Expressive Intention and Performance

ALF GABRIELSSON

Theoretical Background

This paper discusses how intentions concerning the emotional character of a piece of music affect the performance of the piece. In other words, what does a performer do to generate the intended emotional character of the music? We will first present two theories on music and emotion and then turn to some empirical investigations.

Susanne Langer

One of the most influential theories concerning music and emotion was proposed by the philosopher Susanne Langer (1953, 1957). A basic idea in her theory is that there is an isomorphism between the structure of music and the structure of feelings, "music is a tonal analogue of emotive life" (Langer 1953, p. 27), "music is...formulation and representation of emotions, moods, mental tensions and resolutions" (1957, p. 222). The latter statement was a reformulation of a well-known statement by Richard Wagner concerning the expressiveness of music. Langer invoked many other authors as well. Thus Wolfgang Köhler (1947, cited in Langer 1957, p. 226) found musical terms useful for describing the forms of mental life: "Quite generally the inner processes, whether emotional or intellectual, show types of development which may be given names, usually applied to musical events, such as: crescendo and diminuendo, accelerando and ritardando". Carroll Pratt (1931, cited in Langer, 1957 p. 244) remarked concerning the auditory character of music that "[they] are not emotions at all. They merely sound the way moods feel..." This statement was later succinctly put "Music sounds the way moods feel" (Winner 1982, p. 211) Furthermore, in discussing the differences between language and music, Langer stated that "because the forms of human feeling are much more congruent with musical forms than with the forms of language, music can reveal the nature of feelings with a detail and truth that language cannot approach." (Langer 1957, p. 235).

The formal properties that may be similar in music and in human feeling are, for example, "forms of growth and attenuation, flowing and stowing, conflict and resolution, speed, arrest, terrific excitement, calm, or subtle activation and dreamy lapses" (Langer 1953, p. 27), "patterns of motion and rest, of tension and release,
of agreement and disagreement, preparation, fulfilment, excitation, sudden change, etc." (Langer 1957, p. 228). These properties are intuitively appealing to many of us and often appear in various writings on music. However, Langer herself did not go into much musical detail in order to explicate these factors. As a kind of hint she approvingly referred to the study by Huber (1923) on the expressiveness of short pitch patterns ("musikalische Elementarmotive"). Huber presented his listeners with pitch patterns of two or three tones, with uniform timbre, volume, and duration, and asked them to describe what the motive "told them" ("Was sagt mir das Motiv?") with regard to qualities, emotional characters, associations, meanings, somatic effects, and other things. The results showed convincingly "how many factors of possible expressive virtue are involved in even the simplest musical structure" (Langer 1957, p. 231), such as tone color, width of tonal intervals, direction of tonal movement, subjective accents, impressions of relatedness among tones, and others. The implication is that in real music the number of factors is larger still and their relations even more complex.

Manfred Clynes

Another starting point may be taken in Manfred Clynes's "sentic" theory (Clynes 1977; Clynes and Nettheim 1982). Clynes emphasized that emotion and its expression form a unit, an integrated system. However, an emotion ("sentic state") may be expressed by different output modalities, such as "gestures, tone of voice, facial expression, a dance step, musical phrase, etc." (Clynes 1977, p. 18). To get an easily recorded measure of expression, Clynes constructed a so-called sentograph, a device on which subjects express different emotions by pressing a slightly elastic button with the middle finger. The pressure patterns ("sentograms") are recorded, and Clynes claimed that there are distinctly different patterns for different emotions, such as joy, grief, anger, hate, and others.

The same device can be used to study listeners' experiences of pulse and rhythm in music. While listening to the music the subject presses the sentograph button in accordance with how he feels the pulse or motion character of the music. Examples of such "music sentograms" appear in Clynes and Walker (1982) and in Gabrielson (1993). The shape of these sentograms can then be compared with sentograms for different emotions, and thus provide a nonverbal method of exploring the emotional expression of the music.

(Of course, the description of Langer's and Clynes's theories here is incomplete and selective. For a complete discussion, refer to the original texts.)

Emotion, Motion, and Music

Despite all differences between Langer's and Clynes's approaches, their theories are similar in pointing to an intimate relation between the structure of emotions and the structure of music. Langer does this at a rather "global" level, referring to