Known by the Company It Keeps: Associations and the Establishment of Musical Expression

Dissertation

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Abstract

I argue for an association theory of musical expression, whereby music acquires its expressive character through associations with extra-musical content. Musical works can be roughly categorized into two groups: absolute works—works, such as Bach’s “Invention No. 13 in A minor” and Scriabin’s “Prelude in B major, Op. 2, No.2”, that are not accompanied by any descriptive title, text, or program—and non-absolute works—works, such as Schubert’s “Ave Maria” and Williams’ Theme from Harry Potter, that are.

I argue that the best approach to developing a theory of musical expression begins with an analysis of non-absolute music. Analyzing non-absolute music, I show that musical expression is intimately tied up with associations that stem from those texts, titles, and programs.

The benefit of this approach is that it straightforwardly explains not only non-absolute music’s expressive properties, but also how absolute music has its expressive properties. I argue that expression is tied up not only with whole pieces but also with musical elements such as timbre, rhythm, tempo, and melodic gestures. These musical elements are the same in both absolute and non-absolute music, so associations established with non-absolute music simply carry through to the absolute musical
works. The passion of the tango rhythm developed from the longstanding connection between it and the sultry dance. The passionate flavor does not go away when used in an absolute piece. Rather, it remains and lends its expressive quality to the piece. Thus, we do not need to appeal to natural properties of the music to explain music’s expressiveness. All expression, even in absolute pieces, can be ultimately grounded in the associations developed by non-absolute works of similar timbral, harmonic, or rhythmic form.
Dedication

Dedicated to Beth, who is awesome and deserves every good thing that life has to offer. She lights up my days and fills my nights with song.
Acknowledgements

The real joy in writing this dissertation has been in the interactions with all of the people who have helped guide this project. I wish to give special thanks to Lee Brown, my advisor, whose wonderfully interesting Philosophy of Art class in 2004 prompted me to make Aesthetics my specialization. I am incredibly thankful for the accessibility, patience, and insightful criticism he has generously offered me over the years. I would also like to thank Diana Raffman, whose book, *Language, Music, and Mind* prompted me to ask the questions that form the basis of this dissertation. Lastly, I cannot begin to thank Dan Farrell enough for being a constant source of encouragement through my time at Ohio State. I have learned an enormous amount about what it is to be a good teacher, scholar, and mentor (not to mention the numerous virtues of Rothko paintings) from my interactions with him.

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Introduction: Rescuing Associations from the Theoretical Dustbin

*For unto us a Child is born*  
*No, I’m not going to trust you*  
*Unto us*  
*Blind love*  
*a Son is given*  
cruel beauty  
*Unto us*  
*Blind love*  
a Son is given  
*cruel beauty*  
*And the government shall be up-*  
*You lie too much*  
on his shoulder¹  
*flattering deity²*

In the summer of 1741, these two texts were set to the same music. In August of that year, George Frideric Handel was commissioned to write what was to become one of the greatest works of sacred music—the *Messiah*. Being pressed for time, he borrowed music from some earlier compositions, among them a madrigal he composed for Princess Caroline of Hanover in July, “*Nò, Di Voi Non Vo’ Fidarmi.*” The music from one of the most famous and admired parts of the *Messiah*, “*For Unto Us a

¹ “*For Unto Us a Child is Born*”, from George Frideric Handel’s *Messiah*.
² “*Nò, di Voi Non Vo’ Fidarmi*”, George Frideric Handel.
"Child is Born," was originally conceived and composed as an erotic love duet. Some have found this sort of phenomenon to be reason enough to deny that music can be expressive of emotions. Eduard Hanslick notes, “If the music in itself, however, were capable of representing devotion as its content, such a quid pro quo would be impossible, rather as if the preacher recited from the pulpit a novel by Tieck or a page of parliamentary transactions instead of a sermon.”

Hanslick is clearly too quick in giving up musical expressiveness, but the puzzle does remain. If the near-ubiquitous instrumental versions of “For Unto Us a Child is Born” is any evidence, the music itself, not simply the lyrics, is expressive of a sort of devotional joy. So, how should we make sense of its dual role? Composers do not generally reach Handel’s caliber unless they have a very good sense of what settings are appropriate for their music.

One non-starter solution is that the music today has the expressive qualities of both devotional joy and erotic love. It is difficult to see how this could be the case, given we do not hear it as erotic love. Our perception of the expressive quality, furthermore, is more specific than any emotion (or form of the emotion) common to both. Another solution is that it has only ever had the expressive quality of devotional joy. This

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4 Not very surprising, since virtually all of our experiences with the music are with the oratorio version.
is also puzzling, for why would Handel have used it in an erotic love duet (especially since he wrote the duet first)? Handel’s actions would be equivalent to setting dirty lyrics to “Amazing Grace.” A third solution is that the piece has only ever had the expressive quality of erotic love. This is even more implausible since we hear it as strongly expressive of devotional joy and we would have to assume that Handel was comfortable with using such a risqué song for a sacred oratorio.

A fourth option is that the piece was not strongly expressive of devotional joy or erotic love at the time of its composition. Whatever, if anything, it did express was broad enough for the piece to sound appropriate in both places. This pushes the puzzle back a little bit. If the piece did not have such a strong expressive quality at its composition, why is it so readily heard as expressive of devotional joy in today’s Western musical climate? The answer I think can be defended is that as the Messiah became more popular and became the iconic Christmas oratorio\(^5\) and “Nò, Di Voi Non Vo’ Fidarmi” faded into obscurity, the piece became strongly associated with its religious context in the minds of the listeners. The more it was heard, the associations grew stronger and the expressive quality became more entrenched. We might very well have

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\(^5\) Though, in fact, it was composed for as Easter mass.
been astounded that the piece was ever used in a church setting if history had been different and it was the erotic love duet that became popular.

This case, like many others, illustrates the close relationship associations have with the expressive characters of musical pieces. Though associations are often regarded as doing something somewhere in the big picture of musical expression, their role has never been adequately acknowledged as fundamentally important to the development of music’s expressive characters. This dissertation provides a defense of the association theory of musical expression, whereby music acquires its expressive characters through associations with extra-musical contexts. Furthermore, I offer a new strategy for the examination of musical expression. The common strategy has been to examine absolute music (i.e., music without a descriptive title, text, or program) and generalize from there. This simply ignores the important contributions that associations are making towards expression. I suggest that since non-absolute music is by far the most common music we encounter in our daily lives, we should begin with that type of music and then generalize to absolute music.\(^6\)

\(^6\) Though there are always grey areas, the distinction between absolute and non-absolute music is fairly straightforward. The concept and idealization of absolute music began in the early Romantic period and is characterized by the lack of an accompanying program, text, or a title that refers to anything beyond the music itself. Examples include pieces such as Schubert’s “Sonata in A minor, Op. 42” and Scriabin’s “Etude Op. 8, No. 12.” All other types of music can be categorized as non-absolute. Such music might
The basic idea of the association theory is not particularly new, though it is largely discredited. It often appears as a filling out of the logical space rather than as a legitimate contender for an explanation of musical expression. Peter Kivy describes the association theory as ‘tired’ and claims it reduces expression to a mass of private, idiosyncratic responses. Stephen Davies suggests that the association theory cannot account for the expressive qualities of absolute music (where the real puzzle of musical expression lies). Geoffrey Madell, Roger Scruton, and Davies claim the theory strips expressiveness of its value as an aspect of music and turns it into “brute naming.”

I hold out hope for the theory. Once properly understood, the association theory not only avoids the problems attributed to it but also offers the most plausible explanation of musical expression. Where there include descriptive titles (e.g., “Music to Watch the Girls Go By,” Mussorgsky’s Night on Bald Mountain), texts (e.g., “It’s a Small World after All,” Schubert’s “Ave Maria”), programs (e.g., Berlioz’s Symphonie Fantastique, Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition), or any other device that connects the music to some extra-musical content (e.g., musical overtures, film scores).

The grey areas come when absolute pieces have been co-opted for other purposes. Bach’s “Toccata and Fugue in D minor” was used in the 1931’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and so many other horror movies throughout the years. From such a history, it has become the iconic piece of scary music in the West. Charles Gounod attached a melodic section of “Ave Maria” to Bach’s “Prelude #1 in C major,” and the associations to the Marianist text remain even when the prelude is performed by itself. For our purposes, whether we wish to call the grey areas pieces ‘absolute’ or ‘non-absolute’ does not matter much.

Charles Avison advocated something like an association theory in 1752. See Avison, 1775.

Leonard Meyer, for instance, has a small section at the end of Emotion and Meaning in Music where he discusses connotations. Though he acknowledges that associations play a role in affective experience, he states that they play a role in only a small fraction of cases. See Meyer, 1956.

See Davies, 2001, Madell, 2002, and Scruton, 1997. Madell claims that the experience of the expressive properties of music is too powerful for it not to come directly from the musical properties (as opposed to ‘stipulations’). As we shall see in Chapter 3, this objection mischaracterizes the association theory. The theory does not imply that music ever acquires its expressive character by mere fiat.
is expression, we can discover associations as well. Throughout, I shall argue for the plausibility of the association theory by showing how closely bound up expressive characteristics are to contexts and associations with extra-musical content. In the course of doing so, I shall show that the association theory can account for, or at least form the foundation of, all of our expressive claims.

We might ask what sort of ascriptions fall under the heading of ‘expressive properties’ of music. Kivy and Davies restrict expression to emotions.\(^{10}\) However, in the spirit of Nelson Goodman,\(^{11}\) I shall use ‘expressive properties’ to cover both emotional and non-emotional characteristics.\(^{12}\) I shall argue that the association theory can account for all of the non-musical significance we attach to music—not just the qualities like ‘happy,’ ‘sad,’ and ‘joyous,’ but ones like ‘scary,’ ‘lascivious,’ ‘exotic,’ and ‘magical’ as well.

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\(^{10}\) And doing so has led to associations being ignored right out of the gate. Davies gives an argument (Davies, The Expression of Emotion in Music 1980) that ‘expression’ can be used to refer either to personal feelings or to outward human behaviors characteristic of some emotion. Since musical pieces are obviously non-sentient, the other way to understand *musical* expression is that musical pieces resemble in their contour the outward behaviors characteristic of emotions. Such considerations for the term ‘expression’ have driven the development of both contour (Kivy, 1989 and Davies, Musical Meaning and Expression, 1994) and musical persona theories (Levinson, 1990 and Walton, 1988).

\(^{11}\) See Goodman, 1976. Anthony Newcomb also thinks non-emotional properties can be expressed by music. See Newcomb, 1984.

\(^{12}\) Kivy refers to these as the ‘phenomenological properties’ of music. Davies sometimes talks about expression with regards to non-emotions, though he does so in an odd way—non-emotions are given the suffix ‘state of mind’ so that ‘banjos express bucolicness’ becomes ‘banjos express a bucolic state of mind.’
In Chapter 1, after quickly dismissing the arousal theory, I shall argue that, ironically, an idea by Hanslick offers a nice solution to how music can nevertheless arouse emotions (even if it does not rise to the level of ‘expression’). If Hanslick is right, we are beginning to see the important role extra-musical content plays for music’s non-musical significance. Furthermore, I shall argue that absolute music, as we typically understand it, is wrapped up with extra-musical things (associations, contexts, and the like).

In Chapter 2, I shall present a case study in musical expression that will accomplish two things. First, it will highlight two desiderata for a theory of musical expression: normativity and specificity. Second, the case study will show that the well-known contour theory has a problem accounting for the specificity desiderata, as well as raise a serious anthropomorphization objection to the theory.

In Chapter 3, I shall develop a defense for the association theory. I shall argue that the components that make up music (e.g., timbres, rhythms, melodic lines, harmonies) have expressive content, and they acquire this content through associations with extra-musical content. Once we have this, it will be easy to see how associations can determine

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13 The theory that music expresses an emotion by virtue of arousing it in a listener.
14 The theory that music expresses an emotion by virtue of resembling human behavior typical of that emotion.
the expressive character of absolute music, since all musical components are shared by both absolute and non-absolute music.

In Chapter 4, I shall examine cross-cultural comparisons of musical expression. I shall show that differences between how Westerners and non-Westerners perceive each other’s music supports the claim that associations and context have a fundamental role in the creation and fortification of expressive qualities.

In Chapter 5, I shall suggest that the existence of a musical phrasebook that matches up musical components with their expressive character will benefit the plausibility of the association theory greatly. Such a phrasebook would show that musical components are fairly stable and can be codified in the musical lexicon of our culture. Deryck Cooke developed a widely discredited phrasebook, and I shall argue that the flaws of the phrasebook were located in his insistence that expression comes from purely natural elements of the music. A modified phrasebook of benefit to the association theory can be had by severing the phrasebook from its overtone series-based foundations.

To head off one possible point of confusion at the start, I should state that the theory I propose is an association theory of musical expression, and I shall speak about associations throughout. Much of the literature refers to the sort of theory I propose as a conventionistic theory.
of musical expression. I hesitate interchanging the two terms even though they are certainly related. Most notably, both theories take expression to be determined fundamentally by ‘extra-musical forces’. They differ in the regard that, in some of the literature at least, the convention theory involves a certain degree of intentionality—as if the Renaissance madrigal composer had proclaimed, “henceforth, this descending tetrachord shall be lamentful.” Although this is how many expressive features of music get started—conventionally-defined leitmotifs, for instance—I do not wish to imply that such explicitness is necessary. I argue that it is the associations with extra-musical content, not the ‘initial baptism’ as it were, that gives a musical piece its expressive character. This allows for the expressive character of a piece to evolve over time, as in the case of “For Unto Us a Child is Born.”

As one last bit of introduction, nowhere shall I attempt to explain how expressive properties affect musical value. Scruton is quite right in noting that the effectiveness of expression does not necessarily affect the aesthetic value of a piece. Some Bach preludes lack any sort of distinct expressive content, though they are remarkably beautiful. Likewise, some pieces (e.g., overwrought film scores) are expressive through and through.

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16 See Chapter 3 for more details.
17 Scruton, 1997.
yet they are aesthetically boring and tedious to the point of tears. It is enough to explain the source of musical expression.
Chapter 1: There’s More Than One Way to Arouse a Cat

The strength of the arousal theory—that music expresses an emotion by virtue of arousing it in a listener—lies in anecdotal evidence. People often describe the exuberant happiness of early Beatles’ tunes such as “I Saw Her Standing There” as contagious.\(^\text{18}\) Few things are as likely to move one to tears as the violin theme from *Schindler’s List*. Likewise, no one has ever played Marvin Gaye’s “Let’s Get It On” during a romantic dinner for the sheer musicality of the song—teenage boys bank on the truth of the arousal theory for a successful evening. All in all, there is often a strong correlation between what we take a piece of music to express and the emotion that piece arouses in a listener. In further support of the arousal theory, there is a common, colloquial way of speaking where when we describe music, books, or films as heart-wrenching, we mean it wrenches our hearts.

While many examples can be brought up in support of the arousal theory, countless others can be constructed to demonstrate its implausibility. Disney’s “It’s a Small World” and Sister Sourire’s

\(^{18}\) Meaning, I take it, that it fills the listeners with the same exuberant happiness.
“Dominique” both express happiness if anything does, but a significant segment of the population will not be made happy by the music. Annoyance, frustration, and anger might set in, but simple happiness is much less likely. The angry quality of Metallica’s “Enter Sandman” arouses happiness in some listeners due to the loud and abrasive heavy metal sounds. Of course, the most common sort of cases to offer as counterexamples to the arousal theory involve musical pieces that we describe in emotional terms yet we remain relatively impassive when hearing them.

Counterexamples such as these have led the arousal theory to not be taken very seriously in the literature, for good reason. If expression is going to be defined in terms of how it arouses emotions in listeners, then our expressive descriptions of music would be matched by our internal emotional lives. We would feel sad in response to Albinoni’s Adagio, grief-stricken in response to “Dido’s Lament,” and saccharinely euphoric in response to “Boom-de-Yada.” We do not, however, generally respond to music in that way. Thus, musical expression must be rooted in something other than emotional responses.19

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19 These criticisms of the arousal theory are nothing new. For variations on the criticism, see Davies, Musical Meaning and Expression 1994, Kivy, Sound Sentiment 1989, and Scruton, The Aesthetics of Music 1997.
Though the arousal theory has generally been left for dead, there is still a debate concerning the relationship between music and aroused emotions. Kivy, in *Music Alone*,\(^\text{20}\) argues that, for various reasons, music never arouses emotions in listeners.\(^\text{21}\) Colin Radford, in “Emotions and Music—A Reply to the Cognitivists”\(^\text{22}\) responds directly to this ostensibly outrageous claim arguing that there is a great deal of evidence that music does sometimes arouse emotions. While the arousal theory is a theory about what it means to say that music is happy, sad, or some other emotion, the debate between Kivy and Radford is over a psychological claim about music’s capacity to affect us emotionally. The psychological claim is that music has the power to arouse in listeners, in a non-idiosyncratic way, the real-life emotions of happiness, sadness, anger, and the like.\(^\text{23}\)

Initially, it is strange that anyone would deny the truth of the psychological claim. Many people report that in their experiences with music, sometimes the music does arouses garden-variety emotions, and it would be awkward—though, in philosophy, not unheard of—to inform them that they are wrong about their own mental states. Likewise,

\(^{21}\)Not legitimately, at any rate. Any emotional response to music will be idiosyncratic.
\(^{22}\)Radford, *Emotions and Music—A Reply to the Cognitivists*, 1989
\(^{23}\)To clarify terminology here, Peter Kivy, and consequently this chapter, refers to the emotions that are felt in everyday life (e.g., happiness, sadness, anger, jealousy) as the garden-variety emotions. These are to be distinguished from the sui generis aesthetic emotions that many claim might be felt when apprehending the beauty of an artwork. Kivy, 1989.
composers and sound choreographers sometimes count on the arousal of an emotion for the success of a piece. Clearly, arousal is not its only value, but the “Imperial March” from *Star Wars* works better cinematically when it manages to fill a listener with a sense of dread.

The goal of this chapter is to tease out some interesting consequences from this debate. First, we shall appeal to an idea by Hanslick to see that the extra-musical content of musical pieces offers a nice solution to how music can arouse emotions. If Hanslick is right, we begin to notice the important role extra-musical content plays for music’s non-musical significance. In subsequent chapters, we shall see how extra-musical content matters precisely for expression. Second, we shall see that the main sticking point in the debate is how to properly characterize the concepts of absolute and non-absolute music. Kivy’s major mistake is that he spells out the notion of absolute music in such a way as to make it apply to a *very* small number of the pieces we generally take to be absolute. The overall moral of this chapter is that even absolute music, as we typically understand it, is wrapped with extra-musical things. To begin, though, we will turn to Kivy’s reasons for rejecting the possibility of music arousing emotions and dismiss each one in turn.
The Ability of Music to Arouse Emotions

Kivy accepts that beautiful music might move listeners in deep and profound ways; he simply denies that beautiful (or not so beautiful) music can move listeners to joy or sorrow—the same sorts of joy and sorrow that are commonplace in everyday life. Kivy discusses three central arguments against the power of music to arouse emotions: the negative emotions argument, the behavioral response argument, and the folk explanation argument.

I. The negative emotions argument goes as follows: In everyday life, we tend to act as much as possible in ways that keep us from being saddened. We avoid the questionable smelling muffin to avoid the misery and pain of food poisoning. We work hard in our jobs so that we avoid the disappointment of failure. We go through the sadness of breaking up with boyfriends and girlfriends only to avoid an even more troubling situation in the future. Negative emotions are typically things to be avoided, and if music aroused actual feelings of sadness instead of peculiar aesthetic emotions, then it seems we would avoid the sad music as fervently as we avoid questionable smelling muffins. But sad music is listened to and enjoyed, so sad music must not arouse actual feelings of sadness. Hanslick puts the argument this way: “Hence the venerable axiom of the theoreticians, that melancholy music arouses feelings of
sadness in us, and cheerful music, joyfulness, is to this extent not always correct. If every dull requiem, every noisy death march, every plaintive adagio had the power to make us sad, who would want to go on living?”

Kivy continues the argument, “And it seems absurd to suppose that one would willingly, indeed enthusiastically, inflict such painful or unpleasant experiences on oneself for no further purpose of pleasure or self-interest at all.”

The problem with this argument is that in other areas of art, we eagerly subject ourselves to negative emotions. We watch scary movies even though they frighten us, and it is fright, not a peculiar aesthetic emotion, we feel. Moreover, their quality as movies is determined in part by their ability to frighten—the better ones tend to give us bigger and longer chills. Likewise, we continue to read books like *Old Yeller* even though it is well-known that the ending is likely to arouse feelings of melancholy. So, it is simply a brute psychological fact that we willingly (and many times eagerly) put ourselves in situations where we will feel negative emotions. It might be a psychological puzzle why we do so, but our general aversion to negative emotions does not count against the

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24 Though to be clear, Hanslick does believe that negative emotions can be aroused by music in a few exceptional cases. Hanslick, 1986, p. 65.
26 Radford echoes a similar objection in Radford, 1991.
claim that we sometimes seek them out in the arts (or that we actually feel them in response to these arts).^{27}

II. The second main argument against the power of music to arouse emotions goes as follows: Felt emotions typically come along with outward behaviors. Sadness is accompanied by tears or, at the very least, slouched body posture and frowning. Likewise, happiness is accompanied by smiles and ‘bright eyes’. All in all, it is strange for people to say they are happy, sad, angry, or whatever while exhibiting none of the behaviors typically associated with those emotions. But, Kivy argues, this is precisely what happens in the context of music. “But no such consistent behavioral manifestations of the emotions are observed in the concert hall or (as far as I have been able to determine) in front of the hi-fi.”^{28}

Though people might report that they are made happy by the music, there are few smiles, bright eyes, or erect postures at the concert hall that were not already there. Parallel this with a case in which a person is exhibiting the paradigmatic behaviors of grief—the tears, the wailing, the gnashing of teeth—and suppose the sole cause of these behaviors was listening to Mozart’s *Requiem*. It is unlikely that the music could do this all on its own, and at the very least, the behaviors indicate a *clear* overreaction to

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^{27} Levinson spells out eight different reasons why we might enjoy feeling negative emotions in certain contexts. For more, see Levinson, 1990.
^{28} Kivy, 1989, p. 155.
the music. This is all to say that, given the lack of behavioral clues, it is not clear that people are *really* feeling sad (rather than some uniquely aesthetic emotion) when they say that they are made sad by some piece of music.

It is, however, difficult to draw telling conclusions when looking at behaviors in concert halls, typically one of the more subdued of musical environments. It is no strike against music’s power to arouse emotions when behaviors are not exhibited in a context where we have been taught since a young age to be quiet, not to squirm, and just listen to the music. It would be a strike against music’s power to arouse emotions if there were *no* settings in which the typical emotional behaviors were exhibited even if the listeners were free to do so, but this, again, is simply false. People at home, in dance halls, at rock concerts and other more relaxed concert settings more often display those behaviors associated with the garden variety emotions they say the music makes them feel, and so, we should suppose that they *are* feeling the emotions they report are aroused.29

III. Kivy’s last main argument against music’s power to arouse emotions goes as follows: An extensive knowledge of neurobiology is not

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29 There is a significant amount of literature that discusses the legitimacy and nature of our emotional reactions to fiction and fictional entities. For a small sampling, see Radford, 2004, Walton, 2004, and Lamarque, 2004.
required to be able to give an adequate explanation of why we feel the emotions we do. Regardless of what science tells us about the role of certain chemicals in the brain that influences emotions, there is also a commonsense explanation of emotions available to us. Suppose in getting down my summer clothes from the attic, I find a long-forgotten twenty-dollar bill in the pocket of my shorts. *This* makes me happy. It is clear that finding the twenty dollar bill made me happy, and it is clear *why* finding the twenty dollar bill made me happy—I can now buy twenty dollars worth of frivolous things that I would not have bought before. Though the reasons might not always be immediately apparent, this sort of commonsense explanation—Kivy refers to it as an ‘Uncle Charlie’ explanation—is potentially available for all our felt emotions.

However, Kivy argues, it is not clear that such explanations could always be given concerning those emotions supposedly aroused by music. “...an Uncle Charlie explanation is required for the claim that music arouses the ordinary emotions just because emotive arousal is a common, everyday affair...Thus if music, a common everyday part of our common everyday lives, aroused garden-variety emotions such as anger, fear, love, and the like in us, it would seem wondrously strange that it wouldn’t do so in the ordinary, Uncle Charlie way.”

Of course, sometimes we *can*...
give commonsense explanations with regards to music. “Kung Fu Fighting” might make me wistful because it reminds me of more carefree days traveling in China. And “Springtime for Hitler” arouses delight because of its absurd juxtaposition of a universally reviled fascist regime with a sweeping, Oklahoma-esque musical number—it is funny. But, “Kung Fu Fighting” and “Springtime for Hitler” stand in a different relationship to the aroused emotions than the more common examples of musical arousal. “It’s a Small World” arouses happiness, but what is the explanation for this? It would not be enough to point to musical features such as the brisk tempo and the major key, since it is not clear why, in the absence of any law-like connections, those features have anything to do with happiness. This absence underscores the absurdity of Nigel Tufnel’s claim in This is Spinal Tap: “it’s part of a trilogy, a musical trilogy I’m working on in D minor, which is the saddest of all keys. People weep instantly when they hear it, and I don’t know why.”

Kivy construes the dilemma this way: either there is no adequate explanation, in which case it is doubtful that an actual garden-variety emotion is being aroused, or there is an adequate explanation (e.g., with “Kung Fu Fighting” and “Springtime for Hitler”), in which case it is an

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31 Reiner, 1984
idiosyncratic reaction to the music. Something other than the music is explaining the emotions.³²

The problem with the way Kivy has set things up is that the lack of a commonsense explanation does not imply the lack of an aroused emotion. Kivy’s claim is that there are always reasons that could be given for our emotions, though such reasons might not always be immediately apparent. However, all this means is that we might not be justified in feeling the emotions aroused by music whereas we are justified in feeling happy when we find a forgotten twenty-dollar bill.³³ Not being justified in a felt emotion is far different from not feeling the emotion at all. Kivy’s argument has simply shown that the emotions aroused by music might not be justified whereas those same emotions typically are justified in everyday life. What it has not shown is that the emotions are not being aroused.

Kivy’s arguments against the power of music to arouse emotions are not plausible. However, this leaves the big question: how can music arouse emotions in listeners? Hanslick suggests a good answer; the arousal comes from music’s extra-musical ‘baggage.’

³² Cases of emotional reactions to music that are clearly idiosyncratic are generally ignored. What is interesting about music is that there is, perhaps, some widespread (i.e., non-idiosyncratic) connection between musical features and emotions. Spelling out that more widespread connection is the task of the theories of musical expression.
³³ Radford gives a similar response in Radford, Emotions and Music—A Reply to the Cognitivists, 1989.
Hanslick’s Baggage Claim

One of the central goals of *On the Musically Beautiful* was to distinguish the proper way of perceiving and composing music—as a focus on the form itself—from the way music is oftentimes perceived and composed—as an emotional wallow. Hanslick writes, “According to our view, all such pathological ways of being affected by a piece of music are opposed to the deliberate pure contemplation of it. This contemplative hearing is the only artistic, true form; the raw emotion of savages and the gushing of the music enthusiast can be lumped together in a single category contrary to it.”

For Hanslick, this is more than a simple normative claim about how we ought to approach music. In order to listen to music as *music*, we must focus solely on the formal aspects. He adds, “To become drunk requires only weakness, but true aesthetic feeling is an art.”

There is a puzzle here for Hanslick. If the content of music is just the forms themselves, how is it, then, that so many people can engage with music in this emotionally pathological way? The answer, for him, is that listeners do not properly separate their contemplation of the music from concerns of the external world. He writes, “…in musical effects upon feeling, often an extraneous, nor purely aesthetical element may be

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involved.” For Hanslick, extraneous elements included everything from the preexisting emotional state of the listener to the context of the piece, text, program, and anything else in addition to the pure sound structures of a piece. I suggest this claim—Hanslick’s baggage claim, as we might term it—can offer a solution to music’s power to arouse emotions. When we come to music, we bring with us extra-musical baggage, and it is this baggage, not the pure sound structures, that arouses emotions in the listeners.

Kivy takes his paradigm case of music not arousing emotions to be absolute music performed in a concert hall. “It is absolute music, in the setting of the sonic museum, that is, and always has been the sole object of my inquiry and over which my theory of music and the emotions ranges.” So, in such a setting, Kivy argues that it is impossible for music to arouse the garden variety emotions in listeners. If an emotion was aroused, if Bach’s “Two-part Invention no. 13” made a listener sad, then it must have been something other than the music doing the work. Either the reason is personal, as in the case of “Kung Fu Fighting”

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37 What Hanslick might call ‘pseudo-content.’
arousing wistfulness, or it is pathological/idiosyncratic in some other way.\textsuperscript{39}

Radford, in arguing the mirrorist position, takes his paradigm case to be “La Bamba” played in a dance hall, and he concludes that it is obvious that the song is making the dancers happy.\textsuperscript{40} What the song is decidedly not doing is keeping the dancers on an emotional even keel.

Already, it seems apparent that the two camps are working at cross purposes. Kivy is focusing on the more expressively non-descriptive pieces in the more emotionally inhibited environments that calls for attention to be paid to the musical structures, whereas Radford is focusing on emotionally loaded pieces in uninhibited environments. As such, Hanslick’s baggage claim carves out the differences nicely. In Kivy’s paradigmatic example, perhaps arousal does not occur as readily because there are few extraneous factors, and if arousal were to occur, perhaps the arousal was already preexisting in the listener. However, in Radford’s case, arousal is commonplace, given the song, the venue, and all the other things wrapped up in the context.

The baggage claim is pushing in the right direction vis-à-vis music’s power to arouse emotions, but a larger question is emerging. If

\textsuperscript{39} We shall see in Chapter 3 that there is another important alternative. 

\textsuperscript{40} Radford, 1991, p. 249.
Hanslick is right, can music arouse emotions? How should we understand the relationship between the sound structures of music, extra-musical content, and music? The baggage claim can be read in two different ways. One, the baggage, not the music, is causing the arousal of emotion. Two, the baggage, as an aspect of the music, is causing the arousal of emotion. Hanslick (and Kivy) would opt for the former; I shall argue that the latter is more plausible.

What Makes Absolute Music Absolute?

When Hanslick makes his baggage claim, he is claiming that the music is doing none of the work; only the extraneous elements are affecting the listener’s emotions. Here, Hanslick and Kivy are operating with a dubious claim about what we should take music to be fundamentally. Hanslick writes, “Of what instrumental music cannot do, it ought never be said that music can do, because only instrumental music is music purely and absolutely...the concept ‘music’ does not apply strictly to a piece of music composed to a verbal text.”

In the most commonly used sense, “music” is just the music as we typically come across it in our everyday lives already laden with baggage. Kivy and Hanslick, however, mean by “music,” strictly speaking, only those pieces devoid of extra-musical content that are found in the “sonic

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41 Hanslick, 1986, p. 15.
museum.” It is not surprising, then, that there are differences in perceptions vis-à-vis arousal.

For Kivy, Bach’s “Two-part Invention no. 13” will not arouse emotions in listeners because it is absolute music and there are no natural, law-like connections between musical structures and aroused emotions. “La Bamba”, however, does arouse emotions, but perceived as it is, it is not, strictly speaking, music (according to the Kivy). Take away the pre-existing memories of the song, the text, the title, the association-laden timbres, and dance hall venue, and Kivy will argue that “La Bamba” (or, more accurately, “Folk Song in C Major”) is unlikely to arouse any more garden-variety emotions than the Bach piece.

Kivy would argue that if we allow the extra-musical content to do all the work we claim it does, then in some important respect, the *music* is not doing any real expressive work at all. The big problem here is that Kivy restricts “music’ far too much, for it is exceedingly rare that we would actually encounter baggage-free music.\(^{42}\) The quest to analyze ‘real’ absolute music is quixotic at best. Radford chose “La Bamba” as his example because, being in a foreign language, it is “pure enough.”\(^{43}\)

Along the same lines, Kivy writes, “I am listening now to Josquin’s

\(^{42}\) I do not deny that legitimate cases of absolute music *could* exist—radically new forms of music or completely unfamiliar non-Western genres are possible candidates—but given the ubiquity of musical conventions and associations, they are not nearly as common as Kivy believes.

incomparable setting of ‘Ave Maria’; and let us say, for the sake of the argument, that I am listening to it played on instruments rather than sung, so as not to muddy the waters by the obtrusion of a text that, no doubt, does have the power to arouse specific emotions such as love or reverence, particularly in the religious listener.”  

The strategies of Radford and Kivy here are problematic; why suppose that the waters are no longer muddy once the text is taken away (or just sung in a foreign language)? The titles “Ave Maria” and “La Bamba” are still there, corrupting the perceptions of the listener. Even without the title, the timbres and other melodic influences are still there. All in all, once the associations are made, there is no way to reasonably unmuddy the waters, and so, it is not clear that any music in the Western tradition (which includes virtually all pop music and a vast majority of the other music that surrounds us) could possibly be absolute in the sense they wish.

Looking Ahead

If we move ahead a bit into expression rather than arousal, the association theory being defended will agree with Kivy that pure sound structures will not be able to express anything at all. However, the sort of

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44 Kivy, Music Alone, 1990, p. 158.
45 In a different vein, it is, perhaps, unfortunate terminology that “extra”-musical content is called as such, since it already presupposes that such content is not a proper part of music. But, there is no reason to think that the pure sound structures constitute the whole of music any more than the rhyme schemes themselves constitute the whole of poetry or the abstracted moving shapes constitute the whole of film.
musical pieces that are constituted solely by sound structures with no attendant baggage exist only in the hypothetical; Kivy thinks they exist in reality. Musical pieces, though, are never heard alone. Rather, they are heard in meaning-laden contexts by listeners who carry associations and other preconceptions about the music with them. If Kivy insists on reading the baggage claim as stating that the music is doing none of the work, then he commits himself to a wholly untenable conception of music.

Furthermore, Hanslick’s baggage claim is interesting because it is anticipating the association theory. Though the association theory, as we shall see in Chapter 3, will have a much more elaborate account of how extra-musical features works in establishing music’s expressive content, the fundamental principle is the same. Expressive content comes about through music’s extraordinary capacity to carry associations absorbed from “extra”-musical sources.

46 Or if such pieces did exist, they would be exceedingly rare.
47 Hanslick often (though not always) equated expression and arousal.
Chapter 2: Porn Music and Musical Expressiveness

1972’s *Deep Throat* famously opens with Linda Lovelace driving along the streets of Miami with a particularly funky version of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* playing in the background. While a Hammond organ plays the melody, “wocca-chicka” guitar riffs, slap bass jams, and drums keep the laid-back groove going. And though this style of music—“porn music”—existed a bit earlier, *Deep Throat*’s 600 million dollars in total revenue and claim to fame as the first mainstream pornographic movie certainly helped to popularize the genre. This and other popular movies during pornography’s halcyon days of the 70’s and early 80’s—*Emmanuelle in America*, *Debbie Does Dallas*, and *The Opening of Misty Beethoven*, to name but a few—led to the “wocca-chicka” guitar riffs and slap bass jams becoming synonymous with hardcore sexual activity in today’s cultural landscape. Artists in any medium today need only play (or otherwise refer to) a mere snippet of porn music to set a clear mood for wanton sexual activity. Many commercials, for example, use porn music to underscore the claim that cheap beer and ‘real man’-scented deodorant is the quickest way to into a woman’s heart (or pants).
Likewise, reality show producers, hampered by censors, use porn music to illuminate the countless romantic trysts too graphic to show. Even the Animal Planet television network, tongue firmly in cheek, has used porn music to accompany animal mating videos.\textsuperscript{48}

Examining the characteristics of musical expression is tricky because music, emotions, and culture are so closely intertwined that it’s extremely difficult to step outside and see what is influencing what. Mere prudishness ought not to keep us from examining any avenue that might help us come to a better understanding of musical expression. So, this chapter presents a case study in the expressiveness of porn music and will accomplish two things. First, it will highlight two desiderata for a theory of musical expression: normativity and specificity.\textsuperscript{49} Second, the case study will show that the contour theory has a problem accounting for the specificity desiderata, as well as raise a serious anthropomorphization objection to the theory. Ultimately, the association theory does a significantly better job at explaining the expressive qualities (and their development) of porn music that the contour theory does.

\textsuperscript{48} To forestall any confusion, ‘porn music’ will only refer to the 70’s era wocca-chicka/slap bass style of music described in this first paragraph, not simply to the music in pornography (as the music in contemporary pornographic films differs greatly stylistically from that of the 70’s).

\textsuperscript{49} Expressive specificity is the idea that we can ascribe expressive characters to music that are much more specific that “that piece is happy” and “that piece is sad.”
Implicit in the arguments of this chapter is the larger methodological point that bears repeating. Any adequate theory of musical expression needs to be as inclusive as possible, given the vast variety of musical works that exist. Almost all of the theories about musical expression revolve around examples of absolute music in the Western classical tradition, mostly composed in the years between 1700 and 1900. However, a total focus on absolute music (i.e., an assumption that absolute music is all one needs to arrive at the right analysis) will likely lead to wrong conclusions and unwarranted assumptions.

For instance, one unwarranted assumption is the logical priority thesis\(^5\) that states that although extra-musical content may push a musical piece (or particular musical elements) to a more specific emotion, such content can’t be doing all the determining work. The music already had to be appropriate for the emotion before the extra-musical content got attached, so the expression is, in some sense, already in the music prior to the added content. The title “Funeral March” might fix the expression of Chopin’s piece as mournful, but the “Funeral March” already had to have had at least some broadly sad features. Beginning with a radically different piece, say The Friends of Distinction’s “Grazing in the Grass,”

and simply entitling it the “Funeral March” could not have worked for expressing mournfulness.

There are significant problems with the logical priority thesis. Yet, as long as the examples are absolute Western classical pieces, this thesis will remain unchallenged and thus preclude other possible analyses of musical expression, such as the association theory.\(^{51}\)

*The Expressiveness of Porn Music*

In addition to the examples given earlier, a further indication that porn music has really outgrown its purely cinematic roots and entered the social lexicon as having this lascivious character is that this 70’s era music remains, forty years later, the paradigmatic porn music in non-pornographic contexts. Once taken into the social lexicon, porn music can be used in free-floating situations. If porn music didn’t have this rich expressive character and artists merely wanted to illustrate or allude to pornographic features of non-pornographic situations, then artists would presumably look at what style of music is used in contemporary pornography and just use that, not a forty-year-old musical style. The fact they don’t use contemporary pornographic music supports the rich lascivious character that porn music has enjoyed. (And there is no reason

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\(^{51}\) Because it assumes the expressive qualities will necessarily be present prior to the associations. The logical priority thesis will be discussed further in Chapter 3.
to suppose people are not aware of contemporary pornographic films. If anything, the internet has made modern pornography more ubiquitous and well known than the classic pornographic films of the 70’s ever were.)

So, given its numerous pop culture usages, it’s fair to say that porn music has the distinct expressive character of lasciviousness. As a precursor to the following discussion, I shall sketch what I take to be a plausible picture of how porn music came to acquire such a character. Of course, this picture might be wrong—other theories of musical expression will offer other explanations for how, or if, porn music came to be considered lascivious—but this will at least serve as a good measure for the competing theories.

Before Deep Throat, the musical features that were to become synonymous with porn music—the wocca-chicka and slap bass features, the laid-back groove—were, for the most part, expressively vague. Part of the emergent popular music style of funk, the features were heard in clubs and had connotations of dancing, drugs, sex, and youth culture in general. However, the expressiveness was broad enough that nothing about the features suggested lasciviousness rather than the multitude of other possible characters. These musical features were subsequently used

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52 Even though lascivious is not, strictly speaking, an emotion, the contour theorist should not object to this characterization since there clearly are lascivious human behaviors that should be able to be incorporated by the theory. We could also characterize porn music as expressive lustfulness or some other related emotion if that sits better with the contour theorist.
extensively throughout *Deep Throat*, including the sex scenes. The film became a social phenomenon and millions of Americans who had never been exposed to pornography were suddenly made aware of it. The musical features were novel enough that strong associations were made between the music and the sex, and subsequent pornographic films served to reinforce this connection. The connection eventually became so strong and so well-known in the American musical landscape that those features could be used outside the context of pornographic films and serve as an expressive bridge between the current and the original context; the lascivious and free-spirited lewd associations of pornographic movies piggybacked and melded into the associations of porn music. Porn music’s uses in pop culture thus became so well-known that people today can cobble together porn music’s associations without ever having watched the seminal films of the 70’s from which it originated.

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53 It’s an open question how constrained the director’s choices were (i.e., how many different musical styles would have ‘worked’ for the film). I contend that, so long as there were not already strong associations attached to the music, anything would have worked. So, it could have been the case that our paradigmatic porn music consisted of Tuvan throat-singing (but not a Classical minuet). However, perhaps the choices were more constrained. At the moment, the only obviously false claim I wish to reject is that the wocca-chicka, slap bass features were the *only* ones that would have worked.

54 The development of porn music’s expressiveness just sketched makes porn music seem like a non-intentional leitmotif of sorts, and leitmotifs have frequently been dismissed as ultimately irrelevant to worries about emotion in music. The claim is that anyone can make a musical calling card—“Behold! This *Indiana Jones* melodic line will now mean adventurousness”—but most musical expression doesn’t work that way. The problem with disregarding porn music on the basis of this claim is that porn music, unlike leitmotifs, isn’t characterized by a specific melodic line or harmonic progression. Porn music, rather, is a genre, so it can’t be quickly dismissed as just another leitmotif. If, on the other hand, leitmotifs can be constituted by broader musical features of rhythm and timbre, then leitmotifs are a much more common aspect of music, and porn music again becomes very relevant to the debate.
Normativity

Many of the claims we make about musical pieces are either right or wrong. “Stand by Your Man” ends on a Picardy Third. (Wrong) South Park’s rendition of the “Dreidel Song” has the form of a medieval motet. (Right) The Black-Eyed Peas’ “My Humps” incorporates a theme from Dvorak’s *New World Symphony*. (Right) The question of normativity as it confronts us here is whether claims about the expressive character of musical pieces can likewise be right or wrong. In the case of porn music, it seems obvious that we could misinterpret its expressive character. Consider someone who is puzzled why the Animal Planet network is playing the song “Laying Pipe” during an animal mating video, stating that the piece’s character is despair and anguish while the two turtles are experiencing anything but. Such a person is getting something *wrong* about the music (just as wrong as someone who continually claims that The White Stripe’s “Seven Nation Army” has a *basso continuo* [it doesn’t]). Producers pick the porn music to accompany the videos precisely because of its lascivious character. If a person non-ironically played the Sex-O-Rama Band’s “Stiffed” during a debutante’s ball, claiming the piece was sweet, loving and innocent, then there are definite aspects of the music—the long history of the piece’s association with pornography, the various musical characteristics that, through association
or otherwise, are connected to sex and lasciviousness—that the person is simply not getting. It’s more than just the person’s physiological reaction to the music is unusual and idiosyncratic. The person is actually mistaken in the assessment of the piece.

Roger Scruton and Diana Raffman come down on opposite sides of the fence over the normativity of musical expression. Scruton writes:

In the slow movement of Schubert’s G Major Quartet, D. 887, there is a tremolando passage of the kind that you would describe as foreboding. Suddenly there shoots up from the murmuring sea of anxiety a single terrified gesture, a gesture of utter hopelessness and horror, like the outstretched hand of a drowning man. No one can listen to this passage without instantly sensing the object of this terror—without knowing, in some way, that death itself has risen on that unseen horizon.55

To this very case, Raffman responds:

See what such a strong position commits us to, at the very least: if I listen to the Schubert, alone in my room, and find no emotional significance in it at all, or if I find it beseeching, or even just mildly unsettling, rather than terrifying, I am mistaken. I have misunderstood the work...A listener’s emotional response to a work may surprise us, of course: if he finds the Schubert jolly, for example, we may be mystified and wonder what he “hears in it”; but we should no more call him mistaken than the diner who prefers swordfish to salmon.56

So, Scruton claims that perceiving the expressive character of a piece is necessary—unavoidable, even—if one is a competent (read: musically cultivated) listener. Describing the piece in any other way

would be wrong because, as Scruton puts it, there is no other way it reasonably could be heard. Raffman, however, points out that the pieces could quite possibly be heard in different ways and, unless one wants to dismiss her and other talented musicians as not musically cultivated, there cannot be anything wrong about their assessments of the pieces. The reactions might be idiosyncratic, sure, but not wrong.

In light of Raffman's claims, why should we suppose that expression is something we can be right or wrong about? Other standards of correctness hold in our rooms while we are alone, so why not ones for expression? The crux of the issue is whether expression is simply the product of non-normative physiological responses or if it has relevance for larger issues of musical understanding. If it really didn't have any larger relevance, then, yes, taking the Schubert to be jolly or “Stiffed” to be sweet and innocent wouldn't matter any more than having a preference for swordfish over salmon. However, unlike taste in food, musical expression serves a larger societal function. The Animal Planet producers used the porn music for a specific tongue-in-cheek purpose, just like film composers and songwriters have used music's expressiveness for their own

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57 To clarify, there are several different ways we can ‘find’ the expressive character of musical works. If we go along the lines of the arousal theory, then Raffman’s right that it’s odd to think we can have wrong/false feelings. So much the worse for the arousal theory, then, given the compelling case for normativity. But, she also claims that we cannot make wrong/false ascriptions, and this is a far different matter. (The arousal theory, at any rate, will not even allow us to say that porn music is lascivious since, if my experience is anywhere indicative of the typical experience, few (read: no one) are ever made lascivious by listening to porn music.)
ends as well. To miss out on what a piece is expressing is also to miss out on all the other things going on around the music. These purposes require a uniformity in how we perceive musical expression—a uniformity built out of long-standing connections between musical elements and emotions (e.g., the major third and happiness, the plagal cadence and spirituality). And out of this uniformity comes expectations—standards—to which members of a musical community should adhere.

However, this is not to suggest that Scruton has won the debate. Scruton is suggesting that there is one overarching Musical Competence by which we can say that we understand the music. That musical competence necessarily involves the recognition of any expressive character that might be present. To fail in that is to be an incompetent listener, regardless of other ways in which the listener might skillfully perceive the music. Raffman suggests that a listener can remain competent while ascribing to a musical work an expressive character that is wildly at odds with the rest of society. The middle ground is to deny that there is any overarching Musical Competence while nevertheless asserting that there are right and wrong ways to understand music. Whether a person must pick out the expressive content of a piece depends on the questions being asked.
We can fail to recognize the expressive character of a piece while remaining competent listeners; we can, likewise, make assertions about expressive characters that turn out to be not just idiosyncratic but also wrong. That is, there are many, many features that can be perceived about any given piece, and the appropriateness of perceiving those features is largely a matter of context. In a strictly music theoretic context, the interesting properties to be perceived about the piece "Slip It In" are its structural features—its polyrhythmic layering and whatnot. In a musico-historical context, the interesting features are those of the piece that help trace the evolution of the composer's compositional technique and the development of the genre as a whole. Scruton is surely wrong that amidst these different contexts, any competent listener also must attend to the lasciviousness of the piece (or that the overwhelmingly lascivious quality thrusts itself onto the listener). That being said, if the context did call for some attention to be paid to the expressive features and a person claimed "Slip It In" to be expressive of rage, then that person, ignoring the long historical associations and/or various relevant features of the work, is wrong.

For another contemporary example, the Imperial March motif from *Star Wars*, expressive of evil/mercilessness, was used in retrograde inversion in Anakin’s theme from *Episode I*. A music theorist could
certainly ‘fail’ to hear the mercilessness of the theme while focusing on its structural features. But in making claims about its expressive content, anything not in the range of “the Imperial March is evil/merciless” would be wrong.

This false dilemma stems primarily from Scruton claiming that the nature of musical understanding is such that expressive properties must be heard in the music by competent listeners. Anyone who cannot hear the expression cannot understand the music. Put in these terms, Raffman’s response is understandable. Faced with a choice between either having to perceive the “utter hopelessness and horror” of Schubert’s G major Quartet or being labeled musically uncultivated, she simply rejects the normative implications altogether. Of course, such drastic action need not be taken. Clearly, not every property of a piece needs to be perceived in order to be a competent listener—few will consciously notice the subtle polyrhythmic layering of “Slip It In.” Why, then, should expressive properties be held in such a primary position for musical understanding? If we simply treat expressive features as one of the many different

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Scruton’s argument, as I take it, is that musical understanding is a function only of what can be heard in the music. Furthermore, to understand music is to understand its role in the elaboration of the human experience (through, naturally, its expressive properties). So, hearing the expressive properties is essential to understanding the music.

One problem here is that not every musical piece’s function is to touch on the human experience (especially through some expression). A second problem is that there are many ways of understanding music (e.g., from a theory perspective, a historical perspective, or a non-Western perspective) and not all require a grasp of the expressive features of a work. So, there’s still little reason why the understanding of expression needs to be the deciding factor for overall musical competence.
features of music that are perceived in different contexts, then there is no problem with a competent listener failing to hear “Slip It In” as lascivious (even if it is lascivious), just like competent listeners can fail to hear the polyrhythmic layering of “Slip It In” (even if the rhythms are layered in that way). 59

But, this is not to say that no expressive characterizations are justified. And here, oddly enough, Raffman might offer some support. Raffman writes, “I have allowed that if we are told, or perhaps read in the program, that (e.g.) Schubert intended his quartet to be about terror, then there may be some justification for... claiming that someone has failed to (completely) understand the work if he fails to ascribe it that meaning.” 60 Raffman allows that compositional intentions might underwrite the normativity of these expressive ascriptions, but from this, it is an easy jump for theories of expression to argue that more things can underwrite normativity. That is, if Raffman will allow that the composer’s intention

59 A second problem that brings rise to the dilemma is that for whatever reason, many musical pieces lend themselves to excessively florid emotional descriptions that cannot possibly be correct in any reasonable sense. “Slip It In” might be described as lascivious, but it surely cannot be described as “in a moment of hedonistic abandon, youthful trepidation gives way to fiery and unceasing debauchery.” Similarly, consider again Scruton’s description of the Schubert passage: shooting up from the murmuring sea of anxiety is a gesture of utter hopelessness and horror. What exactly would count as a correct perception of this passage? Could we perceive the passage as a ray of despair shooting forth from a cloud of shame? Would the claim, “Schubert’s passage is sad” not be detailed enough? Surely Raffman and other competent listeners would not be faulted for not getting this (because, it really doesn’t seem that Scruton’s description is there in the music to get). If correct ascriptions are going to approach anywhere near this level of detail, then there is good reason to dismiss the notion that correct ascriptions exist; the justification is simply not there. No associations, conventions, resemblances to behaviors, or whatever else theories of expression use are rich enough to get to Scruton’s description.

60 Raffman, 1991, p. 373.
that “Love Muscle” be lascivious makes “Love Muscle” lascivious, then the well-entrenched and well-known historical associations between musical features of “Love Muscle” and features of pornography—lasciviousness—should likewise be able to secure the expressive character. And this seems right—if someone claims that “Seven Nation Army” has a basso continuo, we use theory textbooks to point out the mistake. If someone is confused about the Animal Planet network using “Laying Pipe” during a mating video, we use porn music’s origins and relatively well-entrenched associations to show that the music’s expressive character is being used to highlight the turtles’ own lasciviousness.

**Specificity**

Hanslick’s classic *On the Musically Beautiful* is fundamentally concerned with how listeners should properly appreciate music. One way is an intellectual focus on the pure form of music—the interplay between the notes, the melodies, and the harmonies. The other way is a focus on the emotional aspects of the piece—how the music makes one feel vis-à-vis everyday emotions. As we saw in Chapter 1, Hanslick doesn’t mince words in stating which one is preferable. “The contemplative hearing is the only artistic, true form; the raw emotion of savages and the gushing of

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61 Supporters of the contour theory will make similar claims concerning resemblance to human behavior.
the music enthusiast can be lumped together in a single category contrary to it.”\textsuperscript{62} ‘Real’ aesthetic appreciation is intellectually demanding; emotional wallowing, by contrast, is cheap and dirty. “So, the pleasure is more superficial for hearers whose mental activity is slight, and such musical tosspots are able to consume such quantities of music as make the artistic soul shudder.”\textsuperscript{63}

Hanslick’s antipathy towards emotional appreciations of musical pieces is intimately bound up with his argument that music simply doesn’t have the resources to express emotions (and so, any emotions read into the music will necessarily be illegitimate\textsuperscript{64}). Hanslick points out that although emotions have affective components, these components alone are not sufficient to specify an emotion. That is, not only can one emotion (e.g., happiness) have many different types of affective components (e.g., slow, fast, weak, strong), different emotions can share the exact same affective components (e.g., the affective similarity between panic and euphoria as both fast and strong). So, the mere fact that “Doctor Sex” has certain affective dynamics will never be enough to say that the piece is lascivious. What distinguishes emotions is the combination of their

\textsuperscript{62} Hanslick, 1986, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{63} Hanslick, 1986, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{64} Hanslick tends to conflate the arousalist perspective and the cognitivist perspective. Sometimes he speaks as if music expresses emotions by arousing them in listeners. Other times, he speaks as if mere perception/recognition is sufficient for expression. Regardless, all emotional talk concerning music will be, for him, illegitimate.
affective components and their cognitive components (i.e., what the emotion is about). A particular feeling of culinary happiness, then, is characterized by both its particular affective components and ideas about, say, the deliciousness of a pie and the satisfaction of having eaten it. Likewise, lasciviousness would need to be characterized by thoughts about sex (e.g., partners, acts). Hanslick claims that although music might be able to represent affective components, it can, in no way, demonstrate anything about piehood (or sex partners/acts), especially given his own particularly high standards for expression. Since there is no cognitive element present, music cannot express that, or any other, particular feeling.

It appears, then, that the choice Hanslick offers is between pure formalist intellectual appreciation and being a musical tosspot. Of course, many people disagree. Some have opted to argue that music can only express a sui generis aesthetic emotion (without the problematic cognitive component). Others have argued that music can express garden-variety (i.e., everyday) emotions, but only those that have characteristic human behaviors attached to them, so that the resemblance,

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65 And this only through well-grounded analogies. Hanslick, 1986, p. 20.
66 That there must be a clear and distinct content about which everyone will agree.
67 Those who engage in emotional wallowing are thus doubly sinning: they ignore the formal features of the music in favor of their relation to affective states and they infelicitously bring in the cognitive elements from their own lives.
68 See Osbourne, 1982.
not the cognitive component, is doing the work.\textsuperscript{69} (The so-called Platonic emotions—those, like envy, that ‘really’ require the cognitive component—are left out in the cold.) Still others argue that the Platonic emotions can be expressed, either as stripped-down emotions\textsuperscript{70} (e.g., a ‘general’ feeling of hope) or as an emotional template of sorts that allows something in the listener’s own life to supply the required cognitive element (e.g., personalizing the music so that it expresses the hope that \textit{Baby Milo sleeps through the night}). The problem with these theories, as we shall soon see, is that they cannot account for how quickly we recognize expressive properties.

Of the foregoing, the most popular way of answering Hanslick has been to show that music can individuate emotions with the affective elements alone.\textsuperscript{71} The problem with this is that although it’s clear that emotions have different components (and likely more complex than Hanslick thought), it’s not at all clear that they are relevant to

\textsuperscript{69} See Kivy, 1989 and Davies, 1994.
\textsuperscript{70} See Levinson, 1990.
\textsuperscript{71} Levinson argues that given a more fine-grained distinction of affective elements than Hanslick offers, it seems plausible to distinguish these more general senses of emotions in the music. Whereas contentment and melancholy might both have slow, weak features (and thus be identical for Hanslick), there are further subtle distinctions to make. Contentment seems to be better characterized by being slow and constantly pushing the beat throughout the piece (e.g., “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring”); melancholy is slow and hangs on the backend of the beat throughout the piece (e.g., “Swing Low”). Other emotions also presumably have other subtle, though distinct, affective characters that can be captured in music. Levinson argues that even some platonic emotions that really should require a cognitive element, like hope, are distinct enough in their affective qualities that a general sense of hope can be expressed by a musical piece. Specifically for him Mendelssohn’s \textit{The Hebrides Overture}. See Levinson, 1990, p. 336. Kivy (in \textit{Sound Sentiment}) says a similar thing about pride.
determining what emotions music can express. Consider all of the diverse expressive characters musical pieces are regarded to have just surrounding sex and love\(^2\): the porn piece “Cramming for College” is lascivious; Tchaikovsky’s *Overture from Romeo and Juliet* expresses overwrought love; Marvin Gaye’s “Let’s Get It On”—especially the first four notes—is sensual; the Beatles’ “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” expresses teenage twitterpation; Aaron Neville and Linda Ronstadt’s “Don’t Know Much” is sappy, so on and so forth.\(^3\) The relevant considerations in the legitimacy of these examples do not seem to be whether we are discerning that a cognitive element must necessarily accompany the affective element or whether the affective elements can be finely individuated in the musical pieces. If anything, such considerations are more likely a result of reflections on a piece than part of the active perception of the expressive character, and so should be largely irrelevant to what musical pieces can express. Quite apart from the cognitive aspect of twitterpation or the careful affective delineations of lasciviousness and sensuality, these pieces are simply recognized to have these quickly perceptible expressive characters.

\(^2\) And like porn music, there’s little better evidence that these pieces have these expressive characters than their continued and consistent use in pop cultural settings, especially parodies. Consider the number of times Bugs Bunny in drag has wooed Elmer Fudd with Tchaikovsky’s *Overture from Romeo and Juliet* (or something *Overture*-esque) underscoring the emotions of the scene. Parodies such as these simply cannot work unless the expressive characters of the pieces are readily apparent.

\(^3\) And note, these expressive characters can apply to more ‘pure’ pieces in each example’s broader genre, not just to these specific, perhaps loaded, examples. The bouncing beat, guitar timbres, and tight male vocals are enough to indicate twitterpation.
With respect to the speed in which we can typically recognize the expressive characters of music, there is something misguided about the theories that try to make Hanslick and expression compatible. Our processing of musical information is remarkably fast. Flipping to a random radio station, it’s common to be able to recognize the song and begin to sing along with it in the span of a few beats. Peretz’s 1998 study supports this rapid response to music, noting that listeners can distinguish between happy and sad pieces with significant accuracy in approximately one-quarter of a second. Although this study focused only on the broadest of expressive characters, the recognition of far more specific emotions do not seem to take much longer (if they take longer at all). Given our everyday experiences with music, these results shouldn’t be very surprising. Once the main guitar line comes in after the few measures of a non-descript slap bass introduction, the lascivious character of “Cramming for College” is recognized almost immediately. Likewise, the other examples given earlier of the diversity of expressive characteristics are met with similarly immediate reactions. Overall, it would not be implausible to expand the quick-recognition claim to involve a much wider class of emotions.

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The problem here for alternatives to Hanslick—such as the contour theory—is that it is not speed alone, but also the sort of information we get from music within the brief time it takes us to recognize the expressive quality of a piece. There are many ways to interpret the data of Peretz’s study, but, in general, the results are troubling for theorists who follow Hanslick in separating the ‘musically possible’ emotions from the ‘musically impossible’ ones on the bases of required cognitive elements and subtle affective individuations. First, since there are few elements of music that can be discerned in such a brief time span, two that can be discerned quickly, timbre and texture—both strongly association-based elements of music—probably play a much bigger role in expression than Hanslick admits. Second, since expressive judgments about a piece are made quickly (and accurately), theories of expression that rely on a resemblance between musical contour and human behavior, nuances in musical phrasings that could individuate emotions, or other slower developing perceptions will be pressed to explain how listeners can make these expressive judgments while bypassing the very features of the music that make it expressive. At least the association theory has the benefit

75 Texture defined as how the separate voices weave together.
76 And if association does play a bigger role, then musical pieces can express a very wide range of emotions. Even almost absurdly specific ones, if association is the key. Consider Elgar’s Pomp and Circumstance which expresses something like pride-in-academic-achievement.
77 One response might be that the initial expressive work for a piece (or genre, phrase, etc.) is done by the particular contours of a piece. After some time, associations are made between the contours, the expression, and the timbral/rhythmic features that allows for quick recognition of the expressive
that several of the elements that are regarded as important for expression (such as the aforementioned timbre and texture) can be discerned in the brief moments it takes to recognize the expressiveness of a piece.

Those who want to propose positive views about musical expression need not rely on Hanslick’s basic premises about the characteristics of music and emotions in order to do so. The fundamental problem with Hanslick’s argument is that he would have to claim that a piece like “Cramming for College” can express lasciviousness only through some sort of presentation of lasciviousness’s both affective and cognitive components, but this presentation will almost certainly be slower than the speed at which emotions are typically perceived in the music. And presumably, any reasonable requirements on expression should take into account how the assessments of expression are commonly made. Given the particular immediacy with which emotions are recognized in the music, arguments about how to characterize emotions properly will largely be tangential to issues of musical expression. First, it is not clear whether lasciviousness requires a cognitive element (e.g., lasciviousness towards a particular person) or if someone could be character. This, however, just seems to add an unnecessary level of complexity to expression. If associations can do the ultimate expressive work, why not suppose they do the initial expressive work as well? Though not conclusive, this widespread use of associations certainly puts a strain on the importance of contours for expression.

In other words, a compelling theory of musical expression should be consistent with whatever scientific or philosophical theory of emotions is posited.
lascivious *tout court*. And, it is not clear what about lasciviousness (or any emotion for that matter) allows it to be sufficiently individuated by purely musical structures. It is clear, however, that such evaluations do not seem to arise in the brief moments between the beginnings of a wocca-chicka guitar riff and the recognition of porn music for what it is.

*Resemblance—Contour Theory and Causal Arrows*

Theories of musical expression that focus on natural features of the music and those that focus on associative/conventional features are at odds with respect to the following: when ‘happy’ and ‘sad’ pieces (or any emotively new piece) were first appearing, were ‘happy’ features (e.g., major key, lively tempo, etc.) grouped with happy texts, titles, and contexts *because* those features were happy, or were those features *made* happy because they were grouped with happy texts, titles, or placed in happy contexts? The association theory, of course, will claim the latter—associations between musical features and extra-musical content are what produce the expressive character of pieces; natural theories will claim the former—the choices composers had about what could appropriately accompany happy texts/titles were already constrained by the happy quality of the music. Though one way to answer the question requires a perspective on Western music that has not been around for four hundred
years, the development of expressive characters in contemporary examples can give us some indication as well.

Kivy argues that the expressive characters of musical pieces are ultimately grounded in a resemblance between structural features of the music and typically expressive human behavioral features.\(^{79}\) Albinoni’s \textit{Adagio} is sad because it droops (melodically), much like sad people, weeping willows, and the faces of St. Bernard dogs. Early composers, then, were constrained by the contour of the pieces—does it ‘sound like’ the behavior of a happy person, a sad one, or something else—when deciding what texts would be appropriate to accompany what piece.

One way to object to this contour theory is just to deny that anything in musical pieces \textit{really} resembles human behavior. Music is fundamentally aural, human behavior is fundamentally visual, and no legitimate resemblance can exist between the two.\(^{80}\) This objection ultimately will not work for one important reason: there is a definite propensity among listeners to see a resemblance\(^{81}\) between musical features and human behavior. Consider the salacious character of David Rose’s “The Stripper”. For many, it’s extremely easy (and natural) to hear the song and simultaneously visualize a burlesque dancer thrusting.

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\(^{79}\) Though Kivy does allow that expression could also come through convention (e.g., happiness and the major third), he claims that, ultimately, all convention has its roots in contour.  
\(^{80}\) For an extended argument of this sort, see Madell, 2002.  
\(^{81}\) In whatever way that’s supposed to make sense.
her hips (salaciously, of course) with each trombone blat and shaking her bosom at every brassy trill. Similarly, we can see parallels between the contours of typical porn music (the wocca-chicka guitar, the laid-back groove, etc.) and lascivious behavior, and, though perhaps not as visually vivid, parallels between, say, Chopin’s Nocturne in $E^b$ and serene behavior. It’s far too easy to see the resemblances to deny convincingly that they are really there.

Another objection begins with the observation that mere resemblance isn’t enough for the contour theory. It’s not just that musical contours resemble human behavior. The causal arrow must also go in the right direction—the music is happy because it resembles typical happy behavior. The alternative is that it resembles typical happy behavior because it is happy. That is, we anthropomorphize the music we already take to be happy.\(^\text{82}\) Clearly, simply pointing out examples of strong resemblance will not settle which way the causal arrow points.

Consider again a case of porn music—“Prepare for Takeoff” has all of the typical features of porn music—the classic timbres and grooves—but, fundamentally, it is compatible with many behavioral interpretations, even assuming the finer individuations of emotions discussed earlier. We see it as lascivious, but it could just as easily have been seen as

\(^{82}\) And given our penchant for anthropomorphizing the things around us—animals, weather, furniture, cars, etc—doing the same with music would not be at all atypical.
confidently nonchalant, excitable, or any number of other emotional states. After all, none of the structures, nor their combinations, are distinctly lascivious, behavior-wise. What then pushed the features in the direction of lasciviousness? Obviously, it cannot be the features themselves because they are the very things that are compatible with many different interpretations. The conventional/associative elements, however, are able to do the job of isolating one interpretation—lasciviousness—as the dominant one. Its use in pornographic films and subsequent placement in parodies and other parts of pop culture are what strengthen the associations and isolate the one—out of many—possible ways that it resembles human behavior. So, in the debate with the contour theory, the association theory does not need to deny that porn music might bear a resemblance to typical lascivious behavior. Quite the contrary, because of the numerous ways musical features can be interpreted, strong resemblances between those features and expressive behaviors only highlight the importance of associations (and other conventions) in determining expressive content.

83 Even Kivy's own example is clearly one faced with multiple interpretations. “...the diminished triad can, in a proper musical context, present an anguished quality...it contradicts the resting implication of the melodic line and forces it to continue, even as the restless, emotionally distracted person sits down in one place only to feel impelled by disquietude to get up and go somewhere else at once.” (Kivy, 1989, p 80). The diminished triad, though anguished, could have been seen, behaviorally as many other things—excited, perplexed, shocked, etc. What else besides conventions/associations can pick out just one of these to be the commonly recognized interpretation?
Generalizing from Porn Music

A look at porn music gives us insights with regards to whether we can be right or wrong about what music expresses, the sorts of emotions music can express, the relationship between resemblance and expression, and, overall, the importance of associations in expression. Of course, one key question is whether porn music is sufficiently similar to other types of music so that these insights can be generalized or if porn music is simply an expressive outlier. As to this question, although porn music is especially vivid, it is hardly unique. Spy music (e.g., “Theme from Peter Gunn”), horror music (e.g., Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D minor, “Theme from Psycho”), “magical” music (e.g., “Hedwig’s Theme” from Harry Potter, most things featuring a celesta), quintessential songs of an era (e.g., “Music to Watch Girls By” as 60’s playboyishness, “Theme from A Summer’s Place” as young carefree romance), and many others could have been substituted just as easily and the same sorts of conclusions been reached. Of course, the traditional focus of musical expression has been on absolute music, and most of these current examples exist in a gray area between absolute and non-absolute. It’s a gray area because, although many of the pieces do not have texts, there are many suggestive titles, and all have clear contexts from which their expressive characters sprung. But far from being a roadblock to
applicability, such clear contexts are a benefit to the larger question of how music expresses emotions. Unlike the Oriental motif, these examples cannot simply be written off as ‘uninteresting’ leitmotifs. They show that not only can rich expressive content be carried by broader musical gestures, but the source of the expressive content involves a close associative relationship with extra-musical contents. It’s not a big jump to suppose that even broader musical gestures (e.g., the major triad for happiness, the minor triad for sadness, the plagal cadence for religiousness, the Dorian mode for ‘medieval-ness’) have similar back stories, the history of which is simply forgotten.

At any rate, theories that wish to deny that the properties of porn music can apply to all music will need to show what makes porn music (and the large number of similar cases) so different that the cases cannot apply to music in general (or that the expressive characteristics of music are much different than described here). The prospects for this, I suggest, are rather bleak. Porn music might have had some ‘funky’ elements before Deep Throat, but it was depictions of sex on screen that gave the music its lascivious quality and the popularity of the movie that thrust the association of this music with sex into the national

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84 The G-G-G-F-D-D-F motif that’s heard in “Kung Fu Fighting”, “Slow Boat to China” and many other Asian-related contexts. See Chapter 4 for a fuller discussion of the motif.
85 Even though many of the expressive characters just given are not emotions, most of those can still be reworked in emotional terms.
86 And a similar association-based theory would have to be given about ‘funkiness.’
consciousness. It was such associations that supported the music’s normativity, specificity, and resemblance—features that can and should be properly applied to music generally. And so, unless compelling reasons are given otherwise, it’s reasonable to suppose that, when it comes to expression, what goes for porn music, goes for all music.
Chapter 3: Association and Expression

When philosophers of music begin theorizing about musical expression, they typically take a few moments to explain why the focus will be almost exclusively on absolute music. Authors commonly justify this practice by stating that the puzzle of musical expression is most pronounced in music without a text or program. Andrew Kania writes “It is less puzzling how a musical setting of a maudlin text could be expressive of sadness, for instance, than how a piece of music without even a programmatic text could be, since the emotional expression could somehow be transferred to the music from the text.”

The suggestion is that expression in non-absolute music is fairly straightforward (or, at least, less perplexing): Skeeter Davis’s plaintive howl and apocalyptic lyrics (“Don’t [the sun and the sea] know it’s the end of the world ‘cause you don’t love me anymore”) impart their sad qualities onto the accompanying music. How Albinoni’s Adagio, devoid of wails and tragic text, can be similarly sad is the real mystery.

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Kania, 2007
Another supposed reason to focus on absolute music traces back to Hanslick, who claims that only absolute music is *really* music. Recall the quote from Chapter 1: “...Whatever can be asserted of instrumental music holds good for all music as such...Of what *instrumental music* cannot do, it ought never be said that *music* can do it, because only instrumental music is music purely and absolutely.”

Thus, the argument goes, if we want to understand the nature of music, the sensible thing to do is to look at *real* (read: absolute) music rather than its ersatz non-absolute counterpart. Stephen Davies, with a claim certainly less pejorative towards non-absolute music, nevertheless echoes the same kind of sentiment. “In respect of purely instrumental music philosophical questions are most acute, for such meaning as these works have belongs to the world of musical sound. The contribution music might make in song, opera, film, and the like are clear, I think, only if one is aware of the strengths and weaknesses, so to speak, of music in its most abstract setting.”

Despite its too-casual dismissal, a theory is still needed about how the meaning of texts (and other extra-musical elements) affects the music. In this chapter I shall focus on non-absolute music and defend an association theory of musical expression. Simply put, this theory accepts

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89 Davies, 1994, p. xi
Kania’s suggestion that musical expression can be derived from extra-musical features. However, I shall argue that once we realize that the various components of music—melodic gestures, timbres, rhythms, etc.—can also have expressive qualities, then the puzzle of musical expression with regards to absolute music disappears.

Though we frequently talk about whole musical pieces having expressive character—“Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring” is serene—we can also break down the pieces and discuss the expressive character of their musical components. So, whereas “Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring” is serene, its legato melody is itself serene, the lead cello line is warm and soothing, so on and so forth. Musical components range from very specific features such as timbres, rhythm, specific motifs, and harmonic gestures (e.g., plagal cadence, Picardy third) to broader musical structures such as modes and general musical schemas.

Not only do we often describe components in terms of their character—the sexy tango beat, the goofy bassoon sound, the heroic *Indiana Jones* fanfare—the expressive character of a whole piece seems to be a function of the expressive character of its parts. We would justify

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90 Though he gives no explanation for how that can happen.
91 By musical schema, I refer to the compositional rules/customs that characterizes the pieces of a certain style. So, the musical schema for an Asian piece consists of the use of the pentatonic scale (with the consequent lack of leading tones) as well as heterophony, whereas the Indian music schema is characterized by the use of microtones, drones, and relatively large-scale form.
the expression of a piece specifically by justifying the expression of its parts. As well, changing a melody while keeping all the other components of a piece stable could certainly result in an expressive change.

Transitioning from Albinoni’s *Adagio* to the theme from *Forrest Gump* while keeping the timbres and tempo the same will result in a change from sad to uplifting. Likewise, changing other components while keeping the melody stable can also result in expressive shifts. Consider, for instance, the change from joyous to whimsical when substituting kazoos for strings in Handel’s “For Unto Us a Child is Born” or the *extreme* jump in pathos when “Desperado” is sung by an eight-year-old girl\(^2\) rather than a forty-seven-year-old Don Henley. These shifts are possible only because the individual musical components have distinctive expressive characters contributing to the character of the piece as a whole.

The view I shall defend is that, due to their presence in non-absolute music, the components acquire certain associations.\(^3\) Through habituation, these associations become codified and carry on in whatever those musical components are used, be it an absolute or non-absolute work. Brahms’s *Intermezzo in A major, Op. 118, No. 1* has a religious air because it uses, among other things, the final plagal cadence. But that is

\(^2\) See *Innocence and Despair*, by the Langley Schools Music Project.

\(^3\) As we shall see shortly, the associations do not have to come from connected texts, titles, or programs. Any aspect of the context—church settings, for instance—could result in associations. Texted music is simply a laboratory in which we can see associations as work.
the case because the plagal cadence has a religious quality due to its role as the “Amen” cadence used so frequently in hymns. So, extra-musical content can still influence the expression of absolute pieces because those pieces employ the same expression-laden components as non-absolute music. Through the association theory, I hope to show that Davies has gotten the picture exactly backwards. Music in its most abstract setting cannot be properly understood until we are aware of how music functions in song, opera, film, and its other contexts. 94

The Association Theory

What, then, is the source of the expressive character of these musical components? I shall look at individual cases in turn, but, in general, a very plausible candidate is extra-musical associations. It is, after all, commonplace for extra-musical content to affect how we perceive music. Consider, for instance, the common horror movie trope of having a little child sing some nursery rhyme slowly and deliberately. The juxtaposition of what should be a sweet, innocent song with the clearly evil context makes the song incredibly creepy. When sung by a child, “O Willow Waly” is creepy, and there is no reason for it to be so

94 The association theory is, as Kivy puts it, a cognitivist theory. That is, the expressive character is a perceptible property of the work. Unlike Kivy, I find that pieces might also arouse emotions in listeners, but this arousal is neither necessary nor sufficient for pieces to express those same emotions.
other than it and similar songs were featured being sung by children in horror movies.\textsuperscript{95}

The strengthening of associations turns into a self-perpetuating process. The song comes to be loosely associated with creepiness. Other film composers, aware of this association, use the same schema in other horror movies, thereby solidifying the creepy feel of children’s songs. Ultimately, this ends up as a well-entrenched association that allows us to perceive a creepy character in a work outside of any overtly creepy context where simply hearing an instance of the schema—single child singing a nursery rhyme slowly and deliberately—sounds creepy. But the trope (and corresponding expressive character of the songs) has developed only because of its original placement in a horror movie.

The association theory holds that this pattern is generally the same for the expressive characters of \textit{all} musical components. Repeated uses of the components in their particular contexts lead to stronger associations, which subsequently lead to even more well-entrenched expressive characters. If the associations die out for some reason, so, too, do the expressive characters.\textsuperscript{96} The descending tetrachord, for instance, was

\textsuperscript{95} “O Willow Waly” appeared in the 1961 horror classic \textit{The Innocents}.

\textsuperscript{96} Any number of things could cause associations to disappear. If musical style become unpopular, the necessary continued habituation is less likely to continue. The forgotten associations of various church modes is a good example of this, as we shall see shortly.
once well known as expressive of lament. But when the context in which the tetrachord typically appeared shifted from lamentful settings to lounge music settings, the expressive character shifted as well. Ultimately, the association theory claims that expressive characters of musical components cannot be understood apart from (a) the contexts in which they were originally used and (b) the continued and constantly reinforcing use of them until they become codified.

**The Problem of Idiosyncratic, Purely Personal Associations**

A common objection to associations being the basis for expression is that—as we have learned from Pavlov's dog—anything can be associated with anything else. But even if someone had associations between “You're Sixteen (You're Beautiful, and You're Mine)” and a passionate teenage love affair that ended cruelly, that is not nearly sufficient enough for “You're Sixteen” (or the musical components therein) actually to be expressive of crushing despair. Expression, at least for the cognitivist, needs to be more 'objective' than personal association will allow. Kivy writes, “...the association of ideas...is irretrievably private and idiosyncratic—not the publicly negotiable

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97 Rosand 1999
98 In songs such as Lou Rawls’s “Nobody but Me.”
medium we require for an account of the expressiveness of music that would satisfy the contemporary musician and 'scientific' musicologist.”

Kivy fails to realize that not all associations are private and idiosyncratic. Some do stem from circumstances unique to an individual while others stem from experiences common in a culture. There is a big difference between claiming that “You're Sixteen” is frightening because it was playing on the radio when you had a car crash and claiming that Liszt’s “Hungarian Rhapsody no. 2” is whimsical because of the common experience of watching Bugs Bunny and Tom and Jerry perform that piece (complete with cartoonish antics) in two of the most popular cartoons ever made. One way to make the distinction is to recall the habituating that is necessary for codifying expressive character. Though the connection might be strong, the linking of “You’re Sixteen” to the car crash is a one-off event. The linking of “Hungarian Rhapsody no. 2” to cartoons is widely and frequently experienced.

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99 Kivy, 1989, p. 32. One of the reasons Kivy dislikes the association theory is that he hitches it to the obviously false arousal theory. The associations with past images and events are what stimulates such arousal. (To be fair, Charles Avison, the person whose theory Kivy criticizes, links the two together as well.) But, as I’ve argued earlier, an association theory need not be a type of arousal theory.

This connection Kivy makes between arousal and association theories also explains his claim that associations are irretrievably idiosyncratic. Though some people might respond to music by being emotionally aroused, such responses are in the vast majority. “For the power of some particular musical composition to cause sadness in me, unlike, say, the power of acid to burn my flesh, is not a power that it has over all ‘normal people.” Kivy, 1989, p. 30.
Furthermore, given that an assumption made in expressive claims is that others will perceive the piece in the same way, it is perfectly reasonable to dismiss the former as private, idiosyncratic, and irrelevant to matters of expression while treating the latter as legitimate cases of expression. Kivy's mistake is in thinking that if something is based in associations, then it cannot have a public aspect to it. The distinctions, however, are finer than this: associations that stem from atypical experiences are not public, but those that stem from the typical experiences we have as part of our culture certainly are. Every listener will, at first, make an association that is no more and no less atypical than any other association. The widely experienced repetitions are what separate the idiosyncratic associations from the deeply-entrenched cultural associations.

To summarize the association theory, musical components have expressive content. The content is derived from associations with the contexts in which the components were originally used and the continued

\footnote{That is, it would be very odd to say “The piece expresses sadness” in order to mean “the piece is sad to me and only to me.” That sentiment is typically expressed by “the music is sad to me.” Saying “the piece expresses sadness” implies that I and others will perceive that character of the music. This seems to be what Kivy means by claiming that expression is necessarily public.}
and constantly reinforcing use of them until they become codified as entrenched cultural associations.\footnote{Or, to put it another way, musical component M expresses emotion e iff M has a musico-historical cultural association with e.}

One would be hard-pressed to find examples of some musical component that has well-entrenched associations that, nevertheless, is not thought to be expressive of the corresponding emotion. Likewise, musical components do not fall from the sky expressively complete, but rather can always be traced to some context illustrative of those expressive qualities.\footnote{Those who argue for a more natural basis for expression might think this last claim is unfair. Musical pieces/components came with naturally expressive properties that have been 'covered up' with age by context and associations. This objection works, however, only if we assume we've maxed out musical variety (and thus nothing new can fall from the sky expression-laden). Given the myriad ways that musical pieces can be put together, this seems very unlikely.} It would be arduous to trace the connections in every case. Instead, I shall address examples of various kinds of musical components in order to show how fundamentally important associations are to the development of the components’ expressive meanings. It is to these that I now turn.

\textit{Motifs}—the Oriental Motif

Perhaps the clearest example of how associations play a role in determining expression is in the case of motifs—specific melodic phrases
that are used for the purpose of connoting something extra-musical. One of the most interesting is the 'Oriental' motif.\textsuperscript{103}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{The Oriental Motif}
\end{figure}

This nine-note melody, often preceded by a gong, is commonly regarded as having a distinctly 'mysterious, Oriental-exotic' character to it and has been widely used in the West to connote that mood. Recent uses include The Vapor's “Turning Japanese” and Carl Douglas' “Kung Fu Fighting,” though the motif's beginnings stem to American vaudeville in the early twentieth century. In addition to the blackface acts that mocked black culture, yellowface acts—complete with queues, makeup, and a taping back of the eyes—that did the same to Asian culture, particularly Chinese culture, were also extremely popular.\textsuperscript{104} Because such vaudeville acts rely on caricature, American composers illustrated the 'crude

\textsuperscript{103} Though ‘East Asian’ is probably a more appropriate term, I shall continue to use ‘Oriental’ to remain consistent with the literature.

\textsuperscript{104} Moon, 2005
inferiority' of Chinese music with overly simplistic musical phrases utilizing Chinese musical characteristics. The most successful of these musical phrases was this Oriental motif. Its parallel fourths and pentatonic structure gave it a clear non-Western feel, and its easily recognizable, easily remembered quality allowed it to spread throughout the vaudeville circuit.  

The associative connection between the motif and the expressive quality of the mysterious Orient is pretty clear here. It was used extensively in vaudeville, always showing up in songs with a strong Asian component, such as “Chinatown, My Chinatown” (1910), “Chinese Music” (1913), and “Chong, He Come from Hong Kong” (1919). But even when vaudeville went into decline, songwriters continued to employ the catchy motif in jazz and pop songs such as “Slow Boat to China” and the Coaster’s “Bad Detective,” thereby keeping alive its expressive connotations to today where it is used in songs like David Bowie’s “China Girl” and movies like Cannonball Run (as a leitmotif for the Japanese Subaru drivers).

It might be said that the Oriental motif’s expressive qualities are due as much to its characteristically Asian aspects (pentatonic scale, use of parallel fourths, heavy use of staccato) as to its associations. This

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105 Moon, 2005
objection, however, does not quite work. The musical characteristics might explain why that particular motif was composed and why it was so successful—novelty is important—but it cannot explain why the motif has the expressiveness it has apart from the associations. There is nothing particularly Asian about the pentatonic scale besides our associations with it. To assume that turn-of-the-century Americans could recognize the Oriental quality prior to associations, we would have to attribute to them an implausible grasp of Asian musical practices.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the association theory suggests that different musical communities might hear the same musical components differently, and that is the case here. Those in the Asian (Chinese) musical community, not influenced by American pop culture, would not think the motif is expressive of the mystery and wonder of the Orient any more than we would think “Go Tell Aunt Rhodie” is expressive of the triumphant, humanistic Western spirit.

Another interesting aspect of expression that vaudeville raises is how a musical component's expressive qualities could diminish or disappear over time. During the time of vaudeville, 'coon' songs that

\footnote{The pentatonic scale is commonly used in African-American spirituals, so it is not exclusively Asian. Furthermore, parallel fourths are rare in Asian music, so that aspect of the motif comes to represent the Orient solely through associations rather than through any connection whatsoever with the music of Asia.}

\footnote{It is, of course, important for theories of musical expression to be able to explain not only how musical pieces/components can have expressive features, but also explain how they lose them as well. It’s}
mocked black culture were very popular and “Jim Crow Rice” (the melody of “Turkey in the Straw”) was just as synonymous with caricatured blacks as the Oriental motif was with the Chinese. Why, then, was the Oriental motif (and the Arabian 'snake charmer' theme for that matter) able to retain its expressive character while the character of “Jim Crow Rice” diminished and the melody established as an old-timey hillbilly song?

The answer is likely a complex blend of musical and non-musical factors. When the overtly racist vaudeville scene diminished in popularity, there was nothing to keep the particular melody of “Jim Crow Rice” strongly associated with the American South/black community. Because of the melody’s Western musical features, it did not have the striking uniqueness that the Oriental motif had and so could be more easily assimilated back into popular culture. The Oriental motif (and the Arabian motif), however, continued to stand out due to its non-Western features and was able to continue being used as a successful expressive device.

Thus, the Oriental motif retains its expressive character today, difficult to see how other theories that rely on more natural aspects of music to explain expression (e.g., the contour theory) can handle cases of changing expression when nothing but our associations with it changes.

Southern, 1997

This would likely turn out to be a complex story of music and race relations in American history. The Chinese faced a different sort of racism in America than blacks. Perhaps due to those social factors that led to the Chinese being, for a time, the only class of people barred from immigrating and due to the antagonism of American culture towards the Japanese during World War II, caricaturing Asians was less frowned upon than overt caricatures of blacks. Thus, such caricatures survived to the age of television
whereas the associations between “Turkey in the Straw” and the black community diminishes with each generation of Americans who know it as nothing but a hillbilly song. It is a virtue of the association theory that it can accommodate such relevant non-musical factors as well as musical factors with regards to musical expression.

*Timbres*—*Celesta*

Timbre—the characteristic sound of an instrument—is another type of musical component whose extra-musical significance is highly dependent upon associations. It is difficult to see how most of the expressive properties we attach to timbres could be natural (i.e., not stemming directly from associations). The bucolic nature of the banjo is due to its predominance in Appalachian bluegrass music (and its portrayal in *Deliverance* and *The Beverley Hillbillies*.) The spooky other-worldliness of the theremin is due in large part to its constant use in 50's era science fiction B-movies. Nothing about these sounds would seem to suggest that they are *particularly* well-suited for the expressive features they acquire. The theremin could have had other expressive features had its cinematic use been different, and other timbres could have expressed 'bucolicness' as well as the banjo seemingly does.

and radio where the associations between the musical motifs and the culture were widely disseminated (and, consequently, further entrenched).
To further illustrate the malleability of timbres, consider again the child's voice timbre. If anything should be able to have and retain the expressive qualities of sweet innocence, it would be that. However, as we have seen, the timbre is incredibly expressively versatile, ranging from undeniably chipper (“It's a Small World After All,” “Boom-Dee-Ah-Da”) to pathetic (“Desperado”) to sinister and creepy (“O Willow Waly”). This cannot happen unless surrounding contexts (and subsequent associations) play a significant role in the establishment of expressive features.

Another notable case of an instrument's timbre expressing more than it would seem to be able to do naturally is with the celesta. For years, composers sought a warm, sweet, and delicate sound, but earlier forms of the celesta—a small keyboard instrument in which the hammers strike metal bars, thus producing a bell-like sound—suffered from the problem of being too quiet for orchestral use. In 1888, Auguste Mustel created the modern celesta, which both had the characteristic sound and was loud enough to be useful. Tchaikovsky discovered the instrument in Paris and took it back for use in *The Nutcracker* (1892), where it was prominently featured in the “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies.”

Whatever we wish to say about the timbre of the celesta as warm, sweet, and delicate, it also has a distinctly unearthly magical quality to it.

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110 It should also be noted that due to its relative rarity, *The Nutcracker* was many people's first and only exposure to the celesta. (Zajaczkowski, 1987)
But nothing about the sound itself would suggest that it should express such a thing. Rather, its iconic use as accompanying dancing sugar plum fairies gave it that quality. That quality has subsequently been utilized and reinforced countless times—for instance by John Williams in the opening theme to *Harry Potter*. The celesta has a timbre that smacks of magical wonder, a quality that stems directly from early associations and largely overshadows its originally intended warm, sweet, and delicate quality. As we saw in the case of motifs, it is incumbent upon theories of expression to explain not only how a musical component can have a certain expressive quality, but also how these qualities can change and develop over time. Theories that hitch expression to the natural properties of the musical components will tend to have a difficult time with this, given that nothing about the celesta changed from the pre-*Nutcracker* warm, sweet, and delicate sound and the post-*Nutcracker* unearthly, magical wonder sound. Nothing, that is, besides the celesta's sudden close connection with dancing sugar plum fairies.

*Beats—Bossa Nova*

If it is puzzling how musical pieces—fundamentally, just ordered sounds—can bear any relation to emotions and other states of mind, then it is completely perplexing how beats—mere repeating rhythmic

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111 Any such explanation of how a bell-like sound naturally lends itself to unearthly, magical qualities seems to invariably fall back on prior associations of bells in religious settings and whatnot.
patterns—can do the same. Yet, many beats are highly expressive, and as with timbres, it is hard to see how beats can acquire such properties except though associations. Perhaps one could suggest that there are some timbres that might mimic real world sounds and thus have some natural basis for their expressive qualities (though what sounds of Appalachian nature the banjo mimics eludes me). However, no beats mimic real world actions or gaits. People do not approach their lovers passionately and confidently (or do anything else with their lovers, for that matter) with a slow-slow-quick-quick-quick pattern of steps, yet the tango is passionate all the same.

To get a better picture of how associations determine the expressive qualities of beats, consider the classic bossa nova beat.

![Figure 2. The Bossa Nova Beat](image)

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112 Hanslick, for one, rejects the claim that anything substantively musical comes from nature. “Not the voices of animals but their entrails are important to us, and the animal to which music is most indebted is not the nightingale but the sheep.” Hanslick, 1986, p. 72.
This beat is characterized by an easily recognizable syncopated figure in cross-rhythm with a steady bass line. Expressively, it is intimate and sensual, though nothing about the beat itself, of course, suggests sensuality anymore than, say, a waltz would. Rather, it has these expressive qualities for two central reasons: one, it is closely associated with the area where it was developed and popularized—the beaches of Rio de Janeiro—and two, the other elements of the bossa nova style—the soft, low volumes and the sensual, intimate lyrics from classic songs such as “Desfinado” and “The Girl from Ipanema”—further helps solidify the beat’s expressive qualities.

The bossa nova was developed in Rio de Janeiro in the mid-1950's as a calmer, more relaxing alternative to high-energy samba of the day. To reflect the stripped down beat and instrumentation, the lyrics were focused on cultivating this casual sentiment, with an emphasis on love and sensuality. No wonder that when the genre came stateside, the novel, easily recognizable beat would become associated with the sentiments expressed so often by its accompanying lyrics:

Tall and tan and young and lovely

The girl from Ipanema goes walking

When she walks she's like a samba

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113 Chris McGowan and Ricardo Pessanha, The Brazilian Sound pp. 55-73
That swings so cool and sways so gently

"The Girl from Ipanema"¹¹⁴

One interesting thing to note about this case is that it did not really matter whether João Gilberto and the other creators of the bossa nova intended the beat to develop and have its sensual expressive character or if they merely thought that it would provide a pleasing backdrop for the other aspects of the music. Intended or not, it is enough that associations were made. If associations fail to develop for any number of reasons (e.g., the musical component is not unique/memorable enough, component and extra-musical content are not repeated/reinforced enough, musical component already has a strong expressive character), the intentions will not matter at all as far as expressive characteristics are concerned.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ “The Girl from Ipanema,” music by Antonio Carlos Jobin, lyrics by Vinicius de Moraes (1962)
¹¹⁵ Liszt’s “Hungarian Rhapsody #2” has a distinct whimsical character, but not because of any deliberate actions of the composer (or, in this case, the cartoon director). The “Hungarian Rhapsody #2” has its whimsical quality because of its frequent use in cartoons such as “Rhapsody in Rivets,” “Cat Concerto,” and “Rhapsody Rabbit.” It wasn’t initially chosen because it had any whimsical quality (though later uses were almost certainly due to its whimsicality and canonical status in cartoon soundtracks), nor did the director have any concerns one way or the other regarding it developing a whimsical character. Rather, it was chosen due to its virtuosity and extraordinarily varied structure, which lent itself well to accompanying a wide variety of actions in the cartoon. The development of “Hungarian Rhapsody #2”’s expressive character was a byproduct of its use in the cartoons. (Goldmark, 2002)
Modes—Major and Minor

By now, it should be clear how extensively associations affect the expressive properties of musical components. We could continue on and on with broader musical gestures—the plagal “amen” cadence and its religiosity, the uplifting quality of the Picardy third—but the big question concerning expression centers around modes. Most pithy explanations of the issue of musical expression focus on the expressive qualities of the modes—particular scales consisting of whole and half step intervals. What makes the major mode happy and the minor mode sad? Any adequate theory of musical expression must be able to answer this most basic question, and here, as in the other cases, the influence of associations is apparent.

Unlike today, where the vast majority of musical works are in major or minor, there were at least twelve distinct modes in use in pre-Baroque Europe, each having its own unique expressive

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116 One could argue that we are asking the wrong question here. What we should be asking is what makes the major triad (e.g., C-E-G) happy and the minor triad (e.g., A-C-E) sad. However, the latter question is answerable only within the context of the former. Without knowing the mode, the major triad, for instance, might have expressive qualities other than simple happiness.

117 Certainly among the pieces we’re commonly exposed to—pop music, film scores, soundtracks, and other pieces of incidental music.

118 The seven basic ones are, briefly, Ionian (C to C on a piano using all and only the white keys), Dorian (D to D), Phrygian (E to E), Lydian (F to F), Mixolydian (G to G), Aeolian (A to A), and Locrian (B to B).
characteristics. Given how fundamental our notions of major expressing happiness and minor expressing sadness, it is perhaps surprising that we would not be able to recognize these modes from the expressive descriptions given of them by the composers and theorists of the time. The major, or Ionian, mode was predominantly a secular mode and its expressive characteristics, like wantonness, followed suit. Theorist and composer Gioseffo Zarlino (1517-1590) wrote that the Ionian was “suitable for dances and therefore sometimes considered lascivious.” Theorist Conrad von Zabern (late fifteenth century), with a nice nod towards associations, excoriates those who brazenly use the mode in church.

...Many school Rectors certainly have the Devil in their service when they borrow worldly songs and sing to them the text of the Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus, and I do not know whom it pleases. This causes not only great vexation to the believer in Christ, but it also leads the young fleshy minded people to think less of the kingdom of God than of the dance hall, where they have heard the same kind of singing.

119 Not unlike the Indian ragas of today. One natural question to ask is what gave the modes their particular expressive qualities. Part of what I’ve tried to express in these earlier chapters is that the more specific the expressive quality is, the more obvious its connection to associations.

120 The terms ‘major’ and ‘Ionian’ aren’t quite interchangeable. The pitches involved are identical, but there are rules governing harmony and chord progression in the major mode that are absent in the Ionian. (Pieces in major are in Ionian as well, but pieces in Ionian aren’t necessarily in major.) Nevertheless, the Ionian mode is the clear historical predecessor to the major mode. As well, the Aeolian mode is the historical predecessor of the minor mode, but there are also differences between the two. In addition to harmonic and chord progression rules, the minor features a raised 7th to act as a leading note. For more information on modes, see Grout, 1996.

121 Steblin, 2002, p. 27.

Of course there is a happy element to lasciviousness and enjoyment in worldly pleasures, but there is definitely a difference in perspective between pre-Baroque Europeans who thought that the Ionian mode was too sexual for religious purposes and contemporary society that finds Ionian perfectly well-suited for pieces such as “Amazing Grace” and “Ave Maria.”

There is even less consistency between the expressive characteristics of contemporary minor and the Aeolian mode. Whereas we would describe minor as merely the sad (or sadder) mode, Zarlino describes it as “open and clear; suited to lyrical verses and to cheerful and sweet subject matters.” Even the Dorian mode, which is more minor-ish sounding than some, has undergone a whirlwind of expressive changes. Zarlino described it as somewhat sad and serious, though little more than one hundred years later, it was (eclectically) described by Giovanni Bona as “modest, joyful, serious and dignified,” by Daniel Speer as “happy, joyful, splendid, merry and majestic,” and by Johann Buttsett as “cheerful, joyful and serious; expresses a specially cheerful character together with a wondrous gravity.” Today, the Dorian mode has different expressive characters, depending on the piece. It has the

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123 Given that modern Catholic and evangelical churches are still not very keen on most things sexual, I suggest that the difference is due more to a change in associations than a change in religious attitudes.
124 Steblin, 2002, p. 27.
125 Steblin, 2002, p. 25
‘nostalgic euphoria of a Renaissance fair’ quality with “Scarborough Fair” and “What Do You Do with a Drunken Sailor,” less so with Deep Purple’s “Smoke on the Water.”

Though we take the major-happy/minor-sad dichotomy to be one of the basics of modern Western expressiveness, these modes did not always have these particular expressive characters. The central question is what prompted the change—what turned the Ionian mode from specifically lascivious and concerned with worldly pleasures to a catch-all ‘happy’ mode? One answer might be that as far as expressive efficacy goes, the Ionian was simply the best mode for expressing happiness. As theorists and composers gradually realized that happy texts simply ‘fit’ better in the Ionian mode (and sad texts in the Aeolian), the other modes fell out of favor, leaving us with the two expressively best ones.

The problem with this explanation, of course, is that there is no evidence in the writings of the Baroque and pre-Baroque theorists that there was anything wrong with the modes in fulfilling their expressive

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126 I leave it as an exercise to the reader to decide whether the expressive qualities of the other modes discussed by Zarlino match up with our contemporary usage either. Consider the Phrygian mode, described as suitable for lament, used in Jefferson Airplane’s “White Rabbit” and the theme from Unsolved Mysteries. Or the Mixolydian, described as cheerful, lascivious, though appropriate for threats and anger, used in the Beatles’ “Norwegian Wood” and the theme from Star Trek. Or the Lydian, described as modest, happy, and elevating the souls of listeners, used in “Maria” from West Side Story and the themes from The Jetsons and The Simpsons.

127 A related explanation would be that Zarlino and his contemporaries were characterizing the modes far too specifically. The Ionian was naturally ‘happy’ and, for whatever reason, got shoehorned into lascivious purposes. Eventually, the over-specification fell away, leaving the ‘happy’ core to serve its present-day role.
functions. Rather, the fact that the expressive characters of the modes were so precise suggests that the composers and theorists were remarkably well-attuned to expressive capabilities of the modes. Furthermore, what is ultimately troubling about this type of ‘natural’ explanation is that it smacks of a presumption of inevitability—it was only a matter of time before the Ionian rose up as the dominant ‘happy’ mode. This requires that Zarlino and the other theorists and composers of the time did not really understand the true expressive nature of the modes, but this is implausible. What more is there to expression in modes (or anything for that matter) apart from what people perceive in the modes and their use in larger societal functions?

There is another, perhaps less glamorous, explanation for why the Ionian mode ‘won out’ over its alternatives to turn into the happy mode. One of the things that marked the end of the Renaissance era and the beginning of the Baroque was a shift in musical styles from polyphony (simultaneous melodic lines) to homophony (a single melodic line with harmonic accompaniment). The homophony led to an increased importance in figured bass (the underlying harmonies that accompany the melody). At the same time, due to the diatonic nature of the system, there developed a preference for leading tones (the seventh degree of a scale that lays a half step below the final and provides a ‘driving’ sensation
towards that final). As it turns out, the mode that has a leading tone built in and works best with the figured bass centering on the major triad is the Ionian. The mode that works best with the figured bass centering on the minor triad is the Aeolian (though, given its lack of a leading tone, one was added—hence the modern melodic and harmonic minor scales). As for expressive characteristics, once the modes were put to broader uses, the associations attached to them broadened as well. Whereas the Ionian mode was thought to be lascivious and was shunned from the church because of its widespread use in dance halls among the ‘fleshy minded people,’ once it started being used to accompany all happy texts, its associations, and subsequently its expressive characteristics, expanded from lasciviousness to happiness. In contrast to the Ionian, the Aeolian, augmented with a leading tone when appropriate for harmonic and melodic purposes, began accompanying sadder, softer texts and broadened its expressive quality accordingly.\textsuperscript{128}

So, the Ionian/major and Aeolian/minor did not ‘win out’ because of any great expressive success or efficacy. They won out because of an entirely different matter—newly developed aesthetic preferences for homophony, leading tones, and the figured bass. The major and minor modes were not the expressive standard bearers that guided compositional

\textsuperscript{128} Furthermore, it’s also no surprise that we are left generally clueless (expressively) about the other modes seldom used since the major and minor took off in popularity.
techniques, but rather their expressive qualities merely adapted as they began to be put to a different use. For the association theory, such historical accidents are part and parcel of making sense of our constantly changing and evolving musical world.

The Association Theory, Again

Given that we have broken down expression into the musical components, it would be helpful to know how musical pieces turn out expressively when the components are recombined. Unfortunately, due to variations in strength and other peculiarities of particular associations, there will not be hard and fast rules governing the consequences of expressive combinations. However, typically the components combine in straightforward ways with the stronger associations usually being the dominating force. For instance, anything featuring the kazoo—"Entrance of the Gladiators," "Ave Maria," or Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*—will be generally goofy (though perhaps hope-filled goofiness, plaintive goofiness, etc., depending on the other musical components). Likewise, anything employing the Oriental motif will be colored with a mystical Asian quality. In general, it would not be difficult to break down our

\[129\] Though to be fair, it's not like other theories will have such rules either. In the contour theory, for instance, there's nothing that approaches the level of precision of, say, an intervallic jump of anything greater than a fourth in the major mode will have the contour of a leap of joy; any smaller intervallic jumps will mimic pleased, though not excited, behavior.
general sense of what a piece expresses to the interactions of the various musical components, even if their interactions resist formalized rules.

Furthermore, given that associations are personal and expression is, in some real sense, community-based, we might wonder what guarantees that musical components will be associated in the same way to the same people. The answer is that nothing will guarantee the appropriate connections will be made, but associations are rarely made with just one encounter. Repeated exposure will make it more and more likely that the relevant connections are being made. Furthermore, just like the contour theory can point out relevant features to those who disagree with an expressive claim, association theory can point to the contexts in which something is used, further helping solidify the associations.

By now it should be clear that there really is not a puzzle concerning how absolute music can express emotions when it is devoid of extra-musical content. The answer is that the musical components that constitute absolute music are loaded with extra-musical associations. What gives the absolute piece featuring the celeste, such as the first movement from Bartok’s *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*, a magical, unearthly quality? What gives it that quality is its iconic use in
*The Nutcracker.* It is the same instrument, same timbre, and same associations in play. What makes the absolute piece in the major mode happy? It is *the same exact mode* as the one that has been (not quite exclusively) accompanying happy texts for the past three hundred years of Western music. Grant that musical components can have expressive associations and the puzzle concerning absolute music dissolves away. Indeed, what would be odd would be the view that none of our experiences with music in the non-absolute realm (which, in fact, is most of our exposure to music) have any bearing with our perception of music in the other realm.

**Objections**

The central objection to the association theory seems to be incredulity concerning how malleable expressive qualities turn out to be. Given that associations are what determine expression, and given that there are no constraints on what can be associated with what, it is true that the association theory will claim that, ultimately, any piece of music (or musical component) could express anything whatsoever. “Flight of the Bumblebee” could have had sweet and gentle expressive properties and Brahms’s “Lullaby” could have been angry. This claim is not as radical as it seems—the implausibility, if anything, stems from a

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130 Not to mention the final movement (“Neptune, the Mystic”) of Holst’s *The Planets.*
mischaracterization of the association theory. Geoffrey Madell, in explaining why the association theory is ‘wholly untenable,’ states:

We are led to suppose, then, that the link between the major mode and positive or affirmative emotion and that between the minor mode and sadness is to be explained as a sort of chance fall of the dice of convention, something which could equally have fallen quite differently...There is a possible world which differs from the actual in only one respect: the passage from dissonance to consonance is regarded, not as the passage from tension to relaxation, but from relaxation to tension... ¹³¹

I hope by now it is clear that the association theory would not claim that worlds could differ only in the respect that we regard the major mode as sad and the minor mode as happy. Musical components are always expressive for a reason, just not any that would rely on any ‘inherently expressive’ properties of the music. It very well could have been that the major mode is the sad mode, but no declaration by fiat would do the trick—what would have to change is roughly three hundred years of Western musical tradition. In this light, the initial claim does not seem so radical. Sure, Brahms’s “Lullaby” could have been angry, but an actual change could not happen overnight. Not only would deep-seated associations have to be uprooted, but new ones established as well.

Far from being a problem (much less a *reductio*), this consequence of the association theory—any musical component could have expressed anything—really allows us to capture the malleability and diversity of musical cultures. Suppose having no experience with the musical culture, we encountered two expressively different pieces of Beijing Opera. If we label piece A ‘happy’ and piece B ‘sad’ and were wrong, there might be a modicum of surprise to learn that we were wrong about the expressive traits, but we would not be dumbfounded. When we are completely unfamiliar with a type of music, we are very forgiving about what the expressive qualities are. At some early point in our lives, we were equally unfamiliar with Western music, and it is not a stretch to suppose that we could have been as equally forgiving.

Another objection to the association theory is that if expression is determined by mere associations, then music cannot have the expressive force that we typically take it to have. We might learn the meanings of things through conventions, but those things are fairly expressively benign. We learn that ‘green’ means ‘go,’ but we do not *feel* the drive to move when we see green. Similarly, we might learn that the plagal cadence means religiosity through convention, but we will not *feel* the religiosity like we do at the end of a rollicking, holy-roller rendition of

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132 For variations of this objection, see Madell, 2002 and Davies, 2001
“Amazing Grace.” Something else besides associations/conventions must be giving the music its expressive power.\textsuperscript{133}

Like the first, this objection seems to stem from a mischaracterization of the association theory.\textsuperscript{134} Of course there will not be any visceral emotional reaction if I simply stipulated that an E augmented chord meant angst, but the association theory does not reduce expression down to what Davies refers to as ‘brute naming.’ Nor do I suggest that stipulating expressive characters in a vacuum would ever work. Rather, the associations are developed between musical components and quite often emotionally impactful extra-musical content. We do not doubt that smells are emotionally powerful, yet the connection between, say, the sweet aroma of corndogs and carefree joy is completely associative. It is not clear why music could not behave in a related fashion.\textsuperscript{135}

Another interesting question to ask is why we should want a ‘whole-hog’ association theory to the exclusion of any other that might partly bear on the matter. Surely the framework I have offered is

\textsuperscript{133} What that ‘something else’ is, is not easily solved by the other theories of musical expression. The contour theory likens perceiving sad music to seeing the ‘sad’ face of basset hound, but I, at least, do not feel the sadness in the dog like I feel the sadness in the music.

\textsuperscript{134} Though to be fair, the objections aren’t being raised against this particular theory, but rather a related, albeit less plausible, one.

\textsuperscript{135} As Kivy has persuasively argued, we should also be careful to distinguish between music being aesthetically moving and music being emotionally moving. The two do not stand and fall together. See Kivy, 1990.
compatible with a dual-level view, where both natural and associative elements combine to form the expression character of music. Quite frankly, the reason for not taking that alternative is that we do not need to posit any natural elements. Positing natural elements will lead to problems of how to accommodate the changing meanings of musical features. Nothing ‘natural’ about the Bossa Nova beat changed after it acquired its sensual character in the 1950’s. If we wish to focus on basic emotional meanings, the ‘purely natural’ musical structures of the major mode remained the same in its shift from ‘lustfulness’ to ‘happiness.’

If what I am suggesting is correct, we can do all the work we need to do with association. The fundamental reason for naturalism, as we might call it, is that we cannot appeal to extra-musical elements in absolute music because extra-musical elements are by definition not present. Because the expression-laden musical components are shared between absolute and non-absolute music, this reason for naturalism does not hold any water.

Another objection to the association theory (and a supposed reason why ‘whole-hog’ association could not work is the logical priority thesis.\textsuperscript{136} According to this thesis, not any piece of music would work in any occasion. The music already had to be appropriate to be used in such

\textsuperscript{136} As Kania calls it. See Kania, 2007.
and such a context, so the expression is, in some sense, already in the music prior to when it would acquire its associations. There was not an unrestricted choice of musical pieces to accompany the text of “It’s a Small World After All.” Rather, the pieces already had to be happy.

Of course, if the logical priority thesis assumes that the appropriateness of the music for certain contexts existed before the musical components had time to develop associations in the way I suggest, the thesis is begging the question against the association theory. A further problem for the logical priority thesis is that the association theory agrees that there is no doubt that constraints exist on what musical pieces can be used (successfully) in certain contexts, given the way music history has developed. A slow piece in the minor mode will be a poor choice of accompaniment for “It’s a Small World After All” because it runs up against long-standing traditions in Western music. However, in avoiding the long-standing tradition issue by focusing on when musical components were used initially, the logical priority thesis appears much less intuitive. The theremin has distinct expressive qualities now, but there were not really any constraints on the theremin when it was first used. Had it been featured in Elvira Madigan rather than The Day the
Earth Stood Still, it would likely be considered romantic\textsuperscript{137} rather than spooky and other-worldly.

A better formulation of the logical priority thesis would shift the requirement from musical components having to be\textit{ appropriate} for a setting to a requirement that musical components just need to be\textit{ not inappropriate}. There is an important difference between the two: requiring that a component be appropriate suggests that there is some inherent expressive quality to the component, whereas requiring that components be not inappropriate simply rules out pieces that have a property ill-suited for the context at hand. This has the added benefit of not only avoiding begging the question against the association theory, but also allowing functional and historical considerations to play a role.\textsuperscript{138}

As an example of the modified logical priority thesis, the Heavy Metal rock sound will always be inappropriate as a lullaby, not because of any inevitable expressive conflicts, but because lullabies have a purpose. Children will not go to sleep with fast, discordant, amps-cranked-up-to-eleven thrash metal playing in their ears. Just to fulfill their function, lullabies will be slow and soft. But note, there is a world of difference between lullabies being naturally slow and soft and lullabies being naturally tender and loving. The musical components of the lullaby could

\textsuperscript{137} Or perhaps languorous, depending on how the very-slow-to-develop movie was received.

\textsuperscript{138} In other words, not just expressive considerations will matter.
have had any number of expressive qualities—love, tenderness, exhaustion, frustration, relief, etc. For whatever reason, Romantic perspectives on childcare pushed the components towards love and tenderness. All in all, by requiring pieces to be not inappropriate rather than appropriate, we can avoid assuming that musical components have pre-existing expressive qualities. Rather, functional and historical considerations are what place constraints on which components can be used in which contexts. And as it stands, this reformulation of the logical priority thesis is perfectly compatible with the association theory.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this chapter has been to formulate a plausible theory that makes associations the basis for expression. With the brief glimpses into the Oriental motif, the celesta timbre, the bossa nova beat, and the major and minor modes, I hope to have shown how closely linked musical expression is to extra-musical contexts. I have also argued that once we recognize the expressive qualities of musical components, then, by virtue of the components being common to both absolute and non-absolute music, the puzzle of how absolute music can express emotions vanishes. Furthermore, the association theory, with its consequence that any musical component could have expressed anything, might at first glance

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139 As a new parent, however, I am more than a little surprised that the qualities of frustration and exhaustion did not win out.
prompt incredulity, but I have argued that such reactions stem from common mischaracterizations of the theory. (Besides, as David Lewis noted, incredulous stares are not counterarguments.) The chapter began with Davies claiming that we cannot understand the nature of expression in non-absolute musical contexts until we understand it in absolute contexts. I hope to have given reasons to suppose Davies got the picture backwards—musical expression, in any form, cannot be understood apart from the context in which it was born and developed.
Chapter 4: Music Outside the West

The natural question to ask of a theory that makes cultural associations the *sine non qua* of expression is—how does the theory bear out with regards to the music of other cultures? If it turns out that the expressive qualities of Western music are completely lost on people of other cultures (and the expressive qualities of their music is lost on us), then that is good reason to suppose that an association theory is, at the very least, pushing in the right direction. On the contrary, if people of other cultures have no trouble picking out the expressive qualities of our music (and we have no trouble with theirs), then the association theory is definitely in trouble. After all, what expression-determining work would associations be doing if people who lack those requisite associations nevertheless can pick out the expressions?

For this reason, cross-cultural comparisons of musical expression are very important, lest theories of musical expression risk foundering on a one-sided diet of examples. I shall suggest that such an examination of non-Western music generally favors the association theory. At the very
least, it explains why we typically fail to grasp the expressive qualities of non-Western pieces better than the contour theory does.

**Expression and Non-Western Music**

Supposing that cross-cultural comparisons of musical expression are useful, how different are one culture’s perceptions of expressive qualities from another’s? It is difficult to make clean cross-cultural comparisons between Western music and non-Western cultures because given the incredible spread of Western musical traditions, many Western musical associations are becoming increasingly familiar in other cultures. A Lays Potato Chip commercial on Chinese television features a girl in a potato-chip-eating training montage with “Eye of the Tiger,” the training music from *Rocky*, playing in the background. In another case, “Chariots of Fire,” the iconic piece that accompanies slow-motion races, was used in a Chinese sitcom during a race of elementary school children. A consequence of this Western ‘cultural hegemony’ is that cultures often borrow association-laden works and co-opt them for use in their own musical/cinematographic works.  

So, because of this ‘hegemony,’ comparisons between Western and non-Western interpretations of Western music that would be useful in evaluating the association theory are difficult to get. However,

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140 See Wagnleitner, 2000.
comparisons involving Western and non-Western interpretations of non-Western music is much easier due to the relative ignorance many in the West have of other cultures’ beliefs and practices. As it turns out, there are notable disagreements between different cultures with regards to expressive qualities. Furthermore, how they disagree also suggests that associations are playing an important determining role for expression.

Indian music rivals Western music in the richness and diversity of its expression. To the enculturated Indian listener, for example, the shri raga is mysterious and gentle, the lalita raga expresses amorousness, the asvari raga is sorrowful, and the putamanjari raga expresses grief tinged with hope. To Western ears, however, the ragas have none of the distinct expressive content that Indians ascribe to them. There’s certainly nothing in the shri raga that allows the non-enculturated listener to distinguish its ‘mysterious and gentle’ quality from the expressive qualities of the other ragas. Rather, they all have a similar ‘exotic’ quality.

141 Of course, Western culture has been influenced by non-Western music as well. However, since the rise of radio, television, movies, and other mass media devices, pop culture genres have tended to originate in the West and move outwards. Consequently, Western culture has been, relatively speaking, more slowly influenced.

142 One notable exception to the non-Western perception of Western music is the Japanese’s use of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony as their New Year’s Eve song. The expressive qualities have departed from just joy and now have the happy, nostalgic connotations that Westerners have with “Auld Lang Syne.”

143 Amorous to the point that some parents prevent their children from listening to it.

144 Bandopadhyaya, 1958
In addition to this ‘exotic’ quality, the ragas also have ‘psychedelic’ connotations to many Westerners. The association theory could anticipate that this would be how things would stand. Without the habituation of hearing music based on the ragas in their original contexts—often as accompaniment to sung words—no associations would be developed that would connect various features of the ragas to the extra-musical content. The context in which Indian music (ragas, unique instrumentation) did appear in the West was the music of, among others, Ravi Shankar and the Beatles (e.g., “Within You, Without You,” “Across the Universe”) in the late 1960s—hence the psychedelic connotations.

Another example of Western indifference to the expressive qualities of non-Western music is in Confucian ritual music. “Yingshen” is a typical of the Confucian hymn style. The melody is restricted to whole notes of a one-octave range in the pentatonic scale. The piece, as is common among Confucian hymns, is incredibly slow—44 quarter-note beats per minute.

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145 Returning to the objection of Kivy’s caution argument, the contour theory might be able to explain why the ragas all sound the same, but it is at a loss to explain the psychedelic nature of the ragas.

Music is quite important in Confucian rituals, as it is thought to promote social harmony. This music, in particular, strongly reflects the Confucian values of benevolence, respect, and propriety. To Western ears, however, none of these virtues are conveyed. Due to its lack of a leading tone, its use of the pentatonic scale, and its use of specific timbres, it sounds slow, ponderous, and certainly Chinese-exotic, but the expressive qualities simply do not match up to what the Confucian musicians hold. Furthermore, there might be some contour picture teased out here—the resemblance of the slow, ponderous whole notes with the

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147 The title is translated as, “Welcome to the Spirit of the Sage.” The text reads, “How great the sage, his virtue is respected, maintains the welfare of the country; All the people want the laws, regularly-scheduled rituals, prosperity in the country; The spirit is welcome here, to learn the knowledge and manner of Confucius.” Thrasher, 2005, p. 25.
148 Court music, or ya yue, is supposed to do this. Folk music, or shu yue, excites the emotions (much like Plato thought) and is thus bad for the social order. Thrasher, 2005
149 And, to be fair, to some contemporary Chinese unimpressed with the Confucian traditions, the virtues are not conveyed either.
slow, stately, propriety-heavy steps—but that is not what comes to mind upon hearing the music. The Chinese-exoticness (rooted in associations) of it appears to overwhelm other potential expressive pictures.\textsuperscript{150}

The association theory does a good job at explaining the disconnect between how the people of some culture perceive their music and how Westerners perceive it. If the only associations Westerners have of a particular style is how it is used in Western contexts (e.g., ‘psychedelic’ Indian music) or a vague connection to a culture (e.g., the ‘Asian-exoticness’ of the pentatonic scale), then the expressiveness of the music will follow suit. If the listener becomes more enculturated (i.e., becomes more aware of the contexts musical pieces are used in), then the listener’s perception of the expressive qualities will come to line up better with the perceptions of the natives.

\textit{Kivy’s ‘Caution’ Argument}

Kivy, in defending the contour theory, gives a different explanation for why Westerners and non-Westerners do not often agree about the expressive qualities of musical pieces.\textsuperscript{151} Kivy argues that we should be

\textsuperscript{150} Other cases of expressive disagreement can easily be generated. Even genres like lullabies, which, because of its function, should have shared musical characteristics across cultures if anything does, are not universally recognized as such. Navajo lullabies do not sound particularly like lullabies (with its attendant sweetness and warmth); they sound Native American-exotic. The PBS program, “The Music Instinct: Science and Song,” contends, wrongly, I believe, that lullabies are recognized cross-culturally.

\textsuperscript{151} See Kivy, 1989.
careful about drawing conclusions from any such music. It is tempting, according to him, to say that if distinct musical cultures differ as to the expressive quality of a piece, then those expressive qualities are convention/association-bound. However, what we are missing here, according to Kivy, is that even 'naturalistic' theories of musical expression still rely heavily on cultural conventions. The contour theory, though natural in the sense that expression is rooted in the properties of the music itself (as opposed to, say, associations between music and contexts), is still governed by conventions in two ways. First, how we perceive musical contour depends upon cultural conventions. Pitches of higher frequency are called 'higher' in the West, whereas in traditional Chinese music higher pitches are considered to be 'clearer' (as opposed to 'muddier'). Likewise, notes that sound odd and out of tune in our diatonic system and thus might resemble unstable behavior, might sound perfectly fine (and stable) in the Indian scale systems that make use of microtones. Second, how we, as humans, express emotions might be determined by culture as well. Some cultures might express anger by being particularly animated whereas other, more restrained, cultures might express anger through overly-subdued tight-fisted behaviors.

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\(152\) Though Kivy is solely concerned with the contour theory, his argument can easily extend to other naturalistic theories.

\(153\) Nothing really hinges upon this last point. Kivy would be perfectly happy with the claim that how we show emotions is almost entirely biologically determined.
Both musical contours and bodily behaviors are necessary elements of the contour theory (since, of course, they are the two things doing the resembling). Because they are both rooted in conventions, as Kivy claims, then, if we fail to grasp the expressive import of some non-Western music (or non-Westerners fail to grasp the expressiveness of ours), the contour theory is not yet disconfirmed. Kivy claims that we are simply not hearing the musical pieces as music. (To be charitable, we should take this to mean that we do not hear the pieces as the locals do. After all, we do not often appear to have any trouble recognizing non-Western music as music even if it also appears inexplicable. Kivy, on the contrary, means we do not hear it as anything more than a collection of sounds.)

We mentioned before that there is nothing in the shri raga that allows the non-enculturated listener to distinguish it expressively from the lalita raga (amorousness), the asvari raga (sorrow), or the putamanjari raga (grief tinged with hope). However, Kivy claims, the contour theory could still be at work here. If we could hear the ragas as the locals do, then we would perceive all of the qualities of the work that mimic expressive human behavior. Otherwise, we would hear it either as

\[154\] Bandopadhyaya, 1958
just so much sound, or we hear the Indian music as strange and confused Western music and miss the features that contribute to contour.\textsuperscript{155}

The central problem with Kivy’s argument is that he is too quick to dismiss cases that do not match up with the contour theory as cases simply lacking the ‘musical space’ conventions.\textsuperscript{156} When we listen to a piece of Beijing opera, we generally recognize it as music. However, it is not clear why we would not hear the musical piece through our Western expressive lenses as expressing something, either in accordance with its contour or something else.\textsuperscript{157} There is no good reason to suppose that our ‘musical space’ conventions that are essential to contour always either disappear or are consciously suppressed when listening to Beijing opera.\textsuperscript{158} If we recognize the Beijing opera as music, we should sometimes hear the contours of it as if it were Western music. But, instead, the ‘Asian-exoticness,’ not the expressive contour, is what is

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\textsuperscript{155} Davies makes a very similar argument. See Davies, 1994.

\textsuperscript{156} This objection deals with the general issue of ‘naturalistic’ theories retreating behind conventions. There are also some objections that can be raised about Kivy’s argument that are relevant specifically to Kivy’s contour theory. One is that I do not think Kivy really wants mastery of a musical culture to be a prerequisite for hearing the contour. Otherwise, he will face the same sort of objection that made him reject the association theory—namely, because the contour theory relies on personal judgments about which musical features resemble which bodily behaviors, expression is likely going to be a personal and idiosyncratic, instead of being the preferred public and objective one.

\textsuperscript{157} It seems the presence of novel timbres and other components should not be enough to switch off our perceptions of musical space.

\textsuperscript{158} It is not uncommon to hear unfamiliar foreign languages as English. In Mandarin, for instance, the words for ‘yes’ and ‘no’ are ‘shi’ and ‘bu.’ Though I know the speakers are speaking Chinese, I cannot help but interpret the words as their English homonyms ‘sure’ and ‘boo.’

\end{footnotesize}
Kivy appeals to conventions to show how the contour theory can survive the fact that expressive qualities of music can differ culture to culture. However, he fails to show why we do not tend to ‘animate’ non-Western music as if it were Western music.\textsuperscript{160}

We can see a further weakness of Kivy’s ‘musical space’ defense with a case from the musical cultures of our own past. The paradigmatically slow, somber musical piece in the West is Chopin’s “Funeral March” from the \textit{Sonata in B-flat Minor, Opus 35}. It is as thoroughly sad and somber to Western ears as any piece could be, and the contour theory has a ready answer for why this is so: the musical contours strongly resemble the expressive behavior of mourning people. Now, it is safe to say that the conventions of musical space that Kivy argues are so fundamentally important to the contour theory have not changed dramatically in the past few hundred years of Western musical culture. Given this, an experiment conducted in Chicago by June E. Downey in 1897 has very odd results for the contour theory. She performed the “Funeral March” for twenty-one people and had them write down their impressions. (They were to make a note of it if they already knew the song.) In contrast to the almost certainly univocal response of death and

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\textsuperscript{159} Even if we did force ourselves to animate the music using our Western musical conventions, it would be significantly different from how we typically perceive music.
\textsuperscript{160} The association theory, to its credit, has a ready answer to this. The strongest associations we have with the music are with its particular foreignness, and thus the ‘exotic’ qualities win out.
\end{footnotesize}
mourning that we would get today from such an experiment, only ten had responses predominantly suggesting sorrow. One responder wrote, “...it represented a tired father walking the floor at midnight with a cross, crying baby, and alternately singing Watts’ ‘Cradle Hymn’ and scolding the baby.” Another wrote, “…the first distinct impression was of some sweet poem of Scott; not military, but peaceful.” A third wrote, “A calm, clear, sunny afternoon with pleasing landscape. A traveler is lying on the greensward and reveling in the quiet scene. But soon clouds roll up, and thunder, dark, growling at first, then angry. There comes a shower, after which reappears the peaceful, sunny scene…”

The conventions of musical space have remained stable since 1897, so the contour theory, unlike the non-Western cases, cannot appeal to such changes to explain the difference in recognition of expressive character. What has changed in the one-hundred-and-twelve ensuing years is the advent of radios, televisions, ‘talkies,’ and other forms of mass media. Most of the people in the experiment had not heard the piece; the “Funeral March” is ubiquitous in today’s pop culture. Again, it appears that associations do play a central role in musical expression. We lose sight of this because concern over music’s ability to express

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161 Though this is a nice illustration of our drive to anthropomorphize music, as discussed in Chapter 3.
162 Downey, 1897, pp. 63-64. The excessively florid descriptions suggest that they were making things up because they were supposed to say something. The lack of agreement suggests that there were no strong associations between the piece, its elements, and grief.
emotions goes at least as far back as Plato in the West and Confucius in the East, but this experiment and our experiences with non-Western music illustrate that we cannot underestimate how important radio, television, and more modern media is to the creation, dissemination, and fortification of music’s expressive properties.

Though it was probably not his intent, Kivy’s argument appears just to immunize the contour theory from an obvious line of objections: in many kinds of music, one culture’s perceptions of the music differ dramatically from another’s. But as we have seen, the reasons Kivy gives for rejecting cross-cultural comparisons are fairly weak. If there is no resemblance between musical contours and expressive bodily behavior (or listeners do not even try to look for resemblances), then that is not good news for the contour theory. Contrary to the caution (read: dismissal of data) that Kivy supports, cross-cultural data will be relevant.\(^{163}\)

*Is Expression Universal?*

So far, the association theory comes out nicely in explaining the differences between Western and non-Western musical perceptions of

\(^{163}\) For instance, non-Western music does not stay perplexing forever. We should be able to tell what we are becoming aware of when listening to such music (or new genres of Western music). Do we gradually learn conventions of musical space and movement, and that is what makes the expressive qualities clearer, or do they become clearer because we begin to pick up on patterns of certain musical gestures being used in certain contexts (à la the association theory)? Still along the lines of the association theory, perhaps we get past the strangeness of the non-Western music and start to match it with our own set of expressive associations.
expression, yet the theory is not without its potential problems. Earlier I mentioned that Western musical hegemony has made it difficult to analyze how non-Western cultures perceive Western music. One 2009 study conducted by Thomas Fritz, however, examined a community in northern Cameroon who had no exposure to Western music to determine if the perception of Western musical expression was, in some sense, universal. 164 The Mafa are located in the Mandara mountain range and are completely naïve with respect to Western music. The participants were played several short piano pieces that varied with respect to tempo and mode (major, minor, and indefinite) and were asked to classify them as happy, sad, or scared. Although a few of the Mafa performed at chance level, the results appear encouraging for a universal component of musical expression. 64.64% of the responses correctly reported the happy selections as happy. By contrast, 98.93% of a Western control group reported the same pieces as happy. 47.73% of the Mafa responses reported the sad pieces as sad (Westerners—81.43%), and 49.03% reported the fearful pieces as fearful (Westeners—92.50%).

Although the results are certainly above a chance level (and thus prove potentially troubling for an association-based account of musical expression), other odd data from the experiment should give us pause

164 Fritz, 2009
about concluding that some aspect of expression is universal. One problem is that the Western stereotype seems to be that slower, minor pieces are sad, faster, major pieces are happy, whereas fearful music (“Night on Bald Mountain,” “Toccata and Fugue in D minor,” etc.) is, if anything, relatively fast. However, the study found that, in both Westerners and Mafa, faster, major pieces were correlated with happy pieces, slow, minor pieces were correlated with fearful pieces, and no correlation existed between tempo, mode and sad music. It is strange to think that the Westerners in the study deviated so much from the traditional musical stereotypes of sad music being slow and in minor. Another problem is that if the same musical expressive traits were universal, there should have been a higher degree of similarity among the responses of the Mafa. Given that they all had the same background and were relatively equal with regards to musicianship, less deviation among the Mafa with regards to the accuracy of their responses should be expected, if those expressive traits are universal.

Nevertheless, we should take the experiment for what it says—a number of people from a community never before exposed to Western music (and its conventions) were nevertheless able to pick out happy

\[\text{Fritz, 2009, pp. 1-2}\]
\[\text{Though not necessary with the Westerners as well. Of course, Westerners who grew up surrounded by the music will perform better at picking out the correct expressive content.}\]
music more often than not (and pick out sad and scared pieces at an above-chance level). Though such a result might appear initially troubling for the association theory, it ultimately is not. With respect to music, there is a difference between ‘universal’ and ‘natural.’ ‘Natural’ suggests that the expressive-making properties are built in to the structure of music itself.\textsuperscript{167} ‘Universal’ suggests that everyone perceives the expressive properties in the same way for whatever reason. Whereas everything ‘natural’ will likely be ‘universal,’ the converse is not true. Just as words like ‘ma’ for mother are largely universal among languages\textsuperscript{168} but not natural, the fast tempo for more positive emotions might be similarly universal.\textsuperscript{169} The results for the major mode, by contrast, do not really support a claim of universal expression since there are many musical cultures—such as the Indian and Chinese—that tend to deviate from the major/happy, minor/scared, and indeterminate

\textsuperscript{167} As Cooke would suggest, they are built into the tonal tensions. See chapter 5 for more detail.

\textsuperscript{168} Ruhlen, 1994. One theory about the universality of ‘ma’ is that it is one of the first sounds that babies make when they want something. Since mothers typically have those things that babies want, the connection is established. But, ‘ma’ is not natural since nothing about the sound ‘ma’ itself suggests it refers to mothers.

\textsuperscript{169} The devil, as always, is in the details. To block any associationist account of the data, Fritz is going to have to tell us a great deal about the Mafa. Clearly they are naïve about Western music, but are there any independent associative considerations that link up a faster tempo with happiness (e.g., some particular aspect of their religious rites). Does the construction of their native instruments make it more likely that certain harmonic intervals are played more than others during certain rituals? Without much more information, we simply do not know what to make of his data. Perhaps it spells real trouble for the association theory; perhaps it does not.
tonality/sad pairings. So, no universality (and consequently no naturalism) will apply to modes.

One explanation for the relative similarity in the expressive pairings for the Mafa and the Westerners is that the choices were few enough that the Mafa could have come up with the connections independently. Suppose we gave the people of some non-Western culture the colors white, black, and red and asked them to pair them with the concepts ‘good,’ ‘bad,’ and ‘angry.’ It would not be remarkable for them to come up with the pairings white/good, black/bad, and red/angry at a 50-65% success rate. These pairings alone tell us nothing about any natural connection between colors and emotions. After all, in China, white is sad, black is respectable, and red is lucky. Rather, the study would only suggest that the people of that culture, for some reason, made a connection between the colors and the emotions. The Mafa study should be regarded with a similar dose of skepticism about it demonstrating the universality of musical expression.

What sort of data would cause serious problems with the association theory? Such a study would move away from simple happiness and sadness. The expressiveness of Western music is described in much richer ways than these basic terms anyway. Choose pieces with

\footnote{With respect to minor/scared and indeterminate tonality/sad, I would suggest that even Western music deviates from these pairing.}
expressive content specific enough to appear clearly association-based—“Pomp and Circumstance,” “Amazing Grace” complete with plagal cadence, porn music—and see if the Mafa or others similarly naïve communities can get anywhere close to approximating these expressive qualities. If it turns out they can, the association theory would be in need of serious revision or scrapping.

Unless we wish to argue that the Western musical system is somehow more universally expressive than other musical systems, we already have a good sense of how the study would turn out, with encouraging results for the association theory. Indian music is highly expressive—the kanahda raga is expressive of pride in hunting success, the Bengali raga is expressive of bucoliness\(^{171}\)—but the various expressive qualities are completely opaque to those not steeped in the Indian musical tradition. If this is any indication, we may also safely say that despite the Mafa experiments, associations remain an integral part of expression.

**Conclusion**

When arguing that musical expression is inextricably tied to one’s culture, the obvious question to ask is whether Western experiences with non-Western music and non-Western experiences with Western music bear

\(^{171}\) Bandopadhyaya, 1958.
this out. The association theory, I have suggested, gives us the right results. Kivy, championing the contour theory, by contrast, tries to deflect the question by relying on the conventions of musical space. This deflection is unconvincing, especially when we look at cases from our musical past. The 2009 study of the Mafa society has interesting data, but ultimately the study poses little problem for the association theory. All in all, there is certainly much more material to work with in regards to musical expression than just Western music, and cross-cultural comparisons are certainly illuminating with respect to the properties of musical expression. The association theory, with its emphasis on context, does a very good job at explaining the disparities between the expressive qualities perceived by differing cultures in the same piece of music. Associations are what make the asvari raga sorrowful to some and psychedelic to others.
Chapter 5—Towards a Musical Vocabulary

If the association theory is correct, this would suggest that we can generate a Western musical phrasebook of common musical phrases and their expressive characters. The only systematic development of a musical phrasebook of this kind was created by Deryck Cooke. Due to his somewhat oddball theory that the expressive features of music are the result of the tonal tensions created out of the overtone series, Cooke’s entire project has been given little currency. However, we should think twice about Cooke’s work. Cooke’s project—the musical phrasebook, at least—is very relevant for the plausibility of the association theory. So, I shall examine Cooke’s theory in detail and argue that we can sever the phrasebook from its overtone series-based foundations.

The Language of Music

A possible objection to a theory that holds that music gets its power to express emotions purely by associations is this: if there is no inherent property of a musical phrase that makes it expressive of, say, joy rather

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172 Cooke, of course, would not have liked these motives.
than despair, then there is nothing stopping a composer from using any musical phrase for any expressive purpose. With the scriptures in hand, Handel could just have as easily—and successfully—set the text of the “Hallelujah Chorus” to the music of Albinoni’s Adagio instead of the Messiah. However, the musical phrases Western composers use to express emotions have, by and large, seemingly remained unchanged since the 1400’s, when the tonal system began to emerge as the dominant musical system in Europe. The melodic phrase Robert Jones used in 1608 to accompany the text “Sweet love, my only treasure” is essentially the same as the one used by Irving Berlin to accompany “Heaven, I’m in heaven” in his 1935 song “Cheek to Cheek”. Cooke notes,

…it is difficult to believe that there is no more to [musical expression] than [associations]…it seems surprising that throughout five centuries or more all European composers without exception—some of them violently revolutionary in other respects—should have accepted the established connotations of the various terms without demur…and that this has proved the only unchanging aspect of music. One might have expected a revolutionary composer to try and cut loose from these connotations—to insist on using, say, the major 1-3-5-6-5 of innocent joy to express some dark and evil emotion; but nothing of this kind has been attempted.

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173 This objection, as we saw in Chapter 3, is a mischaracterization of the association theory.
174 According to Cooke. As discussed in Chapter 3, musicologists trace such similarity only back to the early 17th century.
175 Cooke, 1959, p. 120.
176 Cooke, 1959, p. 25.
This is, as we have seen from earlier chapters, not a particularly good objection. Expressive practices in music have not been as immutable as Cooke believes. However, it is this objection that provides the motivation for his seminal work, *The Language of Music*. If music has such a long and (fairly) consistent connection with expression, how is this supposed to be explained? It seems plausible, at least to Cooke, that the expressive power of music comes from the tensions inherent in the tonal system. And since the tonal system is based upon the natural overtone series, the expressive power of music is ultimately grounded in the natural overtone series. So, although expressive practices are certainly strengthened by associations, the reason that they have remained relatively constant throughout the history of Western tonal music is that music is naturally expressive of emotions.

Since tonal tensions lie at the heart of musical expression, Cooke begins by analyzing the expressive characteristics of all twelve notes of the tonal scale, from the tonic to the major seventh. Understanding what a short melodic phrase expresses, then, is a simple matter of putting the expressions of the tensions together. For example, given that the tonic and dominant are emotionally neutral and the minor third is expressive of

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Cooke’s use of ‘tension’ is different from our use today. Our notion of tension is wrapped up in the concepts of consonance and dissonance—dissonance introduces tension, consonance resolves it. For Cooke, however, ‘tension’ in the tonal system merely refers to the interval between a note and the tonic. So, the major third, although very consonant to our ears, is a tonal tension.
tragedy, then the ascending melodic phrase 5-1-3 (minor), by aiming for the minor third, is expressive of approaching, and accepting, tragedy. 

*The Language of Music*, then, is a musical phrasebook. Cooke analyzes sixteen distinct musical phrases, and after giving the explanation of what a phrase expresses, he gives a wealth of actual musical examples from the past 600 years to show that, not only should a phrase express such-and-such an emotion, composers have actually used it to do so. The 5-1-3 (minor), for example, was used by Heinrich Schütz to accompany “My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” in his 1666 St. Matthew Passion. Cooke thinks the sixteen musical phrases are by no means an exhaustive list of musical phrases in the tonal system, but with the theoretical groundwork he lays down, anyone with some tenacity could determine what any given tonal musical phrase most likely expresses.

With multiculturalism firmly entrenched in today’s musicological scholarship, the inherent Eurocentrism and anachronisms of Cooke’s theory have led to it being widely regarded as discredited. The following passage should give some hint as to why.

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178 Cooke, 1959, pp. 124-125. This is, admittedly, a rather crude characterization of how Cooke determines the expressive content of musical phrases. There are many important mitigating factors that have been ignored here. A more precise characterization will follow shortly.
179 For the association theorist, the musical examples are a wonderful illustration of the repetition and codification of expressive meanings.
180 See, for example Cook, 2001, p. 57.
Explanations of the expressive qualities of utterly alien music, such as that of the Indian, African, Chinese, and Japanese peoples, would have to come from experts on such music: it suffices to say that, wherever Western European civilization has penetrated another culture, and set the people’s thoughts along the road to material happiness, the tonal music of Western Europe has begun to oust the music of that culture from the people’s affections.\(^{181}\)

The charge of Eurocentrism is a serious and, in some respects, justified one, and Cooke’s theory is fraught with other difficulties as well: (a) there is no natural connection between tonal tensions and emotions, (b) the emotional descriptions of melodic phrases are often far too specific, and (c) music is clearly less immune to change in expressive content than he believes.

Nevertheless, we must be careful not to disregard the valuable insights within Cooke’s work. If we cannot develop any sort of musical phrasebook, then that suggests that expressive components are more fluid (e.g., relying on a general melodic ‘contour’ rather than specific motifs.) Fortunately, Cooke provides a valuable push in the direction of a musical phrasebook. Clearly, some things will have to be given up (e.g., the naturalistic foundation for musical expression) and some expressive

\(^{181}\) Cooke, 1959, p. 55. This passage is not strictly incompatible with multiculturalism. The point is simply that, with its suggestion that cultures will give up their own music when presented with Western music and its ties to material happiness, these sorts of passages give the multiculturalist pause.
descriptions will have to be changed (e.g., the ascending 5-1-3 (major) melodic phrase is not *exclusively* expressive of “a sense of exuberance, triumph or aspiration”), but in the end, the prospects for a musical vocabulary remain.

*Tonality Naturalized*

A pure tone is a single frequency, but in general, the notes we hear in music are composite tones. That is, they consist of many pure tones sounded simultaneously. When we play a note on the piano, the whole string vibrates and creates the pure tone called the ‘fundamental’ (i.e., the tone with the lowest frequency). However, the two halves of the string also vibrate to create another pure tone (called the 1<sup>st</sup> overtone), and the thirds vibrate to create the 2<sup>nd</sup> overtone, so on and so forth. When we hear a note on the piano, the note we hear is a combination of the fundamental and the overtones. “This means that in nature itself, a single note sets up a harmony of its own; and this harmonic series has been the (unconscious) basis of Western European harmony and the tonal system.”

With C being the fundamental, if we were to map out the beginning of the overtone series on a scale, it would look as follows.

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182 Cooke 1959, p. 41. To clarify, the harmonic series is the overtone series.
183 The starred notes are those that seem ‘out-of-tune’ to us.
Figure 4. The Overtone Series

If the frequency of the fundamental is $n$, then the frequency of the octave is $2n$; likewise, if the fundamental is produced by vibrating the whole string, the octave is produced by vibrating $\frac{1}{2}$ the string.

It should be clear that there is a strong correspondence between the natural overtone series and the tonal system. The first interval that appears is the octave, the second is the fifth (or dominant), notes 4, 5, and 6 combine to make the major triad, and notes 8-16 (with note 14, the minor seventh, being an exception) are the major scale. Going further in the overtone series, notes 16-32 give us our chromatic scale (with a few extraneous notes). Even for those “out-of-place” notes, such as notes 7 and 14, Cooke provides a detailed historical explanation of how they fit into the Western system of tonality. At any rate, we can easily grant that
Cooke has made good on the first part of his argument, that the tonal system is based on the “natural laws of harmony”. But it is the second part of his argument, that musical expression is inherently based on the tensions within the tonal system, that proves far more contentious.

The fundamental note is the tonic. According to Cooke, since tonal music is characterized primarily by having a drive to return to the tonic, the tonic expresses (that is, arouses) a sense of finality.184 Apart from this, the tonic is emotionally neutral. Also emotionally neutral is the next distinct note that appears in the overtone series, the dominant.185 Since there is a constant pull to return to the tonic, the dominant expresses a sense of flux.186

Why should the tonic and dominant be emotionally neutral? Cooke notes that in the 600 years that tonal music has been the standard in Western music, the strongest expressive correlations have been between music in major keys expressing positive emotions and music in minor keys expressing negative emotions. Since the tonic and dominant are the same pitches in both major and minor keys, they cannot be the cause of this correlation. For the same reason, the fourth and passing tones are

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184 Cooke, 1959, p. 47.
185 The octave is considered the same note as the fundamental.
186 But it is emotionally neutral insofar as it does not express either a sense of joy or sorrow.
also emotionally neutral. The pitches that are different between major and minor keys are the third, the sixth, and the seventh, and it is these tensions that determine whether music expresses positive or negative emotions.

The triad, along with the major and minor scale, lies at the heart of the tonal system. As Cooke points out, the ancient Greeks’ harmony was predicated around parallel octaves. By the ninth century, the fifth was thrown into the harmonic mix. Around the twelfth century, though, the third began to emerge as a fundamental part of harmony and with the third, the triad, and tonal music, was established.

As mentioned before, notes 4, 5, and 6 of the overtone series form the major triad. And since note 4, the tonic, and note 6, the dominant, also appears in the minor triad, the most important note in the major triad is note 5, the major third. What, then, is the connection between the major third and the expression of pleasure? Cooke is clear: “That the major third should be found to express pleasure should surprise no one, since it is present, as we have noticed, early on in the harmonic series: it

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187 However, the second does have an emotional charge, but only as a tendency note in a major or minor context.
188 Cooke, 1959, p. 42. Cooke’s version of music history should be taken with a grain of salt. Very little is known about what the ancient Greeks’ actual musical practices were like, and since folk music in the middle ages was rarely written down, it is unclear when the use of the fifth and third in harmony was established.
189 In The Language of Music, Cooke uses “pleasure” to refer to the emotion happiness. I use “pleasure” throughout this chapter to remain consistent with Cooke’s terminology.
is nature’s own basic harmony, and by using it we feel ourselves to be at one with nature.”¹⁹⁰ The closer our harmony matches the overtone series (or at least the beginnings of it), the more “right” it is, and with rightness comes pleasure.

In contrast to the “rightness” of the major third, the minor third, which doesn’t appear in the overtone series until note 19, expresses grief. The minor triad bears a sufficiently close resemblance to the major triad that we hear the minor triad as a flawed major triad. That flaw comes from the minor third, and so we hear it as wrong and unnatural. “Western composers, expressing the ‘rightness’ of happiness by means of the major third, expressed the ‘wrongness’ of grief by means of the minor third, and for centuries, pieces in a minor key had to have a ‘happy ending’—a final major chord (the ‘tierce de Picardie’) or a bare fifth. But eventually, the need to express truth—cases of unrelieved tragedy—led composers to have an ‘unhappy ending’ in the minor.”¹⁹¹

Before we go further, I want to address an objection to Cooke’s naturalizing of tonality that, I believe, stems from a misunderstanding (or at least a selective reading) of what Cooke is trying to do. Examining the objection and the reply will help in further understanding Cooke’s position. The objection is this: Cooke states that the major third expresses

¹⁹⁰ Cooke, 1959, p. 51.
¹⁹¹ Cooke, 1959, p. 58.
pleasure because it appears early on in the overtone series. However, the fifth appears even earlier in that series and it, according to Cooke, is emotionally neutral. He has not shown why the third should have the added importance that he gives it. If the major third is so “right,” there should be more reason to think so than the simple fact that it appears earlier than other intervals. The implicit objection here is that Cooke is arguing for the superiority, the “rightness”, of the tonal system over other musical systems, though he has little justification for his claim.¹⁹²

Though Cooke might, at times, be seen as pushing for the superiority of tonal music, he is not committed to this. The major third is important but only within the context of the tonal system. Furthermore, the tonal system is natural because it is based on the overtone series, but it is certainly not the only system capable of being based on the overtone series, nor must the overtone series be the only natural basis for a system of music. Other systems could place added importance on the fourth or the fifth, or forego the concept of the tonic altogether. These systems will have their own standards of “rightness” and “wrongness”.

With regard to twelve-tone music, Cooke writes:

Twelve-note music has broken away from the tonal system, producing harmony of acutely dissonant effect; conservative

¹⁹² For various versions of this objection, see Scruton, 1997 and Davies, 1994.
opponents of this music declare that it goes against the ‘natural laws of harmony’; twelve-note theorists have retaliated by maintaining the derivation of the tonal system from the harmonic series to be pure illusion, much being made of the practical inaudibility of the harmonic series...One feels that both sides are misguided, since it is possible for a music based on the harmonic series to give way eventually to a music not based on that series...Perhaps twelve-note music will eventually justify its ‘naturalness’ by discovering another ‘natural law’ of music on which it is unconsciously based.

Does this reply to the objection undercut his project of naturalizing the expression of emotion in music? It would only if he had argued that individual tones (e.g., the frequency 440 hertz) have expressive content. But it is the tensions that have expressive content, and these tensions are relative to each musical system. So, Cooke can maintain that some intervals, like the major third, are more “right” than others while also denying that the tonal system is inherently superior. In other words, it was neither natural nor inevitable that we chose the tonal system over modal or other music. However, given that we did choose to ground our music in the tonal system, it was natural and, Cooke would say, inevitable (because of the nature of the overtone series) that we came to regard some intervals as “right” and others as “wrong”.

At least, that is what his theory allows him to say, and indeed, that is what he does say more often than not. However, Cooke often applies his theory in such specific ways that the results are implausible. He claims
that the history of tonality closely parallels the history of the “uniquely” Western belief that individuals have a right to pursue personal material happiness. As the tonal system was adopted in Europe, the major triad was used to express this sort of happiness. As the idea of personal material happiness waned in the 19th century, so did the predominance of the major triad.193 “Ever since about 1850—since doubts have been cast, in intellectual circles, on the possibility, or even the desirability, of basing one’s life on the concept of personal happiness—chromaticism has brought more and more painful tensions into our art-music…”194 This is still consistent with the claim that other systems of music can naturally express similar emotions with different musical features.

Cooke runs into trouble when he claims that this sort of happiness can be expressed only by the major triad. Perhaps this is true within the tonal system, but it does not have to be true across musical systems. According to Cooke’s explanation, the major third has emotional content only because it so important for tonality. So, other musical systems could treat the major third like Cooke treats the fifth, as emotionally neutral. However, even if we grant that a jump can be made between the “rightness” of the major triad and the expression of pleasure by the major

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193 At least in Western art music. Cooke would be pleased to know that the major triad is alive and well today in the commercial and pleasure-driven world of pop music. As before, Cooke’s version of the history of music and philosophy should be taken with a grain of salt.
194 Cooke, 1959, p. 54.
triad, this is a far cry from associating the “rightness” of the major triad with the sort of happiness typified by personal material wealth. Yet, Cooke supports this necessary connection. “Wherefore it is only natural that, outside the orbit of Western European civilization, and outside the period of its belief in the individual’s right to progress towards material happiness, people whose lives have not been based on this attitude have not insisted on the major third, but have expressed their own assertion of vitality in different ways.”

Cooke is simply wrong here. His general theory is not committed to the claim that the expression of personal material happiness belongs exclusively to the major triad, and furthermore, he has no grounds to claim that it does. Cooke’s theory is stronger when we focus on tensions being expressive within the context of the tonal system and ignore his occasional impulse to universalize musical expression.

At any rate, the major third expresses pleasure because it occurs early in the overtone series; the minor third expresses grief because it both sounds like a flawed major third and does not appear until relatively late in the overtone series. Cooke gives similar reasons for why the major sixth, the minor sixth, and the major seventh express what they do. The minor seventh is an unusual case because it, being note 7 in the overtone

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195 Though this claim is highly contentious. See Scruton, 1997.
series, appears much earlier than the major seventh. However, note 7 seems very ‘out of tune’ to our ears in relation to the notes surrounding it and is flawed in that respect.\(^\text{197}\)

The following table\(^\text{198}\) charts out the expressive content of all twelve notes in the tonal system. This will be useful in understanding how Cooke arrives at the expressive content of melodic phrases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note</th>
<th>Expressive Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tonic</td>
<td>Emotionally neutral; context of finality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor Second</td>
<td>Semitonal tension down to the tonic, in a minor context: spiritless anguish, context of finality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Second</td>
<td>As a passing note, emotionally neutral. As a whole-tone tension down to the tonic, in a major context, pleasurable longing, context of finality.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^\text{197}\) This explanation of note 7 invites a charge of circularity for Cooke. The tonal system is natural only insofar as it matches the overtone series. By claiming that note 7 is flawed by sounding out of tune to our (tonal) ears, Cooke is implying that the overtone series is natural only insofar as it matches the tonal system.

\(^\text{198}\) Cooke 1959, pp. 89-90.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interval</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minor Third</td>
<td>Concord, but a ‘depression’ of natural third: stoic acceptance, tragedy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Third</td>
<td>Concord, natural third: joy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal Fourth</td>
<td>As a passing note, emotionally neutral. As a semitonal tension down to the major third, pathos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharp Fourth</td>
<td>As modulating note to the dominant key, active aspiration. As ‘augmented fourth’, pure and simple, devilish and inimical forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant</td>
<td>Emotionally neutral; context of flux, intermediacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor Sixth</td>
<td>Semitonal tension down to the dominant, in a minor context: active anguish in a context of flux</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Sixth</td>
<td>As a passing note, emotionally neutral. As a whole-tone tension down to the dominant, in a major context, pleasurable longing in a context of flux.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor Seventh</td>
<td>Semitonal tension down to major sixth, or whole-tone tension down to minor sixth, both unsatisfactory, resolving again down to the dominant: ‘lost’ note, mournfulness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Major Seventh

As a passing note, emotionally neutral. As a semitonal tension up to the tonic, violent longing, aspiration in a context of finality.

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Figure 5. The Expressive Content of Tonal Tensions

Although the tonal tensions are at the heart of the expression of emotion for Cooke, three other aspects of music play a critical role in accentuating those emotions: volume/timbre, rhythm/tempo, and pitch. Volume and timbre affect the emphasis that is placed on the emotion being expressed, in that the louder the music is, and the deeper and richer the tone of the sound, the more weight that is given to that emotion. Likewise, the softer the music is, and the thinner the sound, the less weight that is given to the emotion. Rhythm and tempo affect the level of animation of the emotion. The faster the tempo, the more animated the emotion. The slower the tempo, the less animated the emotion. Similarly, a piece in duple meter will tend to be more rigid and controlled, while a piece in triple meter will tend to be more relaxed. Lastly, contour, the up and down motion of the musical phrase, affects the “direction” that an

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199 Describing the sharp fourth as “devilish and inimical” is a clear example of Cooke’s frequent unwarranted specificity.

200 Though as seen in Chapter 3, the timbre can affect the type of emotion expressed to a far greater degree than simply the emphasis placed on it. Cooke, however, does not go into detail about when these circumstances occur, possibly because he does not know how to give timbre a natural foundation.
emotion takes. A musical phrase that rises in pitch expresses an outgoing emotion, while a musical phrase that falls in pitch expresses an incoming one.

With the tonal tensions and accentuating aspects in place, we can see how Cooke arrives at his musical vocabulary, for what is expressed by a musical phrase is simply the progression of the individual tonal tensions modified by the accentuating aspects. For instance, with the ascending 1-(2)-3-(4)-5 (major) musical phrase, Cooke states:

We have postulated that to rise in pitch is to express an outgoing emotion; we know that, purely technically speaking, the tonic is the point of repose, from which one sets out, and to which one returns; that the dominant is the note of intermediacy, towards which one sets out, and from which one returns; and we have established that the major third is the note which ‘looks on the bright side of things’, the note of pleasure, of joy. All of which would suggest that to rise from the tonic to the dominant through the major third...is to express an outgoing, active, assertive emotion of joy.

Cooke describes fifteen other musical phrases in similar ways. For example, the ascending 1-(2)-3-(4)-5 (minor) is an expression of an outgoing feeling of pain (an assertion of sorrow), the descending 5-(4)-3-(2)-1 (minor) is an expression of an incoming feeling of pain in a context of finality (an acceptance of tragedy), and the arched 5-3-(2)-1 (minor)

\[^{201}\text{This is in the same vein as the association theory claiming that what an entire piece expresses is dependent upon the expressive character of its musical components.}\]
\[^{202}\text{Cooke, 1959, p. 115.}\]
expresses a brief outburst of pain (because it leaps from the dominant to the minor third) followed by a tragic resignation (because it falls from the minor third to the tonic). The sixteen musical phrases Cooke analyzes are by no means an exhaustive list of the melodies available within the tonal system, but Cooke believes such a list is possible with the groundwork he has provided. “It is hoped that this book will serve as...a foundation on which eventually to build a more comprehensive classification of most of the terms of musical language; and that it will thereby make it ultimately possible to understand and assess a composer’s work as a report on human experience...”\textsuperscript{203} Furthermore, although he does not give generative rules for determining the expression of a musical phrase, based on the descriptions he gives of musical phrases, it is not hard to see what those rules would look like.

1) An ascending musical phrase expresses an outgoing, more universal, emotion; a descending one expresses an incoming, more personal, emotion.

2) If a musical phrase is significantly arched,\textsuperscript{204} the musical phrase expresses an outburst of whatever emotion is expressed by the tonal tension at the apex of the arch. Likewise, if a musical

\textsuperscript{203} Cooke, 1959, p. xii.
\textsuperscript{204} That is, a jump greater than a fourth. With anything less, Cooke claims, the outburst is more of a whimper.
phrase has an inverted arch, the emotion expressed by the tonal
tension at the nadir is muted.

3) The emotion expressed by a musical phrase is the evolution of
its individual tonal tensions. That is, disregarding the
emotionally neutral tonic, dominant, and passing notes, the
emotion expressed by a musical phrase is the emotion expressed
by the first tonal tension, which is then accentuated or tempered
by each following tonal tension.

4) If a musical phrase ends on the tonic, the emotion expressed is
put in a context of finality. If a musical phrase ends on any
other tonal tension, the emotion expressed is put in a context of
flux/longing.

5) Volume/timbre and rhythm/tempo accentuate the emotion
accordingly.

With these rules in place, and with a little tenacity, we can
determine the emotion expressed by any tonal musical phrase. For
example, let us look at the arched 5-3-2-6 (major), which is not examined
by Cooke. Because it is arched with the major third at the apex, it
expresses an outburst of joy. The major third then descends (indicating a
more personal emotional expression) to the major second and then the
major sixth (both of which express pleasurable longing). Since the

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musical phrase does not end on the tonic, the longing is accentuated. The musical phrase as a whole, then, expresses an exclamation of joy and a deep-seated, though pleasurable, personal longing.

Does Cooke’s framework provide us with the right answer about what the arched 5-3-2-6 (major) expresses and how composers have used it throughout the 600-year history of tonality? With regards to whether or not the arched 5-3-2-6 (major) actually does naturally express joy with pleasurable longing, this answer depends on whether we accept Cooke’s account of the natural origins of tonal tensions (and, as we shall see shortly, we should not accept the account). With regards to whether composers have used the arched 5-3-2-6 (major) to express joy with pleasurable longing, Cooke is on better footing. The strength of Cooke’s project is the wealth of musical examples he presents in order to justify his analysis. For every musical phrase he analyzes, he gives numerous examples of actual music from the past 600 years that seemingly express what Cooke claims they should. So, even if musical expression does not have a natural basis, Cooke has at least demonstrated that there are strong expressive traditions in tonal music.

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205 The association theory, by contrast, would say that the answer depends on whether the phrase has been used in the context of pleasurable, personal longing (as well as the appropriate habituations and codifications).
206 So much the better for the association theory.
By looking at texted music, Cooke believes he is able to settle determinately the question about the intentions of composers. More often than not, according to Cooke, the text of a piece is unambiguous about what emotion it expresses. The composer, knowing the text that will be used, composes the music that best matches the expression of that text. “...if a composer uses expressive material...he must consciously or unconsciously intend it to express what in fact it does express, otherwise he would not use it but would turn to material of a less expressive kind.”

So, what of the arched 5-3-2-6 (major)? In 1965, six years after the publication of *The Language of Music*, the Oscar Meyer Corporation copyrighted a jingle. The opening line of that jingle, accompanied by the arched 5-3-2-6 (major), was:

*Oh, I wish I were an Oscar Meyer wiener!*

Against Naturalism

Cooke argues that expression in musical phrases is natural because the expression of a whole musical phrase is determined by its components, the tonal tensions, which are themselves naturally expressive. By identifying the expressive characteristics of each tonal tension and explaining how the various components fit together to determine the

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207 As we shall see shortly, Handel’s *Messiah* / erotic love duet discussed at the beginning of the dissertation will be very problematic for this strategy of Cooke’s.

208 Cooke, 1959, p. 231.
expression of the musical phrase, Cooke lays the groundwork for a musical vocabulary.

Cooke’s explanations of the natural origins of the musical components are fairly dubious. Because of this and other reasons, many believe that he has failed in proving that a dictionary of musical phrases is possible. The goal of this section is examine various objections to Cooke’s theory, more specifically, to determine the reasons behind thinking that a musical vocabulary is not possible under his account. In the end, we shall see that what is implausible is not a musical phrasebook, but rather a musical phrasebook based in naturalism.

A central, if not the most important, goal of Cooke’s project is to show that there is a natural basis for our claims about musical expression. Cooke claims that our ideas of musical expression have been strengthened by years of associating certain musical phrases with certain texts or contexts (e.g., when hearing the ascending 1-3-5 (major) accompanied by something almost always happy), but associations cannot tell the whole story. There must be something about the music itself that made the first composer who linked a happy lyric with the major third choose the major instead of the minor third.  

As I have shown in Chapter 3, we can use associations to account for the connections between the major mode and happiness and the minor

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209 This is the logical priority thesis.
mode and sadness. Even if we grant that he is correct in grounding tonality in the overtone series, Cooke has given us no reason to believe that the “rightness” of the major third necessarily implies pleasure or the “wrongness” of the minor third necessarily implies pain. He must do more than simply assert claims like the following: “People often single out a lively minor piece from the eighteenth century and say, ‘Here is proof, if proof were needed, that minor music need not be sad’. The fact that proof does seem to be needed shows the inherent connection between the minor system and painful emotions.”\textsuperscript{210} The need for proof tells us nothing about an inherent connection between minor music and painful emotions. It is just as plausible, if not more so, that the recognition of a strong musical association connecting minor music and painful contexts compels people to find counter-examples in order to show that the connection is just that, a strong musical association.

Consider another case in which Cooke describes the ‘natural’ origins of a musical component. Concerning pitch, Cooke writes:

\begin{quote}
Pitch is felt by everyone to be an ‘up-and-down’ dimension. I say everyone, though there are those who hold that this is an illusion; that there is no reason for calling notes with more vibrations per second ‘higher’, except in so far as they have always been written higher on the stave. In answer to this, it should hardly be necessary to point out the connexions between the following facts: (1) By the law of gravity, ‘up’ is an effort for man, ‘down’ a relaxation; (2) To sing ‘high’ notes, or play them on wind, brass, or string instruments,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{210} Cooke, 1959, p. 51.
demands a considerable effort; (3) To tune a string ‘upwards’, one screws ‘up’ its tension...There is a natural instinct in these matters, which the intellect should respect...\(^{211}\)

Here it is clear that Cooke is confusing something natural with something that is deeply felt but plainly conventional. The ancient Greeks called the higher notes ‘lower’ and the lower notes ‘higher’ because when the lyre was held in playing position, the higher-pitched strings were closer to the ground. In historical China, the terms ‘clearer’ and ‘muddier’ were used instead of higher and lower for obvious descriptive reasons. Furthermore, it is not clear that (2) follows suit. For most people, throat singing is much harder than singing with a falsetto,\(^{212}\) and it takes some effort to play pedal notes on brass instruments. Likewise, it is merely a contingent fact that low notes are easier to play on string instruments. One can easily think of an instrument design where the low notes require considerable effort. So, even if we grant Cooke the truth of (1), there is little reason to accept the correlation between high notes and effort and low notes and relaxation. Because of this and the fact that other cultures used different and, in the ancient Greeks’ case, contradictory terminology, there is certainly no reason to think that we have a\(\textit{natural instinct}\) concerning which direction or property correctly characterizes pitch.

\(^{211}\) Cooke, 1959, p. 102.

\(^{212}\) Although you have to relax your throat to throat sing, it takes a considerable effort to do so.
Cooke is wrong about pitch being naturally ‘up-and-down’ instead of being a mere convention. But, he has no more reason to suppose the expression of tonal tensions should be any different. Cooke claims that the whole mechanism—emotions determined primarily by tensions and contour—is natural. Now, at least half of the mechanism is clearly not natural. Why should we think the other half is natural? Cooke can only appeal to the fact that tonality has exhibited a long and consistent history of certain musical phrases expressing similar emotions time and time again.\(^\text{213}\)

Though Cooke’s musical examples are impressive in both breadth and depth, expression in tonal music is, unfortunately, not as immune to change as he needs for the purposes of his theory. To revisit the example from the introduction, consider the case of Handel’s Messiah mentioned in Chapter 1. In July of 1741, Handel composed an erotic love duet, “Nò, di voi non vo’ fidarmi”. The opening text was “No, I’m not going to trust you, blind love, cruel beauty!”. One month later, he used the same music (with only nominal changes) in the Messiah to accompany the words “For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given.”

\(^{213}\) A fact that the wholly non-natural association theory is more than with.
Cooke relies on texts to determine what exactly the composer intends the music to express (not because the text influences the emotional expression of the music in any way, but because the emotional expression of texts are more readily understood and composers will compose so that the expression of the music matches that of the text). If we were to do the same here, then the two pieces of music seem to express
two different emotions (though, to be fair, not two wholly unrelated ones). The melody of the erotic love duet expresses a flirtatious, sensual love; the melody from “For unto us a Child is born” expresses a devotional joy. However, according to Cooke, the descending 5-1-4-3 (major) expresses only one emotion, presumably an incoming emotion of pure joy marked by a tinge of pathos.\footnote{The descending 5-1-4-3 (major) is not a musical phrase that Cooke explicitly examines, though given how he treats related musical phrases, my emotional characterization of the 5-1-4-3 seems fair.} This emotion does not seem best suited to match either of the emotions of the texts, though Handel must have had some good reason to believe the music would be appropriate in both circumstances. Composers, generally in tune with appropriate settings for their music, would not use something so ill-fitting. On Cooke’s theory, however, the music itself is naturally expressive of a definite emotion, and it is one that seems to conflict with the emotions expressed by the text. Thus, instead of sounding appropriate, the pieces as a whole should sound expressively confused.\footnote{For a clear example of expressive confusion, pay close attention to the last verse of “You are my Sunshine”. The music is bright and happy, though the verse is “You told me once dear/you’d always love me/if I would only say the same/but now you’ve left me/to love another/You have shattered all my dreams.”}

Cooke might respond to this objection by claiming that sensual love and love for God were not considered dissimilar emotions in the 18th century, and he might be right. Even so, the case of the descending 5-1-4-3 (major) illustrates how Cooke’s theory suffers from excessive
specificity. One picture of musical expression\textsuperscript{216} might be this: the descending 5-1-4-3 (major) expresses some general sense of pleasure and the text then pushes the expression of the piece (text and all) to something more specific like sensual love or devotional joy. In other words, context does a lot of work in determining the expression of a piece. Cooke rejects this picture because here the music is not doing anything other than expressing a general sense of pleasure, and this would not explain the historical fact that composers from the 15\textsuperscript{th} century to today used certain musical phrases to express certain specific emotions (or at least the composers always chose to use certain musical phrases to accompany texts that expressed a specific emotion). If both the ascending 1-3-5 (major) and the ascending 1-5-6-5 (major) just express a general sense of pleasure, then why have composers historically chosen the ascending 1-5-6-5 (major) to express maximal spiritual joy when the ascending 1-3-5 (major) would seemingly work just as well? Cooke’s answer is that there must be something about the music itself, the tonal tensions, that makes the one phrase more appropriate than the other.

One central difficulty of Cooke’s theory is that even though tonality is a fairly limited system, there are still an enormous number of distinct musical phrases. And Cooke, with his tonal tensions in hand, feels

\textsuperscript{216} One that, with qualifications, is compatible with the association theory.
compelled to give each of them its own unique emotion to express. The result of this is that the musical phrases end up expressing absurdly specific emotions. Cooke writes that the ascending 1-5-6-5 (major) (the accompaniment to “Happy Trails” and “California Girls”, and the melody to “Baa Baa Black Sheep”) “is, in fact, expressive of an absolute happiness that can never be fully experienced in civilized human life but only by savages, children, animals or birds, or saints or imaginary blessed beings…[it is] set aside for states of pure blessedness.”

This is an utterly ludicrous description of this melodic phrase. Given that he earlier states “that people can only react to the emotions expressed in a work of art according to their own capacity to feel those emotions”, we can never fully grasp the absolute happiness expressed by the opening phrase of “Happy Trails.” Cooke, with his tendency to overstate the case, presents us with a real problem: how can we salvage his theory (or aspects of it) when the descriptions that come right out of it are outrageously implausible? One way (with a nod to the association theory) is to see when the level of specificity is matched by the context. “Pomp and Circumstance” expresses the solemn yet excited joy of graduation because of its highly specific context. However, it is absurd to think “Happy

\[218\] Cooke, 1959, p. 21.
“Happy Trails” expresses what Cooke claims it does because it lacks a similarly specific context.

Here, then, is the dilemma for Cooke: either music expresses very specific emotions with the result that musical phrases in pieces such as “Happy Trails” are saddled with absurd expressive meanings, or we can accept that music expresses general emotions made more specific by context with the result that it becomes difficult to explain the general consistency of expressive practices in Western music. The association theory, as I have suggested, presents a way out by linking the specificity of the expressive character to the specificity of the context. Cooke, however, rejects any influence of context on emotional expression, he opts for the former line. As a result, cases such as the descending 5-1-4-3 (major) in the Messiah present a challenge to his account, since the only way either “No, di voi non vo’ fidarmi” or “For unto us a Child is born” is not expressively confused is if the emotions expressed in both, sensual love and devotional joy, are really just the same emotion.

A far more damaging example to Cooke’s claim that music is naturally expressive of emotions is that of the descending tetrachord. The descending tetrachord is a four-note repeating baseline pattern. In figure 8, the tetrachord is the repeating D, C, B♭, A.

219 I have ignored the contributions made by tempo, volume, and timbre. However, it should be remembered that they merely accentuate, not change, the emotional content of the musical phrase.
The descending tetrachord is interesting because in 17th century Europe, it was used to express both pleasurable love in a celebration of the Lord and lamentation by lovelorn females. The reason for this duality is that it arose independently in two different musical styles, Roman and Venetian. Luigi Rossi (1598-1653), influenced by the Roman style, used the descending tetrachord to express pleasurable love throughout his opera *L’Orfeo*, whereas J. S. Bach (1685-1750), influenced by the Venetian style, treated the descending tetrachord as an emblem of lament. And although they came from different styles, both Rossi and Bach were firmly rooted in the tonal tradition.

According to Cooke, the descending tetrachord, within the context of tonality, is naturally expressive of lament, and any tonal composer

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220 Today, the descending tetrachord is found in many works of Jazz such as “The Stray Cat Strut”, though it feels expressive of neither pleasurable love nor lament.
221 For more information on the expressive history of the descending tetrachord, see Rosow 1999.
should be able to recognize it as such. However, there is no reason to think that Rossi was being ironic in *L’Orfeo*, nor is there reason to think that the music of the opera sounded wholly inappropriate with the libretto, so how can Cooke’s theory make sense of the expressive uses of the descending tetrachord? With regards to Handel, his erotic love duet, and the *Messiah*, Cooke could have argued that contrary to appearances, sensual love and devotional joy are really the same emotion, but that strategy certainly would not work in this case; pleasurable love and lament are clearly two different emotions. Cooke writes, “a composer...must consciously or unconsciously intend [the composition] to express what in fact it does express...”\textsuperscript{223} So, the only way for Cooke to make sense of the descending tetrachord being naturally expressive of lament is to claim that Rossi was unconsciously intending the relevant parts of *L’Orfeo* to express lament (even though, simultaneously, he was consciously intending those parts to express pleasurable love). This is hardly plausible.\textsuperscript{224} Of course, Cooke could give up the claim that composers must intend to express what the music expresses, but this leaves him with the equally implausible conclusion that Rossi, although he presumably felt the music was appropriate, was, nevertheless,

\textsuperscript{223} Cooke, 1959, p. 231.
\textsuperscript{224} The association theory explanation would be that the associations of the tetrachord and pleasurable love just died out. (Perhaps Bach’s music was just better and thus lasted longer.) This left only the associations with lament.
completely wrong in using it. Because the descending tetrachord expressed both pleasurable love and lament, it cannot be naturally expressive of either of them. Furthermore, there is little reason to think that this is unique to the descending tetrachord; presumably any musical phrase could be developed in a different style to express something different from what we commonly hear it as expressing. If so, then music is not naturally expressive of emotions. Cooke might be right that tonal tensions and musical phrases have certain expressive qualities, and he might be right about what those qualities are, but if so, it is a result of those qualities being deep-seated conventions, not intrinsic connections.

The empirical results of studies based on Cooke’s theory are fairly inconclusive. As noted in Chapter 4, Western musical hegemony has made it difficult for the theory ever to be properly tested. The subject would have to have been brought up in a tonal musical culture so that the proper evaluative framework would be in place, but the subject would also have to have never been exposed to music that was accompanied by any extra-musical content in order to rule out the possibility that expression was based on (or distorted by) association. Thus, the results of these empirical studies, though important, should be taken with a grain of salt.

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225 This is not to say that people can never be wrong about such things. See Chapter 2.
First, in “An Experimental Study of Deryck Cooke’s Theory of Music and Meaning,” Clive Gabriel gave a group of subjects, all non-musicians, a list of Cooke’s emotional descriptions for the sixteen basic terms discussed in the book. For each description, Gabriel played for them the corresponding basic term and asked them to rate on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being “matches perfectly” and 5 being “does not match at all”) how well the music matches the emotional description given. To limit the influence of other musical variables, the volume, rhythm, and timbre of all the terms were the same. Gabriel then gave a second group of subjects, also non-musicians, another list of Cooke’s emotional descriptions and asked them to rate the appropriateness of the music to the description on the same scale. Here, however, the descriptions were assigned to the basic terms randomly.

As it turns out, the mean agreement rating for the first group, where the descriptions were assigned by Cooke, was 3.29. The mean agreement rating for the second group, where the descriptions were assigned randomly, was 3.42. In other words, subjects were just as likely to say that a random description of the music was appropriate as they were to

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say that Cooke’s description of the music was appropriate. Gabriel’s conclusion is unequivocal:

The results...are clear cut: Cooke’s hypothesis is not supported by the empirical test to which it was subjected. It remains a possibility that composers have sometimes used “basic terms” in a culturally or even naturally determined manner but it appears unlikely that their affect in communication would be strong, failing as they did to affect the listeners in the present experiment, a result which is in contrast to the other attributes of music often investigated in the past.

Gabriel’s methodology has not been free of criticism. Sloboda has complained about the strict use of non-musicians in the study. Gabriel insisted on using non-musicians in an attempt to lessen the impact that association would play in the evaluations. By choosing subjects who are not as familiar with the clichés that composers have used throughout the centuries, he hoped to get a more accurate measurement on how naturally expressive these phrases might be. Sloboda argues, however, that non-musicians are less capable of perceiving the musical nuances that contribute to the expressiveness of music. Non-musicians might be able

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228 Another result of this experiment that was overlooked by Gabriel is that the mean agreement rating for Cooke’s description of the music is only a 3.29. The music is supposed to be naturally expressive of emotions, but according to normal non-musicians, the descriptions of the terms are slightly more inappropriate than they are appropriate.


230 Sloboda, 1985, p. 63. A better phrase to have used would be “inexperienced listeners” since a person could be very knowledgeable in music and music history while still being a non-musician.
to perceive that fast music is excited or minor music is sad, but perceiving the expressive qualities of an appoggiatura requires another level of sophistication.

Another problem with Gabriel’s study is that by standardizing rhythm, volume, articulation and timbre in an attempt to make the melodic line the only variable, the example, like typical midi music, is too disembodied to be seen as emotionally expressive music.\textsuperscript{231} As Sloboda notes, even though we use information from the eyes to recognize facial expressions, we need to see the eyes in the context of the rest of the face.\textsuperscript{232} Likewise, even though the melodic phrase might be the main vehicle for musical expression, we need to hear the melodic phrase in the context of the other parts of music—volume, rhythm, and timbre. If these features were artificially rigid, the example from Gabriel’s study just does not \textit{sound} like a melodic phrase. It is too difficult of a task for a listener to determine how appropriate a detailed verbal description is to what sounds like an unrelated succession of pitches.\textsuperscript{233}

In order to correct this last mistake made by Gabriel, Zofia Kaminska and Jennifer Woolf, in their study “Melodic Line and Emotion: Cooke’s Theory Revisited”, simply disregarded the verbal descriptions

\textsuperscript{231} Sloboda, 1985, p. 63. See also Kaminska, 2000, p. 137.
\textsuperscript{232} Sloboda, 1985, p. 63.
\textsuperscript{233} And this might account for why the mean agreements are so high.
given by Cooke.\textsuperscript{234} Instead, they gave each subject four scales, Continuation-Finality, Sorrow-Joy, Constancy-Outburst, and Submissiveness-Assertiveness, which were abstracted from Cooke’s basic terms. The scales ranged from 1 to 10, where 1 and 10 matched each named end of the scale. They then played each of the basic terms and asked the subjects to rate, on each scale, the expressive qualities of those terms. If Cooke’s descriptions are correct, then the 1-5-6-5 (major) would rank very near the continuation end of the Continuation-Finality scale, and near the joy, outburst, and assertiveness ends of their respective scales.

As it turns out, the only scale that matched Cooke’s descriptions with any degree of certainty was the Sorrow-Joy scale. Kaminska and Woolf conclude that these findings suggest that melodic phrases can have expressive power but not to the extent or specificity that Cooke would want. Melodic phrases can, by themselves, express joy or sorrow, but they cannot express the “yielding to grief; never-ending despair” sort of emotions Cooke tried to attribute to them.\textsuperscript{235} One of Cooke’s main goals was to show that melodic phrases had some expressive power, but at best, this study is a pyrrhic vindication.

\textsuperscript{234} Kaminska, 2000.
\textsuperscript{235} The association would just accept the results. The study used general expressive schemas (modes) and got the right results. No more specific expressive qualities were found because the study did not use any of the phrases with those specific entrenched expressive qualities.
The Limits of a Musical Vocabulary

Having analyzed Cooke’s theory and its various failings, we are now in a better position to see what we could and could not expect from a musical vocabulary. One of the central focuses of the issue of a musical vocabulary has been whether its origins are natural or association-based. As we have seen, it cannot be natural; it cannot simply be derived from the tonal tensions. The expressive nature of music has changed through time even though it remained part of the tonal system. Is the music used in both Handel’s “Nò, di voi non vo’ fidarmi” and “For unto us a Child is born” naturally expressive of devotional joy or sensual pleasure? As for the descending tetrachord, is it naturally expressive of pleasurable love or lament? It certainly cannot be both. Today, the descending tetrachord is featured in lounge music, such as Lou Rawls’s “Nobody But Me,” and seems expressive of a certain coolness. How does this fit into the naturalist picture? Cooke’s theory cannot account for this change of expressive properties, since the change is evidence that melodic phrases are not innately expressive of certain emotions. Tonal tensions have remained the same—the 15th century major third is the same interval as

236 One consequence of Langer’s theory is that the same piece of music can express two opposite emotions when the emotions share a dynamic feature. Nevertheless, Langer’s theory is very problematic. Sometimes, she suggests that what is symbolized is the form common to all feelings. Other times, what is symbolized is the form common to the various instances of an feeling. The problem is that emotions are richer than Langer allows. Once all the concomitants are stripped away, in what sense is the music still expressing devotional joy or sensual pleasure.
today’s major third—but expressive properties have changed. So,
Cooke’s claim that expressive properties are built out of tonal tensions
should be rejected. If we appeal to associations as in Chapter 3, then we
can explain how some melodic phrases can change expressively and some
remain the same.

Adopting the association theory also serves to clear up Cooke’s
problem of excessive specificity. A major fault of his theory is that all
melodic phrases are expressively on a par with each other. Of course,
they all express different emotions, but they all express the emotions with
equal power (putting aside the modifications that can be made by volume,
rhythm, and timbre) and equal specification. This seems contrary to
actual experiences with music. Some musical pieces, such as a Bach Two-
Part Invention, do not have strong expressive characters, whereas other
music (Albinoni’s Adagio, for instance) is expressively powerful. The
differences in the two pieces cannot be explained away simply by
differences in volume, rhythm, and timbre; there is something more
expressively robust about some melodic phrases than others. It is unclear
how Cooke’s naturalist theory could account for this.

As we have seen, the association theory can account for differences
in expressive specificity. The more overt and codified the association,

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237 Further arguments for this are in Chapter 2.
the clearer and more specific the emotion expressed. For example, one of the more obviously expressive melodic phrases is the 5-5-3-6-5-3 (major), the classic schoolyard taunt. This phrase is expressive of snottiness for nearly everyone, an emotion as specific, if not more so, than any emotion Cooke gave to his basic terms. This is because there is a very strong and very overt cultural association between this phrase and this specific emotion. Likewise, it seems that most people today, being more familiar with lounge music than that of the 17th century, would believe the descending tetrachord expressed a sort of coolness. The cultural association between the Sinatra/Dean Martin/Martini Lounge atmosphere and the descending tetrachord is today more deeply entrenched than any associations between the descending tetrachord and 17th century opera.

On the other hand, if there were no cultural associations between a melodic phrase and what it is supposed to express, then we should not expect it to express anything remotely as specific as what Cooke would want. The 1-2-3-2 (minor), for instance, expresses sadness, but nothing else very specific. Of course, Cooke’s view will seem strange (and mistaken) when the melodic phrase we take as “kinda sad” is characterized by him as expressing “a sense of brooding grief swelling out briefly into a burst of anguish and dying away again.”

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238 Cooke, 1959, p. 151.
melodic phrases get their expressive power from the same source, Cooke’s theory cannot handle the fact that the specificity of meaning comes in degrees. With the association theory, all that matters is the context in which it was originally used and the subsequent habituation and codification.

All in all, I have kept Cooke’s insight that expressive practices are relatively stable, but I have also provided further consideration for why the vocabulary should be grounded in associations rather than the overtone series (and naturalism in general). One might object that what is being developed is more a handbook of musical clichés than a true musical vocabulary. It is unclear what should be made of this objection. Musical clichés are among the most expressive parts of music, and any theory of musical expression should give them a central role.

Perhaps more to the heart of the matter is this: a true musical vocabulary will give not only the expressive meaning of phrases but will also describe the rules for determining the meaning of a whole piece from the meaning of its component parts. Roger Scruton writes,

There are no ‘parts of speech’, and therefore no clear procedures for deriving a semantic interpretation of a whole phrase or movement from the interpretation of its parts...the only procedure that he can follow is that of succession: the music means first this, and then that. Its meaning does not
derive from the meaning of its parts: there is simply an accumulation of meaning, without articulate structure.  

To this, Cooke could reply that he does have a procedure for determining the expressive content of a phrase from its parts (i.e., the tonal tensions). To determine the expressive content of a whole piece from the content of the component phrases, Cooke states,

We should laugh at a literary critic who maintained that verbal language had a logic of its own which made it incapable of coherent emotional expression; then let us laugh at the musical theorists who say the same of musical language...The whole misconception stems from some strange delusion that because music cannot organize its expressive terms into those logical sequences of intellectual meaning peculiar to verbal syntax, it is debarred from any kind of coherent expression whatsoever.  

Cooke makes a fair point here, but whether or not “music” and “language” should be linked together is not the issue here. Either, following Scruton, music cannot be a language because it cannot have the same sort of syntax as English or, following Cooke, music can be a language because having a sort of verbal syntax is not required of any language. Whether we have a musical vocabulary or a mere handbook of

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240 Cooke, 1959, pp. 211-212.
musical clichés, we have an important collection of examples that illustrates the codification of the expressive characters of many musical phrases throughout Western music history. This is certainly good for the plausibility of the association theory. The wealth of examples Cooke provides gives good reason to suppose that tonal music has a long and (fairly) consistent history of expressive practices, though he is mistaken about their origins. By appealing to deep-seated associations instead of the powers of tonal tensions, we can make sense of both the long-standing practices and, as in the case of the descending tetrachord, the occasional expressive change.
Conclusion: In Favor of Monolithicity

I have argued for an association theory of musical expression, whereby the expressive characters of musical works are ultimately determined by associations between the musical components of the work and extra-musical content. We might wonder at this point how strongly this point can be made—that expression is ultimately determined by associations. Malcolm Budd has claimed that the correct picture of music and expression will be less monolithic than the traditional theories of musical expression have been.\footnote{Budd, 1992, pp. 175-176.} After all, by examining people’s ascriptions of expressive properties to music, we are trying to make sense of what they are saying. Sometimes, à la the arousal theory, people really do mean to say that the piece makes them sad when they say, for instance, that the violin theme from \textit{Schindler’s List} is sad. Sometimes, people mean to say that “Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah” is happy because they can picture a person bouncing along happily to this music, just as the contour theory would predict. Sometimes, people mean to say that the “Imperial March” is dark and foreboding because it brings to mind associated images and
feelings about Darth Vader from *Star Wars*. Rather than one theory standing above all the others, Budd argues that the ultimate explanation of people’s claims about music will be more piecemeal—some claims are best explained by the arousal theory, others are best explained by the contour theory, others are best explained by the association theory, so on and so forth.

Far from conceding the point that musical expression will be a piecemeal theory, I have argued that our claims about musical expression can remain monolithic. Though the claims might ostensibly involve arousal and contours, associations still lie at the heart of expression. Under the arousal theory, what causes people to be sad when listening to sad music? If we accept Hanslick’s baggage claim, then associations are what cause the emotions. How might the association theory play a role in the contour theory? The best the contour theory can do, I argued, is show some relationship between expression and musical contours that resemble human behavior. It cannot, however, show that pieces are expressive because they resemble typical human expressive behavior. If I am right about the merits of the association theory, then it is more plausible to suppose that music acquires its expressive character through

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242 Some of the more musically inclined would also suggest that the “Imperial March” is dark and foreboding because it is reminiscent of both Holst’s “Mars, Bringer of War” and Chopin’s “Funeral March.”

243 Or, they play a fundamental role at the very least.
associations. The relationship between expression and musical contours comes about because we often anthropomorphize already expressive music to resemble human behavior. Budd might be right that we mean different things at different times when we say that music has some expressive quality, but those different usages still owe a great deal to associations. In short, with the association theory, we can keep the relationship between music and expression monolithic.

In Chapter 1, after quickly dismissing the arousal theory, I argued that an idea by Hanslick offered a nice solution to how music can arouse emotions. We are beginning to see the important role extra-musical content plays for music’s non-musical significance. Furthermore, I argued that absolute music, as we typically understand it, is wrapped up with extra-musical things (associations, contexts, and the like).

In Chapter 2, I presented a case study in musical expression that did two things. First, it highlighted two desiderata for a theory of musical expression: normativity and specificity. Second, the case study showed that the contour theory has a problem accounting for the specificity desiderata, as well as raised a serious anthropomorphization objection to the theory.

\[\text{The theory that music expresses an emotion by virtue of resembling human behavior typical of that emotion.}\]
In Chapter 3, I developed a defense for the association theory. I argued that musical components have expressive content, and associations (as well as habituation and codification) are crucial for the development of those component’s expressive characters. Once we established this, it was easy to see how associations can determine the expressive character of absolute music, since all musical components are shared by both absolute and non-absolute music.

In Chapter 4, I examined cross-cultural comparisons of musical expression. I showed that differences between how Westerners and non-Westerners perceive each other’s music supported the claim that associations and context have a fundamental role in the creation and fortification of expressive qualities.

In Chapter 5, I suggested that the existence of a musical phrasebook that matches up musical components with their expressive character benefits the plausibility of the association theory greatly. Such a phrasebook shows that musical components are fairly stable and can be codified in the musical lexicon of our culture. Deryck Cooke developed a widely discredited phrasebook, and I argued that the flaws of the phrasebook were located in his insistence that expression comes from purely natural elements of the music. A modified phrasebook of benefit
to the association theory was had by severing the phrasebook from its overtone series-based foundations.

All in all, I have shown how intimately linked musical expression is to contexts and associations. My initial concern regarding musical expression was that I did not know how theories that developed primarily on the absolute music of the Western Classical and Romantic periods could capture the richness and diversity of our attributions towards music—joyful, grief-stricken, foreboding, magical, euphoric, pious, lascivious, so on and so forth. I also worried that theories that ignored non-absolute music—the pop songs, soundtracks, and others that are ubiquitous in our lives—would miss out on something significant about musical expression. By looking at such music, we can see how associations can comprise the basis by which all musical expression can be understood.
References


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