Emotions And Meaning In Music

A set of thirty questions and answers pertaining to the first chapter in the book, Musical Perceptions, edited by Rita Aiello and John A. Sloboda. The topics which the questions and answers cover include different schools of musical philosophy and evidence of emotional reactions pertaining to our perception of music. The distinction between referentialist and expressionist is made, as well as, the supporting theories of the relationship between music and emotions is detailed within the questions and answer set.
1. Characterize the absolutist view of musical meaning.

   The absolutist view involves the categorization of the meaning of music as being essentially intramusical and non referential. Musical meaning lies exclusively within the context of the work itself.

2. Characterize the referentialist view of musical meaning.

   The referentialist stance involves the categorization of musical meaning as communicating itself through extramusical aspects, such as, concepts, character, and emotional states. Referentialist proponents believe that musical meaning is a conglomeration of all human aspects related to that particular music.

3. Which camp do you lean towards?

   I would have to say I agree more with the referentialist view. Music can be played practically anywhere, except in a vacuum like space, and if no life form is around to appreciate or study it, does it have the same quality? I would say No, it does not have the same quality, there must be a present listener in a musical exchange and the listener can add value to the music by associations and mental processing of that music. Therefore, the full musical meaning and appreciation of a given piece must involve extramusical aspects and I would furthermore categorize myself as a referentialist expressionist.

4. According to Meyer, absolute meanings and referential meanings can and do exist in one and the same piece of music. (True / False)

5. Which sort of meaning was Leonard Bernstein questioning in the conversation that we examined last week, absolute or referential? Explain you answer.

   If I recall properly, I believe that we discussed Leonard Bernstein’s view on absolute musical meaning. Bernstein has certain reservations about referential musical meanings. I did some investigation online and found a transcript of Young People’s Concert, a series of symposiums he did with younger musicians. In this he states that our associations of music with feelings and concepts can change over time or from person to person, and this does not detract from the value of music, the intramusical quality remains concrete and unchanged¹.

6. Characterize the formalist view of musical meaning.

   The formalist stance involves the categorization of musical meaning as the essence of musical relationships and how we perceive and understand them, a primarily intellectual basis.

7. Characterize the expressionist view of musical meaning.

   The expressionist view details the categorization of musical meaning as musical relationships that are in some unknown way capable of causing an emotional reaction and feelings in the listener.

8. Stravinsky was a notorious formalist (True/ False)
9. According to Meyer, Stravinsky’s formalist (anti-expressionist) stance was misguided because he failed to appreciate that emotion might arise from within the music itself (that is, because he found relationalist view abhorrent and he erroneously equated expressionism with relationalism). (True / False)

10. Which type of fellow do you take Bernstein's LP to be, a formalist or an expressionist?
   I would have to say that Bernstein’s LP could be categorized as an expressionist.

11. Meyer's work in emotion and meaning in music is concerned mainly with:
   (a) Those aspects of meaning which result from the understanding of and response to relationships inherent in the musical progress of a work
   (b) Relationships between the musical organization of a work and the extramarital world of concepts, actions, characters, and situations.

12. Meyer's work is best characterized as:
   (a) Absolute formalism
   (b) Absolute expressionism
   (c) Referential formalism
   (d) Referential expressionism

13. The (absolute) formalisms and the (absolute) expressionists are both faced with the problem of explaining the manner in which an abstract, nonresidential succession of tones becomes meaningful. Consequently, Meyer believes that these two camps should consider themselves to be allies rather than opponents. (True / False)

14. According to Meyer, the psychology of music has, since its beginnings, been plagued by three errors: hedonism, atomism, and universalism.
   (a) How does Meyer define hedonism?
      Meyer defines hedonism as the confusion of aesthetic appearance with the sensuously pleasing.
   (b) How does Meyer define atomism?
      Meyer defines atomism as the attempt to explain and understand as a succession of separable discrete sounds.
   (c) How does Meyer define universalism?
      Meyer defines universalism as the belief that responses obtained from music are universal, natural, and necessary.
15. In 50 words or less, answer the question "What is the subjective evidence for an emotional response to music?"

The subjective evidence for an emotional response to music includes accredited philosophers, composers, and critics affirming the ability of music to evoke emotional responses. Also our cultural acceptance of relaying feeling and emotion in musical compositions and performances is a substantial part of the subjective evidence for emotional responses to music.

16. Briefly, indicate one "difficulty" that Meyer mentions regarding the subjective evidence for an emotional response to music.

One difficulty that Meyer mentions pertaining to the subjective evidence for an emotional response to music includes our acceptance of the evidence at face value, we have no general theory for interpretations of emotions and we cannot acquire precise knowledge of the stimulus which created the emotional response.

17. In 50 words or less, answer the question "What is the behavioral evidence for an emotional response to music?"

The behavioral evidence for an emotional response to music includes observed behavioral changes to music and less overtly characterized emotional changes to certain music. This can be directly observed in some cases when certain music is experienced by humans.

18. Briefly indicate one "difficulty" that Meyer mentions regarding the behavioral evidence for an emotional response to music.

One difficulty concerning the behavioral evidence pertaining to an emotional response to music is that certain behavioral changes are in part a means of communication and can be caused to relay through habit and prompted solely by the social situation, a response such as this is not a natural reflexive reaction.

19. In 50 words or less, answer the question "What is the physiological evidence for an emotional response to music?"

The physiological evidence for an emotional response to music includes all biological changes observed in subjects when subjected to music, such examples as a difference in pulse, blood pressure, and respiration can be considered physiological evidence of an emotional response to music.

20. Briefly, indicate one "difficulty" that Meyer mentions regarding the physiological evidence for an emotional response to music.

One difficulty concerning physiological evidence for an emotional response to music includes a lack of sufficient evidence for the connection between the selection of musical pattern and evoking the response and the specific physiological changes taking place.

21. What is the "central thesis" of the psychological theory of emotions?

The central thesis of the physiological theory of emotions is that the musical stimulus must produce a measurable emotion or affect when a tendency to respond is arrested or inhibited.
22. Briefly, articulate the difference in perspective between Dewey's take on emotion and MacCurdy's take on emotion.

The differences between Dewey’s take on emotion and MacCurdy’s view of emotion is that MacCurdy position on emotions is a psychoanalytical one, where the prevention of expression of the emotion leads to the most intense affect. Dewey’s stance on emotions is that the conflict or opposition of tendencies is the cause of emotional responses.

23. What assumption does Meyer articulate regarding how the theory of emotions relates to musical experience?

The assumption that Meyer mentions regarding how the theory of emotions relates to musical experience is that it is assumed that the law of affect where emotions are evoked when a tendency to respond is inhibited is relevant to all realms of human psychology experience include listening to music.

24. Meyer suggests that musical experience differs from nonmusical experience in three important ways, what are they?

The three important ways in which musical experience differs from nonmusical experience according to Meyer is that musical stimuli is non referential which immediately separates it from other referential stimuli. Secondly, the aspect of music as an art form is meaningful because the relationship between the inhibition of tendency and its necessary resolution is explicit, unlike everyday unresolved tensions created by the inhibition of tendencies. Lastly, in everyday life the factors which keep a tendency from completion may be different from those which activated the tendency; this is not the case when dealing with musical experience.

25. What does Meyer mean by the word "tendency" with respect to music?

Meyer’s inference of the word tendency with respect to music is that when a pattern reaction is activated it operates in an automatic way. Furthermore, tendency describes all automatic response patterns, natural and learned, as well as, habit reactions and acquired concepts.

26. What does Meyer mean by the word “expectation” with respect to music?

Meyer’s inference of the word expectation with respect to music involves the encompassing categorization of all tendencies and habits both conscious and sub conscious. Furthermore, our tendencies and habits are linked to our expectations directly where we can perceive the next musical note or stanza in a given piece through cognitive reasoning.

27. Say something interesting about the relationship between the tendency / expectation phenomena and musical experience.

One thing I found interesting about the relationship between the tendency / expectation phenomena and musical experience is that although our tendencies can be fairly specific and defined our expectations can be much more general in both definition and use. Expectations are sometimes nonspecific because we are not sure about them or only have a rough concept of certain expectations; we are not sure how they will be precisely fulfilled.
28. Identify one thing that you find to be particularly interesting in the section beginning on page twenty six on Conscious and Unconscious Expectations.

One thing that I found compelling about the detailed section on conscious and unconscious expectations in music is that it seems most of our ability to listen and react to music is based subconsciously only when we reflect or deliberate does it become a mainly conscious matter. This shows how intertwined and perhaps necessary music is to our brains. In my mind music could be categorized with such necessary subconscious elements as dreams and involuntary biological regulations.

29. For this question, consider the rest of the chapter, from page 29 to the end. Moreover, consider a "sensible salient passage" to be a contiguous group of 1 to 3 sentences which you find to be particularly informative and attention grabbing. Read the pages and select what you think to be the five most compelling sensible salient passages. Then, write them down!
A. Embodied musical meaning is . . . a product of expectation. (p.31)
B. As later stages of the musical process establish new relationships with the stimulus, new meanings arise. (p.32)
C. The operation of intelligence when listening to music need never become self conscious. (p.33)
D. We cannot understand a work of art without…reconstructing the creative process by which it has come into being. (p.35)
E. Analysis of communication emphasizes the absolute necessity of a common universe of discourse in art. (p.35)

30. In three sentences, describe your reaction to this chapter of your book.

At first I was intimidated by the philosophical complexity and language used in the first few pages, but as I read further passages, such as the evidence of emotional responses to music and did some background research, I began to comprehend the full meaning of Meyer’s ideas. I would consider the first part of this chapter very philosophical, but it does eventually move into a more psychological tone later in the chapter. I would recommend that readers have some exposure to brain anatomy, a decent exposure to psychology, and some background on philosophy. Luckily, I have recently studied most of these subjects, so I can easily assimilate certain comparisons and references made to each of these fields of study in the book. This is a level 300 class and I do not think this text is too hard for the level of the class, but I would have significant reservations using it in a 100 or 200 level class. It is certainly one of the more academically loaded books I have read recently and gives me many new ideas to contemplate, which is a good thing.

References