

“Music Causes Emotion”: A Reasoned Critique

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Abstract

The Opinion Article critically comments on the ubiquitous contemporary notion that *music causes emotion*, which is often expressed, both in scientific articles and in pop culture, with few, if any, qualifications or provisos. This view typically tends to rely on studies executed with less than rigorous methodology and ignores contrary research findings, and the opinions of past and contemporary skeptics among musicians, musicologists, and music psychologists. The prevalence of the notion appears to be related to the unsurpassed commercial dissemination of music (very broadly defined), and to *emotivism*, a quasi-culturological stance that insists on the insertion of emotion, feeling, and “sensitivity” – often at the expense of reason and narrative evidence – into every segment of human behavior, especially in the arts and the media.

Keywords: Music and emotion; Music causes emotion; Critique of music and emotion; Emotivism; Anti-emotivism; “Crazy Sexy Cool” music festival; Psychology of music

In the past quarter of a century, there has been an avalanche of claims centered on the notion that *music causes emotions*. The sources vary from self-help and pop-psychology pamphlets to reputable journals and 1,000-page handbooks compiled by premier science publishers. The claims are often very generally phrased to refer to all and any music, and to emotions essentially identical to the basic psychobiological ones, such as anger, sadness, fear, and joy. Virtually never do these numerous sources clearly state something simple and almost certainly true – that “*some music may, sometimes, in some people, under some circumstances, elicit some psychobiological emotions, but seldom or never nearly as powerful as the correspondent emotions in social life*” [1, p. 215]. Furthermore, in their unrestrained music-causes-emotion enthusiasm, most of these sources ignore the opinions of musicians, philosophers, musicologists, and other past and contemporary skeptics (formalists and others), such as Hanslick, Chaikovsky, Hindemith, Stravinsky, Kivy, and Zangwill, among others. In doing so, they also generally ignore music as a major source of calm contemplation, rational enjoyment, and dispassionate analysis – and in saying this I am by no means referring exclusively to the pinnacles of classical music as the object of such nonemotional activities [2].

Many sources, while explicitly acknowledging that most music, from opera to folk ballads to top-40 songs, involves lyrics, often neglect to realize and admit the equally obvious fact that meanings introduced by words may be the actual driving force for any resulting emotion or quasi-emotion. This is, of course, why the analysis of textless, nonreferential, “absolute” music has a special status in both psychological and philosophical aesthetics [3].

As important to a serious critique of the music-causes-emotion thesis is the fact that people – just as they did in Plato’s Athens – often listen to music in situations that involve alcohol, drugs, and erotic stimuli, the latter being especially salient when music is coupled with dance. In fact, the music–dance–sexual display link is probably of key importance in the analysis of music’s origins from an evolutionary viewpoint. The above-mentioned, potentially emotion-producing, features of the situations in which people are exposed to music, and acquire a special liking for it, are often ignored even in serious research studies that are based on participants’ retroactive reporting or use research stimuli specifically chosen by research participants as

significant to them.

Consider, in this context, the implication of the “Crazy Sexy Cool” music festival in Rotterdam (Holland), which was attended by some 10,000 people who had paid €25; and this happened only three days after the crash of MH17 carrying 193 Dutch citizens (*New York Times International*, July 21, 2014, p. A8).

What lies behind the music-emotion enthusiasm? There are several possible academic and commercial reasons, but they all seem to be related to the prevalence of *emotivism* (not to be confused with the concept of emotivism in philosophical ethics), a culturological stance that promotes – often at the expense of reason and evidence – the insertion of emotion, feeling, and “sensitivity” into every crevice of human life and behavior, especially in the arts and the media [4].

Meanwhile, what is needed is far more solid information about the “routes” of the alleged emotion induction by music. At present, one has a multitude of routes varying in psychological and neurological plausibility, but nothing that is based on indisputable research findings. In this general domain, there are other interesting and insufficiently explored questions. One is the search for an empirical solution to mysteries of the hedonic trajectory of people’s voluntary and involuntary *repeated exposure* to a musical piece over sometimes very long time units. Another is a renewal of research efforts on the effects of the naturalistically induced mood and emotion states on people’s *choice* among various music-listening alternatives.

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