

## ALL THE PAIN AND JOY OF THE WORLD IN A SINGLE MELODY: A TRANSYLVANIAN CASE STUDY ON MUSICAL EMOTION

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THE STUDY OF MUSICAL EMOTIONS IS A CHALLENGE for psychology and neuroscience, but the ethnomusicological account is often excluded from the debate. The present article focuses on types of performances that differ from the model of Western classical music: weddings and funerals in a Gypsy community of Transylvania. Analysis of musical activity and expression of emotions in these contexts showed that aesthetic meanings are transformed when music is embedded in social action: the same tunes are played while people dance at weddings and while they cry at funerals. The major anthropological hypothesis suggested by this study is that music acts in rituals as a means for establishing and reinforcing the emotional experiences of different kinds of relationships. The hypotheses and data are discussed in light of recent psychological research on musical emotion.

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UNDERSTANDING MUSICAL EMOTION IS nowadays a major scientific challenge in the fields of psychology and neuroscience (for a review, see Sloboda & Juslin, 2001), but the ethnomusicological account is almost completely excluded from the debate (except for a recent contribution by Becker, 2004). Juslin and Västfjäll (2008) recently observed that data coming from the cognitive sciences are still controversial, which led them to call for an interplay between field studies and experimental studies. Ethnomusicological descriptions and analyses of musical performances may respond to the need of studying musical emotions in real-life situations (among those that deal explicitly with music and emotion, see Becker, 2004; During, 1994; Feld, 1982; Lambert, 1997; Lortat-Jacob, 1998;

Nattiez, 2004; Pasqualino, 1998; Rouget, 1985; Wolf, 2001). Moreover, since these contributions are not limited to a single culture and a single type of music, they offer the additional, fundamental advantage of questioning the subject of music and emotion in a wider cross-cultural perspective.

The present article focuses on types of performances that differ from the model of Western classical music, which still underlies much scientific research (e.g., the composer-performer-listener communication model; see Kendall & Carterette, 1996). As ethnomusicologists have previously shown, participants display different modes of producing and listening to music according to the expectations that pertain to a particular situation (Becker, 2004). In rituals emotional expression may be highly conventionalized and (pre)organized in time and space (Mauss, 1921) and sometimes we cannot tell if and to what degree the emotional behavior observed is a response to music. Still, in these cases, as in many other situations in which humans express emotional behavior, music is present as a socialized practice, a fact that calls for an anthropological approach to studying music and emotion. One hypothesis that underlies the present study is that new insights into the subject of musical emotion may result from describing and analyzing music performances in which music and emotional behavior do not follow the pattern of causal relations given by the communication model.

One related problem that emerges while studying emotion concerns the strong impact the context of musical performance has on the process of assigning emotional meaning to music. While pioneering research has focused on the role of musical expectancy (Meyer, 1956), psychologists have recently proposed that emotional experiences may be mediated by mechanisms that are more independent of musical structures, such as episodic memory, evaluative conditioning and visual imagery (see Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). This could explain why the same melody may elicit very different types of emotions depending on the performance context. A further hypothesis that underlies the present study is that looking at the intersubjective relationships established in performance and their relations

with musical events may offer a complementary way to approach this problem.

### Transylvanian Village Music: Understanding Local Aesthetics

Field research was conducted between 2004 and 2007 in a small Gypsy community of central Transylvania (Romania). Professional Gypsy musicians (*lăutari*) in this region offer their services for the neighboring communities (Hungarians, Romanians, and Gypsies) in various contexts, mainly associated with life-cycle rituals (e.g., baptisms, weddings, funerals) and religious festivities (such as Christmas). Village music, traditionally played on string instruments, is transmitted by Gypsies from generation to generation by oral learning in the family milieu. The repertoire is rich and varied; a professional musician has to know hundreds of tunes in order to satisfy his client's tastes and needs (on Transylvanian music, see Bartók, 1976; Brăiloiu, 1984).

The local oral taxonomy distinguishes between two broad categories of music: *cântările de joc* (Romanian: "dance tunes") and *cântările de mese* ("table songs"). The first are characterized by their metered rhythm, fast tempo, high dynamics, and a virtuosic, energetic performance style, while the second category consists of melodies played in a nonmetered or slightly asymmetric rhythm, in a slow tempo and with subdued dynamics. In both cases, the harmonic accompaniment is based on the tonal system and is always in the major mode, even if the melody is played in a minor scale.

An early research task was to understand local aesthetics, conceived of here as the way musical structure (melodic line, rhythm, harmony, etc.) and type of interpretation (variations, ornaments, tempo, timbre, etc.) are related to qualitative judgments involving emotional terms. Since local discourse on aesthetic matters was highly explicit, an open-ended discussion method of inquiry was used in order to record emotional terms and judgments associated with music. We could then relate these data to the way music is structured and interpreted by using musicological analysis. Results showed that some local terms relating to emotions are directly used in order to identify a subgroup of "table songs" called *de jale*, a term that refers to a sentiment that we might translate as "sadness" or "grief." Characterized by the same musical parameters as "table songs" in general, these melodies are often associated with song texts that talk about the hardness of Gypsy life, poverty, prison, or separation from one's beloved or from the Gypsy community. The expression *cu dulceața* ("with sweetness") characterizes the way these

melodies should be interpreted, that is, using a sweet, rich timbre, profuse ornamentation, and expressive phrasing (use of *ritardando* and silences). These "sad" tunes played "with sweetness," as the local terms suggest, are thought to convey bittersweet emotions. Interestingly, relations between music and bittersweet kind of emotions seem to be present in many different cultures (Demeuldre, 2004). In contrast, *cântările de joc* ("dance tunes") are thought of as "lively" (*de viața*) or "festive" (*de petrecere*). Implicitly, this characterization points to lighter feelings, since dance is an activity associated with festive occasions and prohibited in mourning periods.

### Analyzing Musical Performances at Weddings and Funerals

In this study, which approached the problem of musical emotions from an anthropological point of view, understanding local aesthetics was only the first step. The next task consisted of observing, analyzing and interpreting local practices and performances that involved emotional behaviors (either on the part of the musicians or of the people present) together with musical events. I focused on social contexts in which people cry along with music, mainly weddings and funeral rituals. Performance analysis (relationships between musicians and listeners, repertoire played, role of alcohol, etc.) was undertaken with the aim of determining the relationships between musical events and the expression of emotions through crying.

In the case of weddings, the musicians' role is to serve the will (and the feelings) of their clients. During the wedding banquet, musicians play sequences of "table songs" while people are eating, and sequences of "dance tunes" when it is time to dance (between one course and the next). Early in the morning, when the end of the party approaches and the community prepares to disperse, the moment has come to play slow *de jale* ("sad") tunes that may bring people to tears. In a simplified way, we can say in this case that what we observe in performance is concordant with local aesthetic discourse, in which bittersweet sentiments are associated with *de jale* tunes, and lighter feelings are associated with *de joc* ("dance") sequences.

One further dimension along which music is organized in weddings is to be found in clients' personal preferences. "The melody of X" (*melodie lui X*) is played in order to "act" on a specific person (X) whose musical preferences are known by the musicians: it is the tune that may let him or her dance, sing, or cry. New associations

between tunes and persons who manifest specific affinities are implicitly memorized by the musicians and reutilized in further occasions at which that person will be present. These affinities between tunes and clients constitute important professional knowledge and entail economic benefits (for example X gives a tip to the musicians or engages them for another service).

In other ritual contexts, the relation between the type of music played and emotionally laden events can be different from the situation described above, and sometimes is completely at odds with local aesthetic concepts. This is the case with funerals, where musicians play near the coffin during the two nights of the wake, on the way to the village cemetery, and during the burial until the last clump of earth covers the coffin. Here, musical activity is organized in sequences of ten to twenty minutes and always is structured in the same manner: it begins with a few *de jale* melodies in a non-metered rhythm and then in a slow asymmetrical rhythm (*de meseli*), followed by two types of dance tunes (*csárdás* and *de cinherit*). This sequence ties four musical genres in a progression that goes from slow tempo to fast tempo, from nonmetered rhythm to metered *estam* rhythm, from low dynamics and “sweet” interpretation to high dynamics and virtuosic interpretation.

During the wake, emotion may be expressed in the form of a spontaneous manifestation of grief or in a more conventionalized way (ritual wailing), depending on how each person is related to the deceased and on the particular moment in the ceremony. Performance analysis was used to interpret ritual efficacy as a process that relies on constructing and experiencing relationships between the family of the deceased (*neamuri*) and the other people present (*străini*). These relations are experienced in the emotional mode locally called *milă* (“pity,” “compassion,” or more generally “empathy”; see Bonini Baraldi, 2008a; Bonini Baraldi, in press). Emotional behaviors (ritual wailing and intimate crying) may or may not match the musicians’ activity. Thus, community members agree that when musicians play and women perform ritual wailing, the emotional experiences that structure the overall meaning of the ritual are heightened. Nevertheless, local discourse on the role of dance tunes in this context is highly subjective and controversial: Gypsies say that they allow people to cry harder, or that they calm one’s grief, or more generally they say, “this is our tradition!”

Further analysis of funeral ceremonies suggests that, as in weddings, people may perceive tunes as belonging to specific members of the community, including the deceased, people already buried, or some other person present at the wake (Bonini Baraldi, 2008b).

This referential meaning attributed to the tunes played is neither uniformly shared nor explicit; rather, it is highly subjective and dependent on other actions undergone in a particular moment (such as what is said in ritual laments, or what somebody is doing).

It is beyond the scope of this article to give a full analysis of these two social contexts. The point I would like to make here is that in both cases the same musicians play the same tunes for the same people, the only difference being the manner in which tunes are organized into longer sequences. Thus, different or even opposite emotional behaviors may be associated with the very same melodies: *cântărilor de joc* (“dance tunes”) accompany dancing at weddings and crying at funerals.<sup>1</sup> In both cases, musical practice seems to rely on associations between persons and tunes. These connections may operate at a conscious or at least explicit level—the musicians play the melody of X in a one-to-one correspondence—or else in a more indirect way that depends on various contextual factors.

## Discussion

Aesthetic relations between structural features of the music, interpretation, and type of emotional judgments may vary crossculturally. In this study, similarities were found between the ways basic categories of emotions are coded in Transylvanian Gypsy music and in Western classical music (see the emotional perceptual space presented in Bigand, Vieillard, Madurell, Marozeau, & Dacquet, 2005). In both cases there is a basic dichotomy between pieces associated with low arousal and negative valence on the one hand, and those associated with high arousal and positive valence on the other.

However, new questions arise when analyzing and comparing musical performances in real life situations such as those presented above. How is it that a musical community, having constructed a set of relations between musical structures and emotional terms (or aesthetic meanings), can completely and voluntarily transform these relationships when music is embedded in social action? This question should be approached both at psychological and social levels of analysis and lends itself well to interdisciplinary research on the subject of music and emotions.

One possible hypothesis drawn from psychology would suggest that, depending on the function of music in a particular situation, different underlying

<sup>1</sup>A video example is available at <http://www.cognimusique.net>

mechanisms mediate different emotional responses (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). Since some of these mechanisms—such as episodic memory, visual imagery, and evaluative conditioning—seem relatively unrelated to musical structure, it is understandable why the same melody may be associated with very different (in this case opposite) emotional responses. The problem with fully accepting this hypothesis in relation to our case study, is that when analyzing musical performances, detecting the function of music may be as hard as understanding the emotion involved. In ritual context the function of music is neither simple nor unique (for instance, “to relax, to evoke nostalgic memories,” Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008), but rather always multidimensional, involving as it does social dimensions together with complex cultural representations (e.g., religious, magical). In other words, the function of music is not simply to trigger emotion, but rather its multiple effects pose a real scientific question that has to be addressed by means of performance analysis at a sociocultural level (Blacking, 1973; Merriam, 1964).

To my knowledge, no general theory of music and emotion in rituals has been proposed so far (for trance rituals, see Becker, 2004; Rouget, 1984). Anthropological theory may offer some tools to advance hypotheses concerning how music and emotional behavior are linked in performances such as those presented above, which differ from the classic communication model (see Kendall & Carterette, 1996). Recent work has convincingly shown that rituals allow participants to enact experiences of special relationships, envisaged “not merely as the expression or vehicle for certain values and ideas,” but as “lived-through experiences sustained by intentionally and emotionally laden events” (Houseman, 2004).

My hypothesis is that music acts in ritual context as a powerful means for establishing and reinforcing the emotional experiences of different kinds of relationships (e.g., social relationships, relationships with persons recalled in memory). In the cases presented here, this phenomenon may rely on the process of associating tunes with persons and events. Previous research supports this idea: ethnomusicologists have shown that in various ritual contexts, musical structures (e.g., melodies and rhythms) are often used to identify specific persons,

their actions, or their characters. These may include real or numinous entities, as is the case in most instances of trancing (Rouget, 1985). These relations may be clear and uniformly recognized or more ambiguous (see Prévôt, 2005). It is important to observe that they rarely act as predetermined, rigid, symbolic associations: they might assume this role in some contexts and not in others, and are often reactualized in the course of performance.

This hypothesis, which is particularly important at a social level when considering ritual analysis, may suggest some directions for further psychological research on musical emotion. Specifically, the extent to which the psychological mechanisms that mediate emotion are connected to a relational experience could be explored. Recent research supports this proposition. As Baumgartner (1992) has shown, when used in conjunction with music, episodic memory tends to involve social relationships.

I hope that further psychological research on these processes, coupled with anthropological analysis of performances, could allow us to better understand why we can find all the pain and joy of the world in a single melody.

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