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## USING THE PERSONA TO EXPRESS COMPLEX EMOTIONS IN MUSIC

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Much of the current philosophical debate about the expressive powers of music concerns the persona.<sup>1</sup> Philosophers differ over what this persona amounts to, but the basic claim is that when we hear an emotion in music, we necessarily imagine or have a sense of a person to whom that emotion belongs. The principal attraction of this view is that it explains how a listener can make the crucial transition between perceiving patterns of sound and seeming to perceive a psychological state. Since only psychological beings possess emotions, it is plausible that we associate the music with an emotion by first associating it with a psychological being. Furthermore, the persona can explain how (abstract, non-vocal) music suggests emotions without suggesting the situations that emotions are about.<sup>2</sup> If the music is somehow linked to a person, we can compare the recognition of emotions expressed by music to the recognition of emotions expressed by other people, which is quite possible even if we do not know what the person's emotion is about.

The main criticism of the persona view is that it places too great a demand on what a listener is experiencing when he or she hears music as emotionally expressive. We may agree that a listener can imagine that the emotion in the music belongs to a person. We might also grant that his or her imagination can be passively stimulated to do as such, rather than deliberately engaged on most occasions. But this is far from agreeing that listeners necessarily imagine a persona, and certain philosophers claim to be able to hear music as expressive without their thinking of a person at all.<sup>3</sup> It is possible that an empirical survey of ordinary listeners' non-theory-laden experiences (such as De Nora 2000) could help matters here, or least put pressure on one side or the other to provide convincing counter-examples. But to satisfy philosophical scrutiny, such a survey would need to be carefully designed in two respects. First, we need to be convinced that what a listener describes really counts as hearing music as emotionally expressive. It seems to me, for instance, that someone who automatically judges that 'Jingle Bells' is a cheerful tune, yet who fails to get the sense of an occurrent emotional state of cheer, does not properly perceive the emotional content of the music and is most likely making a reasoned inference based on social convention or memories of more vivid musical experiences. Second, a wide variety of experiential accounts may still belie a core sense of a persona while elaborating on other details.

Appealing to this latter point in particular allows us to respond to some of the persona critics, as well as to synthesise some of the different accounts. For

instance, Stephen Davies thinks that we attribute emotions to music because we experience a resemblance between the way the music sounds and the way that expressive gestures appear. Accordingly, we need not think that any person lies behind that appearance (like the mask denoting tragedy, or the drooping willow tree). Yet Davies also claims that we experience a resemblance to emotions rather than other possible phenomena because we experience the music as 'purposeful and goal directed' (Davies 2005, p. 182; see also Davies 1994, p. 229). It is unclear to me how we can think of something as purposeful, as striving towards a goal, without having a sense of an agent engaged in such striving.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Charles Nussbaum (2007) believes that we hear emotions in music because the hierarchical metrical and tonal schemes are perceived as structuring a musical environment, with which we simultaneously interact – at an imaginative level. Our imaginative musical action then suggests emotions corresponding to the way the terrain is navigated. For instance, anger is suggested by the struggle to overcome an obstacle. This also sounds like a persona view to me, this time where the listener has a sense of being the person interacting with the environment and having emotions as a result.

Again, Paul Noordhof (2008, p. 337) has recently suggested that, rather than imagining a person undergoing an emotion, we imagine an 'emotion guided creative process'. That is, one has a sense of how the expression of an emotion might result in the musical features we hear, without imagining that an act of expression has in fact taken place.<sup>5</sup> Noordhof compares this to perceiving the potential uses to which an object may be put (a state known as affordance perception). But it seems to me that when I see a mug as 'graspable', I have a sense, however mild, of the action of grasping, which is intensified the more I focus on this potential use. Equally, if I hear something as potentially expressive, particularly in the vivid case of musical experience, I have a sense of the act of expression. I agree with Noordhof that in neither case need we deliberately imagine an action, but what we sense – the way our imaginations are passively stimulated – seems to imply a person.

In the end, we need only one conclusive argument in favour of the persona view: that emotions necessarily imply the presence of persons who experience them (assume, by the way, that non-human emotion-bearing agents are covered under the notion of 'person' employed here). Noordhof argues that while person possession may be conceptually true of emotions, conceptual truths regarding phenomena need not show up in our experience of them. For instance, he notes, it may be conceptually true that to perceive an object we must stand in a causal relationship with it, but this causal relationship need not show up in our perceptual experience. The vital difference, however, as I understand emotions, is that it is an essential part of the experienced content of emotions that, in general, they present the state of the self in relation to the world. It has been empirically established that some people tend to recognise their emotions in terms of the contextual situations in which they are embedded, while others reflect more on their bodily feelings.<sup>6</sup> However, in either case, what we essentially perceive is a

relationship: the situation as it calls for a certain response, or the body as it is impacted. I need not call to mind an explicit idea of the person that I am. My minimal sense of self just is a sense of (1) being at the centre of things, (2) being moved to act and (3) persisting through time. And emotions are particularly noteworthy as ways in which the variations of this minimal sense of self are presented – as solid and secure, or weak and contingent, enduring or transient, connected or isolated from others.

In general, this minimal sense of self intrinsic to emotional experience is all that we should consider necessary to the musical persona. We appeal to the persona only insofar as it is required in order to explain the bare connection between music and emotions.<sup>7</sup> Ensuring a uniform response to music is quite a separate issue. So we can be flexible with regard to the different ways in which listeners can make sense in their imaginations of the connection to a person. Listeners may imagine that they themselves are undergoing an emotion upon which they then introspect (as in Kendall Walton's 1997 account), or they may centrally envision themselves engaging in expressive behaviour. The minimal characteristics of a person that I have outlined (subjectivity, agency and persistence) are also something we infer when recognizing the emotions of others. Thus, listeners may be just as likely to identify the persona in music with someone else – the performer, composer or some purely fictional figure specific to the work in question.

The exact way in which we experience the relationship between the persona's emotion and the music can also vary between listeners. In general, I prefer to say that we hear emotions 'in' music, which seems the best way to convey the immediacy of the experience. But the listener may regard the music as the product of the persona's emotion, perhaps in realistic terms as someone spontaneously moved to play an instrument in a certain way, or perhaps emanating from the persona in some *sui generis* manner (as in Jerrold Levinson's 2005 account). More radically, the listener may even imagine that the person is embodied by the music.<sup>8</sup> In any case, the listener manages to gain direct access to the qualitative nature of an emotional feeling, where the persona functions as a frame which unifies or supports the emotional feeling.

If we recognize such variations in imagination, we may also discover contextual factors about the listening environment or the background state of the listener which encourage them to have one sort of experience of the persona rather than another. An experienced violinist listening to a violin concerto may be more likely to imagine himself or herself expressing the emotion heard in the music. Similarly, it is natural, when one is well acquainted with the biography of the composer of the work, for one to imagine the persona as the composer expressing his or her emotions. For instance, listening to the 'Heiliger Dankgesang' movement of Beethoven's String Quartet No. 15, it is not unreasonable to imagine correspondences between Beethoven's recovery from his illness and the expressed feelings of joy. But do we go too far if we envision the great composer rising from his bed one day with a renewed sense of vigour? It seems harmless enough to me, so long as one does not confuse such imagery with the real

expressive properties of the work. The same is true if one is reminded of some personal experience of recovery. It seems quite possible to have such fleeting imagery while fully attending to the details of the music.

Now, such imaginative fleshing out of the persona may be criticized for making, as Schopenhauer put it, 'foreign and arbitrary' additions to the musical experience (1907, vol. 3, p. 235). Yet for creatures like us, who are constantly searching for patterns and meanings in things, it is apparently hard not to make such associations. And I do not see why we should resist. For while it may be truly profound to sometimes witness the raw inner core of an emotion, unsullied by the contingencies of situation, is not the rush of imaginative associations, as when appreciating great novels or paintings, also part of an enriched experience of work – an experience which, moreover, demonstrates its relevance across time and circumstance?

### **Complex Emotions**

In the second half of this article I would like to explore some of the ways in which the necessary triggering of a sense of persona can be exploited. As other authors have noted,<sup>9</sup> if we hear personae in music, the potential exists to express quite complex emotions. This is because a single persona may be heard as undergoing several emotional episodes in sequence – or, alternatively, several personae may be experienced as interacting in some recognizable emotional drama. In either case, such a perception compounds the meaning of more immediately expressed feelings as they respond to or reflect upon each other. For example, in Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand in D major, the expression of sorrow gives way to anger and finally to joy. Given the concerto form, it is natural to conceive of a single persona undergoing this emotional journey, and thereby to judge that the music expresses at its climax not just joy, but joyful defiance in the overcoming of misfortune and frustration. My judgement here is most probably influenced by the knowledge that Paul Wittgenstein commissioned Ravel to write the piece after the pianist lost his right arm during the First World War. Appreciating the mere fact that such music can be produced with only one hand underlines my judgement of the work's expressive content, and such considerations may even have guided Ravel's composition. Yet the Concerto seems to express joyful defiance independently of these contextual factors, partly because there remain aggressive elements within its joyful climax which I recognize as referring back to earlier expressive episodes.

In exploring such potential complexities, however, we must confront a remaining problem for persona theory. Stephen Davies (1997) and others have questioned whether we should suppose that there is only one persona in the music, as opposed to an indefinite number. Perhaps every expressive element of the music corresponds to a different person, either simultaneously or in sequence. This is a particular problem for Gregory Karl and Jenefer Robinson (1995), who argue that a persona is required to impart a level of unity or

coherence to a work which it would not otherwise possess. If several persona narratives are compatible with the same piece of music, it is not clear that we should prefer a unified narrative to a more disjointed one. We have good reason to prefer a unified narrative only if it matches the unity which we already perceive in the music by virtue of its formal features. So a persona cannot give to a work a coherence which it does not already display.<sup>10</sup>

To reiterate an earlier point, on my view the persona is necessary only insofar as it allows us to make the basic connection to emotional experience, which, once made, may be elaborated by the listener in a variety of ways. Some elaborations may then give a more unified emotional meaning to a work than others. But it is only when we can appeal to formal features which support such an elaborated narrative that we can justifiably assert that a work expresses that narrative in an intersubjectively valid manner. That is to say, our perception of expressive features depends on our imaginative engagement with the formal features of the music, though not all listeners may be aware of this dependence. When it comes, then, to asserting that listeners should hear some complex narrative in a work, we must hope that, our having pointed at certain formal connections in the music, other listeners can imaginatively engage with them in the same way. We must also trust that one's narrative interpretation effectively satisfies shared aesthetic ideals of elegance or richness.

Despite the dependence of expressive characteristics on formal features, listeners may have a hypothesized persona narrative in mind which then helps them locate supporting formal features in a work. Contextual factors such as the Wittgenstein commission mentioned above, as well as the composer's known intentions, may also function in the same way. In particular, I want to evaluate two examples in which the composer has ostensibly set out to express the complex emotion of jealousy: 'Celos', by Astor Piazzolla (arranged by Carel Kraayenhof and recorded by Gidon Kremer on violin, Per Arne Glorvigen on bandoneon and Michel Portal on clarinet in 1996),<sup>11</sup> and *Žárlivost*, by Leoš Janáček. Both titles translate as 'jealousy' from the Spanish and Czech respectively. Strikingly few examples can be found which set out to express this emotion, most likely because it is exceedingly hard to capture in instrumental music. In particular, what makes jealousy complex is that any standard depiction of it involves a relatively elaborate interpersonal stance in a way that joy, fear or sadness does not. But the possibility of depicting interacting personae suggests that this emotion may potentially be expressed with the aid of a stereotypical jealous narrative. And this indeed appears to be the method that both Janáček and Piazzolla/Kraayenhof adopt, though in rather different ways.

In the case of 'Celos', the Kraayenhof arrangement of Piazzolla's work takes the relatively straightforward approach of assigning distinctive personae to the three lead instruments (piano and double bass are also present but function in a background rhythmic capacity throughout).<sup>12</sup> After a short introduction, each instrument takes the lead for sixteen bars, firmly establishing a separate identity. Clarinet and bandoneon then play in unison for four bars before being joined by

the violin for another four bars. The rest of the work (roughly half of its duration) is then dominated by the violin.

Certain features of this work suggest that the violin should be identified as the jealous protagonist, the object of its jealousy being the relationship between the clarinet and bandoneon. The mere fact that the violin dominates the second half of the work suggests that it is the principal emotional character. Its noticeable *glissandi*, played *sul ponticello*, throughout the introduction and in the background during the clarinet solo suggest a strained, anguished character. This sense of tension is further supported by a rising modulation halfway through its first solo. Meanwhile, the way that the bandoneon solo seamlessly takes over from the clarinet solo on the same pitch, as well as their following unison section, suggests, to some extent, a sense of romantic coordination.

What does not seem compatible with a jealousy narrative, however, is the way that the violin then joins this unison before striking off on its own. Are we supposed to think that an attempted *ménage à trois* has been rebuffed? More troubling still is that the overall work has a decidedly sombre and melancholy character. Jealousy as a complex emotional state may certainly involve considerable fluctuation between feelings. Anxiety, rage and desire may follow hard upon each other,<sup>13</sup> and sadness may well be included also.<sup>14</sup> But in general, I do not associate this emotion with a predominantly sad character so much as with ugly, aggressive conflict.<sup>15</sup> In 'Celos' there is no real sense of conflict between the instrumental personae. They each take turns at the lead with quite perfect decorum.<sup>16</sup> Overall, then, while the narrative that I have outlined seems to make sense of Kraayenhof's arrangement of Piazzolla's work, I would not anticipate that the majority of listeners, ignorant of its title, would spontaneously judge the music as expressive of jealousy.

Turning now to Janáček's *Žárlivost*, it should be first of all noted that the work was originally conceived as an overture to his opera *Jenůfa*. At the end of Act I, the male protagonist, Laca, slashes Jenůfa across the cheek with a knife in order to mar her beauty and thereby deter his romantic rival (amazingly, Laca goes on to win her hand). Moreover, as noted by Jaroslav Vogel (1962), the thematic material was derived from a Czech folk song about a jealous brigand, for which Janáček composed a choral adaptation called *Žárlivec* (*The Jealous One*). By examining this originating material, it is possible to identify two of the thematic motives in *Žárlivost* as symbolising male and female protagonists. A direct quotation of the brigand's song is repeated in the orchestral work and is the source of the syncopated attacking rhythm used from the beginning (see Exs 1 and 2).

Ex. 1 Brigand's theme from the choral song *Žárlivec*, quoted in Janáček, *Žárlivost*

The musical notation for Ex. 1 is a single staff in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature. It begins with the instruction 'Cr. sord.' and 'pp espress.'. The melody consists of several measures of music with various dynamics and articulations. The first measure starts with a half note G2, followed by quarter notes A2, B2, and C3. The second measure has quarter notes D3, E3, and F3. The third measure has a half note G3. The fourth measure has a half note A3. The fifth measure has a half note B3. The sixth measure has a half note C4. The seventh measure has a half note D4. The eighth measure has a half note E4. The ninth measure has a half note F4. The tenth measure has a half note G4. The eleventh measure has a half note A4. The twelfth measure has a half note B4. The thirteenth measure has a half note C5. The fourteenth measure has a half note D5. The fifteenth measure has a half note E5. The sixteenth measure has a half note F5. The seventeenth measure has a half note G5. The eighteenth measure has a half note A5. The nineteenth measure has a half note B5. The twentieth measure has a half note C6. The piece ends with a double bar line.

Ex. 2 Brigand's theme reduced to the attacking 'male' motive used in Janáček, *Žárlivost*



Ex. 3 Girl's theme from the choral song *Žárlivec*; quoted in Janáček, *Žárlivost*, also highlighting chromatic 'female' motive used in *Žárlivost*

Le - ží tam šo - ha - jek, hla - va po - ru - ba - ná

Ex. 4 Janáček, *Žárlivost*, bars 85–92: example of dialogue between the 'male' and 'female' motives

Meanwhile, a chromatic motive found in the orchestral work is used in the chorale to accompany the female persona's expression of compassion for and fear of the brigand (Ex. 3). Throughout *Žárlivost*, these two motives are developed and set in dialogue (Ex. 4), although the appearance of the 'female' motive is quite gradual, and its fullest expression as a theme does not appear until quite late in the work. The overall narrative seems to be one in which the male persona makes several attempts at wooing the female persona, who initially retreats in fear before the two eventually become harmoniously intertwined (Ex. 5).

Ex. 5 Janáček, *Žárlivost*, bars 128–131: culmination of romantic male-female thematic dialogue



The work also contains a third theme: an arch-shaped idea which bookends the piece, appearing ominously at the beginning in a minor key and at the end in a predominantly lighter fashion. Yet unlike the other two themes, this arch shape does not seem to capture a distinct persona involved in the drama so much as a ‘jealous’ episode on the part of the male protagonist. The reasons, I would, argue, are first, that the arch theme does not appear at all for the majority of the musical action, and second, that it is used mostly as an *ostinato* and is not developed independently of the other themes. As such, the most coherent sense that I can make of the work with respect to a jealousy narrative is that, at the beginning, the male protagonist (whose theme dominates the first half) is consumed by jealous passion. This mood then fades away as the male persona attempts to woo the female. Once the romance has been successfully established, the male’s jealousy then returns, threatening to undermine the relationship. This threat is overcome, and the work ends on a mostly positive note. But the jealous theme, and the concluding appearance of the male’s attacking motive (which, though now in a major key, retains a decidedly harsh quality), lend a dark undertone to the relationship.

Now, it must be noted that, although having this emotional narrative in mind when listening to the work does enable a coherent sense of its meaning, one requires a fair amount of interpretative effort to settle on this narrative. Although the dialogue between the two central thematic ideas is reasonably clear, I predict that a listener would have considerable difficulty picking out a jealousy narrative in the music, despite the piece’s title. Thus, like Kraayenhof’s arrangement of Piazzolla’s work, *Žárlivost* fails, I believe, to capture the emotion of jealousy in a universally intuitive sense. To be sure, it does manage to capture a degree of agitated romance. At the same time, it does not capture the interaction between distinct personae in a manner suggestive of a jealousy narrative, a requirement that seems better suited to the way that the Kraayenhof arrangement clearly introduces three instrumental characters.

Nevertheless, the works of Piazzolla and Janáček strongly indicate that the potential to express jealousy in abstract instrumental music merely awaits a more convincing treatment. These examples highlight some of the ways that the expression of a complex social emotion such as jealousy may be supported or



undermined by the formal features of a work. In particular, it is necessary both that formal features be able to be heard as telling a coherent persona-based narrative and that some of the immediately felt qualities of the emotion be captured. So where previously we might have rejected the attempt *a priori*, having decided that abstract music lacks the resources to capture the required conceptual content (in the case of jealousy, ‘x has been unfaithful to me’), we can now see how the task might be achieved. By situating an appropriate mix of basic emotional content within a suitable context of interacting personae, the music should be capable of being directly expressive (and not merely symbolic) of a complex social emotion.

## NOTES

Exs 1–3 are reproduced from Jaroslav Vogel, *Leoš Janáček: His Life and Works*, trans. Geraldine Thomsen-Muchová (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1962), by kind permission of the publisher. The preparation of this article was made possible by support from the Swiss National Science Foundation, grant PBSKP1-130854 ‘The Mood Organ: Putting Theories of Musical Expression into Practice’.

1. See Cochrane (2010); Davies (1997) and (2005); Kivy (2006); Levinson (2005); Noordhof (2008); Nussbaum (2007); Robinson (2005); and Trivedi (2001).
2. Thus answering the problem famously raised in 1854 by Hanslick (1986).
3. See, for example, Davies (2005), p. 190; and Kivy (2006), p. 304.
4. Note that when we observe machines automatically engaging in some ‘action’, the corresponding claim is that to see them as possessing a goal is to also see them as being agents in some minimal sense.
5. See Noordhof (2008), p. 341.
6. See Laird (2007). Such differing intuitions may go some way towards resolving the long-standing debate between those who support bodily feeling-based models of emotion and those who support situation appraisal-based models.
7. Cf. Levinson (2005).
8. As in Trivedi (2001); cf. also Budd (1995).
9. For example, Karl and Robinson (1995); and Davies (1997).
10. See Davies (1997), pp. 106–8.
11. The Kraayenhof arrangement alters the tango in several ways that have a significant (and in general improving) effect upon its potential expression of jealousy. Most noticeably, it removes the electric guitar from Piazzolla’s original score and adds a clarinet, which is given the melodic lead at the beginning of the work. The three melodic instruments (violin, clarinet and bandoneon) also take the lead in turns, where as Piazzolla more often employs his two melodic leads (violin and bandoneon) in unison. Considerable melodic embellishments and effects for the violin are also added.
12. It is worth noting that the tango form itself is suited to the expression of restrained passion. John Gade’s famous tango ‘Jalousie: Tango Tsigane’ (apparently one of the

most frequently played pieces in the world) also ostensibly attempts to express jealousy, yet I have not looked at it here since it seems even less successful in this regard than the two works I analyse.

13. As noted in Goldie (2000), p. 226.
14. Compare, for instance, the Lied *Eifersucht und Stolz* (*Jealousy and Pride*) from Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin*. In that work, Schubert's approach is to rely not so much on the interaction of multiple personae as on the internal conflict experienced by the jealous miller as he fluctuates between conflicting feelings.
15. Prinz (2004), pp. 98–101, similarly regards jealousy as a variety of anger specifically calibrated towards infidelity.
16. It is worth noting that conflict is difficult to express in music that in general aims at a beautiful aesthetic standard, particularly where conforming to a score can result in a sense of perfectly synchronized activity. A good example where both ideals seem to be satisfied is Beethoven's Cello Sonata in A major, Op. 69, particularly the Scherzo movement, in which the cello and piano seem to snap at each others' heels.

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### *Discography*

- Piazzolla, Astor, 1996: 'Celos', arr. Carel Kraayenhof, on *Hommage à Piazzolla*, Gidon Kremer, violin; Vadim Sakharov, piano; Alois Posch, double bass; Michel Portal, clarinet; and Per Arne Glorvigen, bandoneon (Nonesuch Records, NON79407).

### **NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR**

TOM COCHRANE was awarded a PhD in philosophy in 2007 for his dissertation 'Shared Emotions in Music'. Since September 2010 he has been at the Sonic Arts Research Centre, Queen's University Belfast, working on a project entitled 'The Mood Organ: Putting Theories of Musical Expressivity into Practice', the goal of which is to generate expressive music automatically from physiological measures of emotion. He is co-editing an interdisciplinary volume to be entitled *The Emotional Power of Music*.

### **ABSTRACT**

This article begins by arguing for the persona theory of musical experience, which claims that when we hear music as expressive of emotions, we have a sense of a persona that is in some way attached to the emotional state. The author argues that the sense of persona underlies a number of different accounts

of musical expression and is generally supported by the essential experiential content of emotions. The author then explores the ways in which the listener's sense of a persona may be exploited to allow the expression of complex emotions, focussing on the emotion of jealousy and, to that end, examining two cases where the expression of that emotion has been attempted by Janáček and Piazzolla.