

Whose Feeling Is It? Musical Emotion and the Body That Produces It

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Abstract— Plato, Tolstoy, Nietzsche, and Hume each answer one question about music: where does the emotion it carries reside? Plato locates it in the listener's soul, which music shapes toward virtue or vice; Tolstoy in the artist, who feels first and transmits that feeling to an audience that catches it; Nietzsche in a Dionysian force that runs beneath any single individual; and Hume in the private, taste-bound response of each listener. Set side by side, they seem to occupy the whole range of possible answers. This paper argues that they in fact share one premise: that emotion is something perceived or received after music has become sound, a content that travels either to or from a listener. Each theory even assigns a role to the person who listens to it— a citizen, a composer, an intoxicated participant, a listener. None of these theories assign this meaning to the performer, whose body makes the sound. Read through Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of meaning as made in the act of expression rather than transmitted, that shared premise reveals its blind spot. Taking a wind performance as its test case, where breath becomes sound with no medium in between, the paper argues that musical emotion is not delivered but produced, especially in the very moment the four theories leave out.

Keywords— Dionysian, emotion, music, Pluto.

I. INTRODUCTION

The interval between a flutist holding the final note of Debussy's *Syrinx* and releasing it lasts barely two seconds. In that pause, breath is turned into pitch and intensity through the instrument, and the moment the breath stops, something moves through the room and is gone. The scene poses a question in an acute form: who owns the emotion in that sound, and where has it been? Did the player hold a sorrow before pushing it into the breath, or did pushing the breath out bring the sorrow into being?

Western aesthetics has answered this question in strikingly different ways, but always from one side of a single divide. Plato, Tolstoy, Nietzsche, and Hume disagree about where musical emotion lives, yet all four place it either before the sound or after it: a feeling formed and then transmitted, or a response awakened once the sound arrives. What none of them examines is the connection between the two: the moment the body turns breath into sound. This paper argues that emotion in music is not content passed from a sender to a receiver but an event that happens in that moment of production, and that the four theories cannot agree about where emotion resides precisely because they all skip the place where it is made. The disagreement is not merely academic. After all, if we cannot say where a musical feeling is, we cannot prescribe ownership or agency to that feeling.

To make that case, the paper first sets out the lens to better understand the perspective of the performer: Maurice Merleau-Ponty's distinction between speech that merely repeats a settled meaning and speech that makes its meaning in the act of being spoken. It then turns to the performer's own experience, the flutist releasing the final

note of Syrinx, and reads that moment through the lens. Only then does it chart the four philosophers in turn, showing how each locates emotion outside the moment of production, before returning, in the conclusion, to the performer.

II. MERLEAU-PONTY: MEANING MADE IN THE ACT

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty distinguishes two kinds of speech. *Parole parlée*, spoken speech, is language whose meaning is already fixed; the words carry a sense settled before they are said, the way a familiar phrase is retrieved and passed along. *Parole parlante*, speaking speech, is language in the act of being spoken, where the meaning is made in the saying itself and does not exist in advance. When a person reaches for words that do not yet exist in order to say something that has not been said before, the meaning is not retrieved but created in the utterance. For Merleau-Ponty this is not an occasional event but the ground of language. Meaning is enacted in expression rather than formed inwardly and then sent out.

The distinction matters here because it breaks the picture of expression as delivery. If meaning is made in the act of speaking, it is not a private cargo the speaker packs into words and the listener unpacks. The speaking body is not just a channel between two inner states or ideas, but rather where the meaning happens. Merleau-Ponty makes this argument for language and the speaking body. This paper extends it to music and the sound-producing body – thus, the breath that becomes sound is not a pipe that carries a feeling from performer to listener but the place where the feeling is made. What Merleau-Ponty finds in speaking speech, this paper looks for in the sounding of a note.

III. THE PERFORMER'S EXPERIENCE: THE FINAL NOTE OF SYRNIX

I play the flute, and the clearest case I know of this is the end of Syrinx. The piece closes on a long note that must be held and then let go, and for the two seconds it lasts I am not delivering a sorrow I brought with me to the stand. Before the note there is only breath and the readiness of the embouchure; there is no finished feeling waiting to be released. The sorrow, if that is the word for it, comes into being as the column of air thins, the tone darkens, and I decide, without quite deciding, when to let the sound fail. It is made in the doing. I cannot place it a moment before the sound, because a moment before the sound there is only a body preparing, and I cannot place it only in the listener, because I feel it happen in my hands and chest as the note goes.

Read through Merleau-Ponty, this is *parole parlante* in sound. The emotion is not formed in me and then carried out through the instrument; it is enacted in the act of sounding, as a spoken meaning is enacted in the act of speaking. Wind playing makes the point unusually clean, because breath becomes sound with no medium in between, no bow, no key already tuned to a pitch, only the body, the air, and the edge of the instrument. If emotion were content stored before the sound and released with it, I would feel it before I played; I do not. It arrives with the production and ends with it. This is the moment the four philosophers who follow each pass over, and it is worth naming before turning to them: the place where the feeling is made is the body making the sound.

The point is not confined to that final, dramatic note. In the middle of a phrase, where a crescendo has to be shaped and then eased, the tension I feel is not read off a plan formed before the bar; it takes its exact shape from how the air actually moves and how the tone actually answers, instant to instant. If I try to fix the feeling in advance and

then execute it, the playing goes dead, because the feeling has been treated as something to deliver rather than to make. It comes alive only when it is allowed to arise in the doing. What the philosophers pose as a problem of location, the body has already answered in practice: the feeling is where the sound is made, because it is made in the same act.

IV. PLATO: MUSIC, MORALS, AND THE SOUL

Set against the flutist's moment of making, Plato marks the first and farthest position, placing emotion in the listener's soul before the music even sounds. For Plato, music is never mere entertainment; it reaches the deepest part of the soul and so demands careful control. In the Republic he argues that music shapes character and can plant either virtue or vice, writing that "musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul." Rhythm and melody seep into the listener's mind, molding first the emotions and then the moral sense. Plato's doctrine of ethos holds that different modes call up different states: certain scales foster courage and steadiness, others encourage self-indulgence or grief. Because music works on character so directly, Plato argues that the ideal city must regulate it, admitting only the modes that cultivate virtue, such as the Dorian and Phrygian, and barring those that stir up despair. Music earns its place only when it harmonizes the soul and prepares it for reason.

His argument rests on a fear of any type of feeling that has not been supported by reason. In Book X of the Republic, Plato treats the emotional pull of poetry as a temptation that can overrule rational judgment. Like other imitative arts, music deals in appearances and mimics feeling, and so can rouse intense emotion unmoored from truth; indulged, it can unbalance the soul. Good music brings poise to the soul and readies it to receive reason, while bad music breeds disorder. This is a thoroughly moralistic view, one that places Plato at the far end of a tradition that values art solely for its effect on character and society. For Plato, then, the worth of music lies entirely in its power to deliver ordered feeling and reinforce a moral order, and its danger lies in that same power turned loose. Throughout, emotion is treated as something already seated in the listener's soul, which music shapes from without. The body that produces the sound never enters the account.

V. LEO TOLSTOY: MUSIC AS EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION

If Plato seats emotion in the listener before the sound, Tolstoy moves its source to the performer, who feels first and then transmits. In *What Is Art?* (1897), Tolstoy grounds art not in moral discipline but in emotional communication. Art, he writes, is "a human activity having for its purpose the transmission to others of the highest and best feelings to which men have risen." The mechanism is what he calls infection. Having felt an emotion, the artist uses external signs, whether color, sound, movement, or word, to hand it to an audience, who catch it and feel it in turn. He states the definition plainly: art is the activity by which "one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings, and also experience them." Music is his clearest case, and in that sense it exemplifies the essence of all art for him, since melody, harmony, and rhythm can seed sorrow directly in a listener, and festive dance music can spread joy. For Tolstoy this infection is not an incidental effect of music but its whole purpose and the measure of its worth.

This gives music an ethical weight. Tolstoy holds that sincere art enlarges empathy and understanding, binding people not only to one another but across the classes that ordinarily divide them, and that especially expressive art can carry a nuanced, hard-to-name feeling and so create a particularly fervent bond. Folk songs gather a community in a shared sense of mourning or national feeling, and hymns spread devotion among worshippers, turning one person's inner state into something held in common. Because he measures art by the sincerity and reach of the feeling it carries rather than by its moral content, Tolstoy parts from Plato here: what matters is authenticity and infectiousness, not whether a piece cultivates a particular virtue. He therefore prizes simple, genuine music that is accessible to everyone, and dismisses work that demands specialized taste, that is over-elaborate, or that is insincere, judging such music a failure to unite people. The one sure sign of real art, he insists, is "the infectiousness of art": if the listener comes to feel what the artist felt, the art is genuine, and if not, it has failed whatever its technical polish.

Thus, Tolstoy's musical philosophy is communicative and expressionistic. Music is a fundamental language of the heart, and, to him, the success of it is measured by how directly and universally emotion can be delivered. Unlike Plato, Tolstoy—at least while defining art—was more intrigued in the authenticity and infectiousness of emotion rather than its specific moral characteristics. He insisted that "there is one indubitable indication distinguishing real art from its counterfeit, namely, the infectiousness of art". If the listener feels the same emotion as that of the artist's, true art has arisen. Within Tolstoy's paradigm, the significant value of music lies in the ability to fill the gap between humans, thus being able to turn a single individual's internal emotional experience into a shared one between many. Through music, we "mingle souls with another" and form a distinctive spiritual bond that Tolstoy deemed vital for mankind's unity and advancement.

Yet for all its distance from Plato, Tolstoy's argument keeps the same underlying shape. Emotion is a feeling the artist has already had, then encoded in signs and sent along, and the listener receives and re-feels it. Tolstoy interpreted music as a powerful tool of emotional communication, and stressed its function of bringing people together via spreading that emotion; he quite literally coined the concept of "the language of emotion". Here too, emotion is seen as content that is delivered to another person after the artist has already felt it. What is never examined is the moment in which that feeling is produced in the artist's own body. It is assumed to be finished before the sound begins, so that music only carries a completed emotion rather than making one.

VI. FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE: DIONYSIAN ECSTASY

While Tolstoy still assumes a stable feeling that precedes the sound, a feeling that audience and performer recognizes, Nietzsche removes these individuals altogether, dissolving performer and listener into a single Dionysian flow. He places music at the center of his aesthetics and treats it as the deepest expression of human vitality. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), shaped by Wagner's music and Schopenhauer's philosophy, he opposes the Apollonian to the Dionysian. The Apollonian art of sculpture and epic is the art of form, measure, and rational appearance, the beautiful image held at a distance. The Dionysian, whose highest form is music, is the direct discharge of will and feeling, of intoxication, ecstasy, and chaos. Where visual art shows how things appear to us, music reaches the striving that lies beneath appearances, the instinctive will Nietzsche takes to be the inner core

of things. It cannot be reduced to word or image, he holds, because it expresses directly what is felt in the deepest layers, which is why he writes that “without music, life would be a mistake.”

Music, in his view, is not a luxury but a means of enduring and preserving through existence. At its highest level, music was a tool to grasp meaning from life. In Dionysian ecstasy the individual is carried past the boundaries of ordinary selfhood into a larger emotional unity. Nietzsche traces Greek tragedy to the spirit of music: the chorus draws the audience into a collective intoxication of sorrow and joy at once, so that the separate self blends into a shared feeling. Great music, on this account, speaks directly to the soul, turning the intellectual recognition of a hard existential truth into an upheaval of feeling that can be borne rather than merely known. This is why a tragic work can bring grief and confusion and still affirm life, since it gives suffering an artistic form that can be embraced rather than only endured. To value music in this way is, for Nietzsche, to accept the whole of existence, its pain included, and to overcome the isolation of the single self rather than to surrender dangerously to feeling.

Reflecting his philosophy, his attachment to a particular music changed over time in accordance with what he felt closer to Dionysian flow. He first hailed Wagner’s opera as a rebirth of the Dionysian spirit in modern art, then turned against him, charging that Wagner’s music manipulates feeling on the surface and panders to the public’s sentiment. What he came to prize instead was music that faces pain and affirms life rather than flattering or sedating the listener. The same impulse runs through his figure of the *übermensch*, whom he imagines learning to “dance along the turmoil of life,” music standing for the power to move with existence instead of being crushed by it. While Plato feared music’s emotional power, Nietzsche embraced it and viewed emotional resonance as a necessary component of saying yes to the completeness of life (including both joy and pain) and overcoming the isolation of one’s identity, rather than as a dangerous surrender. Yet again, Nietzsche, neglects the body of the performer, still describing only the body that is seized and intoxicated by the music. The performer whose breath becomes the Dionysian sound remains unconsidered, and emotion remains as a part of the musical experience for listeners.

VII. DAVID HUME: TASTE, EMOTION, AND SUBJECTIVE BEAUTY

Writing a century before Tolstoy and Nietzsche, Hume is concerned less with music than with taste, but his account of aesthetic response applies to it directly. An empiricist skeptical of rationalist aesthetics, he suggests that beauty is not a property of the object but of the mind that perceives it. In *Of the Standard of Taste* (1757) he writes that “beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty.” Hume approaches this through human instinct and psychology: the pleasure of music is a capacity of taste, a refined ability to take pleasure in a particular arrangement of sound. Applied to music, then, the poignancy or joy a listener feels comes not from a quality lodged in the notes but from that listener’s own response, which varies with temperament, experience, and cultural background. One listener is moved to transcendence by a melody that leaves another bored, and for Hume both responses are legitimate, because the feeling is a fact about the listener rather than about the music.

This does not reduce taste to mere preference and behavior. Hume grants at the outset that “the great variety of Taste, as well as of opinion, which prevails in the world, is too obvious not to have fallen under every one’s

observation,” yet he denies that this variety makes judgment arbitrary, because a trained sensibility converges toward a standard. A critic of “strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison” judges more reliably than an untrained one, and over time a rough consensus forms, so that a work of the first rank comes to be ranked above a merely pleasant tune. But that standard still rests on a shared human response rather than on any quality in the sound itself. Through repeated comparison and reflection, Hume thinks, taste can be refined and the feelings themselves educated, much as moral judgment is educated, so that the pleasure music gives grows finer and more discriminating without ever ceasing to be the listener’s own. To deny that a feeling belongs to the one who has it would be as empty, he suggests, as insisting that a thing is sweet or bitter apart from anyone who tastes it.

One consequence is that music’s communicative power is far less certain than Tolstoy supposed. A composer may intend a particular emotion, but what actually reaches a given listener depends on that listener’s range of feeling and cultural preparation, so the same piece draws different responses from different people. What a listener feels, additionally, is not a pre-formed emotion extracted from the sound but a response the listener produces in meeting it; it may be shared among people of similar taste and background, but it is theirs, not the music’s. Here, too, emotion belongs to the receiving mind. The body that produced the sound is treated only as its point of origin, a source the feeling is said to depart from, and never as a primary place where the feeling is made.

VIII. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

On the surface, the four occupy different territories on one spectrum. Plato and Tolstoy agree that music acts powerfully on listeners but place that action at opposite ends: Plato in the moral order already seated in the listener’s soul, Tolstoy in the sincerity of a feeling the artist has already had. Nietzsche and Hume mark the far poles, romantic excess that overrides any individual taste on one side, enlightened restraint that reduces music to a pleasure of taste on the other; both, in their way, give music a redeeming power, but Nietzsche’s redeems the isolation of the individual while Hume’s redeems nothing grander than the ordinary pains of experience. Across two thousand years, Plato and Hume even share a wariness of music’s pull, though one grounds it in an objective moral standard and the other in the variability of subjective response. Read this way, the four look like rivals staking out positions in a single aesthetic dispute.

But the disagreement is not what it appears. Looking at where each places emotion, a pattern emerges: all four treat it as something that has already happened. Tolstoy’s artist felt it before encoding it; Plato’s citizen is shaped by a mode already sounding; Nietzsche’s Dionysian will exceed the music that expresses it; Hume’s listener meets the sound with a response already his own. Each theory even casts a role for the person who matters to it: Tolstoy’s composer, Plato’s citizen, Nietzsche’s celebrant, Hume’s listener. None cast the performer. Beneath the vocabulary of soul, infection, will, and taste, the four collapse into one structure: emotion is the content, sound is the pathway, and the only question left is which end of the pathway the content belongs to. Their disagreement is not four answers to one question but four positions on a single axis none of them examines.

That is what makes the disagreement structural rather than incidental, and unsolvable on the model’s own terms. To ask where the emotion really sits, in this model, is like asking where the resonance of a struck bell is located: in

the bronze at the strike, in the air that carries the frequency, or in the ear that registers it. There is no single answer, not because resonance is mysterious but because it was never a thing sitting in one place. It exists only across the whole vibrating system and cannot be split into a real location and its delivery. Plato, Tolstoy, Nietzsche, and Hume cannot reach consensus, then, not because one of them is wrong but because they are answering a question the shared model makes unanswerable: where a content sits that was never separate from its pathway to begin with. What all four pass over is the moment the body turns breath into sound, and the claim here is that in that moment content and pathway were never two things.

IX. CONCLUSION

Placed side by side, the four explanations can look like a chord, each voice adding a dimension to a full account of why music moves us. But however generously one reads them, lining the four up in a row leaves the root question untouched, because all four are answered from the same side of the sound.

Returning to the Syrinx flutist's held note, in the moment the note is sounded and released, there is no emotion waiting to be carried into the sound and no feeling that precedes the sound the breath delivers. The production of the sound and the arising of the emotion are one event, not a content and a pathway. This is the parole parlante the paper began with: as meaning arrives in the act of speaking, feeling too arrives in the act of sounding. Words do not carry a thought that runs ahead of them, and music does not carry an emotion that runs ahead of it; in each, the action itself makes the meaning. Seen from here, Plato's soul, Tolstoy's transmitted feeling, Nietzsche's impersonal will, and Hume's receiving mind are not four places emotion can live. They are four descriptions of what happens once the sound already exists.

This does not make the four wrong. Each describes something real about how music is received. But each is incomplete in the same way, because each begins after the note has been made and so never reaches the body that makes it. The question of whose feeling it is cannot be answered from the seat of the composer, the citizen, the intoxicated participant, or the listener. It can be answered only from inside the body that turns breath into sound, where the feeling is neither received nor delivered but produced, and where, for two seconds at the end of Syrinx, it briefly is.

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