Distaste, Discourse and the Politics of Emotional Authenticity

Introduction

As demonstrated in Chapter 3 some authors have argued that through emphasising rational, detached listening practices, champions of ‘formal’ music education in Western societies have often attempted to mitigate against the ‘effeminising’ connotations of emotions in music (Citron 1993; Leach 2009; McClary 1991). Whilst Chapter 2 highlighted that the separation of rationality from emotions is a gendered construct, rather than a physiological reality, Chapters 3 and 4 also outlined how there were judgments exercised about which specific types of passions and emotions were acceptable in relation to ‘serious’ music listening and taste. This indicates that specific emotions, rather than emotionality generally, have gendered histories and therefore impacts on which displays and which emotions are (publicly) acceptable and unacceptable.

It will not have escaped most readers’ attentions that certain musical aesthetics and musical ‘subcultural’ participation are, as illustrated in the opening quote, frequently invoked to explain ‘dangerous’ behaviour. Often these explanations have an implicit discursive assumption that it is particular music’s emotional content which is responsible for inducing such action. Whilst judgments around music attachments were important, what were also particularly revealing in the data, were the judgments around the music which, as the survey phrased it, respondents would ‘actively avoid listening to if they could’. As shown below, music perceived to be aggressive, angry or violent was often condemned and simultaneously music without ‘real emotion’ was treated with contempt. Again, as with melancholia, there are historical precedents for these debates.
This chapter outlines how judgements about emotions in music and emotional authenticity linked to certain genres are also frequently gendered and racialised; both in academic literature and participants’ interpretations. It therefore aims to demonstrate how emotions: ‘have a political dimension in that judgments of emotion are interpreted in the interests of regulating the functioning of social groups’ (Warner and Shields 2009: 97). This particular point builds on the idea that emotions are discursive effects of power rather than simply neutrally observed, physiological responses (Ahmed 2010b). In addition, perceptions around the emotional authenticity of certain music forms over others are a way of excluding others through the use of emotions. In contrast to both ‘crisis’ and ‘progressive’ arguments outlined in Chapter 2, asserting authentic emotional experience may therefore actually be a way of denying legitimacy to the emotional experiences of others.

The first part of this chapter looks at media reports which causally link music to ‘deviant’ behaviour (the ‘hypodermic needle’ hypothesis), arguing that these debates are often informed implicitly by the idea that music encourages young men to be ‘more’ emotional (ranging from church burnings to violence and depression). It moves on to critique the methodological and theoretical assumptions inherent in social psychological approaches. The chapter then outlines how Bourdieu’s ideas on distinction, whilst not necessarily adequate for looking at musical ‘attachments’ (Hennion 2010), can tell us about the social dimensions of music distaste. Importantly, distaste often involves exercising strong affective reactions against, as well as judgments about types of emotions contained within, certain genres.

Using data from the survey and from the life-histories, the chapter focuses particularly on judgments made about ‘Black music’ as a way to illustrate the discursive construction of emotions about music through presumed relationships to ‘othered’ bodies. When we compare contemporary comments about rap and many detractors’ comments about jazz, blues and ragtime, from the 1800s onwards, it is clear that there are similar ongoing debates about the harmful emotions in certain types of music which cannot be extricated from a history of racialised bodies. The chapter therefore finally addresses how the presumed emotional authenticity of music, as both a reason for taste and distaste, particularly through judgments about the feminisation of pop music, is also a way of positioning emotional experience in relation to ‘inauthentic’ others through emotions and embodied experience.