

## **MUSIC AND EMOTION. THE DISPOSITIONAL OR AROUSAL THEORY**

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**ABSTRACT.** One of the ways of analysing the relationship between music and emotions is through musical expressiveness.

As the theory I discuss in this paper puts it, expressiveness is a particular kind of secondary quality of music or, to use the term which gives the theory its name, a *disposition* of music to arouse a certain emotional response in listeners.

The most accurate version of the dispositional theory is provided by Derek Matravers in his book *Art and Emotion* and in other papers: what I will try to do is to illustrate Matravers's theory and claim that it is a good solution to many problems concerning music and its capacity to affect our inner states.

**KEYWORDS.** Music, Emotions, Expressiveness, Arousal Theory.

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In its simplest version, the Dispositional theory or Arousal theory has as its basic assumption the following idea: musical expressiveness is a *disposition* to arouse in a listener the emotion he/she heard as expressed by music itself. According to the main supporters of this theory, the only meaningful attempt to explain the experience of music as expression of emotions that is worthy to be made is the one which does not detach itself from the ground of perceptual experiences, of the relationship between the listener and the intentional object of his/her auditory experience: the piece of music itself. According to this theory, and unlike several other theories about the same subject<sup>1</sup>, music expresses emotions because it arouses them as music, as object of a perceptual experience, that is the one of a piece of music and nothing else. To confirm what I just said, here is how Derek Matravers, the author I considered as the main supporter of the Arousal theory, declares the purposes of his research:

... we need to explain expression. What is going on over the period of time during which we hear a piece of music as sad? How does an emotion 'enter into' our experience of art? What is the relation between this and the belief (or judgement) that the work expresses an emotion?<sup>2</sup>

## 1 Derek Matravers and the Arousal theory

### 1.1 Which thesis proposes, how and why defending it

The main aim of Derek Matravers's version of the Arousal theory<sup>3</sup> is to demonstrate that the Cognitivists' approach, the most popular one concerning the problems of musical expressiveness, isn't the only one able to give some interesting contribution to the analysis of the relationship between art and emotions. Furthermore, this approach shows a lot of weaknesses, especially about some more specific problems. The Arousal theory seems much more reliable to solve them. In particular, Matravers argues that the Arousal theory is a valid alternative to Cognitivism in the discussion about musical expressiveness because it deals with this issue from a new point of view, bringing in close-up the listener's experience. Only by focusing on it and by understanding its real meaning (without putting aside the causal frame) it is possible to find a solution to the problem of musical expressiveness that, on the one hand, succeeds in remaining phenomenologically plausible, and on the other hand theoretically strong, thanks to the validity of the basic arguments.

Matravers starts from outlining the territory into which arousalists who wants to go

<sup>1</sup>Among them, I think these are worth mentioning. The Expression theory, which argues that music expresses directly its creator/executor's emotions. Kivy's Cognitivism, according to which music can be expressive of emotions only in virtue of its formal properties and of our detecting them through cognitive effort. The Resemblance theory by Stephen Davies, who claims that music metaphorically represents emotions in a way that causes us to react with empathy just in the same way we would react in front of a human's expression of that emotion. Finally, Jerrold Levinson suggests that we can ascribe expressivity to a piece of music because we react with empathy to an imaginary "music's *persona*" and her expressive behaviour, identified with music, indeed.

<sup>2</sup>(Matravers, 1998, p. 112).

<sup>3</sup>Matravers is not the only author who defends dispositionalism. Indeed, two slightly different versions of this theory are also presented by Jenefer Robinson and Kendall Walton. In particular, Robinson concentrates more on the aspect of the relationship between what the music precisely expresses and what is aroused in listeners when listening to it, while Walton insists on the role of imagination in arousing emotional responses to music: music is something we 'animate' with particular meanings thanks to its being particularly good at representing 'abstract' concepts, including primitive emotions, such as sadness, tension, relaxation etc. On this last point, Matravers does not agree with Walton, and claims, among other things, that imagination is a not reliable enough concept in order to explain the relationship between feelings aroused in listeners and emotions expressed by music.

deeper in the analysis of the relation between emotions and music must stay. The first step is to focus on the listener. After that, it is needed to clarify what kind of emotional reaction is possible in the aesthetic context, then to describe at best the experience and, finally, to demonstrate that a piece of music expressiveness is a dispositional property of the piece itself, that is, a disposition to be experienced so by a subject with the required competences.

To succeed in his theoretical project, first of all Matravers has to find a valid solution to an important problem, which he calls 'definitional problem'. This problem concerns how emotional reactions to fictional objects, such as novels' characters, works of art and, of course, music, have to be explained. First, Arousal theory must establish in which sense we can be emotionally involved with representations, of which works of art are a subclass. This is the starting point: emotions are mental states that, in order to be defined as such, have to be the result of both various physiological-phenomenological components and a certain 'propositional attitude'. It is this propositional attitude that makes the propositional content of an emotion clearly linked to another content, to which the emotion refers. For example, I will be able to react by feeling an emotion (say, sadness) just as soon as, through external perception or even just in my mind, I identify another propositional content (such as a belief or a propositionally organised thought) which is able to cause the appropriate emotional reaction (the memory of a dear person's death, a belief, true or false, about something sad and so on).

... we build up our stock of emotion concepts by bracketing together propositional attitudes of a certain sort with the responses they characteristically cause: those which constitute the emotion's phenomenological profile. An emotion is a compound of some proposition to which the subject assents [...] and various other states, possibly including other cognitive states (such as desires) and physiological and phenomenological states.<sup>4</sup>

Since representations are always representations of *something*, this 'something' is exactly the content which relates to the cognitive component (the propositional content) of my emotion, and from this point of view it is not hard to show how works of art with representational content can cause emotional reactions in their observers.

Situation gets complicated in the case of works of art like instrumental pieces of music: we hardly find in them something similar to propositional contents that can be connected with the appearance of beliefs, thoughts or memories. Looking at an abstract painting or listening to a sonata we don't typically react with a belief, unless that work of art somehow reminds us of something else (like a belief or a memory: we can be moved by a piece of music *because* it makes us think of our lovers, or by a painting because it's able to bring our mind back in the past), but in this case the work would not be the intentional object of the emotion any more: the emotion would be instead directed to a propositional content *external* to the work of art, to which the same work of art just 'helped us to arrive'.

If I am 'triggered' by a work of art into an emotion whose object is something external to the work, such a reaction cannot be the grounds for an aesthetic judgement on the work. The arousal theory will need to provide a way of distinguishing the former sort of reaction from the latter.<sup>5</sup>

There seems to be no way out: pieces of music absolutely cannot arouse emotions, where the definition of 'emotion' is the one given by Matravers himself.

<sup>4</sup>(Matravers, 1998, p. 17).

<sup>5</sup>(Matravers, 1998, p. 148).

Once this last point has been established, Matravers continues and argues that the appropriate reaction to works of art like pieces of music is not actually an 'emotion', but rather a 'feeling'. The difference between 'feeling' and 'emotion' is exactly defined by Matravers in terms of presence/absence of the propositional attitude, which involves cognitive component, so important in order to determine the intentional object of our 'everyday-life emotions'. Furthermore, emotions and feelings are not separate psychological categories because the former have, again thanks to the presence of the propositional attitude, typical causes, while the latter do not, but because of the presence of the propositional attitude, thanks to which alone we can form beliefs supporting our emotional reaction: the decisive discriminator, then, is not the fact that feelings, opposite to emotions, are not directed towards a precise content.

... not all kinds of what we might call psychological experience are object-directed. This property of propositional attitudes, and therefore of the emotions which involve them, serves to distinguish these states in particular from experiences which fall under another psychological category: those which I shall call 'feelings'. [...] This distinction is not between states which have typical causes and those which do not. The fact that feelings are not object-directed does not preclude them from having typical causes. [...] It is the presence or absence of the relevant propositional attitudes, notably belief, which I shall take to distinguish emotions from feelings. [...] An emotion is distinct from a feeling, then, in having a cognitive aspect.<sup>6</sup>

Starting from this distinction, Matravers easily builds up his solution to the definitional problem: works of art arouse feelings rather than emotions. So, the emotional reaction caused by the experience of the work of art can be legitimately explained as a reaction *in presence of* the object, and not as a reaction *about* the object or towards a belief having the object as its content.

The characteristic state aroused by an expressive work of art is [...] a feeling and not an emotion: that is, it does not have a cognitive component. [...] the 'object-directedness' of emotions is a consequence of their cognitive aspect; the intentional object of the cognitive state is also the intentional object of the emotion. The state which is aroused by an expressive work of art (for a qualified observer in the appropriate conditions) has no object. It is neither 'sadness *about* something' nor 'sadness at the thought *that* something'.<sup>7</sup>

To solve the definitional problem with the distinction between 'feeling' and 'emotion' is useful for Matravers in order to make stronger the base principle of the Arousal theory. The principle is the following: «A work of art *x* expresses the emotion *e* if, for a qualified observer *p* experiencing *x* in normal conditions, *x* arouses in *p* a feeling which would be an aspect of the appropriate reaction to the expression of *e* by a person, or to a representation the content of which was the expression of *e* by a person.»

As it is made clear by this definition, Matravers thinks that there is an analogy between the reaction aroused in an observer by an expressive work of art and the one we normally have in front of a person's expression of emotion, and that this analogy is the first assumption of the Arousal theory.

<sup>6</sup>(Matravers, 1998, pp. 19-20).

<sup>7</sup>(Matravers, 1998, pp. 147-148).

Matravers explains the analogy in terms of *appropriate reaction* in each case. It is appropriate to react to a work of art which is expressive of a certain emotion with a feeling lacking cognitive content at all, that is without any belief or any hypothesis about causes or motivations, as well as it is appropriate, in front of a human face expressing the same emotion, to react with an emotion provided by its cognitive component too. Analogy, not Identity, but for Matravers it is sufficient. In the arousalists' view, the statement that the appropriate response to a work of art expressing a certain emotion is a feeling without cognitive component at all, but analogous to the 'full' emotion we would feel looking at the same expression in a person, is the easiest way to solve the problem of art's expressiveness. As we said before, the Arousal theory aims just at an explanation of our experience of 'hearing' a piece of music *as* expressive.

Next step: for the Arousal theory, our experience of the music as expressive justifies two beliefs, and by doing this it justifies in turn musical expressiveness. The first belief is that music actually expresses emotions, the second is the belief that music itself is the only cause of our emotional response. The fact that these two beliefs are justified is a necessary and sufficient condition for our considering music as able to express emotions.

Since the Arousal theory is a theory of experience, it needs a detailed and efficient description of experience, mostly in order to distinguish it from other kinds of experiences that, especially in critics' intentions, could seem rather dangerous counterexamples. These counterexamples aim at making more complicated the (causal) relationship between the feeling aroused in us by a piece of music and the piece itself.

In particular, Matravers wants to get rid of three counterexamples of this kind: (a) the *Wittgenstein cases*, (b) the 'experience of the bad concert' and (c) the 'experience of the drug'.

(a). Wittgenstein suggests to consider this situation: a piano student is practising in a room on the floor below. This 'music' distracts and annoys him, that is arouses in him negative feelings. In this case, on the one hand music is no doubt in a causal relationship with Wittgenstein's feelings, but, on the other hand, is certainly not expressive of them. Is the Arousal theory able to keep the experience it has in mind clearly separate from these 'Wittgenstein cases'?

Matravers's answer is very simple. The Arousal theory doesn't need to deny (and it would be hardly possible to do, actually) that there can be cases, about both expressive works of art and human expressions, in which the emotional response is not the *appropriate* one<sup>8</sup>.

In these cases, however, the two things (the expression and the response) are separate and independent from each other: 'Wittgenstein cases' are not cases the theory is interested in dealing with.

Everything will be easier to understand if we keep in mind the base-principle of Arousal theory: emotional responses the theory analyses are firstly the analogous ones to those caused by a human expression, and secondly the *appropriate* ones, that is the ones we would detect in a person provided by normal sympathetic abilities *were the emotion expressed unequivocally the only cause of that response*.

... art expressive of e will (in the right person in the right circumstances) arouse a feeling of the same type as that which is the component of the emotion characteristically aroused by the expression of e in the central case. [...] the aroused

<sup>8</sup>For example, in front of a sad face we could feel pity for that person as well as we could instead become irritated, having the impression of a just too moaning person.

emotion  $\alpha$  which is the characteristic reaction to  $e$  is that emotion which would be aroused in a normally sympathetic person were the expression of  $e$  the only cause of  $\alpha$ . In the absence of any other cause, normally sympathetic people react to the expression of emotion rather than (as we can put it) the fact that an emotion is being expressed. It would be wrong (for example) to maintain that the characteristic reaction to sadness is irritation, as opposed to pity.<sup>9</sup>

It is evident that in ‘Wittgenstein cases’ the music played by the student is not the only cause of Wittgenstein’s irritation: the Arousal theory would not say it. Wittgenstein does not have experience of that music *as* expressive of irritation and in virtue of it he reacts by feeling irritation too, but simply hears that music *and* becomes irritated: that’s why ‘Wittgenstein cases’ are not considered by Matravers interesting for the Arousal theory, and, as a consequence, are not able to be a danger for the theory.

(b). The ‘experience of the bad concert’ is somehow similar to the ‘Wittgenstein cases’ (music is the cause of my feeling but certainly it is not expressive of that feeling), but here music arouses feelings that are *characteristically aroused* by the corresponding experience of expression (while we saw that in the ‘Wittgenstein cases’ feelings of irritation were not characteristically aroused by a sad face). Here is the situation: I am at a concert of a totally incapable orchestra. As a consequence, listening to the piece played by such a bad orchestra is a terrible experience and, finally, due to this I’m getting sadder and sadder (sadness is a characteristic reaction to expressions of emotion). It can be also that the only cause of my sadness is the piece of music itself (its late attacks, its wrong notes etc.), and not the situation as a whole. However, *this* kind of sadness is not again ‘appropriate’ as the Arousal theory means: it is easier to detect a cognitive component in this sadness (for example the thought that I wasted my money, or that I have to put up with this for two more hours etc.). In this case, my sadness is to all intents an emotion, whose propositional content is connected with these thoughts about the concert, instead of, as Arousal theory would like to, being a feeling able to justify the belief that music is expressive of that feeling. Therefore, even the experience of the bad concert is not an efficient counterexample to the theory. If it was, it would mean that the Arousal theory has to uphold the absurd idea that every time an emotional response is aroused in us, its cause is also expressive of that emotion. In other words, Arousal theory would be forced to claim that, for example, weddings express joy because they can arouse joy in people who attend them.

(c). The third and last objection, the ‘experience of the drug’, is the one to which Matravers dedicates himself the most, since it is also the most important in order to complete his description of the “experience of expression”. The objection is this: a description in causal terms of the experience of musical expressiveness (that is the experience of hearing a piece of music *as* expressive of the feeling we have while listening to it), even supposing that it is necessary, it wouldn’t be sufficient to explain what kind of experience it is: otherwise, we could not account, for example, for the difference between the experience of feeling something caused by a piece of music and the experience of feeling the same emotion under the effect of a certain drug.

Even though it seems very hard even just claiming that the two experiences are potentially indistinguishable, Arousal theory can’t help finding a way to explicitly distinguish

<sup>9</sup>(Matravers, 1998, p. 168).

them, without giving up the causal frame inside which it planned to stay from the start.

Matravers replies to the objection by saying that there is an essential difference between the two experiences: while in the case of the drug the experience is, literally, «opaque as to its causes»<sup>10</sup>, in music case the experience we have is one of both the piece of music (the cause) and the feeling (the effect) «coinstantiated in consciousness»<sup>11</sup>, bounded by an intimate connection in which the second (the feeling) *tracks* the first (the piece of music)<sup>12</sup>. In other words, music guides us in our 'emotional journey' caused by our listening to it.

First, it is necessary not to underestimate the importance, in this experience, of musical understanding, that is the knowledge, even a superficial one, of 'physical' characteristics of a composition (its dynamics, harmonies, tonality, rhythm etc.).

In order to operate the arousing mechanism described by Matravers, and then enjoy an authentic experience of aesthetic appreciation it seems really necessary, as a matter of fact, to possess, even at a basic level, some knowledge about how a piece of music is made. Matravers is in unison with the demand not to underestimate, through the experience's descriptions, the contribution given to it by musical understanding. However, he suggests not to interpret it just as technical competence about music intrinsic qualities, but rather as a simpler requirement: as *paying attention* to the piece of music during the listening.

The experience of expressive music is the experience of an organised structure of sound and the corresponding feelings it arouses. The feelings are aroused by paying attention to the sound, and sustained by continued attention.<sup>13</sup>

... attention must be paid to music in order to keep it "in front of the mind" so that the listener notices the dynamic properties of the music, properties which unfold over time.<sup>14</sup>

... for music to arouse feelings, the listener needs to pay sustained attention to its properties...<sup>15</sup>

The properties of music Matravers is now talking about are not, say, the relations among tones, the 'dynamic properties' we can find in a piece of music, and they are particularly important for Arousal theory: they are exactly the properties thanks to which it is possible to explain also expressiveness and, to notice them, no specific musical competence is required.

Now, Matravers has to explain why it is possible to have experience of expressiveness by paying attention to these properties. This can happen just because there is isomorphism between these properties and our emotional states; for example, we can 'live' a musical passage from dissonance to resolution as a passage from tension to relaxation. This isomorphism, and here Cognitivists' view is reliable, consists in our predisposition to believe that pieces of music possess typical anthropomorphic qualities, which, of course, they do not actually possess, such as the melody's movement in an hypothetical 'musical space'. This mechanism parallels with another one, that is the attribution of secondary qualities to objects and their conse-

<sup>10</sup>(Matravers, 2003, p. 360).

<sup>11</sup>(Matravers, 2003, p. 360).

<sup>12</sup>«... the feeling tracks the music. The tensions and releases in the music directly and immediately influence the feeling. That is, the feeling changes as the music changes in intimate causal connection» (Matravers, 2003, p. 360).

<sup>13</sup>(Matravers, 1998, p. 177).

<sup>14</sup>(Matravers, 1998, p. 181).

<sup>15</sup>(Matravers, 1998, p. 185).

quent being made explicit through experiential judgements. In particular, Arousalists need to support the analogy they claim between the justification normally accepted for the attribution of secondary qualities to objects and the one for the attribution of expressive judgements to music<sup>16</sup>. This is the point: making this analogy acceptable helps the Arousal theory to account for an intuition that is impossible to ignore while trying to describe an experience as much phenomenologically true as possible: Levinson calls this intuition ‘*Externality Requirement*’<sup>17</sup>. Matravers changes it into a question with the same meaning: how can we ‘prove’ the fact that these emotions are all experienced *in* music, that music and emotions together form a *unique* experience while forming, even though strictly connected, two still distinguishable experiences?

Before continuing, let us start again from the analogy Matravers suggests to explore between the experience of musical expressiveness and the experience of secondary qualities of objects, such as, for example, colour.

Matravers uses as paradigmatic examples of secondary qualities *colour* and *solubility*. These two qualities are called “secondary” because, in order to be experienced, they need to ‘lean on’ another primary quality<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, and this is the most important aspect, these qualities cannot be defined independently from the experience they cause in an observer, and this is the reason why they are also called *dispositional properties*. For example, the property of “being red” is dispositional because it can be defined as “disposition to be so experienced by an observer”. Matravers uses these words: «[an object] *x* is red iff for any observer *p*: if *p* were perceptually normal and were to encounter *x* in perceptually normal conditions, *p* would experience *x* as red»<sup>19</sup>.

Similarly, a substance is soluble if, in the right conditions and due to its particular molecular structure, it dissolves. From this definition we can understand that dispositional properties (and, as a consequence, the satisfaction conditions of beliefs we have about objects, beliefs that themselves lead then to judgements like “the ball is red” and so on) are strictly connected to the experience they cause, and that, consequently, also judgements we express about those properties depend, in order to be justified, on that same experience.

Matravers argues that just the same happens with works of art and expressive judgements on them:

The belief that an object is red will be true if and only if a suitably qualified observer in normal conditions would experience it as red. Similarly, the belief that a work of art is sad will be true if and only if a suitably qualified observer in normal conditions would experience it as sad.<sup>20</sup>

In order to better understand, let’s compare directly, like Matravers himself does, the base-principle of the Arousal theory:

<sup>16</sup>The question Matravers is now interested in answering to is this one: how can we say that, for example, the second movement of Beethoven’s *Eroica* is “sad”? On which basis can we express this judgement?

<sup>17</sup>«... musical expressiveness should be seen to belong unequivocally to the music – to be a property or aspect thereof – and not to the listener or performer or composer» (Matravers, 2003, p. 353).

<sup>18</sup>For example: in a red ball, we can experience the colour “red” just because there is a surface that supports it (having a surface is a primary quality of the ball). In the case of solubility, a substance is soluble just because it has a particular molecular structure (again, having a characteristic molecular structure is a primary quality of substances).

<sup>19</sup>(Matravers, 1998, p. 188).

<sup>20</sup>(Matravers, 1998, p. 188).



A work of art  $x$  expresses the emotion  $e$  if, for a qualified observer  $p$  experiencing  $x$  in normal conditions,  $x$  arouses in  $p$  a feeling which would be an aspect of the appropriate reaction to the expression of  $e$  by a person, or to a representation the content of which was the expression of  $e$  by a person.

and the base-principle for colour judgements:

[an object]  $x$  is red iff for any observer  $p$ : if  $p$  were perceptually normal and were to encounter  $x$  in perceptually normal conditions,  $p$  would experience  $x$  as red.

The analogy is not so immediately clear. However, it is sufficiently clear, in my opinion, what Matravers needs from these two definitions: the claim is that on the one hand we can interpret musical expressiveness as a dispositional property, that is as pieces of music disposition to arouse feelings in a listener during his/her paying attention to their formal structure (that in this case plays the role of the primary quality which expressiveness, being a secondary one, leans on), and, on the other hand, we are authorized to ‘recycle’ the justification we give for colour judgements also for expressive judgements. It is a step by step process. When we say that an apple is red, that is we attribute the property “red” to the apple as it was an *intrinsic* property, this attribution is formally a category mistake (“red” means just “disposition to be seen as red by a qualified observer”), but this mistake is acceptable if we don’t go beyond the phenomenology of experience, which is certainly the experience of a red apple, not an experience of the red on one side and the apple on another.

To satisfy the Externality Requirement means to claim the same thing for expressiveness in music: our expressive judgements are justified by the fact that we are just describing experience of listening to a piece of music in its phenomenological aspect: our ‘hearing the emotion *in* the music’ is not so different from our seeing the red *in* the apple.

## 1.2 Further developments

Dispositionalism as a theory of musical expressiveness raises some further objections besides those we previously discussed: a brief mention of them could enrich our description of the theory. The first objection is about a suspected subjectivism of the dispositional account. In particular, critics argue that claiming that a piece of music is expressive of an emotion just in virtue of its disposition to arouse that same emotion in a listener could be dangerously brought back to the sphere of each listener’s private feelings. In other words, emotions expressed by a single piece of music could potentially be as many as people who listen to it, and this is obviously unacceptable.

Matravers and arousalists answer that since it doesn’t make sense to claim that colour concepts are something ‘private’ (on the contrary, they are formed inside the shared social practice), similarly whether or not a piece of music is sad is not something that depends on listeners’ private feelings at all. Claiming that expressive judgements depend, in their being true or false, on the content of the corresponding experience is essentially different from demanding that those judgements are not bounded to a public and normative practice through which we learnt firstly what it is to feel an emotion, and then to set an emotion apart from another.

Matravers uses these words:

... colour and other secondary quality concepts are standardly defined in terms of the experience of the observer in just the way that I am claiming is the expression

of emotion in art. Yet this not entail that our concepts of colour are objectionably 'private'. On the contrary; for [...] I need more than a good eyesight to see what colours objects are. I need colour concepts to turn my visual experiences into experiences of the colours of the objects – and it is no part of our standard 'arousal' theory of colours that I am able to derive these concepts from my 'private' visual experiences. In short, the standard definition of colours in terms of the experience of a qualified observer does not entail any objectionable reduction of the colours of objects to the 'private' visual experiences of people. Nor, analogously, does the arousal theory entail any such reduction of the emotional qualities of works of art to the 'private' feelings of those who experience them.<sup>21</sup>

This is the second objection I want to mention: even though every qualified observer had recognized the same work of art as expressive of the same emotion, this does not imply that they all had the same emotional experience. In other words, the experience of expression as described by the Arousal theory, that is in terms of emotional response aroused by a particular auditory experience, is not analogous to visual experience of colour. In fact, him who judges an apple as "red" (and is not voluntarily lying) does it exclusively because he/she's experiencing it as red. Differently, in the case of a sad piece of music it is difficult to claim that, listening to it, we cannot help having the kind of experience that, according to the Arousal theory, should be the only one through which we are able to explain why we judge that piece of music as expressive of sadness.

In order to better answer to this objection, Matravers analyses it step by step.

First of all, the Arousal theory does not claim the existence of a 'standard' experience even in the case of colour (many observers could use the word "red" though having experiences which will never be the same, since every visual system is different): Arousalists just claim that, should the differences among the perceptual systems be as slight as possible (for example, it is not the case of colour blind people), and should the conditions in the background be extremely similar, observers would have very similar experiences, and the same thing is considered true for experience of expression in art. It is obvious that, in order to be emotionally involved by works of art (and this is the main difference with colour experience), we need, as well as possessing the appropriate perceptual abilities, also to possess them to the right degree.

Matravers uses these words when he compares little capacity to be emotionally involved by music with some sort of 'aesthetic colour blindness':

It is obvious that, in order to appreciate a certain work of art, the sense which a person would need to experience it at all would have to be functioning correctly. There is, for example, no sense in taking a blind person to a gallery of paintings or in reading poetry to someone who is deaf. The same is true of those people who possess the relevant senses, but to an inadequate degree. There are [...] aesthetic analogues of such things as blindness or colour-blindness. Some people are acutely sensitive to the expression of emotion in art and others utterly 'blind' to it. Many, perhaps most, fall somewhere between. [...] The aesthetic analogue of a completely blind person is therefore someone who does not possess the capacity to experience the expression of emotion in art...<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup>(Matravers, 1998, pp. 191-192).

<sup>22</sup>(Matravers, 1998, pp. 193-194).

Moreover, we cannot forget that in order to have this kind of experience it is essential also the capacity of adequately understand art, and that this capacity is very often either developed late in our life or not developed at all.

... the appreciation of a work's expressive properties, requires understanding. Failure to understand a work might mean that its expressive properties – those which have the capacity to arouse feelings in a qualified observer – would be missed. [...] The fact that almost all of us can discriminate colours, whilst not many of us are able to appreciate the expressive qualities of art, is not [...] a problem for the analogy. Colour discrimination requires capacities most of us acquire early in life, whilst appreciating the expressive qualities of art requires capacities some of us never acquire at all.<sup>23</sup>

After having demonstrated that also the second objection does not represent a problem for the Arousal theory, and, contextually, having been more precise about what it is to be a “qualified observer”, Matravers continues by arguing that a problem might arise were the Arousal theory asked for further details about what in its base principle calls “perceptually normal conditions” in which the ‘encounter’ with the work of art have to happen.

Matravers uses as examples works of art that we experience mainly through sight (paintings, sculptures, installations, some performances etc.), and his analysis starts with the claim that, in order for our experience to be “in perceptually normal conditions”, it has to take place while three conditions are being completely satisfied:

(1) There has to be the right light, that is the light under which the work of art is supposed to be seen (generally, daylight).

(2) There must not be any obstacles between the observer and the work which could modify the angle of reflection of light, hence no coloured lenses, no transparent or semi-transparent wall etc., unless these ‘filters’ are expressly wanted by the artist as integral part of the work itself.

(3) The background must be the *appropriate* one. This last condition is the one worth to be better explained. Indeed, Matravers himself says that the ‘normality’ of the background must be in turn defined, and precisely it is set partly by contingency and partly by convention. In particular, the background can be influenced by three elements:

(a) *Spatial*. It is necessary that the immediate spatial background is as much as possible a neutral one, in order to have the smallest, or even no influence at all, perception of chromatic contrasts the work is made up of<sup>24</sup>.

(b) *Temporal*. Our experience of the work can be influenced by other experiences we had before this one, like in “standard” perceptual experiences. For example, if we had previously kept one hand immersed in hot water and the other hand in cold water, each hand will perceive the contact with 30°C water in a different way<sup>25</sup>. A similar thing happens (to borrow another example from Matravers) when, at the restaurant, we are offered a sorbet between a course and another: with the purpose of ‘resetting’ our taste buds and making them more ‘reactive’ to incoming tastes.

(c) *Psychological*. Under this category are collected all the various elements able to have particular influence on internal *conscious* responses<sup>26</sup> and to modulate the intensity of the

<sup>23</sup>(Matravers, 1998, pp. 194-195).

<sup>24</sup>It is well known that colours can be differently perceived depending on which other colours are near to.

<sup>25</sup>The example is taken from (Matravers, 1998, p. 196), but Matravers himself declares in turn to having taken it from Locke.

<sup>26</sup>We always mean conscious background. Here the experience of expression in art is different from the experiences

internal resonance that a strongly involving experience like the one caused by expression of emotion. These elements are, for example, the cultural background, positive or negative memories about previous experiences similar to the actual one, recently acquired or far back settled beliefs, evolutionary factors, will or predisposition at that moment etc.<sup>27</sup>

Also in this case Matravers gives many examples, and underlines that the psychological element can be useful to whom has the task of “guiding” some learning and appreciation courses:

Mary Mothersill, for example, relates that she is now unable to listen to the final movement of the sixth Brandenburg concerto without feelings of nausea, after being forced to listen to it thirty or forty times at a bad party. [...] Not all such changes, of course, are as unpleasant as this and some are changes for the better. An individual might, for example, find that in the course of arriving at a better appreciation of Cézanne, they are forced to re-evaluate the work of some of the Impressionists. Later, perhaps, they might re-evaluate Cézanne in the light of their newly acquired appreciation of Braque and Picasso. [...] Anyone who hangs pictures, compiles anthologies, or arranges concert programmes knows that an audience’s experience of a work will be affected by other works they have recently encountered. This is why it is seldom that we encounter works of art thrown together at random.<sup>28</sup>

The third, rather difficult, objection Matravers and the Arousal theory have to face concerns the previously mentioned (see note 24) “*Dry-eyed criticism*”. Dry-eyed critics are a special kind of art critics, and that is the way they are called because they claim to be able to inhibit their emotional responses without nevertheless losing anything of both what the expressive properties of a work of art are and the authentic appreciation of them. If the critics could really demonstrate that what they say is actually possible to do, there would be a serious counterexample to the Arousal theory: dry-eyed critics would be the living proof for the objection that, to have experience of expression in a work of art, it is not necessary to feel personally the emotion expressed by the work itself. Matravers’s defensive strategy is made up of two parts: on the one hand, the Arousal theory have to accept that dry-eyed critics do exist and that they are really capable of what they claim to be able to do, but, on the other hand, Matravers can prove that they are nothing but a marginal exception, and not a valid counterexample.

First of all, Matravers compares dry-eyed critics with doctors. It happens very often that doctors, in order to be more lucid and efficient in their evaluations and professional choices, are compelled to voluntarily inhibit every feeling of pity or process of empathy towards their patients, no matter how potentially shocking their conditions are. It is part of their job, and with experience this capacity is acquired by almost everybody. Similarly, Matravers argues that a critic who deliberately decides to “dry his/her eyes” could be good enough to succeed in it without giving up catching the expressiveness of the work he/she is analysing. However,

of other secondary qualities like colour: while we can experience the latter even in an unconscious and unwilling way (The only way not to see the red in an apple is by closing one’s eyes!), the former needs further important factors, which are controllable and influenced by us through making conscious decisions.

<sup>27</sup>In this connection Matravers gives the example of “dry-eyed criticism” (Matravers, 1998, pp. 198-203), that is the situation in which a critic willingly decides not to let himself be emotionally involved during his analysis of a work of art and, at the same time, claims that this lack of involvement does not impoverish his appreciation of the work at all. I will deal with dry-eyed criticism later.

<sup>28</sup>(Matravers, 1998, pp. 197-198).

and here is the basic point, Arousal theory needs just to point out that dry-eyed criticism is nothing but an operation during which two beliefs are formed: on the one hand, the critic believes that a work of art expresses, for example, sadness, and on the other hand he/she believes that no feelings are being aroused in him/her. If we assume a functionalist account of mental states, as Matravers does, we must accept the fact that the relationship between our mental states and our beliefs about them is not logical but causal. Consequently, nothing prevents Matravers from answering to the dry-eyed critic that the content of his/her belief that he/she is not feeling anything might be false, and then oppositely claiming that the work of art causes in him/her, behind his/her back, an “incipient feeling”, which is also the most appropriate reaction to expression of emotion. Moreover, in order to deliberately decide to inhibit his/her own emotional reactions, it is required at least a vague sensation that an emotion, were he/she in a different situation, might be aroused. According to Matravers, the Arousal theory is perfectly able to obtain a successful account of dry-eyed criticism from its own thesis.

The burden of proof is now in the critic’s hands: it must be him/her to find an argument, opposite to what the Arousal theory claims about incipient feelings, to show that, even though in normal situations he/she would have normal emotional reactions (he/she is endowed with normal empathic abilities), he/she is nevertheless able to completely ignore his/her natural inclinations if it is necessary. Matravers claims that it is hard to find some good evidence for this latest thesis, hence dry-eyed criticism does not represent a serious threat for the Arousal theory.

The functionalist account of mental states which I am presupposing construes the relation between our mental states and our beliefs about them as causal rather than logical. That is, it is possible for the critic’s belief that he is not experiencing a feeling to be false. The arousal theorist needs to show that what is logically possible is psychologically actual. [...] Consider first the case of the doctor. It is unlikely that the patient’s plight will not affect the doctor’s feelings in any aspect whatsoever. If, we can suppose, he is disposed to feel pity for people who are in pain when circumstances are normal, it is unlikely that he will be able to disable this disposition altogether. To suppress a feeling seems to be doing something with it; a state which is distinct from not having a feeling at all. This suggests that the doctor experiences something which he subsequently suppresses so that it does not interfere with his proper mental and physical functioning. If this suppression is successful, he will be in a position in which he could have experienced a feeling but did not in fact do so. The natural way to report this would be with the claim that he is not experiencing the feeling. Dry eyed criticism may be explained in the same way. The expressive music cause an incipient feeling which is sufficient to cause the belief as to what the feeling would be were one to engage with the music at the level at which an emotion would be caused.<sup>29</sup>

In this perspective, the fact that the critic denies that he/she feels any kind of emotion does not affect the situation. As a matter of fact, empirical psychology would be the first ally of Arousal theory: it happens even too frequently that discrepancies are found between what a person consciously asserts and what emerges from his/her behaviour and his/her unconscious responses.

<sup>29</sup>(Matravers, 1998, p. 201).

To sum up, Matravers accounts for dry-eyed criticism this way:

- (1) We possess mechanisms able to provide beliefs about our mental states;
- (2) Expressive music causes in a dry-eyed critic an incipient feeling which tracks the music the way we described before;
- (3) Thanks to the ‘monitoring’ mechanism of point (1), which ‘intercepts’ this incipient feeling, the critic acquires the belief that that piece of music expresses a certain emotion, then inhibits the feeling just before it crosses the threshold of consciousness and, finally, he/she acquires the (false) belief that he/she is not feeling and he/she has never felt anything.

This account of dry-eyed criticism in terms of incipient feelings is not the only possible. There are other more ‘cynical’ versions of this kind of criticism, but they are also more marginal than the one we analysed in respect to the world of art and aesthetic experiences, which is the world the Arousal theory belongs to.

### 1.3 “Creation and Criticism”

The last ‘challenge’ Matravers wants the Arousal theory to face consists in trying to find a place and a plausible role within itself not only for the listeners, but also for creators (artists) and critics.

First of all, it is necessary to remember that, according to the Arousal theory, either to create an expressive work of art or to analyse it critically, it is fundamental to know the relationship between the work’s secondary qualities (among which there is expressiveness) and its basic properties, that is those properties (aesthetic counterpart of primary qualities) which de facto make possible the experience of secondary ones. While from the listener’s perspective the knowledge of which basic property is causing his/her experience of hearing a piece of music as expressive of a certain emotion is not essential, in the case either of a critic or of an artist who wants to personally create expressive works, this knowledge can be very useful.

What makes a work of art sad is that part of the experience it causes is an experience similar to that which we would have were we be confronted with a sad person. It does this in virtue of its possession of some basic property (or combination of such properties). [...] Knowing which basic properties cause which emotional reaction is useful both to the artist and the critic.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, to know the basic properties of a work of art and the mechanism by which they are able to arouse determined emotional responses is not sufficient to obtain the desired effects.

Otherwise, the task of artificially recreating the experience of expression in art would be almost the same as the the one of a chemist who, since he/she knows very well which formula to apply to obtain a determinate effect, carries out the procedure and reaches the expected result: for example, creating in laboratory a sample of a particular tone of red. Actually, even in the case of colours experimentation is all-important (a chemist does not discover and apply formulas by simply analysing the concepts behind, but thanks to a continuous comparison with experience: in his/her case, for example, his/her personal perceptual experience of the colours he/she creates), and even more so in order to create an expressive work of art it is not

<sup>30</sup>(Matravers, 1998, p. 209).

sufficient at all to apply standard formulas, though they do broadly exist and they can also be potentially known with a certain precision.

The relation between our experience and the properties of the object which cause our experience [...] is contingent; it could not be discovered by analysing the concepts involved. It is discovered, rather, by empirical investigation. [...] The analogous relation between a given basic property (or combination of properties) of a work of art is of course also contingent. It cannot be discovered simply by analysing our emotional or aesthetic concepts. The discovery of the basic properties of a work of art is, rather, a matter of discovering empirically what it is about them which arouse emotions in people.<sup>31</sup>

A big contribution to making the situation more complicated is given by the fact that, as we generally notice, every primary property of a work of art plays its part in determining expressive effects of that work in a way which is not systematic at all. Although some attempts, even by experts in the art field<sup>32</sup>, to create something like a 'dictionary' which links each primary property with a determinate emotion were made, they have not succeeded in explaining everything in those terms yet. As a matter of fact, when a basic property is discovered to be able to cause a certain emotional response, before this effect is really noticeable and the relationship is phenomenologically clear, an indeterminate number of further components come into the picture so that the link which would connect basic property and emotional response is much less immediate than we expected it to be. The component which most decisively 'diverts' the causal chain is the fact that, in the case of an emotional response to a work of art, the object is a *medium*. As a medium, it enters the relationship adding to it its own potentialities, of which the spectator can be either conscious or not. In short, the experience of works of art is made up of part of the emotional reaction a spectator would have facing a situation in everyday life (that is what is caused by the grasp of work's representational content) and the contribution made by *how* the medium represents what it represents. Thus the expressive effect of a work of art turns out to be a combination of the work's content and the way this content is represented<sup>33</sup>.

All we can say, then, is that in principle some basic properties *tend to cause* determinate emotional responses, and the Arousal theory is the theory which best accounts for the unsystematic nature of the relationship between basic properties and expressiveness in art. The artist is consequently seen as an 'hybrid' figure: on the one hand, he/she knows objects' basic properties, he/she can confidently handle them and, conscious of their expressive potentialities, he/she is able to use them at best; on the other hand, he/she is also the first spectator of his/her work («... both creator and spectator...»<sup>34</sup>). By getting personally involved by the expressive properties he/her him/herself made evident (differently from the 'calculating chemist' we touched on before), he/she enriches his/her 'aesthetic experimentation' with significance, anticipating so inside him/her the same experience he/she will then try to make his/her spectators able to live.

With regard to the critic, he/she is simply the one who 'reveals the artist's secrets', this is to say understands and makes clear those primary properties which lie at the bottom of expressiveness of the work examined. In various ways and with various techniques, the

<sup>31</sup>(Matravers, 1998, pp. 209-210).

<sup>32</sup>For example, Kandinsky made some famous studies on psychological effects of colours.

<sup>33</sup>I directly drew on Matravers's words (Matravers, 1998, p. 217).

<sup>34</sup>(Matravers, 1998, p. 217).

critic points at focusing spectators' attention on non-immediately aesthetic properties of the work of art, with the aim of recreating in consciousness those sensations which, for lack of experience, may have lain dormant or even missed at all («The critic is attempting to ensure that the appropriate mental state is aroused by focusing the spectator's attention on the appropriate cause.»<sup>35</sup>). From this perspective, the critic is nothing but a spectator with particularly developed competences, a sort of "maximally qualified observer", that means also perfectly placeable within the Arousal theory.

Among the various techniques a critic can use to reach his/her goal, there is also a particular kind of dry-eyed criticism which seems not to make use even of incipient feelings and which is very similar to, Matravers notices, the chemist's job again. Once discovered what (which primary property) exactly causes a determinate reaction and originates a certain phenomenon (secondary property), he/she is able to explain to anybody what his/her experience consists in and why it does happen just so. However, this kind of criticism might appear quite in contrast with the intentions of who wanted to enjoy at best the authentically aesthetic experience; experience that, perhaps, only a not too much (voluntarily or not) 'shrewd' eye is free to have, and which is, as far as I am concerned, also the most appropriate and the most fulfilling one.

With these last words concerning creation and criticism I consider my analysis of Matravers's version of Arousal theory to be finished. I nevertheless want to end with those Matravers's own words which in my opinion summarize the best quality of this unfairly underestimated theory about the relationship between music (or we should say more generally art) and emotions:

The experience of expression seems almost to require a complicated and mysterious analysis. This train of thought, although tempting, rests on a fallacy: namely, that the explanation of a phenomenon must match that phenomenon in gravitas, importance and so on. [...] It is a virtue rather than a vice that such an explanation [the arousal theory's one] is clear, leaves no mysteries, and makes no use of concepts invented for convenience.<sup>36</sup>

#### 1.4 To enlarge the domain...

As a last further consideration, I could add that the debate concerning the relationship between music and emotions have also a great strategical importance in one of the other main discussion in philosophy of music. As an example, Peter Kivy uses his cognitivism about musical expressiveness in order to justify a formalist approach to music in general. If emotional properties of music, Kivy argues, are nothing but formal properties recognized by us with the help of our cognitive system, then our aesthetic judgements should be based only on them, and, as an immediate consequence<sup>37</sup>, music is those formal properties.

Of course, by claiming that music, in addition to formal properties, possesses also other properties, though in a less intrinsic way (i.e. as dispositional properties), Matravers contrasts Kivy's formalism and thus maintains that our aesthetic judgements on music can't

<sup>35</sup>(Matravers, 1998, p. 220).

<sup>36</sup>(Matravers, 1998, pp. 225-226).

<sup>37</sup>According to Kivy, and, before him, to Hanslick, all that makes music worth existing are its formal properties, which are also exactly the only thing we can aesthetically appreciate.



help being, I would say, constitutively affected by listeners' emotional and perceptual experiences, so connected in consciousness that the latter causes the former.

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