Emotions and music

To trigger certain emotions with music you need to pay attention to the right tempo. Music with a fast tempo has been found to evoke positive emotions, such as happiness, excitement, delight and liveliness. Music with a slow tempo evokes negative emotions, such as sadness, depression and gravity. This is also why we call it “upbeat” when music is happy and positive, and “downbeat” when it’s sad or depressing. The reason why we react to tempo is because it has a direct effect on our heart rate. A person’s heart rhythm will try to sync with the music.

Fast pace tempo triggers enthusiasm, joy and anger. Slow pace can cause feelings of relaxation and depression.

Beats per minute

60 BPM: this is often seen as more relaxing but also depressive. It can also be associated with love.

80 – 100 BPM: this is more alert and engaging, feelings of fulfilment but sometimes relaxing as well.

100+ BPM: this is more lively, exciting and feelings of power

120-185 BPM: this fits with high-energy situations, such as feeling of excitement, anger or drama.

Music modes

The music modes go from brightest to darkest starting with Lydian all the way down to Locrian. In the image below you can see how musicians and non-musicians would describe each mode with the tempo.

Mode	Tempo (beats per minute)		
	72	108	184
Musicians			
Lydian	Sadness (56.7%)*	Serenity (63.3%)	Happiness (90%)
Ionian	Serenity (63.3%)	Happiness (50%)	Happpiness (96.7%)
Mixolydian	Sadness (53.3%)*	Serenity (66.7%)	Happiness (80%)
Dorian	Sadness (56.7%)	Serenity (60%)	Happiness (73.3%)*
Aeolian	Sadness (53.3%)*	Serenity (46.7%)*	Happiness (53.3%)*
Phrygian	Sadness (70%)	(Serenity 33.3%; Sadness 33.3%; Fear/anger 30%)	(Happines 43.3%; Fear/anger 40%)*
Locrian	Sadness (60%)*	(Serenity 33.3%; Sadness 33.3%)*	Fear/anger (50%)
Nonmusicians			
Lydian	Serenity (63.3%)*	Serenity (56.7%)	Happiness (80%)
Ionian	Serenity (70%)	Happiness (66.7%)	Happpiness (100%)
Mixolydian	Serenity (70%)*	Serenity (50%)	Happiness (83.3%)
Dorian	Sadness (66.7%)	Serenity (50%)	Happiness (43.3%)*
Aeolian	Sadness (83.3%)*	Sadness (60%)*	(Happiness 43.4%; Fear/anger 40%)*
Phrygian	Sadness (63.3%)	(Serenity 33.3%; Sadness 33.3%)	Fear/anger (40%)
Locrian	Fear/anger (56.7%)*	Fear/anger (56.7%)*	Fear/anger (60%)

Data are reported as percent (mean). Pieces that were not associated with a dominant emotion are given in parentheses. *P ≤ 0.005 compared to musicians’ or nonmusicians’ responses (ANOVA).

Even though the tempo of a song can trigger certain emotions, it all depends on the feeling. Also higher tones are often considered to be more happy and positive, whereas lower tones are seen as sad and dark.

https://abbeyroadinstitute.nl/blog/emotion-in-music-part-ii-a-practical-approach/