



The Musical Score of Emotions

Music arouses emotions. But exactly what people feel when listening to a piece of music and how they express these feelings is influenced mainly by the times they live in and their culture. A research group led by **Sven Oliver Müller** at the **Max Planck Institute for Human Development** in Berlin has carried out research on the changing emotions in Europe's musical life, focusing in particular on the impact of music's communal spirit.

TEXT **PETRA MIES**

Photo: Corbis



Uncle Martin, who is in his late 40s, wants to give his nephew Niklas, who recently turned 16, a treat. “It will be fantastic,” announces the older man. “I managed to get hold of tickets for the Simple Minds concert, they are amazing. We can go together.” His nephew looks puzzled. “Simple Minds? Do they actually still perform?” The boy knows little or nothing about the Scottish band that has been one of his uncle’s musical icons since his teenage years. His uncle rummages around, shows him records, CDs and photo albums, plays him songs, revels in the music and tells him stories about things that happened back then. “Here, look, here I am with my friends Michi and Klaus, it was crazy.”

Will Martin and Niklas experience similar feelings in the crowd when they attend the concert in Berlin’s Tempodrom arena in November? Will the nephew respond in a similar way to his uncle who, like so many others in the audience, will remember the 1980s and the rebellious mood of his youth?

EMOTIONS AND THE CHANGING TIMES

Anna, 14 years old, and her great grandmother, who will soon be 90, have very different concert plans. “The Berlin Philharmonic!” cries the old lady again and again. “Beethoven’s Fourth and Seventh! I heard them when Wilhelm Furtwängler was still principal conductor, and Karajan too! Those were such great times,” says Henriette, and starts

Reverent silence or loud enthusiasm: The behavior of an audience is influenced by the culture, time and environment.

telling stories from her long life. Anna, who is thinking about the fact that she once again hasn’t practiced the piano, is looking forward to spending the evening with her beloved great-grandma. But she’s not sure if Beethoven, played in the stiff atmosphere of the Berliner Philharmonie, will move her in a similar way to the wild concert by German rapper Cro she recently attended with her friends.

A rock party mood in one instance and sublime-tasteful classical music in the other – when it comes to the experience of music, contrasting emotions compete.

What do people feel when they hear the same thing in public with others? >

» The function assumed by brass band music, workers' anthems and pop tunes at such major events shouldn't be underestimated. They don't serve the purpose of individual listening pleasure, but the "we feeling."

Does everything sound equally joyful to everyone because the composer composed a certain passage of the piece in a particular way, or simply sad in other places? And what influences people's response in the process? Do their environment, era and education play a role? How, when and why do groups form in society through musical practices? How important are shared interests, friendships and enmities? And to what extent did emotions in Europe change over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, and where do the continuities lie?

These are the questions explored by the scientists working on the *Felt Communities? Emotions in European Music Performances* research project. The project started five years ago and at its high-point involved almost 20 doctoral students, postdoc fellows, academic staff members and assistants. The project is due to conclude with a workshop on the history of emotions and music, as well as further future research perspectives.

DANCING AUDIENCES, VIRTUOSO CONDUCTORS

Historian and Research Group Leader Sven Oliver Müller sees the question as to whether and how music, education and emotions are linked as "a fascinating topic in which all the answers inspire more curiosity about other questions."

According to Müller, this topic cannot be considered in isolation from the relevant social and cultural background, historical situation, societal discourses, and social practices. "The

relationship between music and emotions is constituted not only by man and sound, but also by the body and knowledge, taste and communities."

Music is the language of feelings. A platitude, perhaps. But according to Müller, the fact that these emotions are also shaped by learned musical and non-musical experiences and taste patterns and, above all, by shared listening, creates "complex textures." These include dancing concert goers as well as the performances led by virtuoso conductors.

In order to investigate these phenomena, the research group studied a huge number of sources. It scrutinized audio and visual documents, music critiques, fan publications, diaries, letters, memorabilia, and merchandising products. Music is ultimately only all of these things combined.

Whether concert audiences scream or are so silent that every little cough represents an unpleasant interruption, or whether music triggers a profound happiness in them or makes them aggressive is not, in any way, grounded in their individuality. As the 46-year-old historian explains, it is only through the interplay of zeitgeist, education and emotions that the codes of musical practices arise and enable us to understand how people perceive them. Communication in musical life fulfils four ideal-type functions: "It serves the purposes of information, opinion formation, socialization and entertainment."

The extent to which it can create and threaten communities is often underestimated. One need only think of politi-

cal party conferences, whose media perception is dominated more by strong television images than musical associations. Nevertheless, the function assumed by brass band music, workers' anthems and pop tunes at such large-scale events shouldn't be underestimated. They don't serve the purpose of individual listening pleasure, but the generation of a "we feeling." Music can hold a group together and direct it in a subtle way.

EXPOSURE TO HARD ROCK AS A TORTURE METHOD

But it can also exert strong control. As far back as the world wars, occupying powers used music as part of their occupation strategy, and music also served as a propaganda tool and source of resistance. Depending on the circumstances, music was intended to humiliate, encourage and even torture those who heard it. Wars that involve the use of music and the associated emotions continue to the present day. For example, in 2004 the US military made use of not only bombers but also aggressive music in the Iraqi city of Falluja, which became established as a rebel stronghold under the American occupation. Giant speakers bombarded the rebels with the music of hard rock bands Metallica and AC/DC. And, according to Müller, this is not the only example of "music being used on a martial basis to exercise force and power over the human mind and body."

In her seminars, Marie Louise Herzfeld-Schild repeatedly draws attention to the fact that the emotional impact of



Fostering community: Musical interludes have a permanent place at political party conferences. Newly elected party chairman Matthias Platzeck (middle) joined in the performance of the miners' choir at the SPD party conference in 2005.

music is particularly strong when it is experienced in a group. "I show the students that even soft historical factors in this cultural context enable well-founded statements to be made about society," explains the philosopher, who holds a doctorate in musicology. If you only examine how the body reacts to certain musical phrases, if you only measure brain flows without considering the definition of music and its reception and social-aesthetic context, it is practically impossible to understand the emotional state of an era or group. "The concept of music involved here is very broad," stresses the 33-year-old researcher.

This macro-understanding constantly prompted the Max Planck research team to work on an interdisciplinary basis and to draw on different disciplines. Research technology assistant Iris Törm-

er reports how, during the project, historians, sociologists, musicologists and even anthropologists jointly investigated the auditory experience in Europe over the last two centuries.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL POWER OF MUSICAL SOUNDS

Neurologists and psychologists also came to a summer school held in Berlin two years ago to participate in an unusual forum involving disciplines that usually tend to work on a separate basis. Müller fondly remembers how productive it was to discuss different methodological approaches and combine them whenever possible. "Needless to say, we didn't succeed in reducing everything to a generally applicable formula along the lines of 'four bars of

Sibelius make people sadder than eight bars of Mozart'." However, despite the broad nature of the topic, they succeeded in providing a clearer picture of the sociological power of musical sounds.

"In our team, with its accumulated specialist knowledge, 'change' was always the connecting and key concept for our work," adds Müller. "The forms of musical emotions that were experienced at a Roman opera or religious service in 1810 are not identical to those experienced at a punk concert in Liverpool in 1997."

To put it succinctly, collective emotions during the experience of music also have their fashions, and the way they should be assessed within their specific context also changes. By way of example of these emotional concepts and the changes they undergo, Marie



Breathtaking: In the 1840s Franz Liszt captivated audiences with his virtuoso piano playing. Women often fainted at his performances.

Louise Herzfeld-Schild refers to national pride: “This was acted out intensively in Germany in the 19th century but is considered problematic today,” she says. “In contrast, this emotion is viewed completely differently in France and America, even today.”

The researchers emphasize that many pointers to emotions that are typical of a given era can be found in the history of music. When celebrated musician Franz Liszt performed in the 1840s, women fainted by the dozen and euphoric audience members tussled for the handkerchiefs he had used to dab his brow. Such extrovert behavior would be unthinkable in today’s concert halls, where the dictum of profound contemplation prevails. Quiet please: devout attention and silence are the order of the day.

The history of opera doesn’t have any standard code of behavior to offer, either. In Mozart’s day, 250 years ago, eating, drinking and loudly conversing during performances caused no offence. Today, such behavior would be considered a serious faux pas. It is simply not done.

DIFFICULTY IN SEARCHING FOR SOURCES

“We assume that emotions are learned practices,” explains Marie Louise Herzfeld-Schild. She researched hymns of the 18th and 19th centuries. “What was sung and not sung before and after the Enlightenment tells us a lot about spiritual states of mind.” Feelings are in no way exclusively internal states that unfold independently of people’s environ-

ment. The external influence flows inwards and is then expressed publicly.”

But it isn’t always easy to find proof of this. Even if, according to Müller, “almost every source is ultimately relevant, the search for sources in letters, newspaper articles, images, song books and treatises is more of a challenge in periods before the availability of recording media and the proliferation of such media right up to the Internet. Moreover, the sources must be evaluated correctly.

Marie Louise Herzfeld-Schild draws attention to the fact that letters were not always as personal as they are today. “The authors of travel letters in the 18th century assumed that these would be read aloud in a wider context at a later point in time. For this reason, such letters were more likely to reflect soci-



Feelings are in no way exclusively internal states that unfold independently of people's environment. The external influence flows inwards and is then expressed publicly.

etal norms." Should feelings be mentioned at all, they must be noted.

Moreover, the meaning of words themselves also changed. For example, around 1900, honor was perceived as an elite and noble emotion; after the 1950s, it tended to be associated with more negative connotations. "Semantics, vocabulary and emotional knowledge are themselves subject to constant change," observes the scientist. "There are times in which crying is fashionable, and phases when it is just the opposite."

Müller refers to how emotional life is also socially conditioned and influenced by zeitgeist. "In the period around 1930, people didn't care to see crying men, and this had a huge impact on behavior at the time." If the group pressure is as great as the fear of being ridiculous, feelings adapt to the collective. "Rational decisions can be highly emotional."

A HISTORY OF HATE AND DEVOTION

The historian refers to the varied reception of opera and concert performances in the 19th century. "The changes in taste and listening behavior provide a good indicator of how aristocratic and bourgeois codes of perception changed," he says. "The reception of Wagner in Germany alone from that time to the present day contains so much material that it enables us to understand the change in musical communication as a history of hate and devotion." Moreover, it proves the possibilities for interpretation and action offered by the work

of a single composer in the historical and sociological context. "The spectrum of emotional practices is vast." There is no causality between a certain piece of music and its emotional impact.

Müller also draws attention to the fact that emotions can be "strategically deployed and infectious. I do not believe in a clear divide between reason and emotion. This classic opposition is irrelevant." What is involved instead is a spiral, whose mechanism can delight or soothe a group, or affect it in a different way.

The approaches used in emotion research are particularly helpful in the current era of globalization. Müller refers to the emotional significance of music and instruments for ethnic and religious minorities, for example. His colleague Herzfeld-Schild adds: "The more accurate identification of how particular emotions are shaped in particular cultures could be useful for international cooperation."

According to Müller, insights that serve future needs can be gained not only from the analysis of contemporary sensitivities, but also those of past eras: The analysis of how and why – apart from the obvious reasons – the demonstrating rock fans and youth groups of the 1960s differ from Wagner fans in Bayreuth could provide fundamental insights into the political situation in the Federal Republic of Germany and current cultural movements. The historical analysis of musical emotional worlds and music as a factor in political rule is, therefore, relevant to our future coexistence.

Moreover, as Marie Louise Herzfeld-Schild explains, we already make use of the history of emotional reception that every piece of music carries in many situations. This happens both consciously and unconsciously. "The best examples of this are national anthems." Everyone knows them and they unite complete strangers in soccer stadiums.

ADVERTISING JINGLES SUGGEST STRENGTH AND HAPPINESS

Sounds and the group emotional code that accompanies them are also naturally of interest to advertising. "It aims to profit from the learned emotional connections generated by certain pieces of music," says Müller. And it is able to do this only because the target groups have learned and experienced feeling as desired. Even if it all happens on an unconscious level, potential customers are intended to perceive the advertised product as something that makes them strong and free, and in the best case, even completely happy.

The researchers established how radically emotional musical practices can change and that, despite their idiosyncrasies, people are always products of their time, education and origins. What the Romantic audience saw as a true expression of the soul may have been perceived in a completely different way by subsequent generations. Something that may seem deeply moving and arousing today can appear altogether more cheerful tomorrow. >



Multimedia: Sven Oliver Müller and Marie Louise Herzfeld-Schild avail of a very wide variety of sources in their research – from sound recordings and posters to merchandising products.

Existing or fervently desired belonging to a particular community is also important here, although the image of the latter can change as radically as the reception patterns of certain pieces of music. Marie Louise Herzfeld-Schild refers to Theodor W. Adorno's typology of listeners of 1962, which is not entirely unproblematic from today's perspective. Adorno differentiated between, among others, the expert listener, the good listener, the culture consumer, the resentment listener, the entertainment listener and "the rest." Of course, he was defining ideal types here, and hybrid forms are the norm in reality.

Müller reports on an experiment carried out by the Westdeutsche Rund-

funk (WDR) broadcasting company in 1977, which remains interesting and relevant today. In the experiment, 563 test subjects were asked to compare the last movement climax of three different interpretations of Anton Bruck-

ner's Fourth Symphony by Karl Böhm, Leonard Bernstein and Herbert von Karajan. The listeners were supposed to try to match the recordings with the individual conductor, or at least indicate the differences they were able to identify between them. "The self-identified connoisseurs from the educated classes, in particular, followed the cult of the conductor in vogue at the time and explained the different interpretations in great detail with the help of their acquired taste in music," explains the Research Group Leader. The representatives of the white collar and working classes, who accounted for almost 20 percent of the group and had no acquired expert knowledge, were unable to identify any differences between the three versions. Müller laughs. "They were right: the WDR had played the same recording to all of the test listeners three times." ◀

TO THE POINT

- How people experience music depends strongly on the historical context, habits and fashions, as well as on their social origins and education.
- When people listen to music together, the group influences the individual listening experience.
- Music can be used to intensify the "we feeling" and direct a group, but it can also be used to exclude and even torture.

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