

Art and Emotions¹

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the different routes by which art, and especially music conveys and arouses emotions. Apart from the three formerly discussed routes: the narrative route of narration-identification, the direct route of isomorphism and the indirect route of ego mastery, a fourth route is presented, based on the emotions produced by the listener himself as the result of his active attempt to process the musical input in his mind.

This is a “Meta emotion” reflecting the sum-total of all the disparate and opposing emotions conveyed or aroused by means of the other three routes.

The point is made that the assimilation of classical polyphonic music, demands an active effort on the part of the listener. The same is true of other higher rank arts, each one of which has developed its specific means to transmit a wide spectrum of diverse emotions simultaneously. Attached to this challenge, there is the promise of earning a new experience – a Meta-emotion emanating from the ability to integrate the contrarities inside us. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: aesthetic experience, polyphonic music, artistic enjoyment, emotional response, creativity, perfect form in art, art and emotions

In a former paper “How Music Convey Emotions” (Noy, 1993) I presented three different routes by which the artist may succeed in evoking in his or her audience an emotional response. Each is based on a different theory: The theories of “narration-imagination-identification”, of “isomorphism”, and of “ego mastery”. These theories represent three different principles for explaining how art may convey emotions, or in other words – three different routes by which the artist may succeed in reaching and stirring-up his audience’s emotions.

The first is the narrative route, luring the audience to identify with the experiences and emotions of the heroes appropriate to the narrative by arousing his imagination. In fact, most of what is regarded today as “psychoanalytic interpretation of art” is based on the tacit assumption that meanings are always related to a narrative, and the function of interpretation is therefore to reconstruct the hidden narrative line out of its unconscious symbolizations, displacements, condensations and other distortions. The problem is that such an approach is justified only in the case of interpreting content, but not for interpreting form.

The second route is the direct route, using messages that may activate directly by means of their form the emotions the artist is interested in (Langer 1942, 1953; Pratt, 1952). According to Langer and Pratt, every affect has its specific form, or “Gestalt”, and any message used in human communication that has a form similar to one of the affects (isomorphism) may activate this particular affect. As Langer said (1953): “The tonal structures we call ‘music’ bear a close logical similarity to the forms of human feelings . . . music is a tonal analogy of emotive life” (p. 27). And Pratt (1952) explains: “Music presents to the ear an array of auditory patterns which at a purely formal level are very similar to, if not identical with, the bodily patterns which are the basis of real emotion. The two kinds of pattern are with respect to their forms practically the same, but the auditory pattern make music, whereas the organic and visceral patterns make emotion” (p. 17), and he concludes: “Music sounds the way emotion feels” (p. 24).

The third route is the indirect route, provoking the receiver’s ego into that particular organizing activity that, according to the artist’s experience, may result in the emotional response the artist intends to arouse (Kohut & Levarie, 1950).

The gifted artist, as represented by the great creations of art, knows how to utilize all three routes in his efforts to arouse his audience’s emotional response, and knows how to play with the various means separately and in all possible combinations.

In the present article I want to propose a fourth route, based not, as the three former ones, on what musical stimuli are able to convey or arouse, but on the emotions produced by the listener himself as the result of his active attempt to process the musical input in his mind. I would call such an emotion, which reflects in some way the sum-total of all the disparate and opposing emotions conveyed or aroused by means of the three basic routes, but at the same time being neither of them, a meta-emotion. For demonstrating that higher level of emotion processing I will continue to stick to the case of music, but show further how these new principles may be applied also to the other arts.

One of the main differences between what is regarded as “popular” music and “high”, “sublime” or “fine” music, is in their degree of complexity. While the first kind is mostly presented as a single melodic line without or with some accompaniment, the last is mostly structured polyphonically, presenting simultaneously two or more separate melodic lines. Almost all of the great composers in the last 300 years took advantage of that ability of music to transmit several melodic lines at the same time, using each line for conveying a different emotion. By that they succeeded in ascending to a higher level of dramatic expression, not only to convey or arouse one emotion at a time, but representing also the conflicts between disparate and sometimes opposing emotions.

This development made music into one of the highest arts, as described by Susanne Langer (1942): “The real power of music lies in the fact that it can be ‘true’ to the life of feeling in a way that language cannot; for its significant forms have that ambivalence of content which words cannot have.

The possibility of expressing opposites simultaneously gives the most intricate reaches of expressiveness to music as such, and carries it, in this respect, far beyond the limits of the other arts" (p. 243).

Music is a most potent medium of communication to arouse an emotional response. Handel explored this idea in his oratory "Alexander's Feast – or The Power of Music" (1736), based on John Dryden's ode. It features a banquet held by Alexander the Great in which the old musician Thimotheus with his song and lyre "could swell the soul to rage or kindle soft desire". The musician manages to sweep his audience to moods such as admiration, passionate love, jubilation, mourning and revenge, until Alexander and his men are finally incited to burn down the Persian city of Persepolis. Handel uses different combinations of soloists, duets, choir pieces, sometimes delicate string combinations, sometimes military rhythms with horns and drums, to suggest the different emotions evoked. An interesting turn arrives with the appearance of St Cecilia, the patron saint of music, that according to the text, introduces a "sublime" music of harmony and love in contrast to the pagan more base, earthly kind. In the last parts Handel makes use of a more intricate pattern, with a fugue structure. We may deduce here Handel's faith in the possibility of creating a "sublime" music that rises above the more ornamental "Taffel music" common in his times. Still, in this example the different emotions are evoked successively, one after the other.

One of the first examples to demonstrate the ability of polyphonic musical structures to express the conflicting emotions simultaneously can be found in the opera *Idomeneo*. Here Mozart staged his four heroes – Idomeneo the king of Crete, Idamante his son, Electra the daughter of the king of Greece, and Illia the captured daughter of the king of Troy – to express their contrasting emotions not one after another as was conventional, but by singing together. In this ensemble (No. 21 – "Andro ramingo solo"), each of the four participants expresses his specific emotion at that time – Idamante, his anxiety and resentment at being required to leave home, Idomeneo, his guilt feelings for knowing that he in his hasty oat to Neptune was responsible for that tragic situation, and so on. The royal family of Crete represents, according to several musicologists, the nuclear family of Mozart – Idomeneo his father, Idamante himself, and Electra and Illia the two women of his life, his mother and sister Nanerl. While the conflict around the forced separation of the prince Idamante from his home that is expressed and lamented in that ensemble, represents the separation anxiety of Mozart himself, who at that age of 25 had to leave his Salzburg home.

This kind of "family dynamics" interpretation, inspired me to compare the listener exposed to a multilevel musical message to a couple or family therapist, a simile that may speak especially to our profession. The sensitive listener, like a good therapist, is required to attend to all the messages and the different emotions conveyed, and in case he senses ambiguities, discrepancies or conflicts between the various levels, to cope with them. Most musical lovers find it too difficult to attend to different, and often opposing emotional messages at the

same time, and tend to reject polyphonic music as “too complicated”, preferring to listen only to popular songs. Even many of those musical lovers whose ear is open also to orchestral music, prefer to listen mainly to those pieces of music in which the various instruments are used only to accompany the main theme, adding rhythm, color, or harmony, like the nineteenth century ballets, waltzes, “bel canto” opera arias, etc. They can be compared to the inexperienced family therapist that when attempting to attend to the conflicting messages of his clients, tends to identify mostly with one of them, and join him in his struggle against the others.

But the experienced therapist is able to maintain for a while some distance from the immediate impact of the emotional messages, to internalize and contain them, trying to solve the ambiguities or conflicts first inside his own mind before he creates his emotional response. That response is mostly a kind of general emotional attitude, a mood, or emotion aroused as the result of rational, conscious considerations as well as unconscious ones. It may either fit the stance of one of the parties, or be a compromise, or represent something entirely new, not included in any of them. For example, a family therapist may be exposed to a couple involved in endless disputes and quarrels, trying each to gain his sympathy and identification with his stance, but after listening for a while to their argumentation begins to feel an ever growing compassion for these two people, who are loving and dependent one on another, but unable to extricate themselves from the bleak spirits of power quarrels taking control of them. A different therapist may of course have a different emotional reaction, and even in the same therapist at a different session with the same couple a different emotional reaction may arise. The important point here is that he is not swept by one or the other of the conflicting emotions presented but reacts from a stance that is empathic but also somewhat removed, allowing an overview.

So is the response of the sensitive musical listener exposed to one of the great symphonies, chamber music or operas – engrossed in the drama presented by that music, open to the impact of the contrasting emotions conveyed, and able to solve them by creating something new, which may be viewed as some new synthesis, some new insight, or even an experience of catharsis

I believe that these ideas about the conveyance of emotion in music, can be broadened and applied to any form of high art, as Anton Ehrenzweig (1967) wrote: “All artistic structure is essentially ‘polyphonic’; it evolves not in a single line of thought, but in several superimposed strands at once” (p. xii). The art of painting, as Ehrenzweig (1953) had shown, may use the natural perceptual tendency to differentiate a picture into ground and figure, or exploit any other possibility for division of ground or figure for conveying a different emotional meaning on each level. Modern ballet uses the discrepancies between the dancer’s movements and background music, between the dances and the atmosphere portrayed on the stage, and also between the rhythm and movement among various groups of dancers.

In spite of the verbal medium being considered as capable of conveying meanings only on a single level, even the verbal arts often succeed in developing this polyphonic capacity to transmit different meanings and emotion on several levels concomitantly. The art of poetry attains it by manipulating the various auxiliary properties of language, like rhythm, rhyme, velocity, etc. and using them for the conveyance of meanings on different levels. Literature, by using such tricks as presenting two or more narratives interweaved together, inserting flashbacks, exchanging scenes rapidly, etc. And obviously multimedia arts, most of them especially designed for enabling to present multiple contents on the same stage. In fact, all the arts on their higher ranks have developed their specific techniques for manipulating their expressive means to make them suitable to transmit a wide spectrum of diverse emotions simultaneously. And the creative artist is that one who knows how to use these means in the best, most effective way.

However, there is a crucial difference between the creative artist and clients of the family therapist of our example. Both bombard the listener with a mixture of ambivalent and contrasting emotions, using everything in their power to entice him to be empathic and to identify with each, but the artist, in contrast to the clients who are only using the therapist for their own sake, takes care to provide him also with the suitable means to cope with that mixture. The creative artist, when provoking his audience by music, painting, poetry, theater, or literature with the most exiting, distressing, and shocking conflicts of life, will always offer them wrapped into a package of perfect form.

The creative aspect of form creation in art demands that the artist use himself to generate one form of experiencing – his own ideas and emotional experience in an altogether different medium – music, dance, or any other art. As Ogden (2012) points out, in this process of translation lies the potential for transformation. While expressing his innermost desires, fears, and other conflicting emotions the artist is constantly laboring to find new and original ways of expression, better ways of communication, and higher levels of integration. Winnicott, expressed a similar idea in *Primitive Emotional Development* (1945/2006): “Through artistic expression we can hope to keep in touch with our primitive selves whence the most intense feelings and even fearfully acute sensations derive, and we are poor indeed if we are only sane” (p. 150, note 3).

The creative solution is the dynamic opposite of the neurotic solution. While neurosis is a regressive solution, that attempts to restore inner equilibrium at the cost of preventing the free expression of dangerous wishes by repression, splitting, etc., creativity is a progressive solution. It represents the artist's effort of expressing destructive or forbidden impulses while at the same time mastering them. While neurosis tends to redundancy and repetition, resisting change, creativity is an attempt to generate new and daring patterns of adaptation which have never before been tried out (Noy, 1968–1969). This does not mean that a creative artist may not be neurotic, borderline or even psychotic. He may even harbor a dynamic fluctuation between the neurotic and creative states. However, the creative

solution contrary to the neurotic or psychotic ones is a step in the direction of mental health. When the artist after overcoming his own resistance creates a new form, through which he expresses his conflicting emotions, that “package” typically includes the required means to overcome the resistances and defenses of the art consumer. These assist him or her in organizing the inner chaos produced, in reducing any anxiety aroused, and in attaining the supreme goal of any creative artist – to convert excitement, distress and anxiety, into pleasure, enchantment or elation” (see Noy, 1979, 1989).

So, the package of good form that the artist transmits to the audience enables a Mehta emotion, or what has also been named an aesthetic experience. According to Civitarese and Ferro (2012, p. 299) “the deepest meaning of aesthetic experience in the contemplation of art might be that of experiencing (or re-experiencing) the happy alternation of non-integration–integration on a presymbolic and prereflective level.” They also suggest this as the only possible explanation for the importance of form in artistic expression and for the fact that perhaps the most moving art forms of all are dance and music that capture “the rhythm of being”. The listener sways with the changing rhythms, his body and his spirit expand when a dominant theme is sounded in Major scale, then shrink when the theme changes to a minor scale, as he spontaneously adapts himself to the different musical messages the composer has created.

The “greatness” of a work of art is judged neither according to its deepness and complexity, nor according to its perfection of form, but according to the right balance between both. The greatest creations of art, those that have attained the ideal balance, remain preserved in the archives of culture as “symbols of integration”, to use the phrase of Anthony Storr (1972), as a representation of unity, order, reconciliation of opposites, and as proof that such integration is attainable.

Art is the most potent medium of communication to arouse an emotional response. Music can drive us to dance for hours without getting tired, or literature – to carry us on the waves of imagination to far-away countries. The higher arts offer us a higher rank of satisfaction; not by being the passive recipients who get the emotions, but by challenging us to take part in the very process of “working through” the artistic message.

Attached to this challenge, there is a promise – if we are really ready to participate in the task, we may earn a new experience – a higher rank meta-emotion representing the ability to integrate the contrarities inside us and to reconcile opposites.

It seems that here I have reversed the roles of client and therapist in my former simile. So it may be pertinent to adopt the relational psychoanalytic model, with its emphasis on a process of mutual, reciprocal influence, seeing the analyst’s actual participation as a central influencing factor in the process of change. Contributions such as Mitchell (1988), Hoffman (1983), Slavin (1994) to name only a few, have explored the ways in which the analytic relationship actually creates new patterns of emotional reaction and of interpersonal behavior.

So now we may compare the creative artist to the experienced therapist. The same as the therapist – he does not provide direct interpretations, but only invites the client to work together on the problem. He serves the client only by assisting him to clarify the problem to work on, and by presenting him with the suitable means for working on it. If the client can use the therapist to do this work – it remains the client's achievement.

The composer, like the therapist, must carefully weigh the difficulty of the task he presents his patient with. If the task is too difficult – exceeding his organizing or perceptive capacities, it will arouse his defenses and provoke rejection. This perhaps is the case with some forms of “modern” music, that come too close to being experienced as a threat of being overwhelmed by chaos of sound. They demand too much effort of even devoted music lovers, without offering them enough satisfaction by either perfect form, or by hinting at recognizable well known melodies, to enable an enjoyable “Meta emotion” to develop. However, if the balance comes close to the level of organizing or perceptive capacities of the listeners they become motivated to listen to the same piece of music again and again, until they come to enjoy it. It is then a kind of pleasure tied in with the feeling of victory; that unity, beauty, order and harmony have overcome the forces that threaten to throw the mind back into the chaos of dissolution and cessation.

That is our bonus in consuming one of the higher arts – it provides us with a feeling of competence, an experience of being a little more integrated, and of being a bit nearer to perfection.

AUTHOR NOTE

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NOTE

- 1 In collaboration with Dorit Noy-Sharav, MA. Based on a lecture presented at the IPA Congress, Chicago, July 2009.

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