

Comment

Questioning the distinction between intra- and extra-musical meaning

Comment on “Towards a neural basis for processing musical semantics” by Stefan Koelsch

Stephen Davies

Department of Philosophy, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland Mail Centre, Auckland 1142, New Zealand

Received 14 May 2011; accepted 17 May 2011

Available online 20 May 2011

Communicated by L. Perlovsky

“Towards a neural basis for processing musical semantics” [3] relies on a distinction between extra- and intra-musical meaning that I do not think is sufficiently clear.

Music is meaningful not only because it is rich in perceptual information – a patch of grass is similarly rich but not meaningful – but because it is organized and we can predict with more or less success how it will progress. There is a danger, though, of wrongly assimilating musical meaning to the dominant paradigm of linguistic meaning. I think this happens when it is suggested that a theme refers to its original statement when it is repeated, or that, when it is expressive, music refers to human emotion much as the word “sad” does. The distinction between intra- and extra-musical meaning inherits these problems when it is based on this mistaken model: the first reference is “intra” because the repeated theme refers to intrinsically musical features, while the music’s expressiveness is “extra” because the reference goes outside the musical work to the world of human feeling.

Where music is symbolic it is referential. It may be so also when it is iconic: if one work quotes from another musical work there is reference. Similarly, indexical musical meaning may also involve reference, for example, where a composer alludes to an archaic style. But many iconic or indexical connections are non-referential. One bar of soap might be iconic with another but does not refer to it; smoke indicates fire but does not refer to fire. I suggest that iconic and indexical meanings in music are typically more a matter of presentation or display than of reference. A theme or phrase that is repeated in a work usually does not *refer* to its earlier statement though it brings that statement to mind and is iconic with it. And music can present an appearance of emotion directly, rather than referring as words do, which is why hearing music’s expressiveness is more like encountering the direct expression of an emotion than like hearing a verbal description of that emotion [1,2].

In consequence, the distinction between intra- and extra-musical meaning employed in “Towards a neural . . .” lacks precision. Expressive features of the music are as much internal to it as are its themes and internal structures and they involve presentation rather than reference. As such, they should count as intra-musical modes of meaning, rather than as extra-musical. Meanwhile, thematic relationships may involve reference beyond the work, and so be extra-musical rather than intra-musical, as in the case in which one work quotes from another.

DOI of original article: [10.1016/j.plrev.2011.04.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.plrev.2011.04.004).

E-mail address: sj.davies@auckland.ac.nz.

References

- [1] Davies S. Artistic expression and the hard case of pure music. In: Kieran M, editor. *Contemporary debates in aesthetics and the philosophy of art*. Oxford: Blackwell; 2005. p. 179–91.
- [2] Davies S. Emotions expressed and aroused by music: Philosophical perspectives. In: Juslin PN, Sloboda J, editors. *Oxford handbook of music and emotion: Theory, research, applications*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2010. p. 15–43.
- [3] Koelsch S. Towards a neural basis for processing musical semantics. *Physics of Life Review* 2011;8(2):89–105 [in this issue].