

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art

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Robinson, "The Expression and Arousal of Emotion in Music"

I.

*Q: Does music ever express emotion by virtue of arousing emotion in us?

II.

*Kivy provides 2 other ways in which music can be expressive:

1. It has the "contour" of expressive human behavior. (Recall Hospers—Kivy is basically saying that the music mimics the human behavior that typically accompanies the emotion.)

--Robinson notes that in most cases in which this is plausible the music is accompanied by a text that suggests the emotion as well. She also claims that 1 is plausible only for emotions such as joy, sorrow, and restlessness.

2. It is purely conventional

III.

*Here's Walton's suggestion regarding the expressiveness of music:

"Walton proposes that one important way in which music is expressive is by virtue of the fact that in listening to music we imagine ourselves introspecting, being aware of, our own feelings." (471)

--Pay attention to the account of Walton's somewhat beautiful suggestion, as explained on the top of the right hand column, p. 471.

--Robinson has two objections to Walton's suggestion, however.

1. "That is why although we can perhaps imagine these sounds as feelings welling up inside the *composer*, or perhaps in some *character* described by the music, it is not obvious to me that we can imagine them as feelings welling up inside ourselves." (472)
2. Music that is, say, "stabbing" can be imagined as many different feelings. Only a text could help specify this.

IV.

*Walton attempts to connect expressiveness with the arousal of imagined emotions in us. But, can we do better than this and connect expressiveness with the arousal of genuine emotions in us?

*Q: When music evokes an emotion in us, like sadness or unrequited passion, what is the object of this emotion?

--Robinson argues that certain emotions are distinguished by their cognitive content.

“I would suggest that if my response is to count as a response of unrequited passion rather than some other emotion, then I must imagine that there is someone whom I care about deeply, that this person does not care deeply about me, and that I care deeply that this person does not care deeply about me (or something of this sort).” (474)

V.

*Kivy thinks the emotion we experience by listening to music is quite distinct from the emotion we attribute to a piece of music.

--Robinson claims that Kivy might be correct for his one example of “being moved by” music.

VI.

*Robinson claims, unlike the other writers she discusses, that music can emotionally affect us quite directly, without significant cognitive mediation.

“There are, after all, moments in music which make us jump or startle us. Similarly, the perception of certain rhythms may be enough—without any further cognitive mediation—to evoke tension or relaxation, excitement or calm.” (475)

--Such cases (involving more “primitive”, less cognitively sophisticated, emotions) can justify attributing the emotion to the music itself (expression) in virtue of its causing the effect in us (arousal).

VII.

*Complex emotions are expressed in musical works in virtue of features of the overall structure of the piece (e.g., the sequences of more primitive emotions being aroused), rather than something more isolated.

“As I listen to a piece which expresses serenity tinged with doubt, I myself do not have to feel serenity tinged with doubt, but the feelings I do experience, such as relaxation or reassurance, interspersed with uneasiness, alert me to the nature of the overall emotional expressiveness in the piece of music as a whole.” (477)

VIII.

*Summary