

# Lecture 5.2 Emotion and Meaning in Music

**MUS 20 Exploring the Musical Mind**

**Summer Session II 2025**

Instructor: Jingwei Liu | August 19, 2025

# Musical Tendency

## **Emotion and Meaning in Music by Leonard B. Meyer, 1961**

- A tendency is a pattern reaction that operates, or tends to operate, when activated, in an automatic way.
- A pattern reaction consists of a set or series of regularly coincident mental or motor responses which, once brought into play as part of the response to a given stimulus, follow a previously ordered course, unless inhibited or blocked in some way.
- The order established by a pattern reaction is both temporal and cultural. That is, the series involves not only the relation of the parts of the total pattern to each other but also their timing.
- Thus a series may be disturbed either because the succession of the parts of the pattern is upset or because the timing of the series is upset or both.

# Musical Expectations

## Emotion and Meaning in Music by Leonard B. Meyer, 1961

- If tendencies are pattern reactions that are expectant in the broad sense, including unconscious as well as conscious anticipations, then it is not difficult to see how music is able to evoke tendencies.
- For it has been generally acknowledged that music arouses expectations, some conscious and others unconscious, which may or may not be directly and immediately satisfied.

*The pleasure arises from the perception of the artist's play with forms and conventions which are ingrained as habits of perception both in the artist and his audience. Without such habits, there would be no awareness whatever of the artist's fulfillment of and subtle departures from established forms. But the pleasure which we derive from style is not an intellectual interest in detecting similarities and differences, but an immediate aesthetic delight in perception which results from the arousal and suspension or fulfillment of expectations which are the products of many previous encounters with works of art.*

# Musical Suspense

## Emotion and Meaning in Music by Leonard B. Meyer, 1961

- Suspense is essentially a product of ignorance as to the future course of events.
- From the outset ignorance arouses strong mental tendencies toward clarification which are immediately *affective*. If ignorance persists in spite of all, then the individual is thrown into a state of doubt and uncertainty.
- These feelings are themselves tendencies (the avoidance of painful apprehension and the expectation of a propitious conclusion) which become focused upon an expected resolution of the unpleasant stimulus situation.
- The greater the buildup of suspense, of tension, the greater the emotional release upon resolution. This observation points up the fact that in aesthetic experience, emotional pattern must be considered not only in terms of tension itself but also in terms of *the progression from tension to release*.

# Musical Surprise

## Emotion and Meaning in Music by Leonard B. Meyer, 1961

- As soon as the unexpected, or for that matter the surprising, is experienced, the listener attempts to fit it into the general system of beliefs relevant to the style of the work.
- This requires a very rapid re-evaluation of either the stimulus situation itself or its cause – the events antecedent to the stimulus.
- Or it may require a review of the whole system of beliefs that the listener supposed appropriate and relevant to the work.
- If the above mental synthesis does not take place immediately, three things may happen:

# Musical Surprise

## **Emotion and Meaning in Music by Leonard B. Meyer, 1961**

1. The mind may suspend judgment, so to speak, trusting that what follows will clarify the meaning of the unexpected consequent.
2. If no clarification takes place, the mind may reject the whole stimulus and irritation will set in.
3. The unexpected consequent may be seen as a purposeful blunder.
  - Whether the listener responds in the first or third manner will depend partly upon the character of the piece, its mood or designative content.
  - The third response might be made to music whose character was comic or satirical.
  - In a piece whose character admitted no purposeful blunders, the second response would probably be elicited.

The inhibition of a tendency to respond or, on the conscious level, the frustration of expectation was found to be the basis of the affective and the intellectual aesthetic response to music.

**Emotion and Meaning in Music by Leonard B. Meyer, 1961**

# Musical Gestalt

- In the rest part of the book *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Leonard B. Meyer, 1961), it addressed three Principles of Pattern Perception:
  - The Law of Good Continuation
  - Completion and Closure
  - The Wakening of Shape

These principles fall within a larger scope of theory of perception known as the [Gestalt Psychology](#).

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: [Christian von Ehrenfels – Gestalt Qualities](#)
- YouTube video: [Gestalt theory in Music Perception](#)



# Gestalt Laws of Grouping

According to Gestalt psychologists, the fundamental principle of perceptual grouping is the law of *Prägnanz*, also known as the law of good Gestalt. *Prägnanz* is a German word that directly translates to 'pithiness' and implies salience, conciseness, and orderliness. The law of *Prägnanz* says that people tend to experience things as regular, orderly, symmetrical, and simple. In other words, human perception is biased towards simplicity.

- Law of Proximity
- Law of Similarity
- Law of Closure
- Law of Symmetry
- Law of Good Continuation
- Law of Common Fate
- Law of Good Form
- Law of Past Experience

YouTube video: [Gestalt principles | Processing the Environment | MCAT | Khan Academy](#)