

Appropriate Musical Metaphors

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ABSTRACT I argue that we should avoid a unitary account of what makes metaphorical descriptions of music in terms of emotion appropriate. There are many different ways in which musical metaphors can be appropriate. The right view of metaphorical appropriateness is a generously pluralist one.

KEYWORDS Musical metaphors, metaphorical appropriateness

I

Descriptions of music in terms of emotion are metaphorical, or so I maintain. If so, it is a mistake to say that music “expresses”, “arouses” or “represents” the emotions that figure in those metaphorical descriptions. For the description of those relations between music and emotion would be literal: they would describe a relation – expression, arousal, representation – that holds between music and real emotion. And if that were the case, descriptions of music in terms of emotion would not be metaphorical. Once we embrace a metaphor theory, we should dispense with such relational theories of musical description. I have argued elsewhere for the claim that emotion descriptions of music are metaphorical, and I do not want to revisit that question here.¹ I here assume this, so that we can engage with the following issue.

Where a metaphorical description is appropriate we can ask why. What makes it appropriate? Since music is often metaphorically described in terms of emotion, we can ask this question of these metaphorical descriptions. We can ask what makes metaphorical emotion descriptions of music appropriate, both in general and in particular cases. That is, we can ask: in general why is it peculiarly appropriate to describe music in terms of emotion? And we can ask: why are particular metaphorical emotion descriptions of particular pieces or stretches of music appropriate?

There are some who insist that emotion descriptions of music are literal, but say that they have a secondary literal meaning.² I find such a view implausible, but for present purposes I could concede that it is theoretically an option. For such a view still incurs the duty to explain the appropriateness, not of a metaphor, but of the supposed secondary literal sense. We would now have the question: what is the relation between the two senses such that not only is it not a coincidence, but also

such that it is appropriate that the two senses are expressed by the same word? A similar issue is raised whether we opt for a metaphorical view or a secondary literal meaning view.

Now some writers have sought a unitary account of the appropriateness of emotion descriptions of music. In this brief note, I shall argue that we should avoid a unitary account of why they are appropriate. Different emotion descriptions have different explanations and justifications. The case will first be made by means of examples that invite different explanations and justifications, and after that more theoretical reasons will be given.

II

Malcolm Budd claims that music sounds the way emotions feel. (He is inspired by Carroll C. Pratt.) Budd writes:

... when we hear music as being expressive of emotion E – when you hear E in the music – you hear the music as sounding like the way E feels ...³

This is not explicitly a theory of metaphorical appropriateness, but the view has the consequence that the emotion description is warranted by the heard likeness, and there is no genuine feeling in the music; so it is close to a theory of metaphorical appropriateness. What is important is that it is a unitary theory.

An initial complaint that we might have with Budd's proposal is that it is not at all clear that the idea of cross-modal similarity makes sense. It is not obvious that anything *can* sound the way an emotion feels. If we are comparing an experience in one sense modality with another in the same sense-modality, the idea of such similarity makes sense. One thing can sound the way another sounds. But it is not clear that one thing can sound the way another thing looks or tastes, except in a very tenuous sense. Can something smell the way another thing feels? Can something taste the way another thing sounds?

However, let us grant Budd such cross-sense-modal similarities. Even if we can make sense of cross-sense-modal similarities, and even if some (perhaps unusual) people experience such similarities, the fact that such similarities obtain between emotion and music is not a plausible explanation of the appropriateness of many metaphorical emotion descriptions of music. For example, it is more plausible that angry music typically sounds the way an angry person *sounds*, rather than sounding like it *feels* to be angry. The point of the metaphor more plausibly springs from an intra-sense-modal similarity rather than a cross-sense-modal

similarity. Consider a parallel non-musical case. Why might describing a flower as *shy* be appropriate? An explanation is not difficult to provide. A shy flower looks in certain respects the way a shy person looks. There is no question of a feeling of shyness here. When we give such explanations, we are drawing attention to features shared by sad music and sad people or, by shy people and shy flowers, in order to explain why the metaphorical description is appropriate. These shared features are both represented in one sense modality.

So, as a general theory, Budd's view is implausible. The awareness of cross-sense-modality similarities is too strange and unusual to be the basis of a general theory of appropriateness of emotion descriptions of music. And even if it was more familiar and common, it would still not be a plausible explanation of many emotion metaphors.

III

Consider a different unitary theory, which is inspired by the sort of cases that Budd's theory does not fit. On this theory of appropriateness, when we describe music by means of emotion words, this is because the music sounds like the vocal noises produced by a person who has the emotion to which the word normally refers. Some cases, such as those of *sad* music, fit this model. But this too is not plausible as a general theory. *Angry* may be an appropriate metaphorical description of music not because the music sounds like the vocal expression of an angry person but because it sounds like the sounds made in the course of the destruction that is sometimes brought about by an angry person. Angry music would typically have breaking and smashing sounds. An angry person causes things to break and smash. Consider a parallel non-musical example: we might say that an abstract painting looks angry. This is not likely to be because it looks the way an angry person looks. Nor is it plausible that it looks the way it feels to be angry (Budd's kind of view). Rather, it is more likely that it looks as if the person who painted it was angry. It looks like the result of angry activity. The case of a *cruel* wind is similar. A cruel wind feels like it is whipping the person who feels it – which is what a cruel person might do. (It has nothing to do with what it feels like to be cruel or with the typical vocal expression of cruelty.) Emotion descriptions of music are sometimes like the case of the shy flower and sometimes like the case of the cruel wind (and there are other possibilities). In neither case is it a *feeling* of sadness or anger that is important, or the vocal expressions made by a person with the emotion, but the typical behavioural manifestation of sadness or anger – its deliberate

consequences. An angry person makes sudden loud violent movements and causes things to break – to smash. This example neither fits Budd's theory nor the view that the thing looks or sounds like a person who feels the emotion. Other emotion descriptions may have yet other explanations. There are a great variety of explanations of appropriateness. We should not generalise on the basis of examples where one kind of explanation is plausible. The right view of metaphorical appropriateness that emerges on the basis of these examples is a generously pluralist one. We should avoid a unitary account of what makes metaphorical descriptions of music in terms of emotion appropriate. There are many different ways in which musical metaphors can be appropriate.

IV

We have arrived at this pluralist view inductively, but there are also more theoretical reasons that support it.

Firstly, pluralism is encouraged by anti-literalism about emotion descriptions; for if emotion descriptions *were* literal, not metaphorical, then emotion descriptions would describe the relation to emotion, whatever it is, in which music allegedly stands. Emotion descriptions, therefore, ought to be more orderly than in fact they are. A metaphor theory, by contrast, expects and welcomes disorder and plurality and sees that as confirmation. The quest for a unity theory of appropriate metaphorical descriptions of music derives, I suspect, from an inclination to or yearning for literalism. However, once we thoroughly wean ourselves away from literalism, an anarchism of explanations is the natural order of things.

Secondly, this liberality about respectable kinds of explanations of metaphorical emotion descriptions of music is connected with the fact that the use of metaphors of emotion is often closely connected with the use of *other* metaphors and cannot be understood without them. *Angry* music or painting is usually *violent* or *jagged*. Emotion descriptions of music are only appropriate to absolute music and abstract painting because *other* metaphorical descriptions are appropriate. But it is obvious that there will be different kinds of explanations of the appropriateness of these other metaphors. It is important not to fixate on emotion descriptions.

Thirdly, we should avoid a unitary account of what makes *any* metaphorical description appropriate. This is because the creativity of metaphor bucks the constraint of general theory. For this reason, a unitary theory of the appropriateness of metaphorical descriptions of music is

also a mistake. Metaphorical description of music is hugely various. No (non-trivial) theory of what makes such descriptions appropriate can fit them all, and, given the creativity of metaphor, no theory can or should constrain possible future descriptions that people might invent.

These are three principled reasons for thinking that a unitary theory is wrong and pluralism is correct, apart from the inductive case considered above.

Notes

1. See Nick Zangwill, "Music, Metaphor and Emotion," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2007).
2. Stephen Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1994), 162–165.
3. Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), 136.