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Review

An integrative review of the enjoyment of sadness associated with music

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Abstract

The recent surge of interest towards the paradoxical pleasure produced by sad music has generated a handful of theories and an array of empirical explorations on the topic. However, none of these have attempted to weigh the existing evidence in a systematic fashion. The present work puts forward an integrative framework laid out over three levels of explanation – biological, psycho-social, and cultural – to compare and integrate the existing findings in a meaningful way. First, we review the evidence pertinent to experiences of pleasure associated with sad music from the fields of neuroscience, psychophysiology, and endocrinology. Then, the psychological and interpersonal mechanisms underlying the recognition and induction of sadness in the context of music are combined with putative explanations ranging from social surrogacy and nostalgia to feelings of being moved. Finally, we address the cultural aspects of the paradox – the extent to which it is embedded in the Western notion of music as an aesthetic, contemplative object – by synthesising findings from history, ethnography, and empirical studies. Furthermore, we complement these explanations by considering the particularly significant meanings that sadness portrayed in art can evoke in some perceivers. Our central claim is that one cannot attribute the enjoyment of sadness fully to any one of these levels, but to a chain of functionalities afforded by each level. Each explanatory level has several putative explanations and its own shift towards positive valence, but none of them deliver the full transformation from a highly negative experience to a fully enjoyable experience alone. The current evidence within this framework ranges from weak to non-existent at the biological level, moderate at the psychological level, and suggestive at the cultural level. We propose a series of focussed topics for future investigation that would allow to deconstruct the drivers and constraints of the processes leading to pleasurable music-related sadness.

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1. Introduction

The paradoxical nature of enjoying nominally negative emotions such as sadness in the context of the arts and fiction has been widely acknowledged by philosophers from Aristotle to Schopenhauer. However, only the last decade has provided empirical evidence of this paradox in action in the domains of psychology [1,2] and neuroscience [3], and started to expose the ways in which people derive profound enjoyment from tragic films [4], literature [5], and sad music [6].

Central to this paradox are the functional aspects of emotions, such as sadness as an outcome of significant personal loss that results in behavioural withdrawal and anhedonia [7,8]. Fiction and music may be able to operate the very machinery responsible for real-life emotions such as sadness, but since it is detached from the actual consequences, the process can lead to a dramatically different outcome. Music that induces sadness but is nevertheless intensely enjoyed provides a striking example of this phenomenon. It is not just the fact that most cultures have a distinct category for sad music [9], and that listeners frequently report everyday experiences of sadness induced by sad music [10], but these experiences are commonly described to be highly enjoyable [11].

Despite the growing interest and empirical work, frameworks that would offer an explanation for this intricate paradox are still rare. Recently, Menninghaus and his colleagues [12] put forward a novel theory that purports to account for the appeal of negative emotions in all arts. However, their proposal mainly operates on the level of culture and generic psychological principles, and does not delineate the emotions themselves or the actual mechanisms involved. Our review takes a closer look at the appeal of negative emotions associated with music while simultaneously paying closer attention to the functions and mechanisms potentially involved in these paradoxical experiences. We also regard the enjoyment of music-induced sadness as a complex experience linked at biological, psycho-social, and cultural levels. This distinction into three levels bears resemblance to the three broad theoretical approaches to the psychology of emotion – evolutionary theories, cognitive appraisal theories, and social constructionist theories – which all provide different paradigms for research [13]. Each of these levels can be differentiated in terms of a number of key concepts such as the focus, hedonic shift, functions, and the type and quality of evidence, all of which we will consider in the following sections.

Before embarking further into the proposed explanations for pleasurable sadness induced by music, we will introduce five premises that are relevant for all explanations concerning music-induced emotions.

(i) Our philosophical stance to emotions is a nonessentialist perspective that questions the existence of fixed universal types of emotions, and considers emotions as complex, constructed experiences [14,15]. Moreover, we embrace an integrative approach to emotions, where we acknowledge the necessity of looking at the issue across multiple levels (biological, psychological, social, and cultural). This does not, however, mean that we have an instrumentalist account of emotions, where any theory could be right. Our stance could be labelled as scientific realism, where the explanations at different levels can be subjected to empirical evidence [16].

(ii) Emotions expressed by music may be different from the emotions the same music induces [17], our main focus of interest. For instance, sadness expressed by music is associated with a consistent set of affective cues [18], which may convey the emotion even across cultures [19] and to young children [20]. The actual experiences induced by music expressing sadness, however, may not always be aligned with the expressed emotional content [21]. These deviations are explained by distinct emotion induction mechanisms and construction of meaning, explained in the third premise.

(iii) There are multiple emotion induction mechanisms that music capitalises on [22]. Mechanisms such as *episodic memories*, *emotional contagion*, and *evaluative conditioning* have been offered to account for music-induced sadness in particular [23]. A later update to the mechanisms also includes aesthetic judgement (which has been taken to explain the enjoyment of sad music as well; [24]). We will discuss aesthetic judgement and the concept of beauty in the context of sad music in section 4.4. The mechanisms also have a direct impact on the issue of familiarity; unfamiliar music may induce emotions through *emotional contagion*, for example; a mechanism that capitalises on the affective cues of the music. However, *evaluative conditioning* and *episodic memory* are both capable of generating emotional experiences that are in direct conflict with music's affective cues, such as feelings of sadness induced by a cheerful-sounding song that reminds one of a close friend who recently passed away [25]. Even without these key mechanisms, listeners may construct meanings that lead to emotional experiences.

(iv) Music-induced sadness is not an emotional monolith, but better characterised as a spectrum of emotions, ranging from (a) highly pleasurable experiences to (b) feelings of comfort and relaxation, and even to (c) high-intensity

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