Emotion Review

http://emr.sagepub.com/

Skip the Age of Playback

Sebastian Kirschner

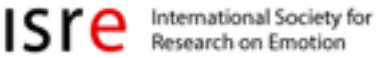
Emotion Review 2012 4: 285
DOI: 10.1177/1754073912439776

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://emr.sagepub.com/content/4/3/285

Published by:

http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:



International Society for Research on Emotion

Additional services and information for *Emotion Review* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://emr.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://emr.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://emr.sagepub.com/content/4/3/285.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Jul 3, 2012

What is This?

Downloaded from emr.sagepub.com at Max Planck Society on September 10, 2014

emotion review

Emotion Review
Vol. 4, No. 3 (July 2012) 285–286
© The Author(s) 2012
ISSN 1754-0739
DOI: 10.1177/1754073912439776
er.sagepub.com

Skip the Age of Playback

Sebastian Kirschner
Department of Developmental and Comparative Psychology, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Germany

Abstract

Kathleen Higgins (2012) claims that emotional responses to music are mostly social constructs, derived from the cultural transmission of musical knowledge. I agree with this general idea, but question Higgins' ethnocentric and narrow view, which reduces music mainly to the art of combining sounds to produce beauty of form and expression of emotion. Instead, I propose that the distinctive and unique behavior of active music-making evolved culturally to serve a range of adaptive functions in the social environments humans used to live in before the age of playback. Consequently, emotions perceived and induced via music should be studied in such "original" contexts.

Keywords

cultural, emotion, ethnomusicology, evolutionary, music, sociocultural evolution

In her article, Higgins (2012) reviews 20th century theories and recent empirical studies dealing with perception and induction of emotions during Western music listening. She concludes that emotional responses to music are mainly social constructs, learned during human enculturation and only marginally constrained by our species' biology and physiology. In her argumentation, Higgins follows the 2,500-year-old tradition of occidental music philosophy, which examines the emotional meaning of music as the listener's felt response, which depends primarily on the qualities of the music per se and secondarily on the listener's cultural background and personal experience.

Let us consider that human music has been heard on this planet for at least 40,000 years (Conard, Malina, & Munzel, 2009), and arguably much longer (Fitch, 2006). During most of its long cultural history human music was constrained by the technological standards and ecological conditions of nomadic small-scale societies living from hunting and gathering, the only mode of human subsistence until the end of the Mesolithic period some 10,000 years ago. Until then, our ancestors probably only used instruments that could be crafted from natural products and transported easily, like bone flutes, string bows, and wooden drums. Furthermore, until the invention of writing about 5,000 years ago, knowledge about how to sing a song or craft an instrument could only be transmitted orally from generation to generation. And until very recently, before Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in 1877, all music on the planet was intentionally created, performed live and, therefore, bound to a particular context (Chanan, 1995).

My brief overview of music's cultural history should remind us that everyday listening to the radio or an iPod, watching music videos and casting shows, and attending an opera or symphony concert, are very recent behavioral phenomena of the Western world and rather unsuitable subjects for a scientific inquiry into "original" human music.

I suggest that any research as to the emotional meaning of music should start by characterizing human music as completely and rigorously as possible. And the best source of accurate empirical data for this ambitious task is ethnomusicology. For example, Cross and Morley (2008) argue that in "most non-western cultures music requires overt action and active group engagement," (p. 66) considering "the differentiation ... of the roles of performer and audience almost ... a minority practice." (p. 66) Higgins recognizes that "the music of many cultures is more dance-related ... and the affect aroused by such music is often a consequence of bodily engagement," (2012, p. xxx) but she doesn't draw the necessary conclusion, as advocated by Cross and Tolbert (2009), that "music might be better conceived of as a mode of interaction rather than as the object of auditory perception." (p. 32) These authors reject the idea "that music constitutes an autonomous and primarily aesthetic domain [because] such approaches cannot adequately deal with the historical and dynamic aspects of engagement with music." (p. 29) Consequently, also the *emotional meaning* of music "is complex and local, in that it can only be understood … in the context of the belief systems and cultural practices" (p. 29) in which it is embedded.

Now, if we consider "original" human music as an interactive behavior which creates context-bound emotional reactions, what kind of "original" human emotions could these be? Darwin (1872) saw the adaptive function of emotional expressions in

Corresponding author: Sebastian Kirschner, Department of Developmental and Comparative Psychology, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Deutscher Platz 6, 04103 Leipzig, Germany. *Email*: kirschner@eva.mpg.de

Downloaded from emr.sagepub.com at Max Planck Society on September 10, 2014

communicating the organism's psychological state and behavioral intentions to others, which is particularly relevant in social species, ultimately solving conflicts or fostering social bonding, and consequently promoting group activities such as cooperative breeding, hunting, or food sharing.

Humans are a social species, facing the constant need for conflict solution and social bonding. But we are also a *cultural* species, capable of inventing highly sophisticated conventions, norms, and behaviors to meet these needs. Therefore, Higgins should have started searching for the origins of "music's capacity to arouse feelings of secure connection with others" (2012, p. xxx) in traditional musical rituals that serve purposes of conflict solution and social bonding, instead of reducing it solely to a vestige from "the condition we experienced as infants attuning to our caregivers" (2012, p. xxx).

Higgins asks "which emotions *can* be expressed through music" (2012, p. xxx), but the ecologically more relevant question would be: Which emotions *should* be expressed or induced via music, depending on the particular context? For example, if singing serves the function of impressing the opposite sex during human mating behavior, the particular song should express "love, jealousy or triumph" (Darwin, 1871, p. 56). If a mother sings and rocks her baby to sleep, the music should induce feelings of attachment and security (Trehub, 2001). If a certain dance ceremony serves to engage a group of people in unified action to strengthen their communal bonds, it should induce enjoyment, exhilaration, and harmony (Roederer, 1984). Yet if the members of a combat unit sing a battle song to prepare for an imminent confrontation, the music should provoke their pride, courage, and even anger. Such an ecological approach gives also a simple answer to Higgins' question as to why music hardly induces the basic and universally recognized emotion of disgust: apparently it was never meant to.

Finally, Higgins provides no satisfactory answer to her opening question of "how it is that the two [music and emotion] have any connection" (2012, p. xxx). While for her "it is not obvious … why we should regard sonic patterns as so apt for emotional expression," (2012, p. xxx), the answer is simple for a biologist: All mammals transmit emotions via acoustic communication; indeed our closest living relatives, the African great apes, all use vocalizations and drum sounds to express their emotions (Fitch, 2006). So there was no need for our hominid ancestors to invent this connection. It was already there.

References

Chanan, M. (1995). *Repeated takes: A short history of recording and its effects on music*. London, UK: Verso.

Conard, N. J., Malina, M., & Munzel, S. C. (2009). New flutes document the earliest musical tradition in southwestern Germany. *Nature*, *460*, 737–740.

Cross, I., & Morley, I. (2008). The evolution of music: Theories, definitions and the nature of the evidence. In S. Malloch & C. Trevarthen (Eds.), *Communicative musicality* (pp. 61–82). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Cross, I., & Tolbert, E. (2009). Music and meaning. In S. Hallam, I. Cross & M. Thaut (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of music psychology* (pp. 24–34). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Darwin, C. (1871). *The descent of man and selection in relation to sex*. London, UK: John Murray.

Darwin, C. (1872). *The expression of the emotions in man and animals*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Fitch, W. T. (2006). The biology and evolution of music: A comparative perspective. *Cognition*, *100*, 173–215.

Higgins, K. M. (2012). Biology and culture in musical emotions. *Emotion Review*, *4*, 273–282.

Roederer, J. G. (1984). The search for a survival value of music. *Music Perception*, *1*, 350–356.

Trehub, S. E. (2001). Musical predispositions in infancy. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, *930*, 1–16.

Downloaded from emr.sagepub.com at Max Planck Society on September 10, 2014