Sizer on Sad Music

JAMES O. YOUNG

Abstract: Laura Sizer holds that the sadness induced by sad music enables listeners to focus on the formal and aesthetic features of music. These features may include the formal features of music or "the beautiful unalloyed sadness" music conveys. Unfortunately, her proposal is, at best, only a partial solution to the paradox of sad music. Empirical evidence indicates, contrary to what Sizer holds, that sad music inclines listeners to think about themselves and their own experience, not about the music they are hearing. Sizer's solution to the paradox of sad music is also unable to explain why enjoyment of sad music is correlated with trait empathy.

Keywords: Paradox of sad music, philosophy of music, Laura Sizer, aesthetics, music and emotion

Introduction

Progress is being made in understanding the attractions of listening to sad music. This progress is the result, in large part, of the fact that in recent years, psychologists have paid increased attention to the paradox of sad music. Many well-designed and conducted experiments have begun to shed light on why listeners will willingly listen to music that makes them sad. While much of the progress has been the result of psychological experiments, philosophers still have a role to play in solving the paradox of sad music. Philosophers are responsible for many of the proposed solutions to the paradox. Psychologists have gone on to seek experimental support for philosophers' hypotheses. Philosophers also have a role to play in interpreting the results psychologists obtain and formulating and revising solutions to the paradox of sad music on the basis of these results. Sizer (2019) has engaged with the psychology literature and proposed a novel solution. She holds that the sadness induced by sad music enables listeners to focus on the aesthetic features of music. Unfortunately, her proposal is, at best, only a partial solution to the paradox of sad music.

The paradox of sad music stems from the apparent tension between four plausible statements: (1) sadness is an unpleasant affective state; (2) people typically strive to avoid unpleasant affective states; (3) sad music arouses sadness; (4) many people willingly listen to sad music. Two main approaches to the paradox of sad music may be identified. The first approach may be called *eliminativist*. It denies the third of these statements. The second approach is *compensationist*. According to this sort of approach, sad music arouses sadness in listeners, but listeners receive a compensation that outweighs any unpleasantness.

Formalists will generally adopt an eliminativist approach to resolving the paradox of sad music. In this respect, Kivy is a representative formalist. Since Kivy believes that music does not arouse ordinary emotions such as sadness, the paradox of sad music is not a problem for him. On his view, "it would be utterly inexplicable why anyone would willfully submit himself" to music that arouses negative emotions (Kivy 1989, 23). He simply denies that music arouses emotions such as sadness. Indeed, he has made the paradox of sad music a key premise in his argument against the view that music arouses any ordinary emotions. Crucial to Kivy's position is the cognitive theory of emotions, a theory that has the consequence that no one can be in an emotional state without having an appropriate belief state with respect to some intentional object. For example, a person cannot feel sad without believing that some unfortunate event has occurred. Since a performance of music cannot

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be the sort of event about which one is sad, Kivy reasons, listening to a performance cannot arouse sadness in listeners.

Even some non-formalist philosophers have adopted an eliminativist approach to the resolution of the paradox of sad music. For example, Carroll Pratt embraces the aesthetic attitude theory holds that our attitude towards music is "detached contemplation" (1931: 88). People have the aesthetic attitude when they are not concerned with practical matters. Rather, they focus on an aesthetic object, such as a musical composition, as an object to be appreciated for its own sake, not as something that can serve some practical purposes. Since, on this view, music is removed from practical purposes, it does not arouse emotions such as sadness.

I agree with Sizer that any satisfactory resolution to the paradox of sad music is likely to be compensationist. The empirical evidence that sad music arouses sadness is just too strong to ignore and this evidence renders eliminative responses increasingly implausible. Recent research confirms that listeners self-report the arousal of sadness by sad music (Ladinig et al. 2019). I agree with Sizer that physiological evidence indicates that sad music arouses sadness. In addition to the studies that she cites, strong physiological evidence that sad music arouses sadness has been marshaled by Vuoskoski and Eerola (2012). They found that individuals listening to sad music performed, on word-recall and judgement tasks, in ways consistent with the arousal of sadness. Other studies have found that skin conductance measures and other physiological metric are consistent with the arousal of sadness by sad music (Krumhansl, 1997).

However, it must be noted that, contrary to what Sizer indicates, the neuro-physiological evidence that music arouses sadness is not as consistently strong as the evidence provided by self-reports and physiological metrics. Some fMRI studies have found that parts of the brain associated with experience of sadness, including the amygdala, are activated by sad music. These studies are, however, inconclusive since the parts of the brain activated by sad music are also associated with emotions other than sadness and the results of these studies have not been replicated by experimenters (Eerola et al. 2018, 106). Despite the fact that the neuro-physiological evidence is inconclusive, abundant evidence indicates that sad music arouses sadness. Since sadness is unpleasant, experience of sad music must provide some compensation or listeners are behaving bizarrely when they willingly listen to sad music.

I also agree that Sizer's proposal has a prima facie plausibility. It must be admitted that Sizer is right in holding that a sad state enables listeners to focus. It is not unreasonable to think that among the objects on which sad listeners can concentrate are the formal properties of music. Focus on music is difficult and anything that can enhance listeners' focus is plausibly held to contribute to their enjoyment of music.

Before turning to Sizer's solution to the paradox of sad music, we need to address a preliminary point. While most writers on the paradox of sad music talk about the arousal of an emotion, Sizer prefers to talk about the arousal of a sad mood. Sizer regards a sad mood as a "diffuse, objectless affective state that subtly modulates our thoughts, but not toward a particular topic or subject matter and not inspiring us to take a particular course of action" (2019, 257). In contrast, emotions, including the emotions of sadness, are presumably directed towards some object.

The shift from talk about emotions to talk about moods is not helpful. Little, if any, empirical evidence can be found for a distinction between moods and emotions. If moods and emotions are different, they likely differ only in degree (Vuoskoski and Eerola, 2012). Moreover, this essay will present evidence that the sadness felt as a result of listening to sad music is directed towards an object and that, consequently, even by Sizer's criteria, the affective states aroused by music are emotions.

Sizer's solution

Sizer's innovative proposal is to say that the sadness aroused by sad music enhances listeners' capacity to focus on music and to enjoy what it has to offer. She writes that, "Sad moods, therefore,

encourage and promote the sort of focused music listening that enhances the listener's engagement with and experience of the music" (2019, 263). The compensation that listeners receive from the arousal of sadness, on this view, is an enhanced capacity to focus on music. I grant that a feeling sad enhances listeners' capacity to focus and, consequently, may enhance listeners' capacity to focus on music. I deny, however, that the paradox of sad music can be solved simply by reference to the capacity of sad music to promote focus by arousing sadness. In general, I find Sizer's solution to the paradox of sad, at best, incomplete.

The first problem with Sizer's solution is that it leaves uncertainty about which features of sad music are appreciated. We are told both that, "Sad moods can pull us in and keep us wrapped up in the music itself and the beautiful unalloyed sadness it conveys" (263) and that sad music "allows the listener to experience a pure, unalloyed sadness that modulates the processing styles of the listener in ways that keep attention engaged with the formal and structural properties of the music itself" (264). Whether Sizer believes that sad music enhances concentration on the music's sadness or on its formal properties, her position faces difficulties. Her position also faces a general objection.

Let us begin by examining the general problem. Sizer writes that, "Sad moods, as compared to happy or neutral moods, are associated with a narrowing of attention, a turn inward with a greater focus on self and one's feelings as opposed to events in the outside environment" (263). This is certainly true. In fact, I will go on to cite some evidence that supports this contention. Notice, however, that it is incompatible with Sizer's stated position. Sad moods turn attention inwards, but her view is that sad moods lead listeners to focus on music. Music is in the outside environment, not something in ourselves. Let us, however, be charitable and assume that the sadness aroused by sad music leads listeners to focus on music and not themselves and their emotions.

Consider first the possibility that sad music, by enhancing listeners' powers of concentration, gives them an increased capacity to concentrate on the "beautiful unalloyed sadness that it conveys." Grant that this is true. At best, we have been given a partial account of what makes experience of sad music valuable. On the face of it, something is odd about saying that sadness is beautiful. At very least, we are owed an account of why experience of unalloyed sadness is found to be beautiful and how this experience compensates listeners for the sadness that they must undergo in order to have this experience.

Sizer's second proposal is that sad music enhances listeners' capacity to focus on "the formal and structural properties of the music." This proposal faces a difficulty similar to the difficulty faced by the first proposal. It does not explain why focus on the formal properties of music is rewarding. Under the influence of Young (2014), I am deeply sceptical about the prospects for a formalist account of why experience of music is rewarding. Nevertheless, let us grant that attention to the formal properties of music is rewarding. Sizer's position still faces a serious difficulty. It is incompatible with recent empirical research.

Recent research by Taruffi et al. indicates that, contrary to Sizer's hypothesis, sad music has a greater tendency than happy music to promote mind-wandering (Taruffi et al. 2017). Taruffi et al. write that listeners engage in mind-wandering, they mean that the listeners direct their attention inwards and become immersed in matters of great personal significance. In an experiment that used both music from film soundtracks and classical repertoire, Taruffi and her colleagues found that both self-reports and fMRI data indicate that sad music is more likely than happy music to induce mind-wandering. The fMRI data indicated that sad music recruits the Default Mode Network, parts of the brain that are associated with mind-wandering. These results are directly contrary to Sizer's hypothesis.

Sizer might object that she is concerned only with understanding why canonical listeners, as Kivy calls them, enjoy listening to sad music. Kivy's canonical listeners are those who focus on and appreciate the formal properties of music and who do not have ordinary emotions (or moods) aroused in them by music. It is unlikely that she would adopt this view, since Sizer believes, unlike Kivy, that sad music can arouse sad effective states even, or perhaps especially, in listeners who carefully concentrate on experience of music.

Empathy and enjoyment of sad music

Perhaps the biggest problem with Sizer's solution to the paradox of sad music is that it is insensitive to the fact that listeners have a variety of responses to sad music. For a start, a significant percentage of listeners do not enjoy listening to sad music. In one study, 42% of the test subjects reported that they do not enjoy listening to sad music (Huron and Vuoskoski 2020). This finding suggests that enjoyment of sad music is linked to certain personality traits and, in fact, certain personality traits have consistently been found to be associated with enjoyment of sad music. Sizer's solution to the paradox of sad music is unable to account for the fact that these personality traits are associated with enjoyment of sad music.

The two traits associated with enjoyment of sad music are empathy and openness to experience. Individuals with openness to experience have an active imagination (fantasy), aesthetic sensitivity, attentiveness to their inner feelings, a preference for variety in their experience and intellectual curiosity. Empathy is the other personality trait associated with enjoyment of sad music. It has four sub-traits: a disposition to empathic concern, a disposition to mirror the feelings of other people or to feel personal distress, a capacity for perspective taking, that is, for adopting the points of view of other people, and fantasy (the disposition to imagine the mental state of a fictional character).

Let us begin by considering the connection between trait empathy and enjoyment of sad music. Many studies have found that empathetic individuals are more likely to enjoy sad music than less empathetic persons (e.g., Taruffi and Koelsch 2014; Kawakami and Katashira 2015). The two sub-traits associated with enjoyment of music are empathetic concern and fantasy. The disposition to feel personal distress and perspective taking are not (Huron and Vuoskoski, 2020). This makes sense. A tendency to feel distress when listening to sad music, perhaps distress linked to adopting another person's point of view, is likely to reduce overall enjoyment of sad music. As we will see below, however, feeling empathetic concern is a positive experience.

If Sizer is right and the appreciation of music is, at least in large part, appreciation of music's formal properties, the fact that appreciation of sad music is associated with trait empathy is inexplicable. Pure musical form is not a suitable object of empathetic concern. Even the unalloyed beauty of sadness does not seem an appropriate object of empathetic concern. However, an alternative solution to the paradox of sad music is suggested by the correlation between trait empathy and the enjoyment of sad music.

Huron and Vuoskoski (2020) have proposed a solution to the paradox that is able to account for the data obtained in recent experiments. Their solution begins by acknowledging the well-established fact that sad music arouses sadness. Most likely sadness is aroused by emotional contagion. Huron and Vuoskoski then distinguish between emotions caused by contagion and what they call repercussive emotions. A repercussive emotion is a meta-response to other emotions. The suggestion is that the experience of sadness gives rise to a feeling of compassion and, in addition, this meta-response is positively-valenced.

The solution proposed by Huron and Vuoskoski is supported by several findings. The first is that many test subjects have reported feeling mixed emotions when listening to sad music. Test results also indicate that feeling compassion or empathetic concern is experienced as a positive emotion. (It must be admitted that these test results show that experience of compassion is positively-valenced when it follows the commission of an altruistic act. The test results have not shown that compassion is felt when listening to sad music is experienced as a positive emotion, but this is not an unreasonable presumption.) Most important, the solution proposed by Huron and Vuoskoski, unlike that proposed by Sizer, is able to explain why enjoyment of sad music is associated with trait empathy. One would expect that empathetic individuals will feel empathy when confronted by an experience of sadness. They are also likely to feel compassion. The solution to the paradox of sad music proposed by Huron and Vuoskoski is congruent with research in response to sad movies. Sad movies give rise to an empathetic response that is, in turn, accompanied by a feeling of being moved that may well be identified with a feeling of compassion (Eerola et al., 2018, 108).

The hypothesis of Huron and Vuoskoski is supported by another reason: some research indicates that music is valued, at least in part, because it provides listeners with a virtual person. Van del Tol and Edwards (2015) found that listeners report that their goals in listening to sad music include feeling a connection with both real and imaginary persons. Listeners frequently report that listening to sad music reminds them of people they know and brings back memories. Listeners also report that they feel befriended, empathized with and less alone when listening to sad music. The evidence that listeners feel a connection with actual people is consistent with the view that listening to sad music promotes mind-wandering. The evidence that listeners regard sad music as a kind of friend supports Huron and Vuoskoski's hypothesis. Van del Tol and Edwards did not ask their subjects whether they empathize with an imaginary person, but if listeners hear or imagine a persona in sad music, this persona could be the object of their empathy or compassion.

Recent empirical results are more compatible with aspects of Jerrold Levinson's classic solution to the paradox of sad music than they are with Sizer's. Levinson (1990) hypothesized that the enjoyment of emotional communion and empathetic responses are among the rewards of listening to sad music. Taruffi and Koelsch (2014) found empirical evidence of this. On a six-point scale, test subjects gave an average rating of 4.27 of the importance of feeling empathy while listening to sad music. (Significantly, a feeling of empathy was not found to be one of the rewards of listening to sad music.) The experimenters did not ask specifically about whether listeners feel compassion when listening to sad music and, consequently, their results do not fully support Huron and Vuoskoski's solution to the paradox of sad music. Taruffi and Koelsch gave test subjects the GEMS (Geneva Emotion Music Scale) categories as the answers they could give in reporting their feelings. Test subjects did, however, report feeling nostalgia (76%) and tenderness (51.6%), two of the options provided by GEMS, and these may be an indication that the subjects felt compassion. (GEMS only gives test these options when reporting their responses to music: peacefulness, tenderness, tension, joyful activation, nostalgia, sadness, power, transcendence, and wonder. In my view, GEMS is a seriously flawed instrument, but the scale's usefulness is a matter beyond the scope of this essay.)

Taruffi and Koelsch (2014) found support for Levinson's other hypotheses. In particular, they found support for Levinson's conjecture that listeners enjoy sad music because it enables them to imagine they have expressive capacities, to understand and savour feelings, be provided with emotional assurance, and have their moods regulated. In fact, their findings suggest that some of the rewards provided by listening to sad music are more valued than feelings of empathy and compassion. On the six-point scale mentioned above, listeners gave average ratings of 4.89 when asked whether they valued music as a way to understand feelings and receive emotional assurance. Emotion regulation received an average score of 4.65 and rewards of imagination 4.46. These results are all at odds with Sizer's solution to the paradox of sad music though it must be admitted that Taruffi and Koelsch did not ask about the enjoyment listeners take from contemplation of the formal properties of music. The results also suggest that Huron and Vuoskoski's solution is, at best, incomplete.

It is worth noting, in this context, that if listeners feel compassion in listening to sad music, and this is part of the explanation of listeners' enjoyment of sad music, the persona theory of music may receive some support. If a persona theory is suggested by the empirical evidence, then this is further evidence that Sizer's theory is, at best, seriously incomplete since if the persona theory is right, music is not simply appreciated as contentless form.

Openness to experience

To this point, another trait associated with enjoyment of sad music, openness to experience, has been ignored. Initially, the correlation between enjoyment of sad music may seem to support Sizer's solution to the paradox of sad music. Among the facets of openness to experience are aesthetic sensitivity, intellectual curiosity and a preference for variety. Consequently, one might think, listeners with this trait are likely to be inclined to appreciate formal properties of music. Certainly, these character traits are compatible with enjoying the formal properties of music.

Unfortunately, aesthetic sensitivity is not the only facet of openness to experience. As we have seen, this personality trait also involves an active imagination (fantasy) and attentiveness to inner feelings. These are personality traits that overlap with aspects of trait empathy and the fact that listeners with these characteristics enjoy sad music does not suggest that music is appreciated simply as contentless form. One study has found that when experimenters test for trait empathy, openness to experience is not significantly correlated with enjoyment of sad music (Huron and Vuoskoski, 2020).

The fact that fantasy and empathetic concern, but not personal distress and perspective taking, are the sub-traits associated with enjoyment of sad music seems particularly significant. Individuals who are not strongly inclined to adopt the perspective of others and feel their distress will not have an especially intense experience of sadness as a response to sad music. On the other hand, individuals who can vividly imagine the circumstances of others and have strong empathetic reactions will be inclined to feel empathy and feeling empathy, as already noted, is a positive experience.

Mood congruency

Psychological studies of the experience of sad music frequently reveal that listeners prefer to listen to "mood congruent" music. That is, listeners who are feeling sad tend to prefer listening to sad music and listeners in a happy state are inclined to listen to happy music (Taruffi and Koelsch, 2014; DeMarco, Taylor and Friedman, 2015). Sizer's hypothesis is unable to account for the tendency of listeners to favour mood congruent music. In contrast, a hypothesis that posits that listeners experience music as a persona or even a virtual friend, seems better placed to explain this phenomenon.

Psychologists have hypothesised that "once an intimate relationship of love, friendship, or trust is lost or broken and people experience the resulting negative feelings, they often look for a surrogate to recapture the social bond" (Lee, Andrade and Palmer: 2013: 383). They have suggested, moreover, that sad music can be a surrogate friend who can empathise with the listeners who have experienced interpersonal loss. Others studies have corroborated the finding that individuals feeling sadness associated with "interpersonal loss" (that is, sadness resulting from difficulties with relationships with other people) exhibit an increased preference for mood-congruent music (DeMarco, Taylor and Friedman, 2015). It is unclear that Lee et al. are right when they say that listeners are seeking a surrogate friend who will feel empathy with them. DeMarco, Taylor and Friedman agree, however, that "music is quite often more than merely an abstract pattern of sounds, but a form of virtual social interaction" (2015: 88). Perhaps, the explanation is that listeners are seeking virtual people with whom they can empathise or sympathise, as other psychologists have suggested. What does seem clear, however, is that the sort of solution to the paradox of sad music proposed by Sizer does not predict the preference that sad people and, in particular people whose sadness is associated with interpersonal loss, display for sad music.

The prolactin conjecture

One more aspect of Sizer's solution to the paradox of sad music remains to be discussed. She notes that prolactin may play a role in explaining the enjoyment of sad music. This *prolactin hypothesis* was, as Sizer notes, first advanced by Huron (2011). Prolactin is the protein that enables mammals to lactate, but also produces "feelings of tranquillity, calmness, or consolation" (Huron, 2011, 152). It is released following sexual intercourse and contributes to sexual satisfaction. Huron conjectured that prolactin is released during the experience of sad music and this release helps explain why listeners will willingly listen to music that arouses sadness. In effect, Huron hypothesized that the release of prolactin gives rise to pleasure that compensates listeners for the experience of sadness. Sizer endorses this hypothesis and she was not the only person do so. It was also welcomed by Young (2014). Unfortunately, the prolactin conjecture turns out to be unfounded.

Unfortunately, the empirical evidence does not provide consistent support for the prolactin hypothesis. A recent study, of which Sizer could not have known, does not indicate that prolactin levels

rise when listening to sad music. This study, in which Huron participated, found that almost all subjects self-reported that they were saddened by sad music and self-reported pleasure markedly dropped. However, blood tests indicated that, on average, prolactin levels remained stable (Ladinig et al., 2019). This study made no effort to find a correlation between trait empathy and enjoyment of sad music but it did confirm that enjoyment of sad music is associated with openness to experience.

The prolactin hypothesis has received some empirical support from another study but the support seems to count against Sizer's hypothesis rather than for it. Sittler, Cooper and Montag (2019) confirmed that empathy plays a role in experience of emotions while listening to sad music. Sittler et al. also found a correlation between the PRL gene (which codes for prolactin) and the experience of emotion while listening to sad music. They did not find a correlation between empathy and the PRL gene but other studies have found a relationship between the PRL gene and empathic (Neumann 2009) responses.

If a correlation between prolactin and empathy, on the one hand, and enjoyment of sad music, on the other, can be established, this would count against Sizer's position. Such a correlation would suggest that the focus of listeners' attention is not the "intricacies of the music" (Sizer 2019, 263), but something in the music that prompts an empathetic response and which prompts the release of prolactin. Formal properties of music do not seem likely to arouse empathy or have, as a possible consequence, the release of prolactin.

Conclusion

Experience of sad music is a complex phenomenon and the explanation of the pleasure that listeners take in this experience will also be complex. Likely listeners value the experience of sad music for a variety of reasons. These may include appreciation of music's formal properties, but a satisfactory resolution to the paradox of sad music is likely to make reference to other rewards. It is certainly possible that some listeners enjoy sad music because the sadness evoked by sad music enables them to better focus on the formal properties of music. At this point, however, such a view is speculative and does not enjoy empirical support. Worse, Sizer's hypothesis is unable to account for some observed phenomena, including the strong correlations between enjoyment of sad music and trait empathy. In contrast, other accounts of the enjoyment of sad music enjoy empirical support and are able to account for more phenomena.

University of Victoria, Canada

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