Sentiment and Sentimentality in Music

Charles Nussbaum

University of Texas at Arlington

A sentiment is an emotion. Sentimentality is counterfeit emotion. Emotions are intentional, evaluative states with aspects that are both mental and bodily. To say that emotions are intentional is to say that they are about something or mentally directed toward something. To say that emotions are evaluative is to say that they appraise objects and events as regards their bearing on the condition of the emotional being. How the object of a given emotion bears on one’s condition determines the emotion’s distinctive core relational theme (Lazarus 1991, 122), the harm or benefit it is supposed to detect. The core relational theme of anger, for example, is threat. The core relational theme of fear is danger. To say that emotions are bodily is to say that they involve action tendencies or changes in action readiness. The angry person will tend to strike out, the fearful person to freeze or to flee. Emotions are normally accompanied by arousal, or at least some intensive change measurable along one or more different axes, including axes of autonomic and electrocortical activity. Emotions may, but need not, involve a distinctive phenomenology. Passions I take to be emotions so intense and deeply rooted that they could not be counterfeit. Passion, therefore, excludes sentimentality. Bertrand Russell says of a major philosopher of the past that “he had many trivial love affairs, which were sensual but not passionate” (1945, 758), a telling remark. Sentimentality and sensuality are not too distant cousins.

According to the view I favor, emotions are cognitive, but not necessarily judgmental or propositional. They are best construed as perceptual, and perception is a mode of categorization that extracts information concerning invariants from a fluctuating sensory array. Emotions do not necessarily follow upon on a conscious perceptual experience afforded by one of the special senses. This point has a basis in physiology. All the special sensory input systems project to nuclei of the thalamus before reaching the specialized sensory cortices, and the thalamus is a central component of the limbic system. Olfactory pathways also project to the
hippocampus, another important component. Emotional appraisal, therefore, can precede, or at least the inception of the emotion process can precede, special sensory awareness.

Not all emotions are equally susceptible to sentimental denaturing. Emotions so susceptible tend to be those that are positively valenced, like the emotion of love; or they tend to be emotions that have the potential to elicit positive, self-directed appraisals, like the emotion of compassion. In one of his novels (I can't recall which), Eric Ambler has one character sardonically imagine another becoming dewy-eyed at the thought of his own magnanimity. Magnanimity is not an emotion, but the character become dewy-eyed almost certainly takes the object of his positive emotion to be the potential recipient of his largesse, not himself or one of his states. To the extent the character is mistaken about this, his emotion is sentimental. Necessary for sentimentality, I shall argue, is a covert redirection of the intentionality of an emotion that weakens or even severs the link between emotion and action. Genuine emotion requires preparedness for appropriate response, for it represents the world as possessing demand characteristics that are urgent: a genuine emotion is one on which we are prepared to act (or refrain from acting), to engage (or disengage from) the world. When in the grip of a passion, we are nearly compelled to act in accordance with the demand characteristics it represents an object to have. While any emotion makes oblique, if only implicit, reference to the self, since it is in the business of evaluating the bearing of circumstances on the self, the positive emotions of love and compassion are not primarily self-directed. They are directed to the intentional objects of the emotions, be that object a beloved or a fellow sufferer. As Sartre, an astute analyst of the intentionality of emotion, points out in *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1960, 58), there is a definite difference of intentionality between the awareness of Paul-to-be-pitied and the awareness of myself pitying Paul. A person who loves another will be prepared to sacrifice; a person who feels compassion will be prepared to assist or assuage.

Emotions become sentimental when the person undergoing them is not prepared to meet their action demands because the intentional objects of the genuine counterparts of the sentimentalized emotions have been covertly displaced. In the first case, an emotional feeling, a component of the emotion process, has displaced, or at least taken precedence over, the original intentional object: the emotional feeling can then be indulged without compliance with any urgent action demands. In the second case, an intentional object that is not the self is displaced by the self, which is aggrandized by virtue of being in the (merely apparent) grip of an emotion that enhances the image of the self. Sentimentality, therefore, is a higher-order intentional state: its object is another mental state (a feeling) or it is the self. There is fairly wide agreement that higher-order intentionality is the province of the human animal. While many animals are clearly emotional beings, it is doubtful that there are any sentimental non-human animals. Oscar Wilde deftly
nails the first variety of sentimentality in his prison letter, *De Profundis* (1949, 130): “a sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it.” Milan Kundera’s analysis of kitsch in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* captures the second variety:

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running on the grass!

The second tear says: how nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!

It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch [1984, 251].

How nice, that is, for *me* to be moved, together with all mankind, says the second tear. Although kitsch may be sentimental, it is not sentimentality itself. For one thing, *kitsch* is an aesthetic concept denoting a gross failure of taste, while *sentimentality* is a psychological concept. Kundera, however, uses ‘kitsch’ more broadly than this. He employs it as a term of art denoting a pervasive attitude of mendacity and fraudulence, a habitual failure of integrity in the society in which his novel is set, and an attitude is of course a mental state. This brings kitsch into reasonable alignment with sentimentality, which is also mendacious and fraudulent.

If, as at least one writer has maintained (Tanner 1977, 130), Shakespeare’s Othello is guilty of sentimentality when he describes himself as “one who loved not wisely but too well," this, too, would be sentimentality of the second type. The intentional object of Othello’s emotional state here is less Desdemona than it is himself; and Othello does not exactly lack for action tendencies, for he takes his own life soon after making this deliverance, an action in keeping with a sentimental, self-directed emotion. But this sentimentality is charged to the character Othello, not to the play and not to Shakespeare. For such targets, one might have to look to something like *Our Town* and Thornton Wilder, if you will allow the example; and here things quickly become complicated. Is the stage manager sentimental, the work, the playwright, or all three? The stage manager functions as an internal narrator, a device unusual in a play. In prose fiction this is standard. Who exactly is being sentimental, if anyone is, in the description of little Eva’s death in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: an implied internal narrator, the authorial persona, or Harriet Beecher Stowe herself? It can be difficult to distinguish an internal narrator from the authorial persona, particularly in novels written in the third person. We may table such complications for now, but when we take up the case of music, we shall have to face them, or ones like them.

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1 Solomon (1997, 225), to whom I owe these references, quotes both passages in order to disagree with them. His aim is to defend sentimentality, which he understands to comprise the soft and sweet emotions that have (unjustly) received rough treatment by theorists of the emotions. This is not how I construe sentimentality.
Although emotions that are susceptible to being sentimentalized tend to be positive, they do not have to be. Some negatively charged emotions can be so corrupted. Imagine an American antebellum southern woman in the company of gentlemen taking a histrionic fright at the sight of a mouse. Her sentimental state is likely to result from the second variety of intentional displacement, a state of self-congratulation for ladylike sensitivity. Similarly self-serving scenarios can be concocted for righteous indignation, which can easily become self-righteous: how nice to be outraged, together with all right-thinking mankind, by this atrocity. Some emotions, for example, nostalgia or elegiac sadness, seem particularly prone to sentimental distortion, perhaps because their distinctive blend of sadness is likely to be bittersweet, and therefore capable of affording pleasant feelings. There is also the fact that the action tendencies associated with other varieties of sadness, for example, the tendency to lower one’s tone and bearing, are minimized by the elegiac mood, which, when genuine and not sentimental, retains a quality of austere composure. Self-aggrandizement is also a possibility: our form of life, lovely as an ancient Grecian statue, the sentimental nostalgic may aver, is now gone with the wind. Still, the general principle of the intentionality of emotion holds even here: the attention of the non-sentimental elegiac will be directed toward events in the past, not toward the emotional feeling or toward herself; nor will she spare herself the bitter so as better to enjoy the sweet.

Let us now attempt to apply this sketch of an analysis of sentimentality to music. In my book, *The Musical Representation* (2007), I argued that music acquired extra-musical meaning by presenting in performance a plan to be extracted from the musical surface and acted on in a virtual musical space defined by axes of pitch and time, and filled out by a gravitational dynamics based on tonal relationships, both melodic and harmonic. By a plan, I intended a non-propositional prescription for organized action that could be represented by hierarchically structured trees of the type employed in generative linguistics and in the generative theory of tonal music it inspired (Lerdahl and Jackendoff 1983). In this virtual gravitational dynamics, dissonance is the analogue of physical instability, consonance of stability. The virtual actions prescribed for the listener, I maintained, were mimetic: gestural and exemplificational. The contours of the virtual actions undertaken in musical space suggested to the listener a complementary terrain or feature domain, perhaps smooth and accessible, perhaps rugged and challenging, and the listener’s off-line charade-like behaviors allowed her to shift back and forth effortlessly in imagination between the roles of agent, patient, and observer in any interactive sequence, just as we do in narrative fictional contexts. Since emotions, on my telling, involve action tendencies, the quality and style of virtual action mandated by a musical sequence strongly determines its emotional character. Also relevant is the standpoint adopted by the listener, whether it be that of agent, patient, or observer.
It is important to distinguish sentimental music from the deliberate portrayal of a musical persona as sentimental, a phenomenon we seem to encounter in the Finale of Richard Strauss’ Don Quixote. Here, as in the case of Shakespeare’s Othello (if we follow Tanner), the Don is represented musically as sentimental, not enamored of Dulcinea, but enamored of being enamored of her (in a knightly way, of course). The music itself, however, is arguably not sentimental, and Strauss himself most assuredly is not, any more than Cervantes was. How the composer manages to accomplish this is a nice question. “Double voicing,” a kind of musical commentary in which music expressive of an emotional attitude is overlaid with another, perhaps quite different, emotional attitude does occur in Western tonal art music. Prokofiev arguably employs this technique in his Classical Symphony, with its deliberate air of parody. One might see this work as commenting from a twentieth-century perspective on a perceived emotional naiveté of the eighteenth-century classical style. The technique is perhaps most obviously exploited by jazz artists who have taken material for improvisation from show tunes, for example, John Coltrane’s edgy rendition of “My Favorite Things” (cf. Zbikowski 2002, 224). In any event, we can say this much: in Don Quixote, Strauss appears to invest his musical representations with a quality of gentle mockery, as in the faintly risible representation of the Don’s expiration by means of a quiet, descending glissando in the solo cello, a musical effect rather different from the sweeping chromatic figure that signals the departure from this world of the soul of the dying persona in Death and Transfiguration. It is with sentimental music, and not the musical portrayal of sentimentality, that I am concerned here.

With these points in mind, we can now attempt to explain how sentimentality in music might arise. A sentimental piece may afford the listener an easily executed action plan that does not levy any very onerous demands of attention or virtual action tendency. This allows the emotions generated to float free of their original intentional tethering and their action tendencies to be reduced to routine, thereby facilitating a redirection of intentionality to emotional feelings themselves. Or the piece may encourage the listener to simulate a musical persona who makes herself an object of positive appraisal. I hope it is clear that these two options correspond to the two varieties of sentimentality already described. It is not easy to find blatant examples of either form of sentimentality in Western tonal art music. To find such examples among the major composers of the modern West, one might look to Franck, Liszt, or Tchaikovsky. But any sentimentality found in the music of these greats would probably not qualify as blatant. The reason for this, I believe, is that the artistic standards that Western tonal art music has evolved over the centuries have effectively refined away grossly sentimental emotional expression in the course of the development of this musical practice into an art whose level of distinction has rarely been equaled in the entire history of the fine arts in the West. (I do not say that it never has been equaled.) Sentimentality in music is much easier to find in other Western musical styles. So, for the sake of clarity, it is with other styles that
I shall begin. Should the suspicion arise that my initial choices exploit invidious comparisons that afford unfair advantage, please be assured that I intend to try to make up for this before we are done.

Compare, if you can, Fauré’s Pavane with Jim Roberts’ “Impressions on Fauré’s Pavane” from his album, Romantic Piano (2004, Madacy Entertainment Group, Ltd.). I assume you will agree that the piano version is an “easy listening,” sentimentalized version of the original. The problem now is to explain why. It will be useful to bear in mind the two versions of sentimentality I have distinguished. The piano version etiolates the original intentionality of Faure’s musical representation and redirects it to feelings evoked. If so, the piano version is sentimental in the first way. It demands little. The musical plan is easily extracted from the musical surface, and the virtual terrain of the piece is easily negotiated. All this encourages immersion in the wash of pleasant feelings. Repetition and narrow dynamics play a non-negligible role with regard to demands on attention. The basic contours of Faure’s musical feature domain are recognizable, but they are rendered in an exceedingly exiguous and simplified way. Notice the elimination of the musical material from the taut middle section of the original. Enough information is provided the listener to allow her to recover and act (virtually) on elements of Fauré’s musical plan, but not enough to demand the sustained attention and flexible action readiness that might interfere with the sheer sensual enjoyment of the emotional feelings that are, so to speak, skimmed from the surface of the original emotion process. I have given no attention to Montesquiou’s rather cynical words in the chorus because the easy listening version has none and because they would only serve to prejudice the case in my favor.

For an example of the second variety of sentimentality, consider two musical representations of the lachrymose, the Lacrimosa from Mozart’s Requiem and the popular singer Evanescence’s Lacrymosa from her album The Open Door (2006, Wind-up Records). Here, the presence of words is very helpful, but not, I think, hopelessly prejudicial. The initial, and most obvious point to make is that Mozart’s Lacrimosa is a compassionate lament for the souls of the guilty on the Day of Judgment, while Evanescence’s Lacrymosa is a compassionate lament for a departed lover. There is nothing objectionable per se in this second mode of lamentation, but compassion, however genuine, for the plight of the forlorn lover, “cold and alone,” is not commensurable with compassion for the souls of the guilty and the lamentation is not of the same order. The Evanescence Lacrymosa expresses self-sacrifice, the noble and generous transfer of guilt for the failed relationship from the departed lover to the singing persona. Mozart’s musical plan, designed to enable the listener to construct mental models of the harrowing circumstances of “this day,” invests the persona’s self-sacrifice with a gravitas that is unearned and unearnable, except perhaps by the Son of God, to whom the entreaty for the benefaction of repose (requiem) is directed and with whom there
may indeed be a sub rosa or, more generously, an unconscious comparison. One may judge that this adaptation of Mozart’s musical material qualifies as kitsch, and therefore as sentimental in the second way. The first tear rolls for the departed lover, the second at the thought of the singing persona’s own magnanimity.

Now to make some of the promised amends. No longer availing myself of the excuse of clarity of exposition, let us now turn to the far more challenging task of comparing works of Western tonal art music. The two works I have chosen (Grieg’s The Last Spring and the Larghetto from Dvorak’s Serenade for Strings in E, Op. 22), I hope you will agree, are both expressive of an elegiac mood. Indeed, one of them is so titled by the composer. That means, in my terms, that they present the listener with an action plan that incarnates the comportment of someone contemplating irrevocable loss with which she has, in time, come to terms. One of these works, I hope you will also agree, is more sentimental than the other, though I would not begin to deny that even the more sentimental of the two is still a bona fide masterpiece. If you do so agree, our task, once again, will be to try to explain why.

If you must choose between the Grieg and the Dvorak, which is the more sentimental? Suppose you happen to agree with me that it is the Grieg. Which mode of sentimentality does it display, and why? The first mode, the one that indulges pleasant emotional feelings? Or the second mode, the one that makes an elegiac persona, assuming there is one, her own intentional object? Both interpretations, I believe, can be sustained. The piece evokes bittersweet feelings; yet it also allows the elegiac persona to respond to her own sensitivity. But how? The only way music can elicit such responses: by eliciting bodily set and virtual movement in musical space. If you find this implausible, consider a telling moment, Grieg’s sul ponticello return of the first subject. It suggests a certain infirmity or perhaps even an over-exquisite sensitivity on the part of the dying persona contemplating her last spring and all that she stands to lose. Such an over-exquisite sensitivity seems to me to pervade the entire work. This, in turn, easily gives rise to self-pity, something quite different from elegy. The over-exquisite sensitivity is capable of producing a sensual frisson, and in the case of self-pity, the piece’s persona becomes the intentional object of the emotion. The Dvorak suggests no over-exquisite sensitivity, nor does it evoke self-pity. If you are once again skeptical, think of the performance of any physical task. Infirmary or extreme sensitivity of touch will tend to interfere with action and to direct attention away from the object at hand and toward one’s own bodily state. Such redirection is easily sentimentalized into self-absorption, veering here into an indulgent lassitude, there into an unacknowledged self-pity. The fact that the self-pity is unacknowledged is important. There is nothing wrong with self-directed emotions, even, perhaps, a touch of self-pity. What is problematic is self-deception: emotion that is self-directed masquerading as other directed and reaping the experiential rewards of other-directed emotions.
But are we to hypothesize entities like elegiac personae in purely instrumental musical works at all? This is controversial. The Evanescence *Lacrymosa*, it is clear, expresses the emotional experience of a single persona, for there we are helped by the presence of the token-reflexive ‘I’. With the Grieg and the Dvorak, a single experiential virtual persona is not so evident. The philosopher Stephen Davies (1997) has argued that no works of purely instrumental Western tonal art music require that we posit hypothetical personae, virtual agents with an intentional psychology, in order to understand complex emotions like guilt or regret, emotions that, unlike anger and fear, do not signal their presence with distinctive bodily manifestations. In fact, Davies doubts that purely instrumental music can be expressive of such sophisticated emotions at all. As for other, less sophisticated emotions, “appearance” or “contour” expressivism is sufficient: we recognize the emotions of which a work is expressive the way we recognize the sad expression on the face of a St. Bernard dog or the sadness of the “posture” of a weeping willow.

I argued in my book (228–231) that the comparison of the contours of music with the visages of dogs or the postures of trees was a flawed one, because, with the possible exception of its rhythmic contours, music does not directly display any expressive contours. In order to be expressive, I argued, music must put the body of the listener into virtual states of posture and activity that comport with the ongoing course of various emotions, thereby co-opting the body and the motor-imagination of the listener as the vehicle of expression. During the process, the listener understands whatever musical contents there are by way of charade-like simulation. I see no reason to deny that in some cases, the listener is encouraged, perhaps even mandated, to simulate a persona or multiple personae, something that pretty clearly occurs, for example, in the slow movement of Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto. I would observe, moreover, that the case for positing a single hypothetical persona tends to be especially strong in very brief works that, in their limited span, are expressive of a unified, sophisticated emotional state, works like the Grieg and the Dvorak.

Notice, however, two salient points. First, the Grieg is more emotionally unified than is the Dvorak, where the somewhat agitated middle section could signal either a shift of attitude on the part of a single persona or the entrance of a new persona. Second, the tendency to posit a persona in the Grieg is stronger because of its title and explicit program. Third, and most interesting, a sentimental piece of the second type, if I am correct, will favor hypothesizing a hypothetical persona, precisely because, on one of the accounts of sentimentality I have offered, this hypothetical persona becomes, in a covert way, the most readily available intentional object of a positive, redirected emotion. It must be admitted, however, that because musical representation is non-conceptual, the notion of musical intentional objects is inherently problematic and needs careful handling, a challenge I attempted to meet in my book. Objects lacking identity conditions are
If a musical work encourages simulation of personae, may a persona be something like a narrator of a story? It may, like the narrative voice I seem to hear in the Andante Moderato of Brahms’ Fourth Symphony. Is this narrator’s voice to be identified with the virtual maker of the musical utterance, the composer-persona? Most likely. Is the composer-persona to be identified with the voice of the actual composer, in this case Brahms? Again, most likely. But this case, I believe, is not the usual one. Musical personae, when they emerge, tend to be heard in the musical surface as they are seen in the surface of paintings where there generally is no narrative persona. Is the central musical persona heard in a piece to be identified with the composer? It may, like the hero of Ein Heldenleben, or it may not, like the dying persona recalling experience long past in Death and Transfiguration, a work composed by a very youthful Richard Strauss. When the second, self-referential, variety of musical sentimentality occurs, deciding just who is sentimental may be as challenging as it is in literature, or more.

Is it possible for a performance to sentimentalize a piece? Yes, if the performance manages to distort the intentionality of the musical representations. Imagine more and less sentimental performances of the Cavatina from Beethoven’s String Quartet in B-Flat, Op. 130. In particular, call up in your mind’s ear the first violin passage in the middle section, marked beklemmt (constricted), played wispily sul ponticello. Such an approach could suggest an over-exquisite sensitivity, a distortion of the emotional set of this musical episode. As such, it might elicit both varieties of sentimentality I identified. In making any such determination, it is of no small benefit to get as clear as possible regarding sentimentality’s intentional structure. This I have tried to do here.
References


