The Functionalist Perspective

The Communication of Emotions in a Musical Performance

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Introduction

Music is often considered to be a medium of emotional communication that is accessible to everyone as it does not require the knowledge of a certain vocabulary or a musical education.

The questions therefore are, what is the code that allows music performers to communicate emotions to listeners? And what is the origin of this code?

The functionalist perspective seeks to explain the communicative process by stating that the functions of non–verbal communication of emotions, that have been inevitable throughout evolution, are similar to the characteristics of the communicative process in music.

The Expressive Code

• General, innate code for vocal expression of basic emotions that has served crucial functions throughout evolution ¹

Involuntary and emotion-specific physiological changes associated with emotional reactions, which strongly influence different aspects of voice production ²

• Similarities in cues used to express basic emotions in vocal expressions and music performance ³

The origin of the code: the factors that shape the non-verbal expression and perception of emotions

Factor I

Evolution

• Our biological preparedness to communicate the basic need-for-survival emotions has been shaped in evolution

• The 5 basic emotions recognised in all cultures:
  • Fear
  • Anger
  • Love
  • Sadness
  • Happiness

• Expressing and understanding basic emotions in music does not require musical training

Factor II

Social learning

• Various forms of social learning shape our ability to communicate emotions

• E.g. a mother would calm her child in a reduced tempo and intensity of speech