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Reply to comment

Towards a more explicit account of the transformation Reply to comments on “An integrative review of the enjoyment of sadness associated with music”

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1. Introduction

Our integrative framework for explaining the enjoyment of sadness associated with music sparked a delightful number (13) of commentaries which challenge, stimulate, strengthen and shape the ideas we initially put forward. Here we organize our response around five central themes brought up by several commentators. These relate to questions about (a) the nature of sad music, (b) whether music can induce genuine sadness, (c) details of the transformation, (d) music as a technology for emotion regulation, and (e) broader implications and extensions.

1.1. What is sad music?

The problematic definition of what sad music actually is raised discussion and criticism from our commentators. For instance, both Swaminathan [1] and Zentner [2] claim that music itself cannot have fundamental properties associated with sadness. We agree – and did acknowledge in our premises – that the features of the music cannot be the sole way of defining what is sad music since other mechanisms (memories, conditioned responses, situational factors, lyrics) often have a major influence on any emotion experienced in the context of music listening. Similarly to “beauty”, also musical “sadness” can be seen as emerging from the interaction between the listener and the music (see p. 13). However, there is also evidence that music can express emotions such as sadness that are conveyed/recognized across cultures [3,4]. The explanation suggested by our integrative framework is not dependent on the actual features

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of the music to explain the pleasure derived. We emphasize the importance of cultural influences on what is considered “sad” in the context of music, but at the same time we see the value in linking the commonly reported properties of sad music to physiological states (which could be one of the reasons why similar musical elements may be found in different cultures).

Zentner, for instance, agrees with our summary that music itself may express sadness through shared cultural conventions, and contrasts this expressed sadness with known features of music that are universally found aversive, such as dissonance (although the universality of this has recently been challenged [5]). The first concern is in agreement with our premise that the context, and other non-musical aspects (lyrics, narrative, acquired codes) are needed to convey sadness. This does not, however, dispel the notion that certain kind of music could be called sad, or used to express sadness. In our framework, we discussed the features of sad music that are assumed to reflect or imitate (sad) physical states, and thus should be similar across cultures, and other features that are most likely the products of cultural evolution. Moreover, as the title of our framework article declares, we did not aim to formulate an integrative theory about “sad music” but rather “sadness associated with music”.

Wassiliwizky [6] argues that we conflated sadness elicited by musical elements and sadness elicited by lyrics. In our opinion, we were explicit about the difference between the two (e.g., sections 1.1 and 4.3), and offered specific explanations regarding how lyrics may amplify emotional responses through transportation or identification (section 3.2). We also agreed with Nussbaum’s [7] notion that music is able to add the kind of conceptual input to the experience that text alone cannot produce, but this also works vice versa: lyrics provide their own conceptual input that can strengthen or alter the impact of expressive musical cues. In our own empirical studies we have typically been careful not to conflate the two, and have carried out studies using either instrumental music exclusively [8,9], or compared the effects of instrumental, unfamiliar music with those of self-selected, familiar music containing lyrics [10]. We agree that different domains (i.e., musical features and lyrics) need to be related to their respective mechanisms [11,12]. However, we want to reject the view of “absolute music” that has no semantic meaning, and to emphasize that even instrumental music has semantic connotations and learnt associations related to its genre, instrumentation, and extramusical information. Thus, we think it would be rather naive to claim that musical effects could be differentiated entirely from the semantic effects of lyrics, since music conveys its own semantic information that is closely associated with verbal information through cultural practices and learning. Interaction between the musical material, lyrics, and personal associations is fundamental in the construction of emotional meaning related to a piece of music, as we expressed in our text (section 4.3).

Tervaniemi [13] tackles a particular – often controversial – aspect of sad music, namely the long-held Western view that sad music is associated with the minor mode. She summarizes past observations regarding the prevalence of the major and minor modes in historical and geographical accounts, which have revealed clearly demarcated regions dominated by minor modes. In our framework, these regional differences are reflections of the cultural patterns, that may – to some extent – have their origins in the inherent differences between modes (such as the minor mode being more dissonant, more ambiguous in terms of its root chord, and less frequent in music than the major mode [14]). These characteristic attributes of the minor mode are associated with increased uncertainty, which in turn is thought to be associated with negative emotions. In Western music, the minor mode tends to account for a third of all music, at least if we base the estimate on all 30 millions songs available at Spotify.¹ However, the apparent association between sadness (both felt and perceived) and the minor mode could also be just a particular convention in contemporary Western culture.

Although the focus of our review was on the listener and his/her meaning-making processes, we did not ignore the fact that music is always composed and performed by someone, and thus it is no coincidence that there are established expressive devices and conventions for the expression of sadness in music (see section 4.1). Perhaps a helpful way to clarify the sticking points raised by Swaminathan [1] and Overy [15] about the different possibilities afforded by the expression and induction of sadness in music, is to project them onto a plane (Fig. 1). “Sad” musical expression created by the composer and the expressive cues utilized by the performer both contribute to the successful communication of an emotion [16]. However, this communication (and recognition) of emotional expression does not necessarily lead to the *induction* of the same emotion in the listener. Similarly, a person can experience sadness without the presence of sad expressive cues in the music through unique episodic memories or meanings generated by

¹ <https://insights.spotify.com/us/2015/05/06/most-popular-keys-on-spotify/>.

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