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Dynamic Music Factors in Mood Change

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THIS article is from the manuscript of an address delivered by the national chairman of the MENC Committee on Functional Music at the Functional Music Forum, March 21, at the St. Louis Biennial Convention. Dr. Gaston is professor of music education and chairman of the department at the University of Kansas, Lawrence.

THAT MUSIC can affect and bring about mood changes is a commonly accepted fact among laymen as well as musicians. Even though it is difficult to speak specifically and in detail about such changes, yet their existence is rarely if ever denied. In view of this it would seem a futile occupation of time to argue the existence of a phenomenon common to everyone's experience.

The subject immediately assumes more interest, however, when we ask what the dynamic factors are in music which change mood. It is certain that all would be able to supply good answers: volume, tempo, consonance, dissonance, tone color, form, etc. It would become more difficult to say how and in what direction these factors change mood; yet again many good answers could be supplied.

In spite of the difficulty of dealing individually with such factors, there are several of major importance which are not often considered fully. They influence us greatly every day; they have been prominent in all cultures; they are easily usable by each of us in our daily work; they help explain many influences of music; they give us a better understanding of aesthetic qualities; and they abound in implications for the interpretation of music and its mood influence.

I refer to rhythm but, more particularly, to two types of notes or musical sounds: the short, detached, more or less percussive type generally labeled staccato, and the longer, more sustained, smoother type generally labeled legato.

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Rhythm is the primitive, dynamic, driving factor in music. It stimulates muscular action. It induces bodily movement. It becomes particularly stimulating when it consists of detached notes. When we think of the music of primitive peoples we think generally of percussive music. Such music induces for the most part images and thoughts of the dance and physical movement. Most primitive peoples develop highly complex rhythms, but rarely develop melodies of equal complexity or worth. I want to play for you a few measures of primitive African music. (War dance music was played.)

This music stimulates and demands physical activity. It is uninhibited. It enhances and builds up physical energy. It is unrestrained. It is not particularly intellectual. It stimulates the emotional, and, shall we say, the subcortical. It does not urge the contemplative, the thoughtful, the dreamlike, or phantasy states.

Melodic passages of a sustained nature in which the percussive element is lacking produce a very different response—for even though there may be rhythm, it is at a minimum. The responses induced are not physical, not tension of the striped musculature, but more intellectual, more contemplative; the result is much more that of sedation rather than stimulation. I should like you to hear music of this sort. (*Adagio* from *Divertimento* by Mozart was played.)

Did you notice the sudden change in mood in yourselves? Slyly observe your neighbor out of the corner of your eye as the illustrations are played.

All dances must contain the detached, rhythmical factors. The more uninhibited and unrestrained they are, the more of the percussive factors they will employ even in modern dances. The detached notes are the demand for physical activity; the sustained melody is the inhibiting, the more civilizing factor. Truly romantic dance music always contains both elements nicely balanced, because romance is not complete liberty; neither is it frustration. Let us listen to a modern dance and hear clearly these two elements. First there will be the typical detached, percussive factor which will demand action and will continue throughout; but always from time to time a very sustained melody will be superimposed over the more dynamic factor, saying in effect, "Be careful, you must use restraint; you are a civilized person." (*Tango Cumparsita* is played.)

If a dance contains mostly the detached, staccato rhythms then it will be an active dance. If it is more sustained the opposite effect is secured. All dances must have the staccato or they do not dance, so to speak—unless it be some dance which does not require leg and foot action but rather hip and torso movement.

The military band, the uniformed marching band of the present time, is a descendant in many ways of the war dance and its music. The march is a form of dance. It would be difficult to conceive of a war dance not consisting of the staccato, percussive quality. Just so it is difficult to conceive of a march not having the same qualities. There is a basic physiological and neurological basis for the true style of a march or nearly any other kind of dance. The real reason for our attempt to get this quality is not aesthetic *per se,* not because of expression marks, not because of attack; rather, it is because the music does not stimulate and induce physical action unless this quality inheres. Notice how the notes are separated in a march well played. (*The Thunderer* by Sousa was played.)

Music of the stimulative type is most often instrumental. The voice and choral type music are physically less stimulative. The chorales of Palestrina and similar music, for example, are more serene.

Lullabies are rather unique but they illustrate another means of achieving physical relaxation and sedation. True lullabies are sung in the middle range of the voice and unaccompanied. This is the purely functional form. When lullabies are set up in art form, the accompaniment has the same identical pattern repeated in each measure with only necessary chord changes. The berceuses of Chopin illustrate this well.

When a quiet, simple rhythm is repeated over and over again in the same style, and a sustained melody is superimposed it will produce a sedative, often hypnotic effect. As a mother sings a lullaby she produces this simple rhythm by rocking or patting the baby. She does not vary the rhythm or make it uneven if the best results are to be obtained. The physiological reason for this probably resides in sensory adaptation. It has potent uses with excited or mentally disturbed patients as well as with so-called normal people.

Muscular tension is a concomitant of emotional states. We judge the emotional states of people by changes in appearance and activity, many of which are due to muscular tension. We have many phrases in everyday life which denote this: "Relax"; "Calm yourself"; "Wake up"; "On your toes"; "On edge"; "Dead"; "Lifeless"; "Tight as a drum," and many others. The nature of our popular music reflects our general emotional tension. Was the boogie woogie and jazz music a sustained legato, or was it percussive and detached? Is not the drum our best single instrument to accompany marching? How prominent are the percussion and strident, detached brass in athletic dances? Is not dance piano a series of detached chords for the most part? Is the string bass bowed or plucked? The answers to these questions show clearly the relationship of emotional state and muscular tension.

Examples of these two qualities are seen everywhere about us. Compare the music of old, stable, religious denominations with that of young, evangelistic denominations. Observe movie music and its appropriateness. The loudest applause, often vocal, follows the stimulative rather than the contemplative type of music—not because the stimulative is better but because of the enhanced physical energy. The commentator of the Sunday afternoon symphony concerts recently remarked that always Ravel's *Bolero* drew thunderous applause. This piece, by the way, is a perfect example of the two types of music being discussed—the staccato accompaniment being the important element, but with a superimposed legato melody.

Which ordinarily requires the greater periodic muscular tension, staccato or legato? Think of the difference in activity of a good conductor when conducting percussive, staccato passages and when conducting flowing, legato passages. In which type of music does a performer use the greatest amount of muscular tension, even of the proper sort? Once in a while we see a conductor fail because he says one thing with his mouth and another with his posture and movements.

It is quite probable that all of you have been making correct use of these factors in your everyday work, although perhaps unconsciously at times. Certainly it is possible to do more with these two elements in securing mood change than is sometimes done, if we work purposely for mood change.

There has not been time to show the physiological, neurological, and psychological reasons for these responses to music, but they surely exist and can be demonstrated. The "startle effect" caused by sudden sound shows clearly the effect on musculature of detached auditory stimuli. The staccato speech of the tense individual has a far different effect than smooth flowing legato speech.

Depression and sorrow are the emotions which relax the musculature. The other emotions for the most part stimulate it. Contrast the nature of depressive and sorrowful music with stimulative music, and the dynamic musical factors in mood change stand out clearly; the one sedative, the other stimulative. A funeral chant is far different from a college yell. Staccato and legato affect us more than we ordinarily realize.

In this paper I cannot indicate the many possible applications for mood change, but I am certain that as you think of these several very dynamic factors you will find many fine and efficacious uses for them not only in interpreting the mood of the music, but, of greater importance, in securing a more beneficial mood response from your pupils and students.

THE OKLAHOMA CITY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA was organized in the fall of 1937 by the Federal Government, as a unit of the Federal Music Project. The first concert was given on January 3, 1938, and later that year the Oklahoma State Symphony Society was organized to co-sponsor the activity. At the close of the 1941-42 season the Symphony Society completely took over the operation of the Orchestra from the Federal government. Members of the Southwestern Conference were invited by Conductor Victor Alessandro and Manager George Judd, Jr. to be guests at a rehearsal of the Orchestra on March 9—one of the high points of the 1951 convention. Recent news is that, after thirteen years as the Orchestra's regular Conductor, Mr. Alessandro will go to the San Antonio Symphony Orchestra next fall. It is also interesting to note that the manager of the Oklahoma City Orchestra is the son of George Judd, who for years has managed the Boston Symphony Orchestra.