

ABSTRACT

Musical Expression: A Comparative Study on the Emotional Experience of Music

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Music pervades our world like no other art form. Among the subtle powers of music is its connection to the emotions. The question of how music is able to express emotions has fascinated thinkers for centuries. Susanne Langer and Stephen Davies are two prominent philosophers who have intently pursued this question. Among her key insights, Langer argues that music is symbolic of the “forms” of feeling and gives us insight into what may be called “the life of feeling.” In contrast, Davies reaches the conclusion that expressive properties are literally possessed by music, and that music expresses emotion through the “appearances of emotion characteristics.” After critical evaluation of these two thinkers, I conclude that Davies’ theory succeeds as the more compelling account. Moreover, I appropriate Davies’ insights by using them in an examination of Gustav Mahler’s *Symphony No. 5*, a twentieth-century work that in five movements takes its audience through a dynamic, emotional experience.

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MUSICAL EXPRESSION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE EMOTIONAL
EXPERIENCE OF MUSIC

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Music pervades our world like no other art form. It has consistently remained a fundamental aspect of culture and of our reality. It surrounds us in various media forms like film, television, and the radio, as well as nature. Music can be found in the way the waves roll in the ocean, the way fire crackles in the fireplace, and the way raindrops patter on the rooftop of a house. Music holds a significant power and weight on our lives, whether we are conscious of it or not.

The modern age gives easy access to a variety of music sources. Technology has definitely assisted spreading and sharing the love of music. Artists, who might not get recognition, now have the ability to share their work with a wider audience. In addition, people no longer depend on concerts or concert halls as the mediums to listen to music. With media devices like iPods, we can listen to what we want when we want. Music not only functions as a source of entertainment, but also as a source of contemplation for those who want to cultivate a more intimate relationship with the art.

Our late modern love of music recapitulates an age-old reverence of music. Even for the ancients, music was revered as an integral part of education and the formation of the soul. In book three of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates states that musical training is a potent asset because rhythm and harmony can shape the soul. Even at such an early time in history, he recognized its potency and ability to reach deep within our souls like nothing else. Long before Plato, Pythagoras, well known for his early contributions to mathematics, reasoned that harmony was the clue to an explanation of the world, and that

human life that is properly ordered and healthy is also harmonious.¹ Pythagoras believed that music had purgative effects on the human soul. He even prescribed music to treat different kinds of mental disturbances for according to him, if used properly, music could produce desirable, healthful effects. This cathartic view of music, also held by Aristotle, suggested that music had the ability to purge the excesses of the emotional life. Even more provocatively, Aristotle used music as an example of something enjoyed for its own sake and thus as a prototype of the intellectual activity that he regarded as the major end of the human life.

Music also has the ability of illustrating the more ineffable qualities of life. Among the inner effects and subtle powers of music is its connection to the emotions. Emotion is a topic that humans have sought to understand better in more ways than one. Trying to study and understand emotion cannot be fulfilled within only one discipline. Psychologists study emotions empirically and try to pinpoint their origins. Writers, from their daily life experiences, extrapolate the significance of emotions, and present fictional accounts in which emotion adds drama and color to our otherwise mundane lives. The arts such as poetry, theatre, and literature all give insight into the wide human palette of emotion. Within these arts, a language of emotion is cultivated. The arts, while assisting in helping us experience and name feelings, also potentially reduce feelings to categories, classes, and kinds. In contrast to the other fine arts, music has the ability to transcend the mechanics of our linguistic vocabulary and convey the life of feeling nonverbally and immediately.

¹ Louis Harap, "Some Hellenic Ideas on Music and Character," *The Musical Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (April 1, 1938): 153–168.

Cognizant of the power of music, the nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche suggests that we can communicate at all only because we live in a world where music is possible.² He thinks that music not only reflects the fact that we all have a common auditory sensation of it, but that it has the ability to create a mode of awareness for its listeners. It has the power to communicate the sense that existence is something that the listener can share with others. Music directly objectifies the struggles of the will, which is in a constant state of turbulence within itself. The will, according to Nietzsche, is responsible for human suffering, since it is utilized in conflicts between humans and conflicts between man and nature. That same will is, he believes, is a powerful resource for overcoming what besets us. When the human will turns to art, it has the potential to both express and ameliorate human suffering. Like Pythagoras and Aristotle's views on the cathartic nature of music, Nietzsche sees a salvation-like quality of music in relation to the sufferings of the world. Music in particular can affect the listener more powerfully than any other art because of its ability to bypass reference to the phenomenal world and approach the will head-on. Nietzsche's view of music highlights its power to relate the individual person to the social world in a more complete way than words can express alone.

Music, Emotion, and Genre

Given the prevalence of musical experience in the modern world, and its connection to the emotions, it would seem that music has the ability to paint a clear picture of the intimate, emotional lives of humans. There is the common cliché that music is a universal language, one that can unite people from different backgrounds and

² Kathleen Higgins, "Nietzsche on Music," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47, no. 4 (October 1, 1986): 663–672.

cultures. With the foregoing in view, in my thesis, I want to explore how musical expression goes beyond the cliché, to inquire into the ways music's qualities allow us to grasp reality with uniquely and well.

My interest in the topic is by no means merely abstract or theoretical, but rather is grounded in my intimate, personal relationship with music. As a musician and music lover, music has naturally been a topic I have gravitated towards throughout my life. I have been exposed to an assortment of musical genres, but have been drawn to the classical tradition more because of my musical training on the cello and experiences playing in a symphony orchestra. As a result, my emphasis in this thesis will be directed towards the works of the classical genre. However, another motive for selecting the classical genre is to provide compelling reasons for a modern audience to engage in the classical tradition of music.

Even within the genre of the classical tradition of music there exists an entire range of sub-genres. While no one sub-genre can be deemed superior to another, for my study I have chosen to narrow my analysis to instrumental music alone. There are several reasons for this. One major reason is that it presents the most difficult philosophical problems. It is less difficult to address why a somber poem set to music would be considered as expressive of sadness than to address why a piece of music without a text might be considered equally expressive of sadness. Vocal music has been excluded from my analysis because it largely depends on lyrics, which like poetry, carries its own semantic weights separate from that of the accompanying music. Since my inquiry is oriented toward questions on the music alone, neither will pieces like arias from operas

be used as examples. In short, attention to music without text helps avoid confounding variables that could stand in the way of clearer understanding.

Even within atextual music disagreements can arise about the purity of the musical form. For this reason, let me address briefly the long existing conflict between absolute music and programmatic music.³ On one side of a longstanding there are the absolutists, who deny any relation between musical forms and states of mind occurring in other than musical experience. To them, an untitled sonata is aesthetically significant by virtue of its own beauty of melody, harmony, rhythm, and color, regardless of any extra-musical “meaning” it may be thought to possess. The potency of the absolutists’ arguments resides in their belief that music alone is a self-sufficient art form, that doesn’t need to be aided by the trite labels we attribute to it. For instance, when listening to Claude Debussy’s *L’après-midi d’un faune*, a notable programmatic piece in musical literature, the musical purist would dismiss notions that the meaning of the piece lies in the images the title of the piece elicits, that of an idyllic, whimsical, and mystical afternoon of a faun. The absolutist would value Debussy’s improvisational, free form style of composition and his impressionistic use of color.

On the other side of the debate lie those who admire programmatic music. While agreeing that melody, rhythm, and other musical devices possess an innate beauty when examined alone, they also argue that a piece of music should be associated in the mind of both the creator and its spectators, and must gain its greater significance by embodying the phases of life. To put it in simpler terms, the programmatic fan is in favor of looking at music as comprising a kind of “story” that has a progression of ideas. They would

³ E. Sapir, “Representative Music,” *The Musical Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (April 1, 1918): 161-167.

claim that the majority of the reason why a piece of music like *L'après-midi d'un faune* is significant is because of the active role it plays in the imagination of its spectators.

There are valuable points raised on both sides of the debate. However, my perspective on music has less to do with whether I see myself as a “purist” or “programmatic,” because while I do want to limit my analysis to the music alone, I cannot discount the power of the music of a piece like *L'après-midi d'un faune* just because it has a descriptive title or is based on French poet Stephen Mallarmé’s famous poem. As a musical piece, it still adheres to rules of good musical form that purists like to harp on. It also is self-sufficient in that regardless of having knowledge of the title or the specific mythical creature it is referring to, it artfully stimulates the human imagination and ends up transcending its given title. There are limits to how much you can restrict music, just as in the rest of the arts. Sometimes what makes music so powerful is the very fact that it can be impure. It is a reminder of how it is an integral part of the human condition: it can transcend reality, but it also shows how imperfections in human nature can be beautiful. Rather than restrict the spectrum of musical pieces to such a degree, I have selected a piece of music for exploration later in the thesis that regardless of whether it is labeled as “absolute” or “programmatic,” still takes on the positive characteristics of both points of view.

Yet again, let me rule out of the scope of my present thesis another kind of music, albeit an emotionally powerful kind: “amusement art.” In particular, “amusement art” refers to art whose value lies only in how much pleasure it can illicit from its audience. There is a quality attached to amusement art that degrades the masses of spectators who choose to interact with it. Philosopher R.G Collingwood refers to a “moral disease” that

is precipitated by amusement art.⁴ This disease seizes people addicted to excess who have abandoned reason so they can be stimulated constantly by their senses. When people succumb to living a life consumed with spectatorship, they become removed from reality because their senses mislead them into embracing a twisted, distorted version of reality. Popular music would be the easiest example of a genre of music that merely tries to excite and spoil the senses with its trite, abbreviated, and crude nature. This music too often is used by the masses for pleasure and pleasure alone. It is listened to not for the sake of listening, but as a drug that elicits sensual emotions from its audience.

Amusement art is the opposite of art that is transcendent, and transcendence is an important quality that indicates the power and importance of a musical piece. Ultimately a transcendent work of art, or specifically in this case music, points to something else leading out of ordinary thought, memory, and intellect. When someone fails to acknowledge that time has passed while listening to a beautiful piece of music, they are not necessarily being distracted by art, but rather they are becoming elevated by art. St. Augustine touches on the quality of transcendence when discussing the relation between the artist's creations and God by claiming that by means of temporal things we may comprehend the eternal and spiritual.⁵ He seems to be insinuating that temporal things like works of art can be instrumental in helping people understand the divide between the absolute, unchanging nature of God and the transient, earthly nature of humanity. The beauty found within art allows humans to see with both the outer and inner eyes the truth derived using the senses and the profound truth (Rom 1:20). Transcendence of music is

⁴ R. G Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 95.

⁵ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Dover ed. (Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, 2009), bk. 1.4.4.

one of the qualities that transport the listener to a higher state of cognition. While many musical pieces may follow the rules of good form and composition, it may not reach the level of transcendent art. Restricting my analysis to work I believe fits the definition of transcendence will produce more valuable insights than selecting pieces like etudes, which although may display advanced technique, does not necessarily take the listener beyond the notes of which it is composed.

Ultimately, what I am undertaking is important both for understanding and cherishing something that elevates human life. While there are plenty of musicians in orchestras who choose to make their living honing their craft on their instrument, concert attendance dwindles. Music appreciation courses in spheres of education attempt to educate the masses to have a greater appreciation of the classics, but that is not enough. My aim is to go beyond a sentimental appreciation for classical music and challenge others to become more self-aware and analytical when engaging music in culture. Those who choose not to engage with it commonly describe classical music as “elitist.” While some intellectuals like to exploit classical music to create an air of superiority, it must be remembered that that is not the artist’s objective. I will call attention back to what I believe to be the artist’s objective: that of someone trying to express something that cannot be expressed the same in words. Perhaps by dispelling stereotypes and prejudices held against classical music, and by looking at the discipline’s purest intentions, readers can focus on their individual experience with the music, and not solely on the good favor of “elitists.” It is my hope that by attending to certain aesthetic questions and theories about musical expression, greater introspective music- listening experiences will be the result.

Organization

To such ends as these, I will be comparing the aesthetic arguments concerning musical expression from the likes of Susanne Langer and Stephen Davies, who function as titans in the sphere of the philosophy of music. Among her key insights, Langer writes that music organizes our conception of feeling and gives us insight into what may be called “the life of feeling.” This “life of feeling” refers to the experience one gets when presented with a piece of art that presents the appearance of life, growth, and unity.⁶ On the other hand, Stephen Davies argues that musical meaning and expression are nothing at all like that of linguistic expression and meaning. He refutes the theories of Langer who thinks that music is symbolic of emotions, and he reaches the conclusion that emotion properties are literally possessed by music, so that music expresses through the “appearances of emotion characteristics.” There needs to be no symbolizing to connect the musical expressiveness to occurrent emotions, for music has an innate expressive nature.⁷

In chapter two, I will develop a constructive, positive description of each thinker. With an accessible background of Langer and Davies in view, chapter three will deal with the fine details of each thinker’s position in relation to the other. I will not only make reference to other notable critiques from well-known aestheticians, but will also provide my own commentary and critique of how they handle different aesthetic questions. Additionally, I will reach the conclusion that out of the two theories, Davies offers the more persuasive account of musical expression.

⁶ Susanne K Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Scribner, 1953), 374].

⁷ Stephen Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 228.

Finally in chapter four, I will utilize Davies' insights by using them in an examination of Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 5*, a twentieth-century work that in five movements takes its audience through a dynamic, emotional experience. My hope is that the difficult arguments I tackle early will enhance some of their value when addressing a concrete piece of music. The piece of music will provide a working model of the emotional import of music formally considered, while also showcasing the overall significance of my thesis topic. Additionally this chapter should helpfully embody some of the insights and ideas others might acquire from reading my thesis, thereby assisting readers in reevaluating their emotional interaction with music.

CHAPTER TWO

Theories of Susanne Langer and Stephen Davies

In this chapter I will provide a survey of the principal features of two significant aestheticians concerned with the emotional qualities of music. First I will look at Susanne Langer. Then I will attend to Stephen Davies.

Susanne Langer

Twentieth century philosopher Susanne Langer identifies how music expresses emotion that shapes our realities in a distinctive way. Langer had a strong interest in the role of the arts from a young age. As a child she learned both the cello and the piano from her father, an amateur musician, and often wrote poetry, stories and plays with her siblings.¹ When she began her undergraduate studies in Radcliffe College, in addition to her academic courses, she also studied the cello and took courses in music theory and composition. The cello remained a serious endeavor, along with her philosophical works, to which she dedicated herself throughout her life. After starting her academic career and studying under logician, Henry M. Sheffer, she wrote introductory textbooks on formal logic. Under the influence of Sheffer, Langer learned that the study of logic need not be limited to the principles of inference but can also be used to study forms or patterns exhibited by other processes. She believed that logical patterns could be achieved in any medium that can be manipulated to form combinations of elements, such as the notes in a musical composition or the pigments in a painting. Langer most deftly displays the

¹ Donald Dryden, "Susanne K. Langer", n.d., 190,
http://www.huthsteiner.org/Knauth/Susanne.Knath.Langer_Bio_DLB.pdf.

application of her theories of symbolic form to the art of music in her two works, *Philosophy in a New Key*, written in 1942, and her later work, *Feeling and Form*, written in 1953.

Philosophy in a New Key marks the shift in Langer's interests from formal logic to the theory of "symbolic transformation," which is a concept influenced by the German neo-Kantian philosopher Cassirer. "Symbolic transformation" allowed Langer not only to examine the discursive uses of language, but also allowed her to examine other cultural resources central to human experience, like myth, ritual, and the arts. The final product of symbolic transformation that Langer discusses in *Philosophy in a New Key*, and later in, *Feeling and Form*, is music. She argues against theories that view music as capable of only rendering affective responses, which she identifies as self-expression. She instead argues that music is not self-expression, but a representation of emotions, tensions, and resolutions that provide a logical picture of life. It is important to note that Langer believes that music does not symbolize emotion in the normal sense, but instead symbolizes forms of feelings.² Through symbolizing the form of feelings, music is capable of providing insight and understanding that language is too limited to provide. While language is useful in communicating concrete ideas and abstract ideas as well, there are some elements in life that cannot be put into words. Music functions as an expressive medium that fills in the gaps of human emotional understanding; it does what language cannot do.

² Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, 27.

Discursive versus Presentational Symbolism

Cognizant of the limits of language, and wanting to contrast it with music, Langer puts forth two terms: discursive symbolism and presentational symbolism.³ Discursive symbolism mainly refers to linguistic symbolism because language has the ability to refer to external things outside us using a vocabulary made out of units of conventionally assigned meanings. The purpose of language is for rational, discursive discourse so that practical communication, scientific knowledge, and philosophical thought can be relayed. It is through language that we are able to objectify our outward experience in the world. With words we can adequately describe our sense experience, and also the facts and things we learn about. Language gives our outward experience intelligibility, and without it, our apprehension of the world would be vague, and unclear.

However, it is important to note that language serves other purposes than the ones here delineated when the poet, novelist, or tragedian instead employs it. These artistic vocations offer a way language can find common ground with musical surface structures.⁴ When one hears poetry like Shakespeare superbly recited one can hear a wide palette of colors and timbre and phrasing delivered by the performer. When poetry is given a chance to escape the confines of the dusty book it is printed in, it has an incredibly similar effect to the effect of listening to a piece of music. Prose can only arrive at poetry through intentional, thoughtful deletions, and in a similar method of transformation, technical, robotic sounding musical pieces can be transformed into art.

³ Susanne K Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key; a Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942), chap. 4.

⁴ Leonard Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question: Six Talks at Harvard* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 79.

Presentational symbolism, on the other hand, refers to symbols that can articulate forms which language cannot.⁵ According to Langer, presentational symbols evoke a conception of the subject that is being symbolized. Whereas language is a symbol system, presentational symbols are autonomous and even if put together, do not form a symbol system. Presentational symbols offer the forms of things that can be abstracted from experience, but cannot be described through linguistic utterances. The form of a thing is unique, and we experience this uniqueness even though we cannot give it a unique definition. Langer makes the distinction between discursive and presentational symbols because she thinks it is wrong to assume that: (a) language is the only means of articulating thought, and (b) everything that is not “speakable” thought is feeling.⁶ By assuming something cannot be projected in discursive form, we would be ignoring the inexpressible aspects of a person’s subjective experience. As a result, Langer writes that presentational symbols, like art forms, are actually capable of an articulation that is not ruled by syntactical or semantic properties of language.

Music as a Presentational Symbol

Langer uses music as a potent example of a presentational symbol because it is logically expressive and is able to convey the dynamism of subjective experience, namely that of emotions.⁷ Music is an articulate form whose parts combine to yield a greater entity, what we call a composition, while still articulating its internal structure to our perception. However, music cannot be called a “language” of feeling because it lacks

⁵ Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key; a Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, 78.

⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁷ Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, 31.

“fixed association” which Langer regards as one of the basic characteristics of language. So while we do receive it as a significant form and recognize its power of expression, it is not a language because it has no vocabulary. She argues that music is a symbol that has import; import refers to the pattern of life as it is felt and directly known.

Sign versus Symbol

Langer makes another important distinction. She draws a distinction between “sign” and “symbol” saying that while music is symbolic of emotion, it does not function in the same way a “sign” does.⁸ An object functions as a sign if it points to something else. A sign is comprehended if it serves to make us notice the object it is pointing towards. To each sign, there corresponds a definite item, which is its object. For Langer, there is not a huge difference between a sign and its object- the two are interchangeable.⁹ The only difference that exists, she claims, is that the subject that attends to them must find one more interesting than the other, and one more easily available than the other.¹⁰ She cites the example that if one were interested in the weather, one would look to various weather phenomena as signs. Such weather phenomena are not important in themselves but as items coupled with something important but not yet present. If it were not for the subject, or interpretant, sign and object would be interchangeable. Thunder may be a sign that there has been lightning, as lightning may be a sign that there has been thunder. In themselves they are merely correlated. It is only when one is perceptible and

⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁹ Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key; a Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, 58.

¹⁰ Ibid.

the other is interesting, that we actually have a case of signification belonging to a term.¹¹ Contrastingly, a symbol articulates and presents concepts that are conceived when it is presented to us. Symbols are not substitutes for their objects but are instead “vehicles for the conception of objects.”¹² To conceive a thing is not the same thing as to “react towards it.” In talking about things we have conceptions of them, not the things themselves. It is the conceptions, not the things that symbols directly “mean.” A simple example of a symbol is a proper name. A personal name evokes a conception of something given in the subject’s experience. Since the name belongs to a notion derived from an individual object, it is supposed to mean that object.

Expression versus Self-Expression

Again it should be reiterated that expression in music is distinct from self-expression. For example, in a work of art, the artist shows the recipient the appearance of feeling objectively through his mode of expression. On Langer’s account, the effect of symbolization is to offer the beholder a way to conceive emotions. Of course the artist is the first person to perceive the symbolic nature of his art form. However, he is an artist not because he inserts his personal feelings into a work, but because of his intuitive recognition of forms of feeling. This allows him to project an emotive character onto his work.¹³ As a beholder of a work of art, one must give one’s self up only to the work in order to be confronted with not only a symbol, but also an object of significant emotional

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 60-61.

¹³ Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, 394.

value.¹⁴ The emotions conjured in the beholder belong solely to the beholder and are not directly expressed in the work. Just because one feels melancholy emotions when listening to Faure's *Elegy* does not mean that the composer intentionally tried to write music with the purpose of eliciting melancholy emotions. Instead, the composer, in full awareness of music, gives his audience a means to conceive emotions in a narrow way.

"The Life of Feeling"

Langer writes that music organizes our conception of feeling, and gives us insight into what may be called "the life of feeling." This "life of feeling" refers to the experience one gets when presented with a piece of art that presents the appearance of life, growth, and unity. While the work of art is not a living organism, it still can be called organic because it molds the perception with the imagination that allows one to experience the outward world. While the apprehension of a work of art has a character of subjectivity, its main purpose is to objectify the "life of feeling."¹⁵ How does the beholder of a work of art come to know about this "life of feeling"? Langer proposes her concept of intuition, which is a purely subjective act that takes place spontaneously and allows the work of art to be taken in as a whole by the receiver. After an intuition of the whole work of art occurs, contemplation revealing the complexities of the artwork may follow thereafter.¹⁶ The value of Langer's claim that a work of art functions symbolically comes from the fact that symbols can present ideas that transcend the past experiences of the beholder of the work.

¹⁴ Ibid., 395.

¹⁵ Ibid., 374.

¹⁶ Ibid., 377–379.

Value of “Life of Feeling”

It is hard to say how valuable this “life of feeling” may be. The intellectual life is often boasted to be the one worth living and casts feeling to a more lowly status. Feeling is often characterized as being fickle and unreliable, as can be seen in the more moody personalities of people. When it comes to music, one normally does experience emotion more so than intellectual insight. Platonists may cringe at the thought of emotions having so much sway over mankind. They might share Plato’s worries about the effects of poetry on the soul. Plato is distrustful of the art of representation, and he specifically criticizes poets lacking a wise person’s grasp of reality that poets aspire to represent.¹⁷ To him, these poets know nothing of reality and are more concerned with giving impressions or imitations of reality. However, music need not solely be given to affective emotional stimuli. What makes music an *art*, rather than something less, is the manner in which it was created, which is distinct from trite soap operas and other amusement arts that tantalize the senses and eventually corrupt the soul.

Feelings Are Not Always Irrational

Addressing those like Plato who distrust art and deem it as “irrational,” Langer disagrees with the conclusions that feelings need always remain irrational and unknowable. She says that feelings are not irrational at all, but that their logical forms are different from the logical forms of language.¹⁸ Langer declares that rationality is the essence of mind, and symbolic transformation is its elementary process. Therefore, because symbolic transformation is a natural function of reason, it would be wrong to

¹⁷ Plato, *Republic* 601b

¹⁸ Sam Reese, “Forms of Feeling: The Aesthetic Theory of Susanne K. Langer,” *Music Educators Journal* 63, no. 8 (April 1, 1977): 46.

recognize rationality only in the domain of the explicit reasoning of science.¹⁹ Feeling must also participate in our knowledge and understanding. Throughout our lives, as we experience new things that we are forced to react to, our feelings become better, disciplined, transformed, and articulated. These feelings develop into definite forms of which we are unconsciously aware.

Experience of Music is Analogous to Individual's Emotional Experience

Langer recognizes the transcendent power of music that not just encourages emotion, but gives a new perspective and awareness to what emotions are being experienced that cannot be easily expressed in words. According to Langer, when one hears a piece of moving music, one is taken through a series of tensions and resolutions, which cause one to grow excited and become relaxed. This experience with music is analogous to how an individual experiences his or her own feelings.²⁰ So, for a particular example, Langer writes that the auditory apparition of time in music is called “virtual time,” a qualitative rather than quantitative experience. This virtual time is an image of lived time and is experienced as the primary illusion of music.²¹ Our sense of time while listening to music might be the real physical time that a musical piece takes to perform, or our sense of time might be imagined. For instance, when listening to music, one person might feel like the piece lasted for forty-five minutes, while another person might feel like it lasted for only five minutes. As a result, form in music dynamic is flowing through this virtual time. While form is permanent, its substance is constantly changing. When we

¹⁹ Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key; a Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, 97.

²⁰ Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

apprehend a work of art, we apprehend its form that does not change but guides our overall experience. However, while this form remains with us while listening to a piece of music, the music's physical substance is changing from the chord progressions to the rhythmic phrases. Langer goes on to show how the dynamic nature of music and other art represents the dynamic nature of the human life. By apprehending with the intuition the forms of feeling presented symbolically through musical forms, the listener better understands the nature of his subjective experiences. Feelings would be ambiguous if they were not embodied in music forms, as well as other art forms. Just as language is needed to understand the objective reality that surrounds a person, art is required to understand the internal, subjective reality of feeling inside every person.²²

How does a musical piece enable us to apprehend this internal, subjective reality of feeling? Consider a concrete piece of music. When listening to Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, one can immediately detect that the piece was written in a minor key. The piece itself cleverly uses musical tension to its advantage, for it repeats its motif of simple chord progressions throughout the piece, and it only finds a resolution at the very end. However, while being extremely simple in structure, it manages to illicit a general response of deep sadness by anyone who listens to it. Does the piece itself contain sadness within itself? According to Langer, who finds affective responses inadequate for describing our emotional relationship with music, it does not. It does successfully portray the form of sadness to us. This form of sadness is unique to this specific piece, and the same exact form of sadness could not be found in other music pieces. As the listener

²² Reese, "Forms of Feeling," 49.

intuits the form of sadness, they immediately respond to the “life of feeling” that is emitted from the piece.

Literature as a Counterexample

One also could argue that among the arts, literature does justice to the process of examining the subjective, inner lives of human beings. While literature is still dependent on language, authors are able to un-restrain the limited, discursive nature of language. While form in literature is distinct from form in music, one still apprehends a certain form of feeling when reading a work. For instance, in Homer’s *Odyssey*, one is confronted with an epic story that has been imitated by others throughout history. The details or substantive matter of the story are not the only reasons this story still captivates our interest. The themes of the story are what still resonate with us today. With artful prose, Homer manages to render the forms of human emotions through his themes and characters.

Stephen Davies

Stephen Davies is a notable aesthetician who, decades after Langer, pursues the major questions of the philosophy of music just as vigorously as she did. In *Musical Meaning and Expression* he is concerned with questions such as “What does music mean and how does it mean?” and he attempts to answer such questions through navigating the relationships between music and language, music and symbolism, and music and emotion. Throughout the work, he criticizes former theories while eventually presenting his own individual theory. He argues on half of a position that more effectively addresses the nature of the emotional experience of music better than other theories.

Value of Musical Expressiveness

Before delving into the details of his own aesthetic theory of musical expression, Davies addresses why we value music for its expressiveness and why it is important to our existence.²³ He states that music draws us into the emotional weave of human life and that we experience it as a communication from the composer or performer. He also questions what could be the value in appearances of emotions rendered in music that is not connected to the human world of occurrent feeling?²⁴ He discusses how music has connections to knowledge, relief, communication, and pleasure. Music is connected to knowledge in that it provides a better understanding of the nature of emotions. When experiencing music, it also has the therapeutic ability to purge us of strong, negative emotions by arousing a response within us. Additionally, music joins us with others in places such as concert halls and churches, providing a sense of community. Lastly, music provides pleasure when contemplating it. Davies identifies how the value of music lies in its ability to contribute to how a person finds meaning in life, and how a culture defines its place in history and the world.²⁵ Music possesses its significance not only by its expressive power, but its expressiveness is one of the more important aspects, as it touches on the affective dimension of life. Music could not serve as a source of knowledge, psychological therapy, human communication and community if it were not expressive.

²³ Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression*, 269.

²⁴ Ibid., 270.

²⁵ Ibid., 276.

Most of all, Davies indicates how music is strongly evocative of emotional responses. The mirroring feelings awakened in the listener are not burdened with the motives, desires, and the need to act that usually accompany them in ordinary experience. The listener is able to reflect on his feeling, and come to a new understanding of it. The power of music begins in the way it works on our feelings rather than its effect on our thoughts. We hear in music not merely a presentation of expressive appearances but also a type of reference, made deliberately by the composer.²⁶ Though expressive appearances are not necessarily followed by occurrent emotions, their deep connection with occurrent emotions, alongside the composer's deliberate command of the piece, allows us to recognize a bond between music and the wider affective framework. We recognize that music is not a natural object but a human product that gets its significance from the experience of its creator and performers.

Musical Expressiveness as a Cross-Cultural Phenomenon

At first sight, Davies' theory implies that musical expressiveness is natural and an inherent quality of music.²⁷ However such a view also suggests that the recognition of musical expressiveness is a cross-cultural phenomenon, and he anticipates the objection that the music of different cultures is expressively different from each another. Additionally, he anticipates that it might be thought that his theory suggests that emotion characteristics in human appearances are familiar to different cultures, and that this view could be challenged. To respond to these potential objections, Davies states his belief that the behavior of emotions is grounded in our common humanity rather than in

²⁶ Ibid., 272.

²⁷ Ibid., 243.

insignificant cultural differences. However he allows that whether members of different cultures are equally likely to attribute the appearance of sadness to Saint Bernard dogs and to willow trees is a different matter. The attitudes and beliefs one holds about animals and nature might inhibit such an attribution. Still, as far as he knows, he observes that people of different cultures are still likely to attribute expressive properties to their music whether it is instrumental or non-instrumental in nature. As a result, Davies thinks that there is a common expressive element found in the music of different cultures.²⁸ This natural expressive element is controlled and structured by the conventions governing its context, so that not all music wears its expressive character on “its sleeve.”

Davies' Theory of Musical Expression

The core of Davies' theory lies in his statement that music is expressive, not because it presents the outward features of emotions like sadness and happiness in general, but rather it presents emotion characteristics in appearances.²⁹ Davies' develops the idea of music presenting emotion characteristics when observing that the kind of emotion property found in music is found outside music as well.³⁰ In this sense, emotion refers not to experiences but to appearances of human and animal faces, nature, etc. All these look or sound the same, but do not feel sad. Davies attributes emotion properties to appearances because appearances are often symptomatic of felt emotions. Our experience of music is like our experience of other behaviors that give rise to emotion characteristics in appearances. According to him, this analogy works because of its reliance on

²⁸ Ibid., 244-246.

²⁹ Ibid., 239.

³⁰ Alan H. Goldman, “Review,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 46, no. 185 (October 1, 1996): 534.

experience rather than an inference that attempts to establish a symbolic relation between parts of music and parts of human behavior.³¹ Emotion characteristics in appearances do not cause these behaviors, since these behaviors involve thoughts and beliefs. Instead, these behaviors are shown in actions that are directly expressive of the feeling component rather than the cognitive component of felt emotions.³²

Emotion Characteristics in Appearances versus Emotions

There are several other factors that distinguish emotion characteristics in appearances from what we refer to as occurrent emotions, feelings or experiences.³³ Emotion characteristics in appearances are publicly displayed, whereas occurrent emotions do not need to be displayed. In contrast, emotion characteristics in appearances can be displayed on the outside without having to be experienced on the inside. It is important to understand that emotion characteristics are attributed to the appearances that people present and not, as is true of occurrent emotions, to the people themselves. It is the faces people present that are sad-looking. Faces cannot feel emotions the way humans can. Emotion characteristics in appearances do not need emotional objects or beliefs. If someone displays the emotional characteristic of sadness in his or her appearance, one cannot say with certainty that he feels sadness, or attribute to him a feeling of sadness. Davies thus uses the terms “emotion characteristics in appearances” because it is not dependent on referencing a person’s feelings. It is usually clear from the context whether we are referring to a person’s feelings or just his or her appearance. Davies’ fundamental

³¹ Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression*, 239.

³² Ibid., 225.

³³ Ibid., 223.

point is that emotion words, such as the word “sadness,” have a common use that does not involve an innate reference to occurrent feelings; emotion words refer to emotion characteristics in appearances.³⁴ The principles for a sadness characteristic are given only in appearances. It does not matter whether the appearance of sadness is natural or consciously worn. In contrast, notions such as sincerity, pretense, and the non-expression of felt emotions depend on the distinction between occurrent feelings and emotion characteristics in appearance.

Davies’ Opposition to the Sui Generis Characterization of Emotions in Music

In opposition to several thinkers who hold that emotions found in music are *sui generis*, or of a unique kind, Davies believes there is a connection between musical and regular, human emotions.³⁵ Of those who deny the connection, Davies points out that they undermine rather than illustrate musical expression. If music presented us with a unique emotion foreign to understanding, how would we find music moving and valuable? By destroying the connection between emotions in music and emotions in life, we would be making the power of musical expression unintelligible and unnecessarily mysterious. Perhaps one could argue that a piece by the modern composer Schoenberg, who has a proclivity for atonality, expresses underdetermined emotions. In general, Schoenberg’s music is appreciated at an intellectual level more so than an emotional one, and is potentially a reason why it fails to connect with a larger audience. Music moves us and enriches because it touches on the emotions that have evolved throughout our lives.

³⁴ Ibid., 224.

³⁵ Ibid., 203.

Musical Expression and Movement

It is important to note that Davies finds little resemblance between music and the human face, and he believes that musical expression depends on the resemblance or appearances of “dynamic character of music and human movement, gait, bearing, or carriage.”³⁶ He observes that motion is heard in music, and that motion shows emotion characteristics, just as movements give a person their gait. Musical movement is associated with expressiveness because, like human behavior, it presents “order and purpose.” In other words, musical movement does not function as a random process, but as a logical, intentional process. Humans gravitate towards music because it emphasizes unity and purpose in the midst of movement. Moreover, he recognizes that musical movement is close to human action more so than to the movements of a machine. This feature, he argues, comes from the character of musical materials, not only from the composer who shaped those materials.

Since Davies’ theory is that the emotions expressed in music are properties of the work, it gives the possibility of unfelt emotions, for music cannot itself feel emotions. Unfelt emotions are a curious concept. Can emotions that are unfelt truly be classified as emotions? Perhaps this is why Davies makes the distinction in his theory saying that music presents emotion characteristics in appearances, differentiating his theory from that viewing music as a stimulus for affective responses or felt emotion. It also gives the possibility of having emotions that do not have objects they are directed towards. As a result, these emotions are limited to a range of generalized emotions like sadness or happiness that do not require an object. More nuanced emotions are differentiated by the

³⁶ Ibid., 229.

nature of their objects, and thus cannot be reflected by music. For instance, you cannot feel jealous, a more nuanced emotion, without feeling jealous towards someone or something. The “emotion characteristics in appearances” he refers to is public, not private, and therefore does not display inner feelings. Therefore, it would seem that, Davies diminishes the subjective aspect of listening to the music by stating that a piece of music presents certain emotion characteristics in appearance that are applicable to a wide audience and that are not dependent on individual inner lives of humans. While others have argued before that music is expressive because it is experienced as similar to human behavior, Davies’ theory distinguishes itself by its explanation of how expressiveness is grounded in the appearances presented in the music, without any connection to elicited emotions. In this view, emotion is not indirectly but immediately presented in music.

Advantages of Davies’ Theory

Davies argues that there are many advantages to his theory, which include that it allows that expressiveness is a property of music that is always evidenced and manifested.³⁷ Davies minimizes the subjectivity of musical expression by showing that expressiveness is an inherent property that cannot be negotiated. Additionally his theory does not rely on a connection between musical expressiveness and someone’s affective or cognitive state. Again, by removing the subjective responses of an individual’s emotional state, Davies highlights how concrete of a property expressiveness can be. Music can function expressively with or without an audience attending to it. Additionally, his theory involves an attribute of expressiveness that has a use in nonmusical contexts. The same presentation of “emotion characteristics in appearances” that music presents its audience

³⁷ Ibid., 239.

with can also be presented in a different artistic medium. Most of all, the theory works well with our experience of musical expressiveness because Davies takes that experience to be one finding the expressiveness in the work and regarding the expressiveness as general in character. Many before him have argued that music is expressive because it is experienced as similar to human behavior.³⁸ However, these views assume that this resemblance allows for an inference of someone's felt emotional state or occurrent emotions. Davies' distinguishes himself from the pack by arguing that expressiveness resides in the appearance presented in music, and that emotion is immediately presented in music.

Can Music Express "Platonic Attitudes"?

In a particularly fascinating line of analysis, Davies comments on the question of whether music can express "Platonic attitudes" such as hope, envy, admiration, etc.³⁹ A "Platonic attitude" refers to a kinds of emotion that must be specified in terms of its cognitive content.⁴⁰ For instance, if one feels jealousy, it is implied that one feels jealous towards some object, person, or thing one believes is attracting the attention of an object that I desire. In the case of one who feels hope, there must be some event or occurrence that one believes to be better than their current situation and is something to which they look forward. The cognitive content or formal objects of such emotions, often seen as elevated, are an important part of what makes emotions and feelings what they are. Davies agrees that the standard case of musical expression is one in which the

³⁸ Ibid., 240.

³⁹ Ibid., 262.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 214.

appearances of emotion are apparent in patterns of musical movement, and that the emotion characteristics recognizable by public display are limited to generalized sadness and happiness. However, he still sees the possibility of sophistications, such as certain “Platonic attitudes,” using this basic mode of expression.⁴¹ He notes that emotions have natural progressions that are used by the composer to articulate his music emotions other than those worn by appearances without regard to feelings. So by ordering emotion characteristics in a musical piece, a composer can express in his music emotional states like that of hope, not susceptible to presentation in mere appearances. Such emotional states exist naturally within the progression of emotions whose characteristic appearances are given in the music. The expression of such an emotional state as hope in a musical piece depends upon and is controlled by the emotion characteristics in sound present in the musical work. Before it can be expressed in a piece, the piece must have sufficient length and expressive complexity to permit the emotions presented in its “appearance” to form a progression in which hope naturally occurs. Just as music might present the characteristic of emotion in its aural appearance, it might present the appearance of a pattern of feelings through the order of its expressive development.⁴² If the outline of the pattern is sufficiently distinctive and complex, an emotion like hope can be developed and heard in the music. At the same time, Davies indicates that not all Platonic attitudes, including that of envy, can be presented in instrumental music. This is because an attitude like envy has no distinctive pattern of emotions in which envy is a natural element.

⁴¹ Ibid., 263.

⁴² Ibid.

Misconceptions of Davies' Theory

Davies responds to certain criticisms and misconceptions of his theory that help clarify concerns his readers may have.⁴³ One critic states we hear feeling directly in music and experience it in music as immediately as we experience our own feelings in ourselves. He claims that we do not infer from the structure of the music as we infer sadness from an emotional gesture. Our direct experience of feeling in instrumental music is very different from our knowledge of other people's feelings since we directly experience emotions in music, as opposed to inferring emotions from an emotional gesture. He claims that a better analogy of musical expression than one Davies suggests is the way we perceive the expressive aura that attaches to some natural objects like the tranquility of the countryside or melancholy of a rainstorm. Davies responds to this critic by arguing that the experience of hearing the sadness in music is no less like seeing sadness in natural objects than it is like seeing the sadness in a face. He claims that the critic draws a false distinction between the two cases. The cases are different only if one views a concern with the sad expression of a face to be an interest in the face as always implying inner feelings. Davies has argued already that one does not approach musical expressiveness this way. He also rejects the notion that we must always infer the feelings of others from their appearances. For if appearances can be constitutive of feelings, then feelings might be apprehended in them, not merely inferred as lying behind them.

Another critic states that a person who wants to express by touch a certain disposition towards another would not have to perform an action designed to fulfill the appearance of an emotion. He suggests that the disposition and the emotion are one, for

⁴³ Ibid., 267–270.

without the disposition, the emotion is hollow and cannot be adequately communicated. He states that musical experience does not rely on the use of inferences and the need for conceptual clarification. He thinks that music is a reminder of the dispositions we share with other humans. Davies agrees with the critic's point that music's expressiveness "is a reminder of dispositions we already share with other human beings."⁴⁴ However, he sees the relevant dispositions not only in humans but also in the appearances worn by "faces of basset hounds, willow trees, and the like".⁴⁵ Davies believes that the critic is wrong in saying that one would not attempt to express one's own feelings by appropriating the expressiveness inherent in an appearance. Davies highlights his argument with the example that he might deliberately put on a face to show how he feels, or point to a mask of tragedy in response to a mood inquiry. If composers have specific feelings they try to communicate, a listener may try to infer from the expressive character of the music what those feelings are. However, no inference is required from the music's dynamic character to its expressive content.

A further critic disagrees with Davies and states that in contrast with visual works of art, music has an emotional immediacy that seems linked only to the emotive impact of sound. If this impact comes from an imitation of human expressive features, then it would seem to follow that the expressed emotion will be equally vivid and immediate where it can be recognized directly in faces and gestures. In response, Davies argues that the analogy between expressiveness of music and human behaviors lies in the way the two are experienced rather than in crude imitation. He also questions what is the "peculiar emotive impact of sound" that makes music more directly expressive than the visual. The

⁴⁴ Ibid., 269.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

critic makes a huge claim that a piece of music is more expressive than a painting, without specifying what makes music have a stronger mode of expression.

In sum, Davies' theory illustrates musical expression as an inherent property of music rendered through the emotion characteristics in appearances it presents its audience. While these emotion characteristics in appearances are limited to a range of sad or happy emotions, Davies allows for more nuanced emotions, such as Platonic attitudes, in natural progressions created in an appropriately complex musical work. In addition to his theory, Davies also expounds on the value and cultural universality of musical expression, and why it is a relevant and important item of inquiry.

Conclusions

Over the course of this chapter I have surveyed the theories of musical expression put forth by philosophers Susanne Langer and Stephen Davies. As was previously stated, Langer believes that music does not symbolize emotion in the normal sense, but instead symbolizes forms of feelings.⁴⁶ Through symbolizing the form of feelings, music is capable of providing insight and understanding that language is too limited to provide as a presentational symbol. Langer uses music as a potent example of a presentational symbol because it is logically expressive and is able to convey the dynamism of subjective experience of emotions.⁴⁷ Langer writes that music organizes our conception of feeling, and gives us insight into what may be called "the life of feeling." Additionally, Langer disagrees with the conclusions that feelings need always remain irrational and unknowable. Similarly, Davies indicates how music is strongly evocative of emotional

⁴⁶ Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, 27.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

responses. Though expressive appearances are not necessarily followed by occurrent emotions, their deep connection with occurrent emotions, alongside the composer's deliberate command of the piece, allows us to recognize a bond between music and the wider affective framework. In opposition to the view that music conveys emotions of a unique kind, Davies believes there is a connection between musical and regular, human emotions.⁴⁸ Lastly, Davies finds little resemblance between music and the human face, and he believes that musical expression depends on the resemblance or appearances of "dynamic character of music and human movement, gait, bearing, or carriage."⁴⁹

In chapter three, I will begin to put together in more critical conversation the two philosophers.

⁴⁸ Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression*, 203.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 229.

CHAPTER THREE

Langer and Davies in Critical Perspective

This chapter puts the two philosophers, Susanne Langer and Stephen Davies, in conversation with one another. As identified in the previous chapter, these thinkers differ substantially along specific lines of reasoning from each other. While neither Langer's nor Davies' account of musical expression is perfect, the differences between these two thinkers demonstrate just how complex the nature of musical expression is. This chapter also examines several major critiques made towards their theories by other aestheticians in the field. Lastly, this chapter evaluates which account emerges as the most persuasive and useful theory for understanding musical expression.

Langer in Critical Perspective

Davies' Critique of Langer

Davies dedicates a good portion of his work *Musical Meaning and Expression* critiquing Langer's theory and pinpointing its weaknesses. Davies' first move in criticizing her theory is questioning the emotions to which she refers.¹ Generally speaking, Davies states the common notion that most emotions and feelings involve objects towards which those feelings are directed, beliefs about the nature of those objects, etc. However, Langer tends to regard such things as merely necessary concomitants of emotions and regards emotions as complex sensations. He restates her theory in his own words saying, "one can know that X symbolizes some feeling because

¹ Ibid., 127–128.

of the iconicity of the form of X with the form of that feeling only if one can identify that feeling by its form.” Davies is not impressed with this line of reasoning and believes that Langer is oversimplifying emotions by not paying attention to those necessary concomitants of emotion. He also believes that her theory does not leave us with the form of feelings, but rather completely ignores the feelings themselves.

Intelligibility of Emotions

More particularly, Davies’ critique puts forth the question: what makes emotions intelligible? If Langer is oversimplifying emotions, there must be certain components emotions are made up of that ensure their intelligibility. Emotions have been referred to as intentional states that have objects that allow one to specify what the “emotion is about.” An emotion cannot simply be an affective or physiological sensation because emotions are intentional states and such sensations are not.² We recognize what emotions we are feeling by knowing how we are experiencing events.³ Sometimes we infer this knowledge from evidence such as our behavior, our circumstances, etc. If emotions require intention and an object in order to be intelligible, can one still speak of the form of an emotion that Langer refers to in her theory? Does the intention of the composer qualify as an intentional state for the emotions musical expresses? As Langer stated in her theory, self-expression of the composer is not the same as musical expression. Based on Langer’s belief that music points to the formal characteristics of emotion, she shows that not having an object formally considered can be an asset because it makes music artistic

² Robert C. Roberts, “What an Emotion Is: A Sketch,” *The Philosophical Review* 97, no. 2 (April 1, 1988): 205.

³ *Ibid.*, 201.

in a highly refined way. The problem of her belief is exposed when evaluating those who cannot elevate themselves to music's level of abstraction, for whom the forms of feelings are inaccessible. An audience who is not familiar with the idiomatic musical form of classical music is bound to have difficulties accessing the forms of feeling. Since Langer fundamentally believes that art elevates above the mundane she must be referring to music that has a complex connection to emotions.

At the same time, it turns out that Davies' theory of musical expression also does not involve an object for emotions. He talks about emotion characteristics in appearances, which are not literally emotions and therefore do not require an object. This means that various listeners are apt to identify what emotions are based on their past emotional experiences. So while Langer and Davies do not require emotions to have objects, the line of critique Davies deploys against Langer seems to apply, in a slightly different way, to his own theory.

Critique of Langer's Denial of Presentational Symbols as Referential

Additionally, Davies calls into question Langer's theory of discursive symbolism and presentational symbolism.⁴ He states that despite Langer's denial of presentational symbols as referential, there are still critics who regard reference as a necessary condition for symbolization. The question they present Langer is: "how can artworks involve a mode of symbolism while you deny that they are referential?" In general, "reference" is a linguistic term defined as the symbolic relationship that a linguistic expression has with the object or abstraction it represents. Therefore, in the case of musical expression, by denying that music is referential, Langer is denying that music has a symbolic

⁴ Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression*, 129.

relationship to an object outside of it. To convince the critics that music can still be symbolic without having a referent, Langer states the case that if music were not a symbol of the emotions, then it would be meaningless based on her assumption that musical meaning presupposes symbolization. Langer believes that for something to have meaning it has to be discerned in a web of symbolic relations. However, since music does have emotional import, then it must be symbolic. Langer defines “import” as the pattern of life that is felt and directly known; it is not clear whether she makes a precise difference between the terms “meaning” and “import.”⁵ The assumption behind her claim that musical meaning presupposes symbolization is that since emotions cannot literally be found in music, some feature of music with musical import must make a connection to the world of human feeling that lies beyond the work. Since this assumption involves music reaching beyond itself, but not to a specific referent, it is described as symbolic and non-referential.

The Issue of Iconicity

In opposition to Langer’s claim that music is symbolic and non-referential, Davies offers two reasons why he remains unconvinced by her theory. The first reason he points out is that iconicity as a symmetrical relation lacks the directionality presupposed by symbolism and doubts that Langer’s account of the source of this directionality as arising from the accessibility of the forms is convincing.⁶ Instead he suggests that the directionality of meaning in iconicity might be generated by the priorities of our interests, and that is what Langer has in mind when viewing presentational symbols as meaningful

⁵ Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, 31.

⁶ Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression*, 130.

independently of an object of reference. To remind the reader, a presentational symbol is a vehicle for the conception of a subject that is autonomous and has import, but lacks reference and a symbol system.⁷

This is a fascinating line of critique by Davies that is not adequately developed. For all the potential illumination gleaned from this line of critique, Davies brings up the topic of “iconicity” to address an area in her theory to which Langer fails to give attention. Davies defines iconicity as a matter of resemblance between formal properties.⁸ It can be inferred from his claim that he believes that iconicity is bidirectional and symmetrical in contrast to a symbol that is unidirectional and asymmetrical. Instead, it would be probably be better to view both icons and symbols as asymmetrical because at least in the case of an icon, the icon can never be the equal of its referent.⁹ Philosopher Paul Griffiths makes a good case for the asymmetrical quality of icons by using the example of religious icons. He argues that the painted images of God featured in the icon are at least one remove from the *vera icona*, or true icon, that refers to Christ’s flesh.¹⁰ Associated with these religious icons are other works made by humans whose beauty gives them an elevated level of participation in God, even though they have nothing to do with the events in which God’s presence is at an elevated level of intensity. The point to which any human work constitutes a sensible iconic array is the extent to which it represents the beauty of God’s work by participation in it, and as a result, refers those

⁷ Ibid., 125.

⁸ Ibid., 38.

⁹ Paul J. Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 196.

¹⁰ Ibid., 196–197.

who see it to something other and greater than itself. So while human works can successfully refer to and appropriately participate in God's being, they can never take the place of God. This example illustrates an asymmetrical relationship. This asymmetrical relationship applies to musical expression as well. While according to Langer music symbolizes the forms of feeling, these forms of feeling cannot take the place of the music. These forms of feeling aid in our apprehension of musical expression, but cannot perfectly define what the music is expressing.

Ernest Nagel's Critique of Langer

Several authors support Davies' arguments against Langer. According to Langer, for presentational symbols, or non-discursive symbols incapable of any general reference, the pattern in which a proposition combines names for things and actions must be analogous to the pattern in which the items named are combined.¹¹ Ernest Nagel, an aesthetician and one of Langer's more vocal critics, believes that Langer does not provide any support for this argument. Nagel uses the example of a map to illustrate his concern with Langer's view. In spite of the similarity between the structure of the map and the area it represents, the map can only serve as a representation of the area if certain rules of interpretation are used. If you change these rules, you change what the map signifies. Additionally, the pattern of relations shown in that area can be illustrated by a set of symbols unlike the map, such as a set of verbal statements. Nagel questions what identifiable analogy is there between the patterns found on a map and a pattern of verbal statements, assuming that Langer's claim is valid. He argues that Langer is confused in

¹¹ Ernest Nagel, "Philosophy in a New Key by Susanne K. Langer," *The Journal of Philosophy* 40, no. 12 (1943): 324.

her claim that: if the names in a sentence have denotations, the sentence is about something, and its truth depends on whether any relations among the denotations exemplify the relational concepts expressed by the sentence, or whether the pattern of things denoted is analogous to the syntactical pattern of the complex symbol. He points out that there is a difference between saying that relations between things exemplify concepts, and saying that the former are analogous to the syntactical pattern of the latter.¹² He cites the example of a straight line and how it is exemplified by the relational pattern expressed by the sentence, “This is a straight line.” He questions why should we also assume that because the line does this, it is analogous to the syntactical pattern of the sentence.

Additionally, Nagel conveys confusion over how exactly presentational symbols are symbols and what is symbolized in the process.¹³ While Langer, regarding the symbol-meaning situation, is definite that there must be a subject, a symbol, a conception, and an object, Nagel questions what object is symbolized when sense forms are apprehended. Langer does not make evident in what way a sensory form is comparable with a physical theory as a symbol. She seems to suggest that sensory forms inhabit a different world than the one in which we live. If, however, symbols need to have objects in order to be symbols, Langer leads Nagel to conclude that either sensory forms are not symbols at all, or they are symbols in a radically new, undefined sense. It is important to note that symbols can sometimes refer to a “token”, or specific instance of something, or to a concept, or “type.” For example, a dot on a map generally identifies

¹² Ibid., 325.

¹³ Ibid., 326.

a token of the type “city” since it refers to a specific city, say “Dallas” or “Waco”.

However, Langer wants to deny that the musical symbol is a token since it doesn’t have the ability to refer to particular forms of feeling. Rather, the musical symbol is a type. At the same time, denying, as she does, that music has no referent at the type level makes no sense even, it would appear, on her reasoning.

Coming at matters from another angle, Langer seems to suggest that sensory forms inhabit another world, and if they do, she is insinuating that music inhabits a different reality. However to again examine the example of religious icons, they too seem to allude to something outside of our world. The ultimate purpose of an icon is to be referential to God, but not to substitute for God. By administering a kiss of reverence to an icon in a Greek Orthodox Church, a person is not idolizing the icon; a deeper spiritual reality is created that the person is able to briefly be a part of. The Greek icon is quintessentially an object for the intellect in that it provides humans limited by the senses to reach out to God in a reflective manner. Is the iconicity or symbolism of a Greek icon undermined because it does not have precise object? Perhaps Langer is consciously or unconsciously cognizant of the transcendent quality of music, and as a result, chooses not to limit the forms of feeling music is symbolic of to the physical world.

Beardsley’s Critique of Langer

Aesthetician Monroe Beardsley, like Nagel, cannot find in Langer’s discussion in *Philosophy in a New Key* any answer to the question: why should we take the music as referring to anything beyond itself, any more than we take other objects like a desk or

tree that way?¹⁴ He poses the question that if music has no vocabulary but has unconsummated or unassigned symbols, how is this different from saying it contains no symbols at all? For Beardsley, a well-defined symbol system is necessary element of what gives symbol relevance. Also, if music articulates the forms of feeling, what does this articulation mean? Langer uses the word “articulate” throughout her works, and is never truly clear as to how music “articulates.” One can only hypothesize that through good musical form in composition, one can apprehend the forms of emotion that are symbolized through music. This “articulate” quality of musical expression is less discursive and more intuitive. Music cannot spell out and name the emotions, as language can, but as a medium, it still manages to provide an intelligible emotional experience for its listeners. Furthermore, Langer states that the factor of significance is not logically discriminated, but felt as a quality rather than perceived as a function. For Beardsley, this claim comes close to denying any presence of significance in the “significant form” of music by limiting the factor of significance to a quality.

Stevenson’s Critique of Langer

Additionally, aesthetician Charles Stevenson thinks that her view about the “morphological similarity” between music and the emotions, which refers to isomorphism, needs to be formulated more specifically.¹⁵ We must be told just how music is isomorphic with the emotions. Isomorphism refers to something having identical or similar form or shape to something else. In Langer’s defense, she does argue that like

¹⁴ Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics, Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1981), 361.

¹⁵ Charles Stevenson, “Symbolism in the Nonrepresentational Arts,” *Language, Thought, and Culture* (1958): 209.

the emotions in life, music takes us through tensions and resolutions that correspond to our emotions. Additionally, Stevenson thinks that Langer needs more evidence for saying music is really a symbol of the emotions because morphological similarity does not involve a sign function. Again, like the previous critics, for Stevenson, music cannot be called a symbol of the emotions unless it is connected with its designatum by some interpretant.¹⁶ Langer gives no evidence that such a conceptual interpretant is present in the music. Stevenson recognizes the problem with establishing the nature of the interpretant in a sign situation.¹⁷

Howard's Critique of Langer

Aesthetician Vernon Howard expresses confusion when trying to understand how music is a “sign” if no extra-musical sign object need enter into the understanding of it.¹⁸ The fact that two things are similar in some respects does not mean that one is a sign of the other. Similarity provides for thinking that music symbolizes the “inner life” rather than the reverse. Again, in defense of Langer, it is important that she differentiates between what a “sign” and a “symbol” is in her theory. To reiterate, she states that an object functions as a sign if it points to something else. To each sign, there corresponds a definite item, which is its object. There is no real difference between a sign and its object- the two are interchangeable.¹⁹ Contrastingly, a symbol articulates and presents concepts

¹⁶ Ibid., 210.

¹⁷ Ibid., 225.

¹⁸ Vernon A Howard, “On Musical Expression,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 11, no. 3 (1971): 272.

¹⁹ Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key; a Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, 46.

that are conceived when it is presented to us. Symbols are not substitutes for their objects but are instead vehicles for “the conception of objects.”²⁰

Kivy’s Critique of Langer

Aesthetician Peter Kivy disagrees with Langer’s claim that the “isomorphism” of music with the emotive life makes music symbolic of it.²¹ He claims that music is expressive of specifiable emotions, while she denies this, claiming that music is a symbol of the emotive life as a whole. He states that it does not follow that because music is isomorphic with the emotive life, it is symbolic of the emotive life. Being isomorphic with the emotive life might be a necessary condition but not a sufficient one for something’s being a certain kind of symbol of the emotive life. Kivy conjectures that Langer denies that music is expressive of specific emotions because she assumes that music is expressive in virtue of being symbolic. As a result, she reaches the conclusion that since there are no semantic rules connecting music with specific emotions, it could not be symbolic of them. She then felt it was necessary to create a kind of symbol, her “presentational symbol,” that did not require semantic rules. Langer’s view, while not clear, is still intuitive. She does not delineate semantic rules that link music with specific emotions, but is more concerned taking in the process of musical expression as a whole rather than focusing on the parts constitutive of the whole.

²⁰ Ibid., 49.

²¹ Peter Kivy, *The Corded Shell: Reflections on Musical Expression*, Princeton essays on the arts 9 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 60–62.

Issue of Musical Import

A second reason Davies offers to challenge Langer's arguments is that if expressed emotion is possessed by the musical work, then one can allow that the work has import without that import coming from music's symbolizing something beyond it.²² This, he believes, is a great advantage, and it is one that her theory lacks. Davies notes that Langer's previous argument that music must be symbolic supposes that music could not directly present a conception of feeling, such as sadness. While Langer would admit that there is music that potentially directly presents a conception of feeling, like a trite advertisement jingle, she would probably deny that such an example of music is capable of authentic feeling. If the assumption that music must be symbolic were rejected, there would be no reason to see music as significant through symbolic forms outside of it. Or viewed from the other side of things, by rejecting Langer's theory, one need not deny that music has intrinsic import that comes from its own expressiveness.

Let me explore the issues a bit further. Langer sees musical import as being of "meaning A", and thus, non-referential. Davies points out that, with intentional use, natural meaning in music could lead to reference, by transforming into "meaning B." If this were to happen, not only would a musical work express sadness, it would be doing so because the composer is intentionally trying to reference the emotion sadness in general. One can argue that a work like Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain* is trying to reference an emotion of terror. However, in general, one can deny that music is symbolic and referential in this manner because while composers want their music to have expressive properties, they do not intend these properties to refer to emotions in general.

²² Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression*, 130.

Davies states that in general, the intention to make a work expressive does include a referential intention.²³ Additionally, the intentions in question rely on the appropriation of a natural meaning, and the study of musical expressiveness should examine how music possesses that meaning, rather than its potential for referential use. Langer recognizes the issue of not the possibility of referential use, but rather an account of how music possesses a natural meaning that can be used by the composer to create a general reference without relying on a discursive symbol system. Langer offers that music's natural meaning is symbolic in nature. However, since her theory of presentational symbolism is on Davies' analysis incoherent, she cannot completely explain how musical expression of emotions is possible.²⁴

Intelligibility of Langer's Theory

Ultimately Davies does not believe that Langer's symbolic theory is as explainable as she thinks it is. According to him, the elements of her theory such as indescribable forms or indemonstrable iconicity are unintelligible. On his view she tries to hide her flaws by her description of presentational symbols, and by insisting that no theory stated in language could fully explain the symbolic connection between works of art and emotions.²⁵ Rather than allowing for a deeper explanation of her theory and solving the problem posed by the expression of emotion in music, she merely restates the fact that we can hear emotions in music, but cannot provide better clarification as to how we can. She is convinced that empirical investigation would put her theory into practice.

²³ Ibid., 131.

²⁴ Ibid., 132.

²⁵ Ibid.

However, Davies believes that when Langer's claims are tested against our experience of the expressiveness of music, they prove to be false.²⁶ According to Langer's theory, works of art express or signify not emotions but conceptions of emotions. While the presentation of an emotion sometimes elicits an emotional response from the listener, it is not at all obvious that the presentation of the form of an emotion would ever call forth an emotional response. Langer's theory removes emotion from art, replacing it with forms of emotions. In so doing, her theory undermines the need for emotional responses to musical works and makes mysterious the power of art to evoke such responses. Her account of musical expressiveness fails to explain why we find music moving.

Davies' Theory in Critical Perspective

Epperson's Critique of Davies

While Stephen Davies manages to avoid some of the problematic claims found in Langer's theory, his theory, while modern and updated, still has its critics. For instance, philosopher, musician, and admirer of Langer, Gordon Epperson, thinks that Davies' dislike of Langer's theory that music is symbolic has made it difficult for him to realize that there are actually certain similarities in their basic principles.²⁷ Epperson observes that Davies finds the "presentational" symbol Langer puts forth as unintelligible because discursive language is unable to translate it. However he questions whether Davies would continue to hold his view in regards to the "untranslatable-ness" of poetry into literal statements, and whether nothing special is to be attributed to its form. Epperson is

²⁶ Ibid., 134.

²⁷ Gordon Epperson, "Review," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 3, no. 1 (April 1, 1995): 56.

probably more forgiving to Langer because as an artist he discerns the difficulties one encounters when trying to make any artistic process more systematic. According to Epperson, when Davies remarks that the “expressiveness of music depends mainly on a resemblance we perceive between the dynamic character of music and human movement, gait, bearing, or carriage,” he is echoing the views of Langer.²⁸ This view closely aligns with Langer’s view that music organizes our conception of feeling and gives us insight into what may be called “the life of feeling.” This “life of feeling” refers to the experience one gets when presented with a piece of art that presents the appearance of life, growth, and unity. Additionally, Epperson observes that Davies’ “emotion characteristics in appearances” in music depend on its dynamic aspect, as in patterns of tension and release. This closely aligns with Langer’s view that when one hears a piece of moving music, one is taken through a series of tensions and resolutions, which contributes to music’s dynamic aspect. So, Epperson concludes that, to some extent, like Langer, Davies acknowledges that music is isomorphic or symbolic with certain patterns of human life.

Epperson thinks that Langer’s concept of presentational symbol as possessing musical significance is quite similar to Davies’ theory that the significance of music is internal to the work and resides in its intrinsic properties. Further, Epperson states that Langer’s theory points to observable phenomena that invite empirical testing, and therefore, has potential to be intelligible. Epperson also finds Davies’ preoccupation with the “sad” or “joyful” polarity of emotions that are presented by music to be overly reductive and banal. To him, it is not clear whether Davies thinks that humans seek in art

²⁸ Ibid., 57.

the experience of the full range of emotions and all their nuances. A piece of music cannot be categorized as either sad or happy, and to attempt to categorize a piece of value that way would be doing it a disservice. In Davies' defense, he discusses how he still sees the possibility of that by ordering emotion characteristics in a musical piece, a composer can express in his music more nuanced emotions that Epperson suggests. The expression of such nuanced emotions in a musical piece depends upon and is controlled by the emotion characteristics in sound present in the musical work. However, if such emotions can be expressed in a piece, the piece must have sufficient length and expressive complexity to permit the emotions presented in its "appearance" to form a progression in which hope, for one example, naturally occurs.

Goldman's Critique of Davies

In response to Davies' analogy between emotion characteristics in appearances and musical expression, aesthetician Arthur Goldman points out that if we learn that a person with a drooping face, is in fact not sad, the look will no longer express sadness to us.²⁹ Consequently, Goldman sees a difference between musical expression and emotion characteristics in appearances that he thinks Davies ignores. For music, the composer's feelings are irrelevant to the expressive qualities of music. On the other hand, Goldman claims that emotion appearances are somewhat dependent on the knowledge of knowing someone's true emotional state. As a result, Davies' analogy is slightly faulty. In addition to this doubt, Goldman finds problems with Davies' claim that just as humans tend to animate perceived movement in music, we also tend to respond to perceived emotion

²⁹ Goldman, "Review," 534.

properties in appearances.³⁰ Instead, he thinks that we do not respond to sad-looking trees by becoming sad in their presence because we do not perceive them as human or as human products. Goldman rightfully points out a distinction between the emotional appearances of humans and nature. While as humans we are able to recognize the emotional characteristics in appearances mirrored in the nature that surrounds us, our response to nature is not the same as our response to a human face.

Robinson's Critique of Davies' Theory

While Davies believes that what is expressed in music must be independent of the emotion aroused, philosopher Jenefer Robinson thinks that emotions play a more important role in musical expression than Davies acknowledges. She suggests that recent empirical research suggests that humans have an innate tendency to mimic each other's facial expressions, and thereby to some degree take on the emotions that these facial expressions express.³¹ Since this happens not only in adults but also in young children, Robinson does not think that the recognition of the emotion expressed may be necessary to its being mirrored and felt. The process seems to occur independently of cognitive processes. She suggests that our proclivity to hear music as expressive of a particular emotion is somewhat due to its ability to arouse that emotion in us prior to recognition of what its "emotion characteristics in appearance" is illustrating. Robinson draws an interesting line of inquiry: does our emotional response to musical expression occur unconsciously, or does the recognition of the emotion occur before our response? Do humans naturally imitate the emotions we apprehend in music? A question like this

³⁰ Ibid., 534–535.

³¹ Jenefer Robinson, "Review," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 3 (July 1, 1996): 309.

would be best dealt with empirically by examining at what point in the process of listening to a piece of music cognitive activity in a person activates. If Robinson's claim is true, it will only strengthen the idea that music is intimately linked to human experience, even when we are unaware of its effects.

Cook's Critique of Davies' Theory

For aesthetician Nicholas Cook, two claims that Davies makes are not plausible. The first is Davies' claim that there are such things as unfelt emotions. The second is Davies' claim that it is possible to have emotions that do not have objects. Let me take each criticism in turn. First, Davies' claim that there are such things as unfelt emotion is grounded in the obvious reality that music itself cannot literally feel emotions, combined with his judgment that music is an emotional medium. While music is not a living being capable of sensing and feeling, Davies still observes that the emotions we apprehend through it are an innate characteristic of music. Therefore, Davies is right in using the term "unfelt emotions" to highlight that while inanimate, music still has the quality to express emotions, just not literally. Second, Davies' claim that it is possible to have emotions that do not have objects is valid because the object cannot be found in the music. Also, this is another reason why Davies thinks that emotion characteristics in appearances presented in the music is restricted to generalized emotions ones like sadness, because they do not require objects. However, it does take us back to the question posed early in the chapter: what makes emotions intelligible? Davies' theory questions the notion that emotions must have objects that describe what the emotion is about. When listening to a piece of music, there is not one object or thing to which we are responding. Music confronts us with abstract matter without delineating objects or

concretely defined affective stimuli. It is doubtful that music provokes unique emotions that humans have never experienced before. This is why Davies' idea that music presents feelings in emotion characteristics in appearances is so compelling. Without ascribing music qualities that do not mesh with the daily emotional lives of humans, Davies gives the best explanation as to why music can still express emotions. By separating musical expression from humans' affective response to music, he emphasizes how music alone has the ability to express emotions that we come across in daily life.

Conclusions

On the whole, after critical evaluation of these two thinkers, Davies' theory evidently succeeds as the more compelling account of musical expression. As was previously stated, Davies believes that in her theory, Langer is oversimplifying emotions by not paying attention to those necessary concomitants of emotion. He also believes that her theory does not leave us with the form of feelings, but rather completely ignores the feelings themselves. His critique also poses the question of the intelligibility of emotions. If emotions require intention and an object in order to be intelligible, can one still speak of the form of an emotion that Langer and Davies refer to in their theories? Additionally, Davies calls into question Langer's theory of discursive symbolism and presentational symbolism.³² He states that despite Langer's denial of presentational symbols as referential, there are still those who regard reference as a necessary condition for symbolization. In opposition to Langer's claim that music is symbolic and non-referential, Davies offers two reasons why he remains unconvinced by her theory. His first reason derives from his belief that iconicity as a symmetrical relation lacks the

³² Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression*, 129.

directionality presupposed by symbolism and his doubt that Langer's account of the source of this directionality as arising from the accessibility of the forms is convincing. Philosophers and aestheticians like Ernest Nagel, Monroe Beardsley, Charles Stevenson, Vernon Howard, and Peter Kivy all agree with Davies' assessment of Langer, and put forth their individual criticisms. A second reason Davies offers to challenge Langer's arguments is that if expressed emotion is possessed by the musical work, as on his own view, then one can allow that the work has import without that import coming from music's symbolizing something beyond it. In short, Davies does not believe that Langer's symbolic theory is as explainable as she thinks it is, and indeed he argues that key elements of her theory such as indescribable forms and indemonstrable iconicity are unintelligible.

Davies' theory is also not without its criticisms. Thinkers such as Gordon Epperson, Arthur Goldman, Jenefer Robinson, and Nicholas Cook all question the validity of Davies' theory in unique ways. For instance, Epperson thinks that Langer's concept of presentational symbol as possessing musical significance is quite similar to Davies' theory that the significance of music is internal to the work and resides in its intrinsic properties. Goldman sees a difference between musical expression and emotion characteristics in appearances that he thinks Davies ignores. Unlike Davies, Goldman claims that emotion appearances are somewhat dependent on the knowledge of knowing someone's true emotional state. Robinson thinks that emotions play a more important role in musical expression than Davies acknowledges. She also draws an interesting line of inquiry of whether our emotional response to musical expression occurs unconsciously

or not. Lastly, Cook expresses his concern over the “unfelt emotions” and “emotions that don’t require objects” elements of Davies’ theory.

After looking at each of the arguments and critiques put into perspective, I can confidently conclude that Davies’ theory is a more intelligible and applicable account of musical expression. Davies’ sensitivity to the emotive processes of music not only clarifies how music expresses, but also bolsters the reasons why musical expression is significant. In the next chapter, I propose to put Davies’ theory to a limited test by applying his insights to a famous work in classical music, Gustav Mahler’s *Fifth Symphony*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Putting Theory to the Test: A Daviesian Interpretation of Mahler's *Fifth Symphony*

In this chapter I will appropriate Davies' insights by using them in an examination of Mahler's *Fifth Symphony*, a twentieth century work that in five movements takes its audience through a dynamic, emotional experience.

Mahler's *Fifth Symphony* provides an apt object of study for my purpose because in comparison to Mahler's previous works, there is no detailed program for this work.¹ Recall the dispute between absolute and programmatic music that was touched upon in the first chapter. To reiterate, the absolutists are those who deny any relation between musical forms and states of mind occurring in other than musical experience. Additionally, they believe that music alone is a self-sufficient art form, that doesn't need to be aided by the trite labels we attribute to it. On the other hand, in opposition to absolute music, promoters of programme music like Franz Liszt argue that absolute instrumental music lacks the ability to communicate precise ideas, and that a programme is necessary to restore a 'poetic dimension' to the music.² The dispute between absolute and programmatic music figures heavily for Mahler, who was trying to portray himself as a composer of "absolute music."³ His ideology stems from German aesthetics which praised absolute instrumental music as a separation from the imitations of feelings and

¹ Constantin Floros and Reinhard G Pauly, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies* (Portland, Or.: Amadeus Press, 1997), 141.

² Jeremy Barham, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Mahler*, Cambridge companions to music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 37–38.

³ Ibid., 40.

language and demonstrating that music can signify on its own with no reference to the objects of everyday, ordinary human experience.⁴ Music historians confirm that neither conversations with Mahler nor anything else in the music suggest that “extra-musical thoughts or emotions” have any direct influence on the composition of the *Fifth Symphony*. Mahler believed that his audience should be left to their own conclusions over his work and should not be forced to read a programme during the performance; their musical experience should not be prejudiced by preconceptions about what the music means.⁵ He thought that a specific programme would become an unnecessary crutch to the listening experience.

Proposal of Qualitative Assessment of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony

Since the *Fifth Symphony* is not dependent on a defined program of music, and its significance comes from the music alone, it is a useful example of musical expression to examine in light of Davies’ theory. To do this, I will conduct a qualitative assessment of several program notes of Mahler’s *Fifth* from renowned orchestras and critics. My principal question is whether or not, and to what extent, they converge in their assessment of the musical expression of “emotion characteristics in appearances” through the five movements. If aestheticians such as Davies are correct in holding that music possesses intrinsically stable meaning grounded in “emotion characteristics,” convergence in interpretation should be more likely than not.

⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁵ Steven Ledbetter, “Gustav Mahler’s Symphony No. 5 Program”, n.d., 3.

Historical Background of Fifth Symphony

The *Fifth symphony* was inspired while Mahler was recuperating from an intestinal hemorrhage that almost killed him.⁶ He was stimulated by the idea of using different themes in his music that would combine and “develop freely, side by side, each with its own impetus and purpose” so that people would be able to distinguish them from one other. In 1901, Mahler used his summer vacation at a large chalet in Maiernigg, a resort town in Carinthia on Lake Wörth, to give him the isolation and peace to compose. He brought along Bach’s eight-part motets, which definitely provided much needed inspiration for the *Fifth*. He managed to work on two movements of the symphony while working on some other projects, but the summer soon ended. Mahler was not able to start working on the symphony again until summer of 1902. In the meantime an encounter with his future wife, Alma Schindler, changed his life. Enchanted by Alma’s beauty, intelligence, and musical talent, he married her before Christmas. Inspiring such passion in Mahler, everything Mahler wrote for the rest of his life was composed for her, beginning with the conclusion of the *Fifth Symphony*. While together with Alma, Mahler finally completed the *Fifth Symphony* during the summer of 1902 and he completed his detailed orchestration during the winter. Alma was ill and unable to accompany Mahler to Cologne for the premiere of the *Fifth Symphony*, and as a result, Mahler sent her an excited, elaborate letter. Of the symphony he wrote: “Heavens, what is the public to make of this chaos in which new worlds are forever being engendered, only to crumble into ruin the next moment? What are they to say to this primeval music, this foaming, roaring,

⁶ Ibid., 1.

raging sea of sound, to these dancing stars, to these breathtaking, iridescent, and flashing breaks?”⁷

Overview of Fifth Symphony

The symphony comprises five movements, though Mahler grouped the first two and the last two movements together, so that in three parts, he sketches a progression from tragedy to joy, with contrapuntal excellence and a harmonic progression from the opening C-sharp minor key to the final movement in D major key.⁸ At the center lies the *Scherzo* whose design is ambiguously placed between the larger two parts, although by itself it is longer than any other single movement.⁹ Part one of the symphony shows life as tragedy, moving from the funeral march of the first movement to the dispirited climax of the second movement. Part 2, the *Scherzo*, is the “hinge” where the music shifts in emotional outlook, and the third part eventually achieves triumph.¹⁰

Each of the five movements can be seen as marked by certain emotional characteristics based upon program notes prepared for five famous symphonies and their interpretations of Mahler’s work. These symphonies include the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, the London Symphony Orchestra, and the Colorado Mahlerfest Orchestra. In general the five interpretive analyses converge and agree on the emotions the music expresses, in addition

⁷ Michael Steinberg, “San Francisco Symphony: Mahler: Symphony No.5 in C-Sharp Minor”, n.d., 2.

⁸ Ledbetter, “Gustav Mahler’s Symphony No. 5 Program,” 3.

⁹ Steinberg, “San Francisco Symphony: Mahler: Symphony No.5 in C-Sharp Minor,” 2.

¹⁰ Phillip Huscher, “Program Notes: Symphony No. 5, Gustav Mahler” (Chicago Symphony Orchestra, n.d.), 2.

to how the music expresses these emotions. The consensus is that within the music exists an inner programme that demonstrates a logical progression from deep despair to anger to love and then to pure joy.

Qualitative Assessment of Fifth Symphony

The first movement, the *Trauermarsch*, starts in C-sharp minor and in the emotional realm of deep despair. According to the various orchestras, the first movement, a death march, is variously described as “martial,” “darkly somber,” “wild,” “grief,” “yearning,” “dark,” “lamenting,” “violent,” “savage,” “frightening,” “nostalgic,” “passionate,” “menacing,” and “desolate.”¹¹ The movement begins with an opening trumpet solo that Mahler indicated to be played somewhat hurriedly, in the manner of military fanfares.¹² The major idea of this movement is the contrast between the formality of the key sections and the elaboration of expression in the trio sections. Overall, massive brass sounds, faltering rhythms, and threnodic passages characterize the main sections of the movement. In the trios, where an amount of subjectivity comes through, the tempo accelerates. In the first trio, the music expresses passion and wildness according to Mahler’s performance markings.¹³ The second trio is based on the thematic ideas of the first trio, but with a change in key. Mahler creates a completely transformed part. For both trios, there is a surge of intensification that leads to climaxes that quickly

¹¹ Stephen Johnson, “Gustav Mahler Symphony No.5 in C Sharp Minor”, n.d.; Ledbetter, “Gustav Mahler’s Symphony No. 5 Program”; Kelly Dean Hansen, “Mahler’s ‘Funeral March to Joy’ The Fifth Symphony”, n.d.; Huscher, “Program Notes: Symphony No. 5, Gustav Mahler”; Steinberg, “San Francisco Symphony: Mahler: Symphony No.5 in C-Sharp Minor.”

¹² Floros and Pauly, *Gustav Mahler*, 142.

¹³ Ibid., 143.

lose their intensity.¹⁴ Overall, this movement is marked by symmetrical structure and formal perfection. While the movement starts softly with the hurried trumpet solo, it also finishes with a muted trumpet solo and flute accompaniment. The music then disappears into the distance almost completely beyond hearing.

The second movement best represents the primary emotion of anger. Critics describe it as “stormy,” “vehement,” “frenetic,” “sorrowful,” “mysterious,” “savage,” “noble,” “faltering,” “grieving,” “rough” “wild,” “demonic,” “lamenting,” “falsely triumphant,” “eerie,” “urgent,” “painful,” “ruminating,” “ecstatic,” and “unstable.”¹⁵ The movement takes the wild outbursts of the first movement as its character and then contrasts them with a sorrowful march melody. The movement offers a perfect example of thematic contrast between two themes.¹⁶ A group of themes to be played “vehemently,” is contrasted by an elegiac second theme. Additionally, in several parts of the music, the trumpets play tritonic motifs that offer a notable symbol of evil or inevitable doom according to music theorists. To some, this second movement has an inner program that refers to a “comparison of inferno and paradise, of reality and utopia, of boundless despair and the promise of another, better world.”¹⁷ However, this “realm of paradise” is never reached and the movement inevitably ends in mystery.

¹⁴ Ibid., 145.

¹⁵ Johnson, “Gustav Mahler Symphony No.5 in C Sharp Minor”; Ledbetter, “Gustav Mahler’s Symphony No. 5 Program”; Hansen, “Mahler’s ‘Funeral March to Joy’ The Fifth Symphony”; Huscher, “Program Notes: Symphony No. 5, Gustav Mahler”; Steinberg, “San Francisco Symphony: Mahler: Symphony No.5 in C-Sharp Minor.”

¹⁶ Floros and Pauly, *Gustav Mahler*, 147.

¹⁷ Ibid., 149.

The third movement, the *Scherzo*, gives expression to sharply contrasting emotion. It is filled with a mixture of tranquility and anxiety. It is alternatively described as “energetic,” “sardonic,” “boisterous,” “vigorous,” “ebullient,” “nostalgic,” “bold,” “parodistic,” “genial,” “strange,” “eerie,” “idyllic,” “frenetic,” and “schizophrenic.”¹⁸ According to Mahler, this lengthy movement has “nothing romantic or mystical in it, only an expression of extraordinary strength. It is mankind in the full brightness of day, at the zenith of life...”¹⁹ This movement expresses a wide range of emotions. While there are sections that express the geniality of a rustic dance, there are also many sections that are not only dissonant, but also eerie and strange.

The fourth movement, the *Adagietto*, beautifully represents the emotion of love. It is described as “gentle,” “hesitant,” “sensitive,” “restrained,” and “breathless.”²⁰ Mahler wrote this movement as a kind of love letter for his wife Alma, and as indicated in its emotional characteristics, the movement fulfills Mahler’s artistic intent. Even without knowing about the movement’s context, the movement marks a dramatic change in tone from the unpredictable *Scherzo* it follows. The movement has been referred to as a “song without words,” and the directions Mahler supplies for the performance, such as “soulful”

¹⁸ Johnson, “Gustav Mahler Symphony No.5 in C Sharp Minor”; Ledbetter, “Gustav Mahler’s Symphony No. 5 Program”; Hansen, “Mahler’s ‘Funeral March to Joy’ The Fifth Symphony”; Huscher, “Program Notes: Symphony No. 5, Gustav Mahler”; Steinberg, “San Francisco Symphony: Mahler: Symphony No.5 in C-Sharp Minor.”

¹⁹ Floros and Pauly, *Gustav Mahler*, 153.

²⁰ Johnson, “Gustav Mahler Symphony No.5 in C Sharp Minor”; Ledbetter, “Gustav Mahler’s Symphony No. 5 Program”; Hansen, “Mahler’s ‘Funeral March to Joy’ The Fifth Symphony”; Huscher, “Program Notes: Symphony No. 5, Gustav Mahler”; Steinberg, “San Francisco Symphony: Mahler: Symphony No.5 in C-Sharp Minor.”

or “with warmth,” only paints a pale impression of the soulfulness and intimacy this music possesses.²¹

The fifth movement, *Rondo Finale*, is best representative of the emotion of joy. It is described as “cheerful,” “exuberant,” “extroverted,” “celebratory,” “jubilant,” “affirmative,” “noble,” “vigorous,” “radiant,” and “celebratory.” This final movement can be called the counterpart to the first movement’s funeral march.²² The deep despair of that funeral march is contrasted by a cheerfulness that escalates to boisterousness in this movement. This movement has been “an anthem of jubilation in praise of earthly life.”²³ Alternating lyrical and virtuosic passages gives this movement a unique quality. Mahler marked the main theme at the beginning of the movement as, “Allegro, giocoso,” a direction that lends its mood to the rest of the movement, which does not have any sections in minor.²⁴ The major key of “happy emotion” fundamentally defines this movement. While the music is largely in the major mode, it still utilizes tension. Mahler uses the deceptive cadence, which refers to a falling cadence in which the listener expects a dominant chord to resolve to the tonic, but resolves to something else instead.²⁵ With the deceptive cadence, Mahler keeps his listeners in suspense throughout the movement.

²¹ Floros and Pauly, *Gustav Mahler*, 154.

²² Ibid., 155.

²³ Ibid., 156.

²⁴ Ibid., 158.

²⁵ Ibid., 159.

With this final movement, Mahler closes the symphony optimistically.²⁶ He also excels at following the logical emotional progression from deep despair to love and then to joy.

Discussion

To be sure, programs of different orchestras might be inspired by one another rather than emerging out of an independent insight into the character of music. They might be, except that such a simplistic explanation fails to do justice to what even casual listeners can identify as the legitimacy of their analyses. It certainly seems that the emotional experience of Mahler's *Fifth symphony* is universal. This piece, one among many like instances, demonstrates Davies' idea that in artfully developed music, by ordering emotion characteristics in a musical piece, a composer can express in his music more nuanced emotional states like that of despair, anger, love, and joy, that are not amenable to presentation in mere appearances.²⁷ The expression of such emotions in a musical piece depends upon and is controlled by the emotion characteristics in sound present in the musical work. The *Fifth Symphony* has both sufficient length and expressive complexity to permit the emotions presented in its "appearance" to form a progression in which these emotions naturally occur. The symphony is able to present the appearance of a pattern of feelings through the logical order of its expressive development.

Additionally, Davies discusses how emotional characteristics suggest musical movement that resembles appearances of "dynamic character of music and human

²⁶ Hansen, "Mahler's 'Funeral March to Joy' The Fifth Symphony," 6.

²⁷ Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression*, 263.

movement, gait, bearing, or carriage.”²⁸ Musical movement is associated with expressiveness because, like human behavior, it presents “order and purpose.” The *Fifth Symphony* represents this concept both between and within its musical movements. Between the movements, the music possesses the same “gait” in its movement through the abstract as a human being journeying in the physical world. Within the music, there is a sort of intentionality not characterized by imitation of human emotion, but intentionality behind the emotion characteristics of appearances that we apprehend. The music does not follow a random pattern, although arguably the *Scherzo* is an example of the fickleness of human nature since it explores a wide palette of emotions. It is important to remember that Davies points out that music’s expressiveness does not rely on a connection between musical expressiveness and someone’s affective or cognitive state. The *Fifth Symphony* can function expressively with or without an audience attending to it. The significance of the piece is not dependent on how many emotions or thoughts it fills its audience with; its significance resides within the music that was created by Mahler.

As discussed before, Davies makes several cases for the value of musical expressiveness. Aside from music’s connections to knowledge, relief, communication, and pleasure, its emotion characteristics in appearances have a deep connection to the human world of occurrent feeling as demonstrated in Mahler’s *Fifth Symphony*. Mahler successfully composes the *Fifth Symphony* in such a way that it not only celebrates his creative use of musical form, but also faithfully expresses the wide affective framework that humans encounter in everyday life. Emotions such as despair, anger, love, and joy

²⁸ Ibid., 229.

are relayed artfully and universally without Mahler having to write up a precise musical programme for his audience. Music truthfully expresses emotions in the *Fifth*. There is no trace of excess sentimentality or cheap imitative musical devices deployed to persuade audiences to feel a certain way. The appearances of emotion characteristics in this music give the audience an honest gateway to examine the intricacies of our everyday, occurrent emotions. The *Fifth*, like other significant musical pieces directs its audience toward a wider appreciation of the human experience of emotion.

CHAPTER FIVE

Final Thoughts

As illustrated by this thesis, music is a significant phenomenon and one that demands thoughtful examination. As human beings we are capable of an extraordinary range of emotions that permit us to live our lives richly and meaningfully. Langer and Davies both realize this and in their theories, they support the emotional richness that is offered by music in their contrasting accounts.

Among her major insights is Langer's belief that the experience with music is analogous to how an individual experiences his or her own feelings.¹ She also shows how the dynamic nature of music and other art represents the dynamic nature of the human life. By apprehending with the intuition the forms of feeling presented symbolically through musical forms, the listener better understands the nature of his subjective experiences. Feelings would be more ambiguous if they were not embodied in music forms, as well as in other art forms. Just as language is needed to understand the objective reality that surrounds a person, art is required to understand the internal, subjective reality of feeling inside every person.

Similar to Langer, Davies understands how music is evocative of emotional responses. The mirroring feelings awakened in the listener are not burdened with the motives, desires, and the need to act that usually accompany them in ordinary experience. The listener is able to reflect on his feeling and come to a new understanding of it. The power of music begins in the way it works on our feelings rather than its effect on our

¹ Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, 27.

thoughts.² Though expressive appearances are not necessarily followed by occurrent emotions, their deep connection with occurrent emotions, alongside the composer's deliberate command of the piece, allows us to recognize a bond between music and the wider affective framework. We recognize that music is not a natural object but a human product that gets its significance from the experience of its creator and performers.

While the differences and examinations of their individual arguments are important to understand, what the reader should be left with hopefully is not only a further appreciation of the emotive character of music, but a refined awareness of how music shapes our lives from the inside and out. Mahler's *Fifth Symphony* is only an example of a piece of music that has the power to transform our emotional experience. Music like the *Fifth Symphony* encourages humans to look for a deeper meaning in this aspect of life and to realize in a world that seeks to find exact definitions of everything there are still experiences that cannot completely be put into words.

² Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression*, 272.

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