Music and Negative Emotion

In his essay, *Music and Negative Emotion*, Jerrold Levinson attempts to explain a strange phenomenon: people finding pleasure in music that conveys emotions with normally distressing connotations. By explaining the differences between musically aroused emotion and those we usually experience, refuting misleading explanations, and formulating some more reasonable ones of his own, Levinson makes a noble attempt to delve into this curious, yet common occurrence. His investigations yield eight distinct rewards conferred upon a listener of such musical works. While Levinson's essay presents a fairly comprehensive argument, it contains several flaws, leading him to too hastily reject valid arguments, or fail to encompass other useful explanations. Although by no means presenting its own unified explanation of the rewards of listening to negatively emotional music, this essay will endeavor to supplement Levinson's line of reasoning.

One of the main faults of Levinson's argument is a premature inclination to dismiss alternate explanations of why we seek out negative emotions. Just as Clive Bell's "aesthetic emotion" cannot account for all of the ways in which art affects us, there is no one reason that we feel happy when hearing sad (angry, etc.) music. (Indeed, Levinson thinks of eight!) Levinson's rejection of the many justifications of this occurrence often relies on their failure to be applied to every specific case of a general and varied phenomenon. But there is no reason that, taken together, these theories might explain a large quantity of the scenarios in which sad music gives us cheer. Therefore, it will be fruitful to revisit some of the philosophies Levinson refutes.

Hindemith posited the idea that music appeals to previously-experienced emotions in the listener, or evokes memories of events that inspired those emotions. While Cooke makes the point that this is not possible in all cases, if it is useful in describing some situations, it is worth consideration. But Hindemith faces a secondary objection. Why, Levinson argues, would we want to bring up memories of sad times or feelings? The answer to this question can actually be found within Levinson's own discourse. Firstly, a memory would be a sort of removal from the "life-implications" that real emotions carry with them. There is no further action to be taken, no immediate stimulus to respond to; whatever course of events that was to unfold has already happened, and a new state of emotion has replaced whatever feelings the individual experienced before. Thus, the three rewards associated with concentrating on a pure emotion, divorced from an immediate context, are fulfilled in the case of a memory. We may savor the feeling of the emotion for its own sake, may explore the nature of our emotions in order to gain a further understanding, and remind ourselves that we are capable of feeling such emotions. Similarly, as emotions raised by memories do come to an end, by associating those memories with the music, we can re-live our eventual mastery over the sadness in our lives. And, as this success corresponds with real events, the psychological return is probably that much sweeter. This constitutes what Levinson calls the reward of Emotional Resolution.

Levinson also attacks the idea that one may listen to a piece of music and not adopt the feelings which it expresses. This way of approaching music, in his opinion, is not as fulfilling as actually partaking in the emotions it presents to the listener. However, it is still a possibility, and therefore may explain some cases where one encounters the

allure of music expressing negative emotions. Perhaps Levinson believes that not feeling sad when listening to sad music robs one of the empathetic response that music so often evokes. But even in the case where the listener does not participate in the emotion expressed, one may still imagine a fictional entity who feels sadness, or imagine the composer to be in the same mental state. Therefore, the reward of Emotional Communion can still be gained from identifying with this fictional persona whose sorrow the music expresses; it is simply a matter of feeling sympathy in place of empathy. Just because we do not feel the emotions put forth in the music in one instance does not mean that we are incapable of remembering when we have felt them, or feel ourselves incapable of ever embodying them in the future. Pity for a person in distress is just as much of a connective force between human beings as feeling yourself in the same state, without the more distressing side effects.

Not feeling the emotions expressed in the music, only pitying the person one imagines to possess them, may actually benefit the listener more than an empathetic response. If feeling emotions with no life implications— in effect, distancing oneself from the emotion— can help us learn what a feeling is like, totally divorcing one's self from the emotion can give us even more of an objective view. As Levinson says, this would give the listener "an opportunity to introspectively scrutinize and ponder the affective dimension of an emotion— say anguish— whose idea is before the mind, in a manner not open to the individual in the throes of real anguish" (325). Therefore, gleaning no emotion from a piece of music, only perceiving it, can augment the reward of Understanding Feeling.

On a side note, the practice of distancing one's self from the emotions expressed in a piece of music not only leaves the listener more capable of understanding those feelings, but of appreciating the music as a work of art. One may be impressed by the ability of a painting to represent its subject, such as a sad face, without actually feeling sad. And, if one was to be saddened by this picture, the observer might not pay as much attention to the painting itself, as much as they would their own emotion. Similarly, if one was to feel the emotions expressed in music, they would dwell more upon that feeling than upon the music itself. Taking a step back allows us to ask about the representation. For example: What about the painting makes the person look so sad? Isn't it remarkable how life-like that frown is? What in the music reminds us so much of sadness? That last phrase was particularly beautiful; the composer has done a marvelous job. Divorcing personal experience of feelings from the expressed content of the music therefore enables the listener to enjoy music with negative emotions for both a greater understanding of those emotions, and for the artistry of the piece itself.

Now that further value has been gleaned from ideas originally rejected by Levinson, it is time to turn to the arguments that Levinson makes himself, or has overlooked completely. Levinson lays out three initial conditions necessary for considering music in an aesthetic matter. The second of these states the following: "…a mode of attention closely focused on the music, its structure, progression and emergent character, with a consequent inattention to, or reduced consciousness of, the extramusical world and one's present situation" (320). While it is obvious that the music must be the main focus of contemplation, it is less apparent why the listener's personal circumstances must be left out of the picture. If the question being examined (namely, why do people

actively seek out the experience of music containing negative emotions) involves the motivations of the listener, it would seem that their state of mind would be important in determining the answer.

Indeed, when I asked myself why I most frequently listened to sad (or other emotionally negatively charged) music, I found that most times, the answer had to do with my own present emotional state: I most often listen to sad music when I, myself, am feeling sad. I identify with the emotional content of the music; it expresses what I am feeling. The explanation for this phenomenon might be found by reconfiguring an idea of Levinson's. If we can empathize with a person whom we feel is expressing their sorrow through the music, why can't the music, via the persona we give it (that of the composer, or a fictional character feeling the same way as the listener) reciprocate when we are feeling poorly? It would seem that being comforted by the music would more powerfully assure us that we are "manifestly not alone in the emotional universe" (329), than simply empathizing with an unknown person who is sad for an undefined reason. Therefore, by allowing one's personal circumstances to be given a musical voice, the reward of Emotional Communion is increased dramatically.

There are other benefits to letting one's emotions color their perception of music which conveys similar expressions. These, too, are manifestations of Levinson's ideas, specifically the rewards of Expressive Potency and Emotional Resolution. The former is no different than if one was simply "imagining oneself possessed of real negative emotion" (328); by giving our emotions an aesthetic beauty, we are able to withstand the suffering they give us. The latter reward, Emotional Resolution, is given new significance if personal emotional states are involved. Not only does the music (if one is

intent on the music, and not simply in stewing in whatever state one is experiencing) give clarifying direction and form to negative emotions, but at the end of the piece, these emotions will be fully worked through. This allows the listener to more effectively (i.e. calmly, rationally) deal with the reasons/conditions that initially triggered the emotions in the first place, rather than dwelling on the emotions themselves. Music expressing negative emotions, in this way, becomes a therapeutic tool in the process of problem solving.

Another explanation for why Levinson is so quick to exclude the listener's personal emotional state might be found in his denial that the music itself can inspire full-fledged emotions. If this were so, we could never fully identify our emotional state with that expressed in the piece we were listening to, as there would be no analog for the cognitive element of our emotions. Levinson argues, "When a symphonic adagio 'saddens' me, I am not sad at or about the music, nor do I regard the adagio as something I would wish to be otherwise" (314). "When we are saddened by sad music…we generally are not making believe that there is a particular object, with particular characteristics, for us to be sad about…Nor do we make believe that we have certain attitudes or desires toward such determinate intentional objects" (317). This would seem to suggest that because we have certain beliefs or desires about the cognitive element (the object) of our emotion, we cannot fully identify them with the music. The benefits of listening to sad music could not be gained; instead, we would be consumed by the problem at hand.

But why can't we have attitudes or desires about music? I can hope that a piece I don't like will end after the next musical phrase. I can expect that a series of notes will

resolve on a particular chord. It *is* possible for me to believe or wish for a change in any facet of the music. I don't even need to be able to imagine an alternative; wishing the music to be another way than what it currently is would be enough. Our experience with music will tell us that the piece is already written, and these desires will most likely not come true (maybe later in the piece the composer does transform a phrase into something that we like better.) Just because you have attitudes or desires about something does not mean you expect them to come true. And just because they are unlikely to do so does not preclude you from having them. Therefore, we are able to be sad about a musical outcome.

Additionally, I would argue that one could imagine a particular object about which the music (or the creator of the music) is sad. For example, we are perfectly capable of asserting that a certain musical piece expresses grief. Where did that emotion come from? Levinson grants the listener the use of the Expressionist assumption; let us put it to work. The grief we hear in a piece is someone's expression of their emotion; namely, the composer. The grief of the composer is not groundless; there must be a reason for it, or an object of it. He has lost a concrete "something" and has attitudes and desires about this entity. One could easily imagine this object to be a person close to the composer, say, his wife. She has died, and because he loved her (attitude), and wants her never to have died (desire), he is grieved. There is no reason to believe that an "[e]motional response to music does not have the same degree of cognitive structure as emotional response to well-delineated entities of fictional worlds" (317). The music may indeed have a subject who is well-defined, and fictional, as we have shown. And if, at the death of my puppy, I listen to this piece of music, there is no reason I should be

unable to associate my loss of my faithful companion with the composer's loss of his wife. That is, I will be able to fully identify with the musical emotion and its cognitive element while my real-life emotions are present in my mind.

When discussing the reward of Emotional Resolution, Levinson finds it useful to draw comparisons between the nature of music and the nature of negative emotions, stating that both are finite. But there are other interesting similarities between the act of listening to music, and that of experiencing negative emotions. One idea, which Levinson does not consider, is that one who has the inclination of listening to music might be actually predisposed to gaining pleasure from negative emotions. Actively listening to music entails shutting out other sounds and isolating our attention to the piece at hand. This is especially the case when one wishes to focus on the emotional implications and representations of a piece; one could *hear* a piece while having a conversation with another person, but chances are, the hearer would not grasp the ideas conveyed by it. Thus, listening to music in the way that Levinson suggests is a private experience, which entails separating ourselves from other human interactions. Indeed, in the example given by the author, a man sequesters himself in his easy chair as he experiences his musical negative emotions.

Similarly, most negative emotions carry the connotation of isolation, or loss of contact. For example, grief is a manifestation of missing something or someone now gone, rage may result in the urge to destroy another with whom one is angry, and the pain of unrequited love is due to the failure to create a bond between two people. These instances certainly do not seem to be the pleasantest of sensations. However, those who appreciate the solitude they gain by listening to music may, in fact, find the same sort of

pleasure in experiencing emotional states of seclusion, finding it allows them to focus on tasks at hand. In the case of listening to music, the task is to understand what the music means to express. In the case of experiencing negative emotions, the task is to focus on what those emotions mean to us and feel like. Although his line of reasoning differs, Levinson notes a similar sensation in the rewards of Apprehending Expression and Understanding Feeling. By isolating oneself, either by physically "tuning out" the world, or by feeling oneself alone in a negative emotion, the listener can gain an increased focus. This leads to a better perception of the musical or emotional content of the work.

When considering music and negative emotions, Levinson certainly hits upon an intriguing puzzle. Just thinking about my personal musical collection, I can recall as many "sad" pieces as I can "happy ones". Indeed, some of my favorite songs are sad, yet I enjoy them greatly. And just as Levinson says, I do gain the rewards of Apprehending Expression, Emotional Catharsis, Savoring Feeling, Understanding Feeling, Emotional Assurance, Emotional Resolution, Expressive Potency, and Emotional Communion. But I also gain pleasure from parts of the music that Levinson believes should not affect my interpretation, or has not taken into consideration. I relate the negative emotions in music to memories of times when I have experienced them in real-life contexts, gaining satisfaction in the remembrance of how I triumphed over them through the resolution of the piece. Sometimes, I do not feel the emotions the music expresses, but only pity the person I imagine to possess them. I admire the music for its ability to so powerfully represent negative emotions, and examine those emotions without adopting them. Many times, I relate a current experience of negative emotions to those I perceive in a musical piece, and the music comforts me and helps me work through a troubling time. And

finally, listening to sad, angry, or grief-laden music allows me a peaceful time of private reflection and intellectual probing into the nature of my emotions and musical nature. In addition to giving me new pleasant effects, these practices often further enhance the eight rewards Levinson discusses. For all of these reasons, listening to music expressing negative emotions continues to be a frequent, productive, and enjoyable practice.