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Suggested Reference

Davies, S. (1999). Response to Stecker. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 39(3), 282-287. doi: [10.1093/bjaesthetics/39.3.282](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/39.3.282)

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Response to Robert Stecker

I am most grateful to Robert Stecker for his careful consideration of my views in his "Davies on Musical Expression of Emotion" (in this number). His thoughtful comments are directed to arguments I presented in Musical Meaning and Expression (Cornell University Press, 1994). There I argued that, in instrumental works, music is expressive by presenting appearances of emotion characteristics, without regard to felt-emotions.¹ In this response I address Stecker's three main criticisms

Stecker's first objection observes that a resemblance in their dynamic character does not license an inference from music to emotions. He approves when I defend myself against the point by suggesting that its expressiveness is a perceived property of the music, not something inferred. Music quite literally has an expressive character in the appearance it presents to the listener, though this would be perceived only by listeners with an appropriate knowledge of the relevant musical idioms. But Stecker continues: "While Davies escapes the criticism he directs to others, it's not clear that the others don't have a similar means of escape. They too can say that expressiveness is not the mere resemblance of dynamic qualities to aspects of emotion, but a matter of the way we experience music, on the basis of the intentional and conventional context that informs this experience. Connection to emotions as psychological states results from the music making reference to these in ways that we saw Davies's own account invites. The persona account, [according to which the listener

¹ I should emphasise something that Stecker notes, but only passingly: The part of my theory that he discusses deals with purely instrumental music. In its other parts I allow that much more complicated things go on in opera or song or music with drama or film. For instance, musical works of these kinds often deal with Platonic emotions experienced by their characters; the cognitive aspects of these emotions are indicated or described within the work, though not by purely musical means. Moreover, I allow that purely instrumental music is capable of quite subtle forms of expression when it invokes musical and cultural associations between contexts of ordinary or ritual emotional expression and musical forms, words, instruments, musical types, and the like. The final part of Chapter One of Musical Meaning and Expression is devoted to a discussion of some of these kinds of "non-natural" musical meaning. I think they are very common and very important in music. I do not devote more pages to their discussion only because I do not think they raise philosophically interesting challenges.

imagines a persona as the subject who experiences the emotions expressed in the music], might be one, though not the only, way of fleshing out the connection Davies requires between felt emotion and the experience of a sentient being." The objection becomes this: if I can save myself by characterising expressiveness as a property of the musical works, others can defend their theories against my criticisms in a similar manner.

It seems to me that there always must be an inferential or imaginative leap in hearing the expressiveness of music as the expression of an emotion felt by someone (for instance, an imagined persona). Is this inferential or imaginative leap both justified and required for recognition of music's expressive character in the standard case? I argue that the answer to this question is "no." The music is presents emotion characteristics in the way it sounds without expressing anyone's felt-emotion. In that case, inferences of the posited kind can neither explain nor underpin music's expressiveness.

I do not doubt that auditors often listen to music as expressing someone's felt-emotions -- the composer's, the performer's, or those of an imagined persona. I agree that there might be heuristic value sometimes in encouraging a person to approach music in this fashion. Perhaps she can better come to appreciate the music's expressive character by entertaining the thought of its embodying a narrative about the emotional life of an imagined persona. Nevertheless, I reject the strong view that the perception of music's expressiveness always and necessarily involves such inferences or imaginings. Simply, I do not think that we directly hear the expression of actual, experienced emotions in music; that is, I do not think we hear the sadness of the music in the way that we perceive in his face and body the sadness a man is feeling and showing. Accordingly, I do not think that it is plausible to claim that we recognise in music the expression of felt-emotions, while I do think it is plausible to claim that we hear its expressive aspect as a property possessed by and directly apprehended in the music.

Stecker may think otherwise because he seems to believe that I am committed, as these other theorists also are, to moving beyond appearances that are merely like human behaviour to actions that are informed with human thought and feeling. This mischaracterises my position, although in a minor way. I do argue that, because of its internal tonal and rhythmic telos, we experience music as more like human actions than like bodily or mechanical movements. And I think that, were this not so, we would not be liable to experience its expressive aspect as we do. But this is because humanly presented emotion-characteristics, such as those revealed in a person's gait or bearing without regard to how they feel, are more readily observed in actions than in mere movements. Accordingly, I think that we can and must hear music as like human action already at the stage of hearing it as presenting expressive aspects. I do not think, as Stecker perhaps implies, that one first notices the expressive aspect of the music and then, by thinking of this in connection with felt-emotions, one later comes to hear the musical movement as like human action. When I argue that we experience music as more like human action than like mere movements, I have in mind the kinds of actions that present emotion-characteristics in appearances, rather than those that express or betray felt-emotions. So it is not the case that, in the background, I also must invoke

imaginings or inferences that take one beyond expressive aspects to expressions of felt-emotions.

The second objection poses to my theory the question that is crucial for any theory that locates the expressiveness in the music: "why should we say that the music expresses emotions if there is no felt-emotion to which it gives expression?" To speak correctly of "expression" in music, some connection to psychological states, real or imaginary, needs to be established. I have argued that music's expressiveness is a matter of its displaying expressive appearances that are not indicative of felt-emotions. So I can allow only that music presents appearances of emotions, not that it expresses them.

Here I am in broad agreement with Stecker, though I do not feel stung by the objection's force. My view of the basic case is that music presents auditory appearances that are characteristic of emotions, and thereby is expressive of an emotion, but that it does not express anyone's felt-emotion.

If sometimes I write of music's expressing sadness (while also emphasising that the emotions it presents are not experienced by anyone), I do so because I think this is more liable to be understood than would be an outright denial that music expresses emotions. The outright denial would easily be misinterpreted as entailing that music is not expressive of emotion or that emotion is not expressed in it. In fact, my view does allow for the legitimacy of such attributions; music can be expressive of emotion and emotion can be expressed in music. Both of these locutions are consistent with talking about a thing's appearance without regard to felt-emotions. A face can be expressive of sadness without being an expression of its owner's felt-sadness, and sadness can be expressed in the way a face looks without being felt by the face's owner. The faces of Basset hounds are expressive of sadness and sadness is expressed in their faces, though, as a breed, Basset hounds are not prone to feel sad more often than any other. So long as I am allowed to retain "the music is expressive of X" and "Xness is expressed in the music," I would give up "the music expresses X."

Stecker's third objection insists that music does not refer to emotions, whereas I maintain that sometimes it may do so. he concludes that my model for the kind of reference conveyed by music is inadequate. As he writes: "...the intention to pick out or make salient natural emotion characteristics is not sufficient for reference to them. ... Suppose I am preparing a meal and I choose dishes with contrasting textures so that the guests will better be able to attend to appreciate them. In making and serving the meal, I don't refer to the textures though I intend to make them salient, to give emphasis to them."

I think that Stecker slightly misrepresents my position here.² I agree with him that the intention to make some natural item salient is not sufficient to secure reference to its features or more generally to features it exemplifies. The relevant and crucial intention is an intention to refer by the use one makes of a thing in appropriating its natural significance. As an example of this kind of reference, I use the case of a medical lecturer who presents the class with a

² Compare his account of what I call "meaning B" with my own in Musical Meaning and Expression, pp. 31-32.

patient who has measles and who says: "Those spots mean measles." His intention is not merely to make the spots salient (as might be that of a person who says: "Wow, how spotty that person is!") but to secure a reference to the symptoms of measles by pointing to them. Another case, one that is closer to the musical one, is that in which I respond to a query about how I am feeling by deliberately pulling a sad face. Now, I think that composers do intend sometimes to refer to emotional states or experiences via the expressiveness they impart to their music and, in addition, that we can know they have such intentions either on the basis of their writings or of other pieces in a similar style or genre. Their music refers only when they have such intentions. I agree with Stecker that a composer whose intention only was to make expressiveness a prominent feature of her musical work would not thereby make the music referential.

This leads to a further point made by Stecker: music could not refer, because there is no reference without predication, and music presents no propositional content concerning the emotions it expresses. That is, Stecker must doubt that I can make good the distinction invoked above -- that of intending to make something merely salient as against that of intending to use something to secure a reference -- because, even if composers have the intention to refer in their music via its expressiveness, Stecker does not believe they could successfully carry through those intentions

There is a philosophical tradition that can be traced via Frege to Kant according to which reference goes with predication. On this view, reference involves more than isolating a topic or indicating something as the object of attention. If I say "President Clinton," I have not referred to the President, because from that utterance, it is not clear whether I am mentioning or using the name, for instance. Reference is a use of language that is inseparable from the characterisation of the subject that is referentially identified.

I allow that reference has the purpose of preparing the way for predication and I accept that, unless it were typically linked to predication, the notion of reference would have little point or sense. Also, I concede that in the technical sense established and analysed by philosophers, there can be no reference without predication. Nevertheless, I think there is a folk notion of reference that is more relaxed in its application. While it acknowledges that reference typically goes foot in glove with predication, it also allows for a kind of reference that involves an intentional act of selection, without the referer's going on to describe or to qualify the subject that is marked for attention and contemplation. Call this "proto-reference."

So far as my argument is concerned, it is sufficient to appeal to the folk notion of proto-reference in claiming that, sometimes at least, composers intend by creating expressive music to refer to the emotional experiences that typically are associated with the emotion-characteristics they make the music present. As I wrote in Musical Meaning and Expression (p. 265), even if a Basset hound means nothing by the way it looks, a sculptor who carves a statue of a Basset hound could intend (and could be known to intend) to lead the audience to reflect not only on the expressive appearance of the depicted dog, but on the world of human feelings that are cognate with that emotion-characteristic. If this point is inconsistent with the philosopher's technical notion of linguistic

reference, so be it. I do not think my theory would lose anything by conceding that, according to the Fregean analysis, music does not refer.

Having helped myself to the folk notion of reference, perhaps I can also advance my cause by invoking a folk notion of predication. Music does not describe the emotions to which it refers -- not in the way that propositions involve the predicative description of their subjects -- but there is a sense in which it elaborates and characterises them via the manner in which it presents its expressiveness. Perhaps that can be seen as quasi-predication, so that, after all, musical proto-reference is accompanied by quasi-predication, though, in terms of the philosopher's deliberately narrow construal of these notions, music is neither strictly referential nor exactly predicative.

The idea I have in mind can be developed this way: A painted portrait presents a perspective on the sitter via the manner in which he is depicted. He is shown as stern and forbidding, or as noble, or as ill and depressed, or whatever. In terms of the philosopher's theory, the portrait does not refer to the sitter because it does not predicate anything of him. There is no standard pictorial convention that indicates what speech-act is intended; that is, there is nothing that distinguishes assertion from idle speculation, or indicates tense, mood, quantification, and the like. Moreover, there is no end to the descriptions one could develop of a painting's subject on the basis of the depiction, whereas predication takes place within the confines of finite propositions, and in that way always come to a full-stop. Despite the philosopher's theory, however, there is a natural and seemingly licit folk use of terms such as "refer and "describe" such that the portrait refers to its subject and describes him.

Someone might deny that there is a relevant analogy between depictive painting and expressive music, arguing as follows: While it is obvious that portraits present their subjects under visual aspects that have describable contents, it is not clear what instrumental music "says about" the emotions that are cognate with the emotion-characteristics it presents. Indeed, music regularly is described as (and often is praised for being) ineffable in the manner of its expressiveness.

I reject the above claims about music's ineffability, and in that way aim to defend the analogy that is being challenged. On my account, music is not expressive of highly particular emotions, but of rather general emotions of the sadness and happiness varieties. It is highly particular, though, in the manner by which it presents these emotion-characteristics. The sadness is not special as such, but it is a sadness that is presented in a very specific note-sequence. If the sadness strikes some people as hard to describe, I think this is because they expect they should be able to elaborate from a phenomenological perspective on the sensational character of an episode of sadness, or expound on the attitudes, objects, and settings that usually give such an experience its distinctive character. These things are absent from the musical case, and so are not available for description, but this does not mean that we cannot be more specific about the expressiveness we hear. The sadness of Chopin's funeral march is not the same as that of Beethoven's, but the difference lies not in the emotion of which the music is expressive but in the concrete detail from which arises the musical realisation of that expressive appearance. In my view, what music tells us is the way emotion-characteristics sound. This recalls Carroll

Pratt's aphorism, which certainly was a perceptive one, but which could not but seem empty for the absence of an explanation in his own account of how music could sound as the emotions feel.

As Stecker rightly observes, the argument about music's referential power is not idle, not merely terminological, because it is far from easy to account for the value of music's expressiveness unless music does succeed in referring to and commenting on the world of human feeling. And my account faces a difficulty that does not apply to theories claiming that music can express felt-emotions, for I must show how music gets us beyond the emotion-characteristics of mere appearances to the full-blooded experiences that give emotions their significance in human life. Stecker certainly is aware that I try to address this concern in my book, but he is not sure that I succeed. This is an aspect of his critique that deserves a fuller treatment than I can give it here, however.

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