

Music is not even language-like: Analyzing Kivy's view on music and language

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Abstract: In this paper, I challenge the idea that music is language-like, in the sense it has a semantic-like dimension, as apparently implied in Peter Kivy's view on the relationship between music and language. Kivy suggests that music is semantic-like because it expresses something at the level of meaning which appeals to "musical expressivity". Musical expressivity is captured by the emotive properties constituting the musical content and recognized by a competent listener. I discuss two positions on musical expressivity, cognitivism and emotivism, which characterize the two aspects of musical expressivity differently – the emotional experience of the listener, and the musical objects and their features – the connection between them, and how they shape musical content. I conclude that since none of them provides an exhaustive explanation of musical expressivity, we should abandon the idea that music is semantic-like and, *a fortiori*, that music is language-like, at least within a framework which considers the semantic dimension of music to be related to emotive properties and musical expressivity.

Keywords: language; music; semantics; musical content; meaning; emotions; emotive properties; musical expressivity

1. Introduction

Music and language share their basic constituents – sounds and their audible properties, such as pitch, loudness and timbre – at least when comparing speech sound with musical sound, as opposed to written language and written music. Like other art forms such as painting and sculpture, music and language are also both used to communicate. Leaving aside these basic and very intuitive commonalities, other similarities between language and music can be examined at different levels. There are at least four levels of analysis where we might individuate similarities between music and language: meaning, translatability, cognition, and perception.

- 1) Analysis at the level of meaning involves determining whether music has content that expresses such a meaning or whether it communicates something approximating the meaning expressed by language.

- 2) Analysis at the level of translatability assumes that music has meaningful content – regardless of whether such meaning equates to linguistic meaning – and investigates whether such meaning can be expressed in words. Such analysis examines the translatability of musical content into linguistic terms. Translatability of musical content is often intertwined with the more general question of the ineffability of aesthetic content.
- 3) Analysis usually carried out at the cognitive level may verify whether the cognitive capacities for acquiring and using musical idiom work in the same way as those for acquiring and using language.
- 4) At the perceptual level, by comparing spoken language and music we can assess whether the cues and principles that determine how the phonemes grouped into words to form sentences – and then segregate them from other words to form other sentences – resemble the cues and principles that determine the grouping of notes into melodies and harmonies, and that then segregate them to form other melodies and harmonies (Bregman 1990).

This paper examines the first level of comparison: the possible similarities between music and language and the meanings they may express. I focus on natural languages and on music labelled as “absolute” or “pure” music, namely, instrumental music with no text, or references to other extra-musical elements. I have restricted my analysis to Western music, usually considered to be music composed in the Western tradition, from ancient Greek times to the present day. I discuss Kivy’s (2007) view on music and language, in particular his statement that music is not a language but is *language-like*, since it is similar to language in a weak, analogical sense. Kivy suggests that music is language-like since it has a syntax, and although it lacks any semantic component akin to linguistic semantics, it still has emotive properties that constitute its content and can be recognized by a competent listener.¹ Therefore, Kivy appears to be suggesting that music has a semantic-like aspect, although he does not explicitly state this. Like natural languages, music has a syntax and a semantics, although linguistic syntax and semantics differ from musical syntax and semantics. I agree with Kivy, and propose an even more extreme claim: that music is not *even* language-like. I will limit my analysis to the semantic-like dimension of music and show that semantics have no place in music since it does not resemble semantic language in even a weak or analogical sense. To justify my assertion, I will challenge the idea that there is any semantic-like dimension of music captured in terms of the emotive properties that constitute its content – which seems to be Kivy’s notion

¹ Throughout the paper, by “listener” I always mean “competent listener”. A competent listener is someone who has some familiarity with Western music and can at least distinguish it from, say, the music of the African or Indian traditions.

of musical semantics. I will do so by reviewing key literature on the relationship between music and emotion, including Kivy's. I will then conclude that there seems to be no exhaustive view which clearly explains the link between the alleged emotive properties of music and the fact that these can be recognized by a listener. As there is currently no satisfactory explanation for the emotive properties of music, there can be no semantic-like dimension which explains musical content. Therefore, music is clearly not language in a weak, analogical sense. Music is not even language-like.

2. *Music is language-like: Kivy's view*

In the following paragraph, I will present Kivy's view on music and language, and show how his view is committed to the idea that music has a semantic component which is characterized in terms of musical emotive content.

Kivy's discussion of the commonalities and differences between music and language begins with the following quotation:

When Franz Joseph Haydn, 'papa' Haydn to his friends, decided, in 1790, at the advanced age of 58, to make an extended trip to England, Mozart is supposed to have exclaimed: 'Oh, Papa, you have had no education for the wide world, and you speak so few languages.' Haydn's legendary reply was: 'But my language is understood all over the world.' (Kivy 2007: 215)

This famous anecdote establishes a context which leads Kivy to conclude that music is language-like. In the quotation, Haydn suggests that there is no need to learn many languages to be understood, since "speaking" the language of music will allow him to be understood "all over the world". This is because music is a language with an international (that is a "universal" character). In the quotation, by "all over the world" Haydn is referring to his own world, namely the European countries of Austria, Germany, France, Bohemia, France, England, and Italy (*ibid.*). According to Kivy, Haydn's answer rightly suggests that in his world, his music would be understood and taken as a *lingua franca* because it was part of its culture. Moreover, music can be learned naturally and effortlessly when the listener is immersed in it, like any natural language such as French or German. The wider universality of music (the fact that it can be understood more broadly than a natural language) and people's ability to learn it make it language-like: "[...] for the broader understanding of European music, as opposed to European languages, must be that natural languages have a semantics as well as a grammar. You have to know what French words mean to understand French. But you don't have to know what the themes (or whatever analogue to words you choose) of a classical symphony mean to understand

it. They don't mean anything. One way of putting this is to say that, unlike natural languages, music of the kind Haydn wrote has a 'syntax' without a semantics" (*ibid.*: 216).

What Kivy means by "understanding" a classical symphony without knowing the themes will become clearer later when I discuss his statement on the emotive properties of music (see paragraph 3.2). The passage above states that while natural languages have syntax and semantics, music has a syntax but lacks a semantic dimension, which partly explains its apparent international character. Saying that music has a syntax but lacks a semantics already weakens the claim that music is language-like since, in order to be language-like, music (even in a weak or analogical sense) should necessarily possess both features of language. Nevertheless, later in the same paper, Kivy suggests that although music lacks a semantic dimension understood in linguistic terms, we can still talk about a semantic dimension at the level of meaning by employing the "vocabulary" of emotions (*ibid.*: 220). For Kivy, music is language-like since it has "universally recognizable emotive qualities" which are emotive building blocks expressed by a "whole arsenal of musical themes and harmonic techniques whose emotive character became instantly recognizable to the competent listener" (*ibid.*). Kivy adds that some sort of musical meaning is unavoidable since "it is almost impossible to refrain from calling these emotive building blocks I have been alluding to an emotive 'vocabulary', making up an emotive musical 'language'. And as a *façon de parler* it is perfectly harmless. Music is certainly language-like in having these universally recognizable emotive qualities" (*ibid.*). These emotive building blocks are the basis of a theory of musical content intended to explain why music can be considered an international language: a competent listener has learned to recognize the emotions expressed by music in the same way as when learning to speak a natural language. The shift from saying that music lacks a semantic dimension to the idea that some weak form of meaning remains is evident when Kivy writes that "[t]he notion that music is a language of the emotions, then, like the notion that music is an international language, has a kernel of truth in it: it reveals to us one of the ways in which music is language-like. It is language-like in that the competent listener to Western music – [...] – can recognize the emotive qualities of the music in a consistent manner. And in this regard, it is language-like too, in that the ability to 'read' the musical emotions, like the ability to read French or German, is not innate or cross-cultural. Just as you must learn to read French or German, so you must learn to 'read' the emotions in Western music. Music is not a language or the language of the emotions. But its emotive character makes it language-like in that respect" (*ibid.*: 222).

Just like language, music has a syntax, and just like language it has a level of meaning that still provides musical content, albeit not a fully semantic one. This is how I interpret Kivy's view. In addition, the fact that a competent listener can recognize the emotive qualities of music and must be trained to be able to 'read' musical emotions indicates that the use of emotive musical 'language' it is not a mere *façon de parler*, as Kivy maintains.

I will challenge the claim that music is language-like by discussing the idea that music has a semantic-like dimension,² that is, by challenging the claim that music is the expression of emotions made universally recognizable through musical content with embedded emotive qualities. I will argue that music is not language-like since it has no content which is close enough to any semantic dimension captured in terms of emotive qualities. Therefore, music is not even language-like in a weak semantic sense. To support this assertion, I will examine key views on musical expressivity as proposed in contemporary philosophy of music which characterize expressivity in terms of emotive properties, and show that none of them provides a satisfactory explanation of musical expressivity. of musical expressivity. We cannot conclude that music is language-like since it does not seem to have a semantic dimension, even in the weak sense of *merely* being the language of emotions. Therefore, music is not even language-like.

The originality of this paper lies in addressing possible similarities between music and language when considering the emotions involved in understanding music, when these subjects are generally discussed separately.³

3. *Musical semantics as a way of expressing emotions*

I am skeptical about the claim that music is language-like if its semantic aspect is characterized by expressivity captured in emotive terms. The views on musical expressivity proposed in the current debate on the relationship between music and emotion do not seem to exhaustively account for this relationship.

There are two main views in the philosophy of music which explain the expression of musical emotion and how a competent listener recognizes them. These can be organized into two distinct categories, depending on the "location" they attribute to emotions, whether in the ear of the listener or in the music itself (Di Bona 2019; Kania 2017; Lentini 2014). These are the emotivist view and the cognitivist view. In the following passage, Kivy (1990) presents these positions as two different parties to an ancient dispute:

² For a clear and exhaustive discussion of musical syntax and its similarity with linguistic syntax, see Swain 1995.

³ I would like to thank one of the reviewers for identifying this specific point of originality.

An “ancient quarrel” runs through the philosophy of music. It concerns the relation of music to the emotive life, and I will characterize it here as the quarrel between musical “cognitivists” and musical “emotivists” [...]. Those I am calling musical emotivists believe that when, under normal circumstances, musical critics, theorists, or just plain listeners call a piece of music (say) “sad,” it is because it makes us sad when we listen to it; and what they mean by “sad” music, I will assume, is music that normally arouses sadness in the normal listener. The musical cognitivists, like the emotivists, believe that it is proper sometimes to describe music in emotive terms. But unlike the emotivists, they do not think that sad music is sad in virtue of arousing that emotion in listeners. Rather, they think the sadness is an expressive property of the music which the listener recognizes in it, much as I might recognize sadness as a quality of a dog’s countenance or even of an abstract configuration of lines (Kivy 1990: 146-147).

The two positions differ significantly since they assign the listener a different role in the attempt to characterize the emotive properties constituting musical content. While for the emotivists the listener has the “power” to give substance to emotive properties, for cognitivists the listener merely recognizes the emotive properties which exist independently in the musical object. For the emotivist, it is only when emotions are aroused in the listener that they can properly recognize such emotions and attribute these to the music. For the cognitivist, the opposite is true: musical content already expresses emotions, and the listener should be able to recognize them by identifying similarities between the musical content and human emotional expression.

As we will see, even though both positions seem to capture some intuitive facts about music, neither can fully explain emotive properties or exhaustively describe how musical emotive properties are connected to music and the listener. In the next two sections, I will further analyze the principle emotivist and cognitivist views to make clear my assertion that they are not fully exhaustive.

3.1. The Emotivist View

Emotivist (or arousal) views claim that musical expressivity must be characterized by the emotions aroused in the person when listening to music. These expressive properties are dispositional properties and come into existence only when aroused in the experience of the listener while she listens to music. We are moved, feel musical emotions, and then recognize the emotions as belonging to the musical piece. Different versions of this view have been suggested by Speck (1988), Robinson (1994; 2005), Ridley (1995), Matravers (1998; 2003), and Nussbaum (2007). I will briefly present the main ideas in theories proposed by Matravers, Robinson, and Ridley since these are the most representative and fully developed within the emotivist framework (Di Bona 2018: 161).

Matravers's (1998) version of emotivism can be expressed by the following statement: a piece of music expresses E if, and only if, that piece of music aroused E in the listener. To determine the emotion being expressed by that music, we should look at the emotions it stimulates in the listener. What matters for musical expressivity, then, are the emotional reactions of the listener and their musical experience. The musical object⁴ generates a certain emotional reaction in the listener, and this is the only way to individuate musical expressivity. Matravers adds that it is not a matter of merely reacting emotionally when appropriately stimulated, since the listener should also be somehow aware of the emotive properties that trigger their reaction. Moreover, the kind of emotion that music stimulates is not fully-fledged but a mere feeling, a sensation that lacks cognitive content: "[t]he 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'" (1998: 147-148).

Robinson (1994) focuses on a central feature of the emotivist view, namely, on the relationship between the expressivity of music and the arousal of emotions due to the listening to such music. She states that there are emotions which do not require any cognitive mediation since they can be suddenly aroused by merely listening to the music. That is, without being aware of the kind of music we are listening to, whether a symphony or a quartet, we can simply feel a certain emotion. According to Robinson: "we may not even be aware why we feel as we do: the effect of the constantly shifting harmonic pattern affects us 'directly' without conscious cognitive mediation [...]" (1994: 19). To conclude, Robinson claims that music can quite directly: "[...] make me feel tense or relaxed; it can disturb, unsettle and startle me; it can calm me down or excite me; it can get me tapping my foot, singing along or dancing; it can maybe lift my spirits and mellow me out" (*ibid.*: 18).

The last emotivist I will briefly present is Ridley's (1995; 2004). He shares Robinson's view and claims that emotions are aroused in the listener directly. More broadly, he starts from the conception of music as something embedded in our life, and claims that expressiveness is conceptually connected to our capacity to feel. Because music is embedded in our life, it shares some characteristics with it, especially concerning emotive features. The resemblance relationship between life and music is based on the fact that music profiles

⁴ There is a distinction between the musical object and the musical content. In this paper, by "musical object" I mean the musical piece, which can be a symphony, a quartet, a trio, and so on. The musical object has musical features, such as harmony, melody, and rhythm. With musical "content" I mean what can be expressed by an occurrence of the musical object. The musical content is usually characterized in terms of expressivity of emotive qualities.

– which are made of harmonies, melodies, dynamics, and all the syntactic musical elements which are called “melisma” (Ridley 2004: 2) – share the “melismatic gestures”, which are expressive human behaviors that include vocal and physical expression. Music melisma resembles something expressive, which is human expressive behavior. The concept of melisma helps to characterize the link between musical expressivity and human expressivity. Moreover, listeners should also respond empathically to the musical object, otherwise the relationship between musical expressivity and human expressivity cannot take place. As will become clear after discussing the cognitivist position in more depth below, Ridley’s view overlaps with the cognitivist position because it introduces an isomorphic relationship between human emotive behavior and musical content that explains the connection between music and human reactions. According to Ridley, the empathic response of the listener is the key to understanding this connection, as is evident here: “It is rather like my coming to appreciate the melancholy of a weeping willow only as the willow saddens me: I could, of course, merely identify the expressive posture which the willow’s posture resembles; but instead I apprehend its melancholy through a kind of mirroring response. I respond to it sympathetically” (2004: 52).

After this short presentation of the core ideas of the most representative emotive proposals in the recent literature, I will now introduce two key concerns that prevent us from concluding that these views successfully characterize musical content as expressing emotive properties (Di Bona 2019: 168-173).

When aiming to characterize musical expressivity, all of the emotivist positions I have introduced above consider, on the one hand, the musical object and its properties – the musical piece with its harmony, melody, and rhythm – to be a secondary, negligible element, while, on the other hand, the listener’s reaction to be what really matters. However, if the emotive reaction of the listener is key to providing the correct explanation for the musical content, then we cannot really identify the specificity of this content since we cannot grasp the specificity of musical experience as distinguished from similar experiences caused by different objects (Di Bona 2019: 173). If within the emotivist accounts, musical expressivity is based uniquely on the subjective reactions of the listener, then these accounts do not capture the aesthetic specificity of the musical object. Musical experience seems to be equated with the experiences arousing similar emotive reactions to musical emotions but generated by different causes – such as sexual experiences or the various experiences we have of losing a loved one, loving another, the fear of the unknown or experiences we have under the effects of drugs. The problem is that the same expressive emotional state may be triggered by an object other than the musical object, the emotivists should provide at least one criterion to distinguish between two

apparently identical emotional experiences— for example, where the perceiver feels equally happy – but which are produced by different objects. This criterion does not seem to be suggested.

Another concern about the emotivist view is that it ignores crucial features of primary importance for musical expressivity, namely, the “causes” of musical expressivity – melodic phrases, harmonic structures, musical form, the specific genre of the piece of music, etc. – because this view considers the musical object itself a unimportant element, a mere “arouser” of specific emotions (Di Bona 2019: 173). It seems unreasonable not to highlight the importance and complexity of the musical object for a theory on musical content. This is because musical experience cannot be the mere occurrence of an affective state lacking any aesthetic feature which undoubtedly connects to the musical object itself, in the sense of being bound to a particular musical object in a necessary way.

Correctly understanding the characterization of the relationship between a musical object and emotion is challenging, and the emotivists fail to do so.

Let us now examine whether the main cognitivist positions provide an exhaustive theory to explain the importance of the emotional response and the relevance of the musical work.

3.2. The Cognitivist View

According to the cognitivist approach, musical content is constituted by the expressive properties a competent listener can usually recognize. Musical expressive properties are perceptual properties that can express different emotions; the listener is able to detect these when listening to music. When we see a St. Bernard dog, we cannot assume that he is constantly sad, even though his facial expression is always sad-looking. That is, his face is *expressive* of sadness, without *expressing* sadness; likewise, music is *expressive* of a certain emotion, without *expressing* that emotion (*ibid*: 168).

The cognitivist view must explain how expressive properties are embodied in music such that the listener can recognize them. This is only possible if the cognitivist can explain how someone becomes acquainted with the musical content expressing a specific emotion. Cognitivist views vary precisely because of the different answers they give to the question above.

Kivy (1980; 1990; 1999; 2002) supports the contour thesis of musical expressivity, in which there is a correspondence between music and the auditory and visual manifestations of emotions in humans. Human vocal expressions or gestures human beings have when having an emotional experience possess a typical contour. Music is expressive of an emotion when it shares this contour. For Kivy, there is a similarity between musical contour and the features that exemplify human emotional behavior. This similarity is the key to recogniz-

ing the emotions displayed by musical content. Moreover, this similarity helps to explain what Kivy means by understanding a classical symphony without knowing its themes: he merely means recognizing the emotions represented in the musical content.

Similarly, Davies (2011) proposes a correspondence relationship between music and human behavior. He claims that a listener can recognize the emotional properties of music because they resemble the auditorily expressive behaviors of emotional people. For example, a happy voice has a typical auditory profile. A melodic line in a passage of music expresses happiness when it resembles the typical auditory profile of a happy voice. For Davies, then, acquaintance with this correspondence relationship allows the listener to recognize happiness as expressed by musical content. To be more precise, the correspondence relationship which determines musical expressiveness “is that between music’s temporally unfolding dynamic structure and configurations of human behaviour associated with the expression of emotion”. Moreover, as we see the expression of movement in the objects that surround us: “[w]e experience movement in music—in terms of progress from high to low or fast to slow, say—but as well in the multistranded waxing and waning of tensions generated variously within the harmony, the mode of articulation and phrasing, subtle nuances of timing, the delay or defeat of expected continuations, and so on” (Davies 2011: 10).

On a slightly different note, Levinson (2006) proposes a contour theory according to which the listener recognizes a certain emotion only when they “see” someone, namely, when imagining someone represented in the musical content, a *persona*, who seems to express that specific emotion. One clear quotation about this is: “a passage of music P is expressive of an emotion E if and only if P, in context, is readily heard, by a listener experienced in the genre in question, as an expression of E” (Levinson 2006: 93). According to Levinson, the expression of an emotion requires someone to express it. Given that music is not a sentient being and hence cannot express emotion in a literal sense, we need to imagine that someone, a person, will express it. This is the only way for a listener to recognize musical emotion. We recognize someone feeling an emotion when we listen to music, and this explains how we come to understand musical content that expresses a specific emotion.

Maintaining quite a different but still cognitivist position from Levinson’s, but always within the cognitivist position, Budd (1995) states that people do not always manifest their emotions visibly via an external behavior, since some emotions, like melancholy or gratitude, are not necessarily associated with bodily sensations or visible signs. Therefore, to recognize the emotions expressed by musical content we need to verify how we feel “inside” when moved by music. Budd appeals to the introspection of one’s emotive life to individu-

ate musical emotions. While Levinson imagines that we recognize a specific emotion expressed by music because we attribute this emotion to an external character, an imaginary person, Budd (1995) conversely claims that we need to focus on our inner emotional states to achieve the same aim.

Following this brief outline of the main cognitivist positions, we can summarize their general view by saying that, compared to arousal positions, cognitivists explain the expressivity of music by maintaining the autonomy of the musical object, and highlighting the relevance of musical features and their crucial role. Nevertheless, these positions do not provide an accurate explanation of the embodiment of emotions in music. In particular, it seems that the different characterizations of the resemblance relationship – which should guarantee that the listener will recognize musical emotions – are not very informative and none of them can correctly describe how musical expressivity resembles human expressive behavior – whether it is the vocal expression of an imaginary *persona*, an inner emotional state or visible vocal expression (Di Bona 2019: 170). If almost anything can resemble anything else in some respect, we cannot identify a perfect isomorphic relationship which will undoubtedly match musical features to emotive auditory or visual expressions, considering the different ways in which such expressions can be presented. Trivedi clearly voices this concern: “[a]ll kinds of things may resemble how we vocally or physically or behaviorally express various mental states or the affective tones of these mental states, but they are not expressive of these mental states, even if we perceive these resemblances” (Trivedi 2011: 227).

Another more serious concern about the cognitivist view is that it seems to lack any explanation for a very intuitive fact about musical experience: why and how we are moved by music and feel emotions when listening to it, without the need for them to be represented in the musical content. If emotions are found in the music and emotive properties are uniquely embedded in the musical content, cognitivists must explain the emotional reaction that music often stimulates. Cognitivists are aware of this problem but they are in hurry to resolve it since they consider that emotional arousal in the listener is not necessarily connected to the expressive properties of the musical object. For them, recognizing expressive properties does not imply that the listener feels them. Moreover, it is obviously very often the case that humans first feel emotions and then attribute them to the musical object that is, in fact, responsible for them. The problem of taking into account the listener’s undeniable emotional experience does not affect emotivism, of course, since this is deemed musical expressivity within this view. Emotivism suffers from the opposite problem: it does not acknowledge the importance of objective features in the musical object in shaping musical expressivity.

4. *Conclusion*

It is hard to accommodate the two fundamental aspects of musical experience in shaping musical content, namely, the subjectivity of the listener and the objectivity of the musical object. Nevertheless, any view on the expressivity of music and musical content must consider both aspects and offer a plausible way to connect them. Neither emotivism nor cognitivism exhaustively explain how musical content expresses emotive properties; therefore, we may conclude that we cannot use either to account for musical expressivity. We likewise cannot use any current notion of musical expressivity – a notion used by Kivy to suggest that music is language-like – which justifies the claim that music is semantic-like and, *a fortiori*, that music is language-like or similar to language in a weak or analogical sense. I refer here to musical expressivity since, in Kivy's view, the semantic component of music which makes music language-like is characterized in emotive terms. Of course, we can still claim that music is language-like and propose a characterization of the semantic component which we cannot describe in terms of musical expressivity. If we wish to maintain that music is language-like because it has a semantic component, two options remain. One is to wait for a better explanation of musical expressivity, in terms of emotive properties, which resolves the problems in cognitivism and emotivism. The other is to put aside these emotive properties and define musical expressivity in different terms. That might allow us to show that music is semantic-like by saying that although musical content has nothing to do with emotions (the idea that music is the “language of emotions” is, then, untenable), it still expresses contents that are either ineffable or appeal to value or beauty. I will leave future researchers to assess these options. The aim of this paper has merely been to explore the limits of a view on music and language from one of the most prominent contemporary philosophers of music in the analytic tradition.

Acknowledgments

I presented a version of this paper at the Polonsky Seminar in Jerusalem in 2020. I would like to thank the audience who attended the seminar, Stefano Ercolino, and the anonymous referees for their comments and suggestions.

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