



Reply to comments

The value of a uniquely psychological approach to musical aesthetics Reply to the commentaries on ‘A unified theory of musical emotions’

Patrik N. Juslin

Uppsala University, Department of Psychology, Box 1225, SE-751 42, Uppsala, Sweden

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Interest in emotion and aesthetics is steadily increasing. Consistent with this trend, my review outlined a framework featuring eight mechanisms through which music may arouse emotions, focusing particularly on aesthetic judgments. Despite the space limitations, the commentators managed to raise many interesting issues for discussion, for which I am grateful. In this reply, I address their comments in terms of three themes: terminology, broader perspectives, and the nature and role of theoretical frameworks.

1. Terminology: distinct types of affect

Hargreaves, North, and Schubert [8] noted that studies of people’s responses to music have been plagued by problems regarding definition and argued that “Juslin’s incorporation of aesthetic emotions into the BRECVEMA model runs into some of these problems” (p. 269). I agree that terminology is of great importance to the field [20]. In fact, that’s why I provided working definitions of all terms at the beginning of my review [15, Table 1]. I don’t agree that terminology was a problem, however: All terms were defined and used consistently. As outlined in Table 1, ‘emotion’, ‘preference’ and ‘aesthetic judgment’ are all examples of ‘affect’. Their common feature is that they are valenced – that is, evaluative. As explained in the article, judgments of aesthetic value based on subjective criteria may lead to both ‘preference’ and ‘emotion’. (Thus, the framework may account for both ‘commonplace’ (liking) and ‘exceptional’ (intense emotions) experiences of music, as mentioned by Huron [12].) Hargreaves, North, and Schubert argued that “they” – by which I assume here that they refer to “aesthetic emotions” mentioned in their previous sentence – “might be better conceived as affects rather than emotions”, and that “they are evaluative rather than emotional responses”. These arguments do not make sense in the context of the working definitions provided, since emotions *are* affect and *all* affect is evaluative. In addition, Hargreaves et al. confused *affect* with *criteria* (e.g., beauty) that may arouse affect, and also confused *emotion* (pleasure, awe) with *preference*. I urge them to re-examine the terminology presented in my article, which is consistent with increasingly consensual views in ‘affective science’ [5].

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E-mail address: patrik.juslin@psyk.uu.se.

2. Broadening the perspective: multi-disciplinary insights

Several commentators suggested broadening the perspective of the framework, with respect to evolutionary perspectives, other forms of artistic expression, and social, cultural and historical influences on responses to music.

2.1. Evolutionary perspectives

Simonton [28] argued that a “complete account” of musical emotions should “place the music-and-emotion connection in a larger explanatory context” (p. 277): “What is the evolutionary basis for the music–emotion-relation?” I concur with Simonton that an evolutionary perspective may be heuristic to understand emotions, but it must be noted that the music-and-emotion relationship is not really an equal one: As far as we know, emotion-mechanisms evolved well before music appeared on the scene; hence, music making most likely evolved on the foundation of existing emotion-mechanisms, with a longer evolutionary history [23]. Is it helpful at the current stage of theory development to consider evolutionary perspectives specifically on how the *musical* elicitation of emotions may have been adaptive, or would it leave us bogged down in unresolved issues concerning the origins of music? Altenmüller, Kopiez, and Grewe [1] admitted that “from a scientific viewpoint the question of the origin of music is difficult, if not impossible, to answer” (p. 314). It may actually be a *strength* of the BRECVEMA framework that it’s *not* dependent on knowledge about the origins of music: we might still make progress in understanding how emotions to music occur. I agree with Simonton’s argument that “music and language split off from a common communicative system” (p. 278). Elsewhere, we [17] suggested that music and speech originated from vocal expression of emotions, and provided the first systematic comparison of the two modalities, which revealed numerous similarities between the channels. Again, however, the implication is that music making built on the foundation of an existing emotional system (in this case, vocal expression of emotions).

Paradoxically, questions about the origin and possible adaptive value of music might be most relevant for the latest addition to the BRECVEMA framework: aesthetic judgments. Because this is probably the most recent and flexible of the mechanisms, it may be the one most likely to have been influenced by evolving notions about what music ‘is for’: its uses and functions in society. Should music invite dancing? Or should it communicate crucial information about emotions and social identity? Or should it ‘only’ be beautiful? These are all interesting issues. Arguably, however, we do not need to know everything about how aesthetic ideals developed *originally* in order to explain and predict aesthetic responses in the here and now.

2.2. Other forms of artistic expression

Simonton [28] also suggested comparing emotional reactions to music with other forms of artistic expression (e.g., painting, sculpture, architecture), noting that “some of the mechanisms may be the same”, whereas “others may prove irrelevant” (p. 2). This idea opens up an interesting avenue for future research in the field. Simonton’s closing comment that it might be true that music does not evoke any unique emotion, but that the specific *pattern* of active mechanisms may be unique, echoes our own proposal that, “the unique thing about music may be the way that music can recruit and combine mechanisms” [19, p. 611]. Cupchik [3, p. 181] noted that “the greater the number of dimensions or levels of the work that the audience members can discern and appreciate, the richer the experience”. Such richness may at least partly reflect the combined effects of multiple emotion-mechanisms at distinct levels.

2.3. Socio-cultural and historical influences

Hargreaves, North, and Schubert [8] commended the present author’s inclination to investigate experiences of music in real-life contexts, though they questioned whether the BRECVEMA framework can incorporate broader, higher levels of social influence: “The model does little to explain where these broader socio-cultural influences originate, how they interact, or how they might develop” (p. 269). I believe this is a fair assessment. Similarly, I concur with Reber and Bullott’s [24] claim that knowledge and historical perspectives are important. In fact, I noted in my review that aesthetic sensitivity may require some information about the art-historical context, in particular to appreciate meta-art statements in conceptual art [27].

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