic of music-induced emotions, showing how these help the listener to understand the music. Our emotional responses to expressive music can help us understand the music's expressive properties. Similarly, emotional responses to the music's development draw attention to the music's structure.[8] Despite this, Robinson does not attempt to develop a general criterion such as the one I am after here.[9]

A CRITERION OF ARTISTIC RELEVANCE

What form should a general test for the artistic relevance of music-induced emotions take, and what requirements should it respect? As we have seen, philosophers who have examined aesthetic relevance were concerned with what I called the 'objective condition': aesthetic appreciation is directed to specific objects, and whatever enhances appreciation must be related to such an object or focus our attention on some features of it. A similar requirement will apply in the case of artistic relevance, with the added complication that the object in question is appreciated as a work of art. In addition to this, a further condition concerns emotions as a causal event: we need to rule out cases in which an emotional response merely co-occurs with the music, but is not caused by the listening process. I will call this the 'causal condition'. On the basis of these two general requirements I will outline the main elements of the test for artistic relevance and sketch a tentative formulation.

A preliminary requisite seems to be what I will call *appropriate listening*, which is constituted by two further conditions: *competence* and *attention.* Appropriate listening is the *focused listening* of a listener at least *minimally competent* with regard to the music style in question. While I contend that a criterion such as the one I am after need not specify what exactly counts as minimally competent listening, I will assume as valid the characterization of minimal musical literacy defended by Jerrold Levinson under the name of 'concatenationism'.[10] He holds that minimally competent music listening is characterized by the experience of *quasi-hearing* the development of the music after the moment that is being actually heard. Quasi-hearing is the *vivid anticipation* of the music's development on the basis of a *vivid recollection* of the preceding bit of music. On this account, a listener minimally familiar with a musical style needs only to possess some basic *discriminatory*, *recognitional* and *continuational* abilities regarding that style.

It will be clear that appropriate listening does not necessarily result in artistically relevant emotions. This way of listening could produce irrelevant emotions coming from personal associations – something that is indeed the case in almost any actual case of music listening. Appropriate listening is thus a necessary condition for artistically relevant emotions, but not a sufficient one. An additional *desideratum* for a test of artistic relevance is related to the idiosyncratic emotional responses that music critics have to certain works. While presumably all music critics competently focus on the musical substance of the piece they are listening to – rather than engaging in personal associations or flights of fancy – they respond emotionally in radically different ways to a given piece. Later I will offer examples of these cases and provide reasons to hold that these responses should be considered artistically relevant.

As a tentative formulation of the criterion I suggest the following:

> A music-induced emotion is artistically relevant iff (1) it is caused by the listener's appropriate listening and (2) (a) it is dependent on specific features of the piece of music (or of the performance thereof) as a work of art and (b) it has the disposition to further direct our attention to such features.

A few clarifications are in order. (1) specifies the necessity of a causal connection between music listening and the aroused emotion. It meets, therefore, the causal condition. If the emotion merely co-occurs it is not artistically relevant, even if it happens to be an emotion of the sort that would be typically induced by appropriate listening of the piece under consideration.

(2) deals with the objective condition. In (2a), the expression 'as a work of art' is intended to isolate properties of the music that are constitutive of the piece or performance thereof. What counts as constitutive is arguably determined by a set of conventions regarding the art form in question. This condition also entails that the piece needs to be considered in its historical situatedness as belonging to a specific tradition – how this is relevant will be shown later, when dealing with quotations and appropriations of musical pieces and themes.

(2b) intends to characterize the capacity that artistically relevant music-induced emotions have to direct our attention to the music. Music-induced emotions of the non-relevant kind are often 'centrifugal': they direct our attention to things other than the music itself. Artistically relevant music-induced emotions, on the other hand, depend on features of the music as specified by (2a). Because of this, they generally have the capacity to direct our attention to the musical features responsible for them.

THREE TYPES OF MUSIC-INDUCED EMOTIONS

I will now consider three different sorts of music-induced emotions and see how they fare with respect to the test for artistic relevance I have developed. The discussion of these emotions is particularly interesting, as they represent prominent ways in which music arouses listeners emotionally, and because we have strong intuitions as to their artistic relevance.

1) *Kivy-emotions*.[11] These are emotions fitting into the standard cognitive model and taking the music (or performance thereof) as their intentional object. I can be lifted by the great compositional skills that I recognize in a piece or annoyed by a bad performance of a piece I love. Kivy believes that these emotions are the key to understanding how music can move us in an artistically relevant way.[12] When we stand back in awe at the beauty of the music, we are experiencing a kind of emotion that fits the standard cognitive model. Its object is the music (or some of its features) and the relevant belief is one about the outstanding character of it.

Are Kivy-emotions artistically relevant? It is relatively easy to produce cases in which the emotion induced by the music is not artistically relevant. For instance, a mother might feel pride and joy as a response to her child's performance, however lacking the performance might be. In this case, the emotion falls rather squarely into the cognitive model but there is no link to the actual features of the piece. We might describe this situation as one in which the attentiveness requirement is not respected, or more plausibly concede that the mother is listening attentively but add that her emotion has no relevant causal connection to her attentive listening, as it is rather induced by the fact that her child is playing in front of an audience.

A more complicated case is presented in the following scenario. Suppose a violin player listens to a rival musician playing a challenging piece. The rival's eloquent and polished playing makes him nervous, envious and perhaps even slightly angry. The emotions in question are strictly linked to his appreciation of the rival's performance. Yet they do not seem to qualify as artistically relevant: after all they appear to rest on vanity more than on the actual willingness to appreciate the music played. It is worth noting, however, that the emotions in question are dependent on features of the piece in a way in which the mother's pride need not to be.

Consider a similar example, this time involving a work of music rather than its performance. Imagine Rousseau listening to some of the French music he deemed inferior to the Italian. His emotional reactions to the piece are various and often negative. Surely they do not resemble much the average emotional response to the pieces in question. Yet, they are linked to the very same musical features that occasion the most common responses, they respond to changes in those features and are liable to further direct the philosopher's attention to them.

Both these two examples represent idiosyncratic emotional responses to music that can show understanding and appreciation of it. Because of this, I submit, these responses should pass a general test of artistic relevance, and they do pass the one suggested above.

The two cases just mentioned are also apt to draw our attention to another interesting feature of the proposed criterion for artistic relevance. The work/performance duality, which is characteristic of performing arts such as music, might result in peculiar cases in which an emotional response is artistically relevant as to only one of the two. The violin player's emotion is artistically relevant as to his rival's performance, not to the piece he is playing. The relevance test I suggested is apt to distinguish Kivy-emotions relevant to the performance from Kivy-emotions relevant to the work. As the criterion includes reference to the features of the music, it is evident how this might happen: the musical features of a performance do not completely overlap the musical features of the work.

2) *Meyer-emotions*. These are named after Leonard Meyer, who famously claimed that listeners familiar with a musical style, even though they may lack formal training, possess an implicit mastery of syntactic rules governing the progress of works in that style. Listeners respond emotionally to deviation from the norm, as when a long-delayed cadence resolves our restless anxiety into a soothing sense of relief.[13]

Meyer-emotions might at first seem to always qualify as artistically relevant: because they are related to expectations about the music's unfolding, they always track properties of the work. However, things are not so simple. We could imagine a case in which the emotional response to the development of a piece of music is occasioned by expectations that are inappropriate to the relevant style. For instance, I might consider odd a plagal cadence in a Renaissance piece because I would have expected a common-practice V-I cadence, and this might prompt an emotional response of the Meyer sort. But a IV-I (or iv-I) cadence is common in Renaissance music and a listener familiar with that style would not make the

mistake of taking it as a non-standard feature of the piece. The suggested criterion for artistic relevance includes a reference to appropriate listening, which is in turn characterized as attentive and minimally competent listening. The question is then whether this minimal familiarity with the style is sufficient to rule out inappropriate emotional responses of the Meyer sort. This is likely to depend on the characterization of minimal competence we opt for, but one should notice that, even if the bar is set at a relatively low level, as in the case of Levinson's concatenationism, failure to be familiar with common harmonic progressions in the style would count as a failure in basic musical understanding. It follows from this that, under my proposed criterion, the emotions evoked by, say, an unexpected iv-I cadence should not be considered artistically relevant, as they are not a result of appropriate listening.

In the case of Kivy-emotions, I have distinguished responses to the work from responses to a performance. This distinction is also appropriate in the case of Meyer-emotions, as there is one case in which these apply not to a work but to a performance: improvisation.[14] Consider, as an example, an improvised solo in a jazz standard. In these cases, a listener has various expectations in relation to the musical idiom, the style of the player in question (if known), and the relation of the solo to the genre and particular piece that is being played. Thus, a nervous and hectic solo is likely to come as unexpected in a laid-back piece. Likewise, the use of an uncommon scale can surprise us. In both these cases, the ensuing emotional responses would all count as artistically relevant under the proposed criterion.

3) *Davies-emotions*. These represent a case of *emotional contagion*.[15] Music can 'infect' us with its mood, as when we become sad by listening to sad music. It is interesting to notice that our sadness in this case is not a full-blown emotion as described by a standard cognitive theory of emotions. It lacks in fact an intentional object (we are not sad *about the music*, but merely saddened by it) and it lacks a relevant belief (there is no reason why we should be sad). Stephen Davies distinguishes between *attentional* and *non-attentional* emotional contagion. The first one is the result of a music-focused listening.

> The mirroring response of the music-focused listener is of this second variety. She is very likely to identify the music's expressiveness as the cause of her response because her reaction tracks her following of the music and recognition of its expressive character [...].[16]

But this is not the only case of contagion. According to Davies, who grounds his claim on psychological research, emotional contagion can occur in the absence of appropriate listening (the non-attentional case). As an example of the non-attentional case one could take that of a listener relaxed by the laid-back pop music that is playing in a shopping mall. This kind of emotional contagion could not qualify as artistically relevant according to my criterion – it fails to meet condition (1). In the attentional case, however, the happiness aroused in a listener when listening to happy music is artistically relevant, as it is the result of appropriate listening and it is linked to a feature of the piece, namely its happy expressive character.

A concern for my decision to exclude non-attentional contagion from the domain of artistically relevant emotions is the following.[17] Suppose that I am at a rave party. Throbbing techno music is playing loudly. I have a drink and exchange a few words with someone next to me. I do not pay particular attention to the music, nor am I familiar with the genre. However, its steady beat and sub-bass frequencies get my feet tapping, and the moment after, regardless of my unwillingness to dance, my whole body is swinging to the music. These bodily responses (perhaps along with the drink) get me in a good mood. The question arises as to whether we should consider such an emotional response as artistically relevant.

One could contend that these emotions should indeed be considered artistically (or perhaps at least aesthetically) relevant. I could force this case into the criterion I defended by considering the listening in question as focused listening, although perhaps in a different way than the one typical of the canonical concert hall listening. Alternatively I could, somewhat counterintuitively, deny that the emotions in question are aesthetically relevant. The apparent relevance of these emotions might still be salvaged by allowing that they might be relevant to rave parties in a non-aesthetic way.

My suggestion, however, differs from both of the above: I believe that music at a rave party and our reaction to it should not be considered in separation from the rave party as a whole: our emotional

reaction is relevant, and our listening is *not* focused, hence the contagion is non-attentional, yet our emotional reaction is not a reaction to the music; rather, it is a reaction to the rave party, of which the music is a component. The music, hardly the object of attentive listening, plays a central role in making possible the experience (arguably not artistic, but possibly *aesthetic*) that is characteristic of rave parties as multi-stranded experiences involving music, bodily behavior, alcohol and perhaps psychotropic substances.[18]

THE ISSUE OF UNIFORMITY

A test for artistic relevance such as the one suggested already implies that a purely subjective account of emotional reactions has been discarded. What is artistically relevant in a work of art might be subject-dependent in the broad sense of requiring a subject to be appreciated, but by no means is it a projection of the experiencing subject. A usual preliminary way to defend the objective validity of aesthetic appreciation draws on the remark that there is a considerable *uniformity* in the aesthetic responses of different subjects in different times and places. It might thus be thought that, in order for us to better grant the artistic relevance of emotional responses to music, a *uniformity condition* could be added to the criterion. This condition would specify that artistically relevant music-induced emotions are typically shared by competent listeners in different historical and cultural contexts. However, the previous discussion has probably already shown why this might not be a good move, as Kivy-emotions are sometimes quite idiosyncratic and yet can possess artistic relevance.

Another, more radical issue is that such a uniformity condition is at the same time too narrow and too broad. It is *too narrow*, because it leaves out of the criterion emotional responses that depend on the recognition of non-obvious properties of the sort that might be inaccessible to the average competent listener. If a competent listener spots, for instance, a large-scale formal compositional feature in a complex piece of music, her emotional reaction to that feature should be considered artistically relevant. It will not, however, be a shared response, as most minimally competent listeners will fail to notice the feature in question. This fact is especially relevant if we accept a characterization of competent listening as a moment by moment understanding of the music's unfolding: in this case most induced emotions related to large-scale features would be out of reach for listeners who possess only a basic musical understanding.

The uniformity condition is also *too broad*, at least if left without further qualification. Certain common emotional responses to a piece of music might be shared by a community of competent listeners in virtue of a large-scale association of the piece in question with extra-musical events or objects. Such is the case when classical music is used as a soundtrack: responding to Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* by imagining warfare scenes from Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) is likely to produce strong emotional responses, but emotional responses resting on this kind of association are hardly to be considered artistically legitimate responses to Wagner's music as the work of art it is. This last consideration allows us to appreciate how (2a), which specifies that the response should be a response to the music as a work of art, takes into account the historical situatedness of the piece.

LARGE SCALE ASSOCIATIONS EXPLOITED IN MUSICAL QUOTATIONS AND APPROPRIATIONS

Once established that we should not consider uniformity as a warrant of aesthetic relevance, a few more remarks on large-scale associations are in order. These are, like in the Valkyries' example, extra-musical or inter-musical associations shared by communities of competent listeners – inter-musical associations being those cases in which music recalls other music. In both these two cases, large-scale association can be intentionally exploited by the composer in order to achieve a particular expressive effect. Such would be the case if someone composed a symphony using one of Ennio Morricone's Spaghetti Western soundtracks, intending to exploit its association with that historical period and/or with the movies'

atmosphere.[19] The association does not need to be to a specific piece (inter-musical), as it could rather rely on the shared associations of certain musical sounds with extra-musical objects or events. In addition to the well-known example of wind instruments used to recall a bucolic atmosphere, we might point here to the established association of the Theremin with the world of the supernatural as well as with sci-fi atmospheres.

While elaborating a typology of musical illustrations, Kivy draws attention to a Bach Cantata that provides us with another good example. In the Cantata *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen,* Bach uses the melody from a hymn well-known to his congregation to evoke the meaning of the text set to that tune.[20] Here we have an example of an extra-musical association achieved through an intra-musical association.
Having pointed out the ways in which pre-existing associations could be exploited by the composer, what is left to do is to assess whether the resulting emotional response has to be considered artistically relevant. It is obvious why we should answer in the affirmative. Being intentionally exploited by the composer, the association and the emotional response it might evoke is apt to draw our attention to the composer's use of the large-scale extra- or inter-musical association to its expressive or representational ends. Needless to say, awareness of the association and competence as to the discrimination of intentional use from mere accident are part the competent listener's expertise, although – as shown by Bach's example – this competence is strictly tied to particular historical contexts and hard to win back once lost. A person lacking this kind of competence nowadays might attend Wagner's *The Valkyrie* and believe the composer is quoting the famous scene from *Apocalypse Now*.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to develop a viable criterion for the artistic relevance of music-induced emotions. This should allow us to better understand the relationship between the emotions induced by music and its appreciation. Although the criterion is here restricted to the musical domain, I speculate that it could apply to other art forms as well. Perhaps, with suitable qualifications, a general criterion for artistically relevant emotions induced by *art in general* could be developed.

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[1] Juslin and Västfjäll (2008).
[2] See for instance Matravers (1998).
[3] Eaton (1992).
[4] Carlson (2000: 129).
[5] Kivy (2006: 275).
[6] *Ibid*.
[7] Scherer holds that "an aesthetic experience is one that is *not* triggered by concerns with the relevance of a perception to my bodily needs, my social values, or my current goals or plans, nor with how well I can cope with the situation, but one where the *appreciation of the intrinsic qualities* of a piece of visual art or a piece of music is of paramount importance" (2004: 6). My proposed criterion will allow for *some* of the idiosyncratic responses that Scherer is here ruling out to count as artistically relevant.
[8] Robinson (2005: 349-378).
[9] It should also be mentioned that Jerrold Levinson briefly glosses over "the conditions of listening" that conduce to what he takes to be a typical strong emotional response to music (1990: 319-320). He mentions familiarity with the style, focus on the music and "emotional openness to the content of the music". Although it does not seem that Levinson is after a criterion such as the one I develop here, both his first two concerns will appear in my own proposal.
[10] Levinson (1997).
[11] I follow Jenefer Robinson in naming this kind of music-induced emotion after the philosopher who discussed it in greatest depth (2005, 350). I will do the same in the case of Meyer-emotions, and extend Robinson's terminology to music induced by means of emotional contagion, calling these 'Davies-emotions' (after Stephen Davies).
[12] Kivy (1990).
[13] Meyer (1956).
[14] I leave aside issues as to the ontological status of improvised pieces. The only assumption here is that syntactic features of a bit of improvised music, even if within a composed work, are not fixed as the syntactic features that belong to the parts of the work that have been explicitly scored.
[15] Davies (2011).
[16] *Ibid*., 64.
[17] I owe this observation, as well as some of the points made in response to it, to Jonathan Neufeld.
[18] An observation that is somewhat in line with this is made by Scherer: "While some kinds of music, like rock or techno, may well have the potential to induce collective affective phenomena in large groups of people at concerts, it is not clear whether the affective manifestations, including motor behaviour, actually induces bona fide

emotions and if so, if these are due to the music or to the nature and behavior of the musicians. To my knowledge, there is no empirical evidence on this question." (Scherer 2004: 9)

[19] Notice how this would work even though the *musical* connections between the soundtrack and the American Old West are actually loose. In fact, Morricone largely refrained from using the instruments traditionally associated with that setting. His compositions feature anachronistic instruments such as the electric guitar and the Sicilian *marranzanu*, a sort of jaw harp.

[20] Kivy (1984: 50).