**What Makes Sad Music…Sad?**

Exploring how musical characteristics portray emotions and make us feel.

Psychology today

Posted Sep 22, 2017

I’ve had an intermittent relationship with podcasts. Over the past several years I’ve tended towards listening to epic audiobook stories on Audible. Books like Game of Thrones, the Harry Hole detective series—things that would eat up any free audio listening time I had available.

But I’m slowly re-introducing myself to podcasts. It started with some of the NPR serial podcasts, as well as Stuff You Missed in History class. And with this renewed interest comes new recommendations, such as Malcolm Gladwell’s Revisionist History podcast. More specifically, his July 20, 2017 episode titled “The King of Tears.”

In this episode, Gladwell explores what makes sad songs…well, sad. He focuses in particular on lyrics and on the imagery and memories stimulated by such lyrics, with a brief touch on musical genre as a reflection of cultural communities. Though as a music therapist the cultural aspects of musical genre are of interest to me, what was most striking about Gladwell’s exploration was that…

…well, it fell short. Surprisingly short.

My primary reason for this claim is that Gladwell only focused on one characteristic of music—lyrics—and its role in the perception of sad music. Perhaps, though, that was part of his intent. After all, music itself is a highly complex stimulus and humans have complex and individualized reactions to music. Thus it would not be possible to provide a thorough examination of all characteristics associated with sad music.

Yet lyrics are not enough. So I take this opportunity to present other reasons sad music is sad. As with the podcast episode, this is not an exhaustive exploration and there is much we researchers and clinicians still need to understand. But it’s a start…

**One: Modes**

Modes involve the arrangement and ordering of musical notes in a particular key. It’s this arrangement of notes that create the chords we hear, which lend themselves to our perception of a piece’s tonality. (Tonality describes the color of a musical piece and is based on which chords and harmonies are more important than others in a given musical work.) Common modes include the major mode and minor mode, and these two modes, in particular, are used to portray happy (major mode) and sad (minor mode) music. Research lends support, as musical modes are potent cues for musical emotions (Gabrielsson & Lindström, 2010), even in school-aged children (Dalla Bella et al., 2001).

**Two: Tempo**

Tempo refers to the speed, or pace, of a musical piece. As with modes, tempo is also used as a way to express emotions. In fact, it’s generally considered to be one of the more important musical characteristics to do so (Gabrielsson & Lindström, 2010), with fast music portraying happiness and slow music portraying sadness. Now, it should be noted that fast and slow tempos can be used to indicate other emotions (e.g., fast tempo for anger and slow tempo for calmness). In these instances, other musical characteristics interact with tempo to portray the intended emotion. For example, fast music in a major mode will more likely sound happy, whereas fast music in a minor mode will more likely sound angry.

**Three: Interactions Between Musical Characteristics**

Finally, the role of other musical characteristics in expressing emotions—melody, timbre, dynamics, harmony, etc.—has also been explored by researchers. And though research indicates each contributes in some way towards making sad music sad and happy music happy, in practice emotional expression is really more about the interactions between how different musical characteristics are structured (Gabrielsson & Lindström, 2010). An example of this has been shared already—fast music in a major mode is considered happy, while fast music in a minor mode is considered anger. There are other examples as well, such as loudness (dynamics) and pitch height. High pitched music played quietly will likely sound fearful, while high-pitched music played loudly will likely sound happy (or angry, depending on other factors like timbre, tempo, mode…).

As I understand it, Gladwell’s main point is that musically-induced tears occur when “melancholy collides with specificity.” In other words, when the characteristics of the music itself (in his argument, lyrics) combine with details, memories, and images related to one’s life or other emotional triggers, that’s what contributes to the experience of sad music. And though I don’t disagree with this sentiment, the phenomenon itself is much more complex than that, or even (quite frankly) than what’s been shared in this post. The perception of sad music includes other characteristics beyond lyrics, particularly tempo and mode, as well as the interactions between musical elements.

A final point—I’ve focused mostly on the music itself in this post. However, context matters, too. The same song can be sung by different performers and achieve different emotional results. Perceived musical emotions also depend on the listener. One listener may be touched by a particular song (and, yes, it may be due in part to the lyrics contributing to the melancholy + details formula proposed by Gladwell), whereas another may not be, even if hearing the same performance.

Ultimately, although this topic is of interest to me both as a scholar and a clinician, I think at the heart of it I’m just grateful music makes us feel.

**References**

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