Comment

A sadness-independent account of the enjoyment of music-evoked sadness: Comment on “An integrative review of the enjoyment of sadness associated with music” by Tuomas Eerola et al.

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Sadness, known as an aversive emotion, combined with its enjoyment in music, has earned music-evoked sadness the reputation of a paradox. Efforts to address this have included conceptual analyses, experiments, and interpretations that have left behind a scattered literature without obvious answers. In this context, Eerola et al.’s [1] contribution offers a much-needed integrative review, remarkable for its unique coverage of the literature and for its interpretational restraint. Rather than forcing disjointed evidence into a new explanatory tale for the phenomenon, the authors carve out a series of mechanisms that potentially underlie the phenomenon with unprecedented clarity. In doing so, they pave the way for a better-informed appraisal of the enjoyment of sadness associated with music. In this commentary, I offer follow-up thoughts on two points that I regard as essential for a better understanding of the phenomenon.

The idea that musical sadness can be enjoyed would hardly have attained prominence, were it not for the belief that (a) certain types of music are sad, or may be called sad with good reason; and (b) genuine sadness can be induced in response to sad music. As I argue in this commentary, both beliefs lack a solid conceptual and empirical foundation. Because the notion of “sad music” appears to be poorly defined and emotions other than sadness are typically induced by so-called sad music, I propose a sadness-independent account of the enjoyment noted in connection with sad music.

Is there such a thing as “sad music”? Sadness is a basic human emotion and it is therefore unsurprising that composers have invented aesthetic means of representing it in their art. In the vast majority of cases, the use of these means was not intended to plunge audiences into despair, but to portray or express sadness. As highlighted in Eerola et al.’s [1] very readable section on cultural perspectives, the musical means used to portray sadness change across cultures and historical periods and are recognizable only to suitably prepared or educated audiences. Evidence for musical features that would be universally or naturally recognized as sad is tenuous at best.

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Thus, whereas aversive affective responses to dissonance are observed from the first weeks of life (e.g. [2]), and recognition of sad facial expressions emerges before the first birthday [3], stereotypically sad musical features such as a slow tempo and a minor mode are not associated with sadness until about school age [4]. Similarly, whereas some musical sounds have probably been experienced as unpleasant since the dawn of music making, so-called sad musical features such as the minor mode have come to be heard as conveying sadness only recently.

Even within a given culture, extramusical features such as a powerful narrative or a personal associative context appear to be necessary to make musical features sound sad. Remove the lyrics, change the musical genre or the venue in which the music is performed, and the same features end up sounding tranquil, boring, inspiring, nostalgic, or tender (incidentally, the minor mode derives from the Latin mollis (soft), as opposed to durus (hard) and has retained this designation in most Germanic languages.) That is not to say that music cannot be identified as sad. However, the extent to which such identification is driven specifically by musical features or by a non-musical context is difficult to ascertain. The least we can say is that the notion of “sad music” is poorly defined.

Does music induce sadness? Let us ignore the complications involved in defining sad music for now and assume that a piece of music sounds sad to a given audience. Does it also induce sadness? This question is not directly addressed by the review, but the notion of “hedonic shift” implies that, to be shifted, genuine sadness must be there in the first place ([1], p. 21; see also Table 1 therein). However, if sadness is understood in its original sense, namely, as a predominantly unpleasant emotional experience characterized by feelings such as despair, grief, helplessness, or disappointment, there is little evidence to suggest that listeners experience a great deal of sadness in response to sad music at any stage of the listening experience.

My reading of the evidence can seem biased because some studies report that music is effective in inducing sadness. However, on closer inspection, such effects appear to be limited to self-selected sad music or to listeners with special personality traits [5]. In addition, reports of musically induced sadness are usually obtained from multipurpose measures of emotion or mood scales that include, besides happy and sad, musically irrelevant emotion terms such as angry, scary, drowsy, distressed, upset, and guilty (see [6]). Participants may simply have given their highest ratings to sadness because it is the least irrelevant term they could find to describe what they felt, which does not mean that they considered “sad” to be a particularly salient aspect of their emotional experience.

Indeed, a different picture emerges when listeners were given scales with musically relevant emotion terms beyond sad, happy, or energetic to describe their feelings. Thus, in one of the studies reviewed by Eerola et al. [1], participants were asked to indicate the most frequent emotions evoked by sad music [7] by using the Geneva Emotional Music Scales (GEMS) – a tool specifically devised to measure musically evoked emotions [8]. As shown in Fig. 1, the most frequent responses to sad music were nostalgia, peacefulness, and tenderness rather than sadness. It is also worth

Fig. 1. The most frequent emotions, as measured by the GEMS, evoked in response to sad music (reproduced from [7], where it appears as Fig. 3).
noting that, to describe musically elicited sadness, listeners seem to prefer using labels that stand for weaker forms of sadness. An example is ‘melancholy’ – a term that was more strongly associated with the Nostalgia than with the Sadness component of the GEMS model in a French-speaking population. In another study discussed in the review [9], sad instrumental music made participants feel markedly more moved than sad. Only pieces with sad lyrics induced about equal degrees of feeling sad and feeling moved, albeit at modest levels of intensity. This suggests that lyrics may be needed to elicit even moderately sad responses. Finally, studies that examined emotions evoked by music in general found sadness to be a relatively atypical response [8,10].

How can we interpret these findings? One possibility (favored by most studies reviewed by [1]) is that sad music induces genuine sadness, which is followed by a hedonic transformation to a different, more rewarding emotion. While intriguing, this explanation is also intricate and difficult to test, as it requires (a) an empirical demonstration of genuine sadness having occurred in the first place and (b) some form of temporal tracking of the transformation from genuine sadness to enjoyable sadness or some other positive emotional state. At present, evidence relating to both points is inconclusive.

The evidence presented in this commentary suggests a more parsimonious explanation. The emotions that are characteristically experienced in response to sad music, such as tenderness, nostalgia, peacefulness, compassion, and being moved, can be directly related to the features of sad instrumental music. Rather than being inherently sad, these features are more appropriately characterized as slow, soft, dark, beautiful, or tender. As such, they are well suited to induce the enjoyable feelings evoked by sad music in an unmediated way. Thus, to account for the responses typically elicited by sad music, it is unnecessary to presume that any sadness has occurred. Nor does the soothing or consoling effect of sad music require any reference to an experience of shared misery or social support, as some authors claim (see [1], pp. 20–21), because the soft musical features are themselves “friendly.” As such, they may be soothing in a way that is comparable to the way a warm bath or a walk in an autumnal forest can be soothing.

This is not to say that sadness is never induced or cannot be felt in response to sad music. But its modest prevalence and doubtful genuineness should give us pause for thought. It is one of the merits of the analysis by Eerola et al. [1] that, by exposing the tenuous factual basis of so many accounts of music-evoked sadness, it invites us to revisit deeply held assumptions and to open up to alternative hypotheses.

References