Musical Gestures: 
Toward a Theory of Musical Expressiveness

Myriam Albor

Musical expressiveness is commonly explained by connecting it with emotions. However, what we now know about emotions shows more differences than similarities between them and musical experience. In this thesis, I propose a better account of musical expressiveness on which emotional expression is supplemented by the expression of other affective processes, like feelings.

The idea that music is expressive of emotions has been challenged on the basis that it does not present an intentional object, nor an evaluation of the situation, which are the elements that permit an individuation of the emotions. A popular reply to this problem is given in the Resemblance Theory, according to which music resembles characteristics of emotional gestures. Even though this theory successfully faces the problems derived from the lack of intentional object, it also reduces the scope of musical expressiveness to those emotions that have distinctive acoustic gestures.

My proposal is to extend the Resemblance Theory to include feelings, as these both do not require an intentional object, and are capable of better explaining music’s subtle expressiveness. In support of this, I present some musicological examples that show that the search for resemblance between musical elements and feelings has formed a practical basis for the composition and performance of expressive music throughout history.

Going further, I suggest that the relationship between music and what it expresses is not an iconic relationship, but an indexical one. Using a simulation theory of musical experience, based on the activation of mirror neurons, I argue that music indexically presents a sonic landscape that the listener explores offline, thereby triggering the associated feelings. This permits us to construct a concept of musical gestures that is consistent with contemporary theories of emotions, musical practices, and philosophical rigor.

MYRIAM ALBOR
Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (National Autonomous University of Mexico)
Institute for Philosophical Research
Faculty of Philosophy and Letters
EMAIL: myriamalbor@gmail.com