

**Emotional Responses to Music Performance and Listening:  
Exploring the Teacher’s Ability to Foster Aesthetic Experiences**

Aesthetic education is a unique component of the arts curriculum. It highlights the inherent value of art (art for art’s sake). Aesthetic experiences are never right or wrong; they are emotions formed from our experiences and perceptions and are elicited through involvement in music. As an educator, understanding this process and the connection between music and emotional responses will allow me to provide opportunities for my students to experience and appreciate the intrinsic value of music and foster the vital and too often overlooked component of my field; aesthetic education. I will be discussing three studies concerning this subject that look at the components of neural responses, eudaimonic appeals to engagement and meaning, and the emotivist position on genuine emotional responses.

The first study (“Dynamic Emotional and Neural Responses to Music...” by Chapin, Jantzen, Kelso, Steinberg, & Large) deals with observations of emotional responses and neural activity as they evolved together with stimulus parameters over several minutes. 125 undergraduate psychology majors completed a questionnaire assessing musical background and personal responses to music. Those that qualified as “deep listeners”(those who believed music played a greater role in their life than the average person) were sorted into either experienced or inexperienced categories (based on backgrounds in musical skills) and then

submitted to the fMRI test that would yield the results of study. Participants recorded their own personal levels of emotional arousal and emotional valence on a visual computer generated map before and after entering the fMRI machine for the study.

In the study, participants entered the fMRI machine and listened to two performance recordings of Frederic Chopin's Etude in E major; one expressive, and one mechanically altered (in strict rhythm and time as notated, no dynamic contrast). The machine gathered information on the participants' emotional arousal and emotional valence patterns through magnetic resonance imaging as they listened to the two recordings. The results indicated that expressive music performance activates emotion related structures in listeners, and that even a moderate level of music experience enhances this emotion-associated activation and increases the rewarding aspect of music listening. Familiarity with a piece does not seem to be necessary to evoke this response. The fMRI machine showed this taking place through the engagement of the mirror neuron system and its interaction with the limbic system.

The second study ("Emotion, Engagement and Meaning..." by Lamon) had thirty-five university students give free reports on their strongest, most intense emotions experiences of performing music. Their reports were then analyzed using the Strong Experiences of Music Descriptive System and also analyzed for components of well-being using an idiographic approach. The goal was to identify commonalities that showed a connection between the pleasure induced in music making (hedonistic) and increased personal well-being (eudaimonic).

The results indicate that both hedonistic and eudaimonic routes to happiness play an important role in strong experiences of music performance, but the eudaimonic route dominates. The strongest emotions were characterized by music making that emphasized engagement and search for meaning. Performing in front of an audience and musically collaborating with others increased these emotions. The overwhelmingly positive memories of music-making help sustain a motivation for music from a hedonistic and eudaimonic perspective. Thus, by emphasizing musical experiences that highlight engagement and meaning, the eudaimonic route to wellbeing will provide an increase in valuable and rewarding experiences that contribute to long-term motivation.

The third and final study (“Emotional responses to Music Experience...” by Lundqvist, Carlsson, Hilmersson, & Juslin) seeks to determine whether musical experiences evoke genuine emotional responses in listeners (the emotivist approach) or if listeners merely perceive emotions expressed by the music (the cognitivist approach). Thirty-two participants listened to popular music composed with either a happy or sad emotional expression and the study examined the participants’ self-reported emotion, facial muscle activity, and autonomic activity.

The results supported the emotivist perspective. Happy music generated more zygomatic facial muscle activity, greater skin conductance, lower finger temperature, more happiness and less sadness than in sad music. This demonstrates that the listener is responding externally and internally to the emotion of the music in a unique way to each piece and not simply mirroring consistent, comparable happy or sad emotions.

I agree with the results of all of these studies. In regards to the first study, I have found that as my experience with music has increased, my emotional responses have increased in intensity, but there also seems to be a limit on that intensity. This has made music listening much more rewarding regardless of familiarity with a piece. I would even say that I am more able to enjoy unfamiliar music than previously with less musical experience. Commenting on the second study, I agree very much that my motivation for music is increased through positive experiences of collaboration and a search for meaning in my performance as well as performing in front of an audience; as opposed to solo performances that are not in front of an audience and that are focused more on skill improvement which mostly provide a hedonistic route to happiness. In regards to the third study, I was happy that the study focused on popular music (which is my area of interest) and even more pleased that the findings supported genuine emotional responses (which any musician would argue for to the grave with or without evidence).

In-class connections to this course with aesthetic education are numerous. Sensory memory will play a large role in students' perception of music and how students learn to process and organize musical pieces will greatly affect how they interpret music. Also, in regards to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the Aesthetic need is second from the top of the hierarchy and precedes self-actualization, so an emphasis on aesthetic needs seems quite crucial in education. Mastery approach goal orientation will assist in a consistent, meaningful progression of students' musical skills and knowledge which will in turn increase the value of experiences

students can have from performing and listening to music and thus more greatly satisfy their aesthetic needs.

These results show me the obligation I have to my future students. I have the opportunity to give them the skills necessary to interpret, make informed judgments of, participate in, and enjoy the music that surrounds them in this world to the fullest extent. I must highlight opportunities for my students to collaborate and find meaning in the music they make. Also, increasing successful performance opportunities in front of an audience will lead to increased motivation. I will provide opportunities to expand students' aesthetic value of music by introducing them to a large variety of styles of music from different cultures and eras and guide them to making significant connections to their lives through the emotional impact different elements of music create in us. I will encourage students to analyze and search for meaning in all music either from their own perspective or that of the people it was created for; passive listening and performing or an over-emphasis on cognitive and psychomotor domains defeats the inherent purpose of music and does not allow for aesthetic education to take place.

These studies have proven to me that guiding students to find the aesthetic value in art is what leads to behaviors that will allow people to find pleasure in music, feel motivated by music, experience genuine emotions that help them understand themselves and better form a healthy identity. Aesthetic value is completely unique to art alone and that alone gives arts and arts education intrinsic value. No, aesthetic experiences do not have a utilitarian purpose, but the result is a richer, more meaningful life. Mastering the art of living should be our ultimate goal

and purpose. Through our health, intellect, ethics, faith, and aesthetic cognizance we can reach our full potential of self-actualization. Nothing could be more important.

## Works Cited

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