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Why do Minor Chords Sound Sad? The Theory of Musical Equilibration and the Emotions of Chords

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Abstract

One of the most exciting areas in the field of musicology is attaining solid new insights into the correlation between music and emotions. The Theory of Musical Equilibration now presents a new perspective on this topic. The Theory states that music itself cannot convey emotions, which is to say it is no more effective than other approach to expressing feelings. Instead, music communicates processes of the will which the listener identifies with, and relating to these processes gives music its emotional content.

"Music and Emotions -Research on the Theory of Musical Equilibration" is the name of the English version of the German book entitled Musik und Emotionen-Studien zur Strebetendenz Theorie. Authors Daniela and Bernd Willimek present their theory and demonstrate its validity using examples from musical literature and test results. The book was translated from the German by Laura Russell.

The first part of the book explains the theory before exploring how it can be interpreted in terms of individual chords and harmonic progressions. A major chord, for example, is something we generally identify with the message, "I want to!" whereas a minor chord conveys the desire, "No more!" The volume at which a minor chord is played determines whether it is perceived as sorrow or anger. Furthermore, the authors discuss issues such as why a diminished chord is well-suited as the score for film scenes involving fear, or how an augmented chord can convey amazement and astonishment.

In the second part of the book, there is a discussion of test results which show a strong correlation in the way people perceive chords from an emotional standpoint. The Basic Test and the Rocky Test link harmonic sequences to scenes from a fairy tale and to emotional concepts, respectively. The outcome of these tests revealed the musical preferences of over 2000 children and adolescents (including members of the famous Viennese Boys' Choir) across four continents. Similar tests for use in music therapy are currently being prepared.

Keywords: Music; Emotions; Chords

Review

Despite the fact that there is already a rich history of publications exploring the topic of music and emotions, it is new for there to be insights into this field which are solidly rooted in music theory.

This book describes two complementary studies: one examines the correlation between chords and words with emotional meanings, and the second explores the link between musical selections and emotionally charged scenes from fairy tales. A total of over 2000 volunteers (including members of the world-famous Viennese Boys' Choir) on four continents took part in these studies.

The volunteers expressed their preferences by selecting specific musical pieces which they felt best matched a particular emotional content. A significantly high correlation was seen among their preferences: 86% chose the same examples, more or less independently of their age, sex or any previous musical training. The test results were also compared with similar examples found in the repertoire of Romantic-era lieder and pop music; this confirmed the correlation between the emotional content of the respective lyrics and the harmonic device the composer chose.

All of the research discussed in this book is explained in detail and illustrated by means of the sheet music included in the text.

The inspiration and the guideline in creating and selecting the musical pieces was Willimek's Strebetendenz-Theorie, the Theory of Musical Equilibration. This theory states that music itself does not convey emotions: instead, it expresses processes of will that the listener can identify with. It is not until the identification takes

place that these processes of will take on an emotional character. This idea is demonstrated using a variety of different chords and harmonic structures. To provide one example, a minor chord does not communicate any sorrow in and of itself: instead, it inspires the listener to identify with the message, "No more." The dynamics at which the chord is played communicate the message as something which is perceived as sad (when played piano) or angry (when played forte).

This book makes direct references to musical material as it sets forth its arguments. The Theory is especially compelling because of the way it offers a precise analytical description of the emotional effects of musical harmonies and other compositional parameters [1].

References

1. Daniela Willimek, Bernd Willimek (2011) Music and Emotions-Research on the Theory of Musical Equilibration.

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