“Music Causes Emotion”: A Reasoned Critique

Vladimir J. Konečni*
Department of Psychology, University of California, San Diego, USA.

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-cultural 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, Chałkowski, 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 pinnacle 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 emotivism related to the prevalence of emotivism (not to be confused with the concept of emotivism in philosophical ethics), a cultural 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 neurologically 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.

 References

*Corresponding author: Vladimir J. Konečni, Department of Psychology, University of California, San Diego, USA; E-mail: vkonecni@ucsd.edu

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