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Aesthetics

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**Hilaritas**

I attended Hilaritas, a holiday concert put on by the University of Alabama vocal and jazz ensembles. The pieces in the performance ranged from subdued choral arrangements to high energy jazz reimaginings of classic carols. In this paper I will examine my experience at Hilaritas from Levinson’s point of view about the empathetic response to art, and attempt to explain the emotions which I felt during the course of the performance based upon Levinson’s theory on the subject. For the purposes of argument, I will expand the scope of Levinson’s argument to include all emotions generated by music, not just negative ones (with which he is primarily concerned).

During the course of the performance, I experienced a wide variety of emotions through the music. I felt happiness during such songs as “Baby it’s Cold Outside,” sadness during “Hallelu,” and enjoyment during the instrumental “Winter Medley.” Levinson suggests that these emotions are different than the same emotions aroused as a response to life events, that is to say that the happiness I feel during a rendition of “Baby it’s Cold Outside” is different than the happiness I feel after winning the lottery, satisfying a desire, or spending time with a close friend. The difference lies in the fact that the musical emotions I experience are a) lacking in a cognitive component and b) are not automatic.

I can confirm from my experience that there was no cognitive component to the emotions aroused during the concert. I felt the way that I did without needing to consider consciously what exactly it was about the music that was eliciting the emotion. In fact, I did not make any particular effort to analyze or interpret my feelings about any particular piece; I merely took each piece as it came and allowed myself to experience any musical emotions that arose without cognitive interference. If, as Levinson suggests, it is the case that musical emotions are not automatic, then there must be some other explanation for my feeling them, as they arose despite the fact that I was not making a conscious effort to cultivate them.

Levinson states several preconditions for the experience of musical emotion. First, he states that a familiarity with the musical style and work being listened to is essential for musical emotion to arise. As I pride myself upon my relatively high degree of knowledge about Christmas songs, vocal performance, and jazz, it is conceivable that this is a valid prerequisite for the experience of musical emotion. Levinson’s second prerequisite is the necessity of listening to the music in the right way. I am not sure if I did this, as I did not make a conscious effort to experience the music and just sat back and listened. Perhaps Levinson means that should musical emotion arise, it means that however the person experiencing such emotion listened must have been the proper way, otherwise the emotion would not have arisen. As for Levinson’s third criteria, emotional openness to music, I can assert with confidence that I was in a state of emotional openness to the music. With respect to Levinson’s requirement that the listener be able to recognized expressed emotion, I am a qualified, competent agent.

Having shown that I fulfilled all of the preconditions for having an empathetic emotional experience at the time of the concert, I will move to an analysis of the actual emotional responses I had to the music. When I felt happiness, sadness, or enjoyment, what was I feeling? Levinson argues that it was a combination of things, namely the thought of the emotion in conjunction with the belief that the music expresses the emotion and the projection of the emotion onto my mental state. This medley allowed me to sample a wide variety of emotional states in a relatively short period and with little actual effort, whereas if I had gone out in the world at large in search of such emotions, I would have to experience a great number of emotions that I may or may not actually be interested in experiencing and expend a much greater amount of effort than I was able to avoid by going to the concert instead. I am undecided on whether or not I achieved a greater understanding of “feeling,” which is one of the rewards of the emotional response to music outlined by Levinson. On the one hand, I was able to experience a variety of feelings, but they were on the whole feelings that I had felt before in similar circumstances, so the experience was not of particular value in developing new personal knowledge about feeling.

I turn now to the cognitive component as it relates to the featureless object of music. While Levinson argues that there can be on the face of things no cognitive component in pure musical emotion as there is no object around which to develop emotional responses, it is nevertheless intuitively true that a certain amount of cognitive engagement with the music is necessary in order to develop any sort of understanding, emotional or otherwise, about it. This cognitive engagement can allow us to develop a better understanding of the musical emotion, but is not an integral or necessary part of that emotion. Empathic resonance with the cognitive process behind the art in question essentially replaces the need for us to have an object for cognitive analysis. Unfortunately, I did not experience any of the rewards of the cognitive component of engagement with the concert as outlined by Levinson, and as such cannot personally attest to their validity. I did not feel a sense of emotional resolution or expressive potency, and though I appreciated the skill and dedication of the artists onstage, I did not feel connected to them on any special or intimate level.

In short, my experience at the Hilaritas concert seems to confirm parts of Levinson’s theory of emotion and to fail to confirm others. This suggests to me that either a modification of Levinson’s theory whereby emotion can be experienced to different degrees/as a combination of many different components all of which do not necessarily have to obtain for the emotional experience to exist is necessary, or that I am simply not a person of sufficiently developed cognitive or emotional range to fully enjoy the benefits of a full aesthetic relationship with the arts.