



Emotion and Meaning in Music

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"Altogether it is a book that should be required reading for any student of music, be he composer, performer, or theorist. It clears the air of many confused notions . . . and lays the groundwork for exhaustive study of the basic problem of music theory and aesthetics, the relationship between pattern and meaning."—David Kraehenbuehl, *Journal of Music Theory*

"This is the best study of its kind to have come to the attention of this reviewer."—Jules Wolfers, *The Christian Science Monitor*

"It is not too much to say that his approach provides a basis for the meaningful discussion of emotion and meaning in all art."—David P. McAllester, *American Anthropologist*

"A book which should be read by all who want deeper insights into music listening, performing, and composing."—Marcus G. Raskin, *Chicago Review*

Emotion and Meaning in Music Details

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Stephanie says

It's not very often I give a book I read for school five stars, but this book I picked out myself for my research project and it was so packed with information and so good!

John Park says

2.5 stars.

The question of exactly how music can convey emotion has intrigued and troubled thinkers and musicians for generations; some have gone so far as to deny that it can do so. The question of the meaning of a piece of music is obviously related to such expression. This book, perhaps best regarded as an exercise in applied psychology, does deal—obliquely—with the expression of emotion, but meaning in the conventional sense seems a little more elusive.

I don't know how current its thinking is. The book was evidently intended to establish a theoretical basis for further exploration. The copy I read was acquired by the library in 1982 after more than a dozen printings, over 26 years; so presumably the work has exerted some influence. I found it both fascinating and irritating: irritating because it's mostly written in 1950s' academese, with a shortage of first-person pronouns or examples to illuminate jargon, and a lot of passive verbs and abstract nouns.

Meyer distinguishes between emotion, mood and affect, and concentrates on affect. (Mood is a relatively long-term state of mind; emotion is the name we give to a set of feelings, coloured by the context they occur in—the difference between weeping for joy or from grief; affect is the raw feeling, the need to weep[?].) He initially states that affect is the result of cognitive tension, which left me wondering how a musical work could sustain an essentially single mood or set of emotions for twenty minutes or more; and also how music of any length could express joy. Later it appears that when tension is resolved in the right way, the result is a sense of well-being, and this is also affect. The logic here seems less clear or precise than it might be.

His theoretical framework comes from gestalt psychology and the concept of *Prägnanz*—the idea that the mind interprets ambiguous data in the simplest way possible. His main assumption is that when this is difficult or an existing interpretation is thrown into question an affect-generating state of tension results. (He argues, for instance, that the minor key feels darker or sadder than the major because the minor is more ambiguous, occurring in at least three forms, and therefore feels less comfortable.) He applies this theory to various musical examples, mainly from Western classical music but also from jazz, folk music and works from Asia and Africa. His general approach is to identify tonal, rhythmic or other ambiguities in the piece and show how they are developed and resolved. In many cases, particularly where I did not know the piece in question, the analysis was beyond me, but I was prepared to give provisional assent.

Meyer emphasises the importance of past experience and of expectations in our response to music. (For example, the same chord can have quite different implications [meanings?] in different musical cultures.) He cites results from experimental psychology to discuss rhythm (which he distinguishes from pulse and metre): variations in note-length tend to produce accents at the end of a metrical foot; variations in intensity, accents at the start.

In these terms a Beethoven finale can convey a feeling of joy for ten or twenty minutes on end. The darker shades seem better explained, but only to a limited extent. In an analysis of the opening of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Meyer makes some good points about the loss of the distinction between figure and ground; but if I can agree that the main theme then emerges as a "stark and awful declaration", I don't understand what in Meyer's theory makes it so. As far as I can see, we're still a long way from "meaning".

Jessica says

Classic and must-read for anyone interested in why music causes affect (emotion) and some of the most thoughtful analysis that links together psychology with music theory. While some of it shows its age in the dense writing, it is still quite relevant to today, as a springboard and foundation for the castles in the sky that are being built with the cognitive neuroscience of music. Took me a while to get through it because of the information density, but that really just underscores how excellent of a resource this is. Oh, and sincere kudos for realizing, 60+ years ago, that music is (a) cultural (b) a product of learned expectations and (c) Western classical music is not the epitome and highest evolution of music, and is not superior to other styles. People seemed to have missed that point....

Rachel Leia Devadason says

It was all good until the author referred to non-Western musical cultures as "primitive" cultures...white musicologists pls fix ur superiority complex.....

Otherwise I really enjoyed reading this. I feel the tremendous insights I've gained are already enriching the way I understand Music as a listener, as well as informing me how to perform and compose more sensitively. The psychological basis of a lot of Meyer's claims was clear and easy to understand, albeit slightly repetitive at times. In particular, I liked how listening was framed as a Gestalt concept, in which expectation depends on an inherent logic we confer onto any given material, and the desire to find things 'acceptable', otherwise transform them into 'good'.

I only wish it ended conclusively: summarising the dense, though sometimes disparate, ideas brought up and linking the inhibition of tendency more strongly to the evocation of emotion, a thesis the whole book seemed directed at delivering.

Christa says

We have all become obsessed with the problem of meaning in various subjects. This book explains musical meaning and it's communication. "Not only does music use no linguistic signs but, on one level at least, it operates as a closed system, that is, it employs no signs or symbols referring to the non-musical world of objects, concepts, and human desires." Hence, the difficulty this book presents on the matter because it strives to analyze music where people usually don't consider music as merely entertainment, not a subject so technical in nature. Deep, thought provoking and complex. If you're truly serious about music, then you must read this book.

Maya says

Referenced in *The Music Instinct: How Music Works and Why We Can't Do Without It* by Philip Ball (p. 278).

Benitez B says

the movie was incredibly
