THE FUZZINESS OF ‘EXPRESSION’ IN RELATION TO ALGORITHMIC MUSIC.

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ABSTRACT

All sorts of music expresses all sorts of ideas. Yet algorithmic music is often critiqued for its lack of expression. This raises questions about what makes any music ‘expressive’. This in turn leads to addressing definitions of expression itself. A logical approach reveals that the concept of expression in music discourse is very vague. This fuzziness arises from three sources. Firstly, the idiomatics of English is inherently confusing and yields specific expectations about music and expression general. Secondly, the accepted ways of listening to Western art music identified by Becker [3], cause difficulties in identifying the substantial meaning of the word ‘expression’. Thirdly, the conflation of composition and performance into the umbrella term ‘music’ such as the article ‘Expression’ in Groves Music Online [24] generates its own confusion. Revealing these sources of confusion, places the alleged deficiency in the expressiveness of algorithmic music into the logical deficiencies of music discourse, rather than locating it in algorithmic music.

1. INTRODUCTION

Music is a powerful, pervasive and crucial form of human communication and expression” is a proud mention made on the website for a recent musicological conference [22]. Algorithmic music has been critiqued for being ‘un-expressive’. This may be because this music is not capable of being expressive, or because algorithmic music is so badly composed that the ideas are not articulated coherently, or because the fuzziness of ‘expression’ is highlighted by the intrinsic nature of algorithmic music. The last possibility returns the original problem to the logic of music discourse, rather than a deficiency in algorithmic music. This paper is primarily concerned with addressing this question.

There are difficulties in articulating the concept of expression in an intangible, abstract art form such as music. Nancy Baker, an American musicologist, highlights the paradoxical use of the word in relation to performance and in music criticism [1]. While addressing this paradox, Scruton’s philosophical linguistic approach leads him to conclude that it is logically impossible for music to be ‘expressive’, while acknowledging the reality that music does indeed have a strong emotional resonance [24].

Unpicking Scruton’s reasoning shows that his apparent paradoxical outcome about music and expression arises from several causes. Firstly, various linguistic conventions lead to differing meanings and logical implications despite the use of identical words. Secondly, his automatic elision of ‘expression’ and ‘emotion’, is a result of what Becker [3] describes as the ‘habit of listening’ adopted in analysis and criticism of Western art music. This elision immediately excludes the possibility that music may be composed to express ideas other than emotional transcendence. Algorithmic music, as a genre, may be designed to address other ideas through the medium of music. Thirdly, Scruton’s implicit assumptions result in faulty logic. This compounds the difficulties presented by the subtleties of English grammar, in clearly articulating the concept of ‘expression’ in the intangible abstract art form which is music.

This paper shows that an explicit understanding of expression through music clearly points to algorithmic music as a means of human expression of a broad range of ideas.

2. IDIOSYNYCRASIES IN USE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

The concept of ‘expression’ in music discourse is very messy. The words ‘expression’ or ‘expressive’ are regularly used in a wide range of diverse contexts. For example Jacobson writing in the CD liner notes of Beethoven’s string quartets manages to make ‘expression’ quite meaningless in his comment that a particular movement is “the smoother and more sustained in expression” [18], or the CD liner notes to music by German algorithmic composer Barbara Heller says that her work is “...in search of new forms of expression, of possibilities of articulation...for her musical language” [27].

Similarly, some musicologists are quite free in their use of the terminology of expression. “The public quartet made possible an increase in expressive depth in the Slow movement because an ensemble can say things which would be embarrassing or ridiculous if vouchedsafe by individuals...” Griffith goes on to say in an analysis of a Haydn quartet “...that the prominence of Major and minor in a single movement, can be used to achieve expressive extremes...” [13]. Yet there are no clearly articulated ideas about what this word means, or consistent evidence which could provide insight into an implied meaning. The end result is that, rather than helpfully clarifying the attributes of ‘expressive music’, the use of the term seems to reflect some type of indefinable, subjective experience.
Sources of this implication and interpretation, lies
within the pragmatics of English in every day usage, as
well as the grammatical construction of English,
specifically in relation to the usage of 'expression' in
music discourse. These are compounded by differences
in readers and writers abilities to grapple with the
complexity of the English language. Variations in the
ideas associated with 'expression' build erroneous
expectations regarding its meaning in relation to music
in general.

Firstly, the term 'expression in music' often seems to
refer to a discrete feature which can be dispassionately
observed similar to 'rhythm in music' or 'melody in
music' both of which are intrinsically music-specific
features. Hence we are led to expect that expression is
embedded in music in a similar way. Even without
knowing specifically how, or what, the music, the
composer, or the performer, is expressing, this phrase
'expression in music' is difficult to interpret. The phrase
somehow overlooks the reality that music is the medium
of expression, rather than expression being a component
of music. Music can express 'things', whether it be an
idea, an emotion, the state of the natural world or the
glory of god, but the idea being expressed is realised
'through' music, as an alternative to other media such as
cocaine, photography, or words.

Confused expectations can also be brought about
through the abbreviation of the concept of 'expression'
in/through the medium of music, into 'musical
expression' such as in the title of Scruton's entry in
Groves Music Online [24]. This can lead to subtly
different interpretations because of the multiple
meanings attached to the term 'musical' in different
contexts.

For instance, the term 'facial expression' indicates in
a straightforward way that the expression is occurring
through the medium of the face. Similarly 'musical
expression' can indicate that the expression is occurs
through the medium of music. However, in other
contexts, the application of the adjective 'musical', when
applied to another object, implies qualities like beauty,
or melodiousness, for example 'musical bird-song' or
'musical instruments', or when people say 'it was a
musical performance' they apply 'musical' to the key
word 'performance'. Hence, it is quite easy to interpret
the phrase 'musical expression' so that 'expression' is the
key feature, or object, of the phrase, which, when
qualified with the adjective 'musical', means that the
expression was particularly beautiful or harmonious. Yet
even loud, ugly, inharmonic, dissonant noises in music
can be expressive of something, such as anger, agitation,
or nuclear war, even if the idea is not usually associated
with 'beauty'. Even then, depending on perspective,
difficult things can have an abstract inherent beauty of
shape, pattern, colour or texture which can become
apparent to the listener.

The notion of 'expressive' music is so ubiquitous in
Western thinking, that it appears in the popular press as
well as more academic music criticism and analysis.
Looking at the common language definitions of
expression[9] provides an interesting insight into what
concepts people are communicating when using this
phraseology. Of particular importance is the
common language definitions provide only two
types of references to music, of which one of the referred
to as 'expression-mark' not to music itself. While 'expression-
marks' looks as if it might be getting down to the
meaning of these marks are only considered indicative, not
manifesting or representational. This permits us to
regard the ideas about expression, which is particularly related to expression. The other reference to
music simply refers to nuanced performance does not
bring out the 'feeling' of the music [9]. While it
explain the vagueness of the phraseology it does not
unravel the technical aspects of expression in relation to music theory and composition.

Roger Scruton, a British philosopher and critic, addresses the issue of 'expression' at length in
Music Online [24]. His attempt to unpack some of the meanings, actually provide examples in them, is
an insufficiently broad view of both expression and music. Scruton's work is useful in that it points
out the confusion in the meaning of 'expression' arising from the grammatical construction of English. However, it reveals confused thinking. The issue he points to is significant. If the human significance of the reason for problems with the meaning of 'expression'. However, this article
example of how difficult it can be to unpack the meanings and implications from what seems to be
simple and logical statements. Scruton's argument is wrong
is based on his erroneous assumptions about the misrepresentation of music as an activity rather than a
fixed object.

Scruton says: "When it is said of a piece of music (say, of Schubert's Erlkönig) that it has 'expressive'
meaning, it seems natural to ask: what does it express? There is
a presumption that expression in music is transitive, that to have expression is to express something in
a case a feeling of terror) [24]."

Scruton also points out that "It may be true that a performance that a certain passage is played
musically. The piano teacher (or the critic) seems to be talking about expression in some other
sense, in a sense which forbids the performer's perspective "what am I expected to express?" [24]."

Differentiating between transitive and intransitive verbs turns out to be a false distinction, an
inaccurate representation of the real grammar problem. It shows his view to be inadequate for
through. Verbs are the 'action' words in a sentence. Verbs describe the nature of an activity being
accompanied by a given object, which might actually be a noun or even perhaps a musician! Using a word that
requires that the action must refer directly to a specifically named object [15]. For instance, "the piano keys" makes sense while "I press" makes no sense. However, intransitive verbs are not accompanied by a direct or specifically named
object. For example "I sing" makes complete sense just as "I dance." Of particular relevance here, is the observation
by Harvey, an American grammarian, that intransitive verbs, such as 'drive' or 'run', are generally intransitive
verbs [15]. Thus I suggest that Scruton has inappropriately highlighted the core problem, because the
Speaking or composing is motion oriented like 'dance, 
play', so it seems that considering the use of 
these terms in music may be helpful. However, the activity of making 
musical sounds is not the same as music itself. Music (even as a 
conceptualized performance) is an object with descriptive 
qualities including 'expression'.

Consequently describing music with the quality of 
'expression' is similar to describing the music with the 
ig of 'nuanced' or 'bright' or 'loud'. This is 
the case when someone says that music is played 
expressively or has 'expression'. These are 
jectives, not verbs whether transitive or 
intransitive. Hence there is no implicit question in either 
of what "What is a performer expressing when they 
play?" To my mind, this grammatical de 
tinction of a typical remark about 'expression' 
appropriately raises the alternate question "How is the 
music being expressed?" Interestingly, this is the more 
interesting question in terms of compositional (and 
performance) decision making.

Is notable that this line of argument arrives at 
different subsequent questions namely "what is the 
music expressing?". This illustrates how easily 
ambiguous interpretations of expression in music 
can arise. The questions are valid, but their difference also 
points to different associated meanings for the term 
"expression". "What does it express?" refers to an idea 
inside the music, while "how does it express?" refers 
qualities which reside inside the music itself. These 
questions are both implied in discussions of expression 
music. Yet, not only do different lines of thinking 
about expression arrive at the different subsequent 
questions, but also the different questions have different 
implications concerning the locus of 'expression' in 
music, which are not always explicitly stated.

'EXPRESSION' IS A STAND IN FOR OTHER 
PERSONAL REACTIONS

The second reason that expression may be a slippery 
concept is that different people perceive that 
"expressive" music as more acceptable than writing about 
their degree of personal engagement with the music.

A digital thesaurus [5] illustrates how 'expressive' 
could be replaced by three main words: mobile (with 
associated words of animated, communicative, open, 
responsive); meaningful (with associated words of 
significant, dramatic, emotional, sensitive, vivid, telling); 
and representative (with associated words of 
representing, demonstrating, signifying, indicative of, 
indicating) [6]. While 'engaging' could be replaced by 
attractive (with associated words of appealing, charming, 
winning); connecting (with associated ideas of fitting 
into place, attaching, joining, uniting, bonding); holding 
with associated words of keeping, absorbing).

So expression and engagement are not one and the 
same thing but they are closely related activities in that 
engagement is likely to be engaging, as the features described as expressive are likely to ensure 
that engagement happens. This is clarified by looking at 
the opposite of expressive is categorised as blank, 
cool, aloof, deadpan, giving nothing away, unemotional, 
exacting, or enigmatic [6]. Yet these characteristics 
could be expressed through music, in which case that 
music would be 'expressive'! However, the point is that 
critics may feel uncomfortable revealing their degree of engagement with the music, preferring to externalise 
their remarks to 'expressiveness' which is less personal.

Another significant source of confusion is the 
conceptual elision of expression in music with emotion, 
not only in popular writing but throughout academic 
discourse. There are several aspects to this point. The 
first is the varying degree of comfort with, and self 
awareness of emotion among individuals. Harris points 
out that "We are always experiencing emotion of some 
sort, just as there is weather of some sort, although 
sometimes it isn't strong enough, or distinct enough for 
us to describe it or perhaps even to notice it...Everyone 
has emotions and feelings regardless of being in touch 
with them, or being able to express them in words [14]. 
As well, there are individual differences in desire for 
and tolerances of emotional connection. For some, 
intellectual connection is sufficient. Together these 
aspects will impact on both a listener's reaction to music, 
and the way they denote that experience in terms of 
music and its 'expressiveness'.

Another defining aspect of 'expression' in may stem 
from the accepted ways of listening that have become 
part of the Western art music tradition. Judith Becker is 
an ethnomusicologist studying African music. Becker 
develops and explores the notion of the 'habit' of 
listening [2,3]. This describes listening habits, and the 
expectations of listeners in a particular culture. Studying 
these habits can reveal implicit assumptions about what 
music is for, what music 'means', and how it is to be 
perceived, as well as the appropriate responses to the 
music.

Justin and Sloboda [19], succinctly explain that the 
difficulties Western musicology has in articulating 
emotion in its discourse stem from its strong grounding 
in "classical concert culture", that is, the behaviour 
expected of audiences attending classical music concerts. 
Typically this requires silent and respectful listening, 
with minimal bodily movement or other emotional 
expression, until the conclusion of each musical work. 
This way of responding to music is accompanied by 
particular intellectual and aesthetic understandings. 
Thus, in the West, "appreciation of music" has come to 
mean having an intellectual understanding of the history 
and form of a musical work, rather than an articulated 
emotional response to the music. While some emotional 
response is permitted and valued, it is restricted to the 
transcendent and spiritual aspects which are related to 
the 'higher' abstract and aesthetic properties of works 
rather than full-blooded emotion. These characteristic 
attitudes towards music extend throughout the academic 
paradigm of music scholarship. Consequently, there 
is no academically accepted means of framing and 
derstanding emotion, and consequently 'expression' in 
music theory, since Western musicological discourse is 
so strongly grounded in "classical concert culture".
4. THE DIFFICULTY OF ACKNOWLEDGING MUSIC AS AN AURAL ART FORM

Writers of textbooks use 'music' as "...shorthand of the scores of American and European modernist composers..." [26]. Performance is required to bring all music into existence, whether by human performers or by machines. Performance transduces the composer's ideas, whether sketched, precisely notated, or programmed into computer code, into the aural experience we know as music. Music is what we encounter with our ears and minds. Listeners perceive the surface of the music as it emerges over time. No matter what, the listener is only presented with the surface of the music as an aural experience.

Conventional score-based analysis does not explicitly include the vital aspects of music as an art form. Music exists as a temporally emergent aural experience, organised around ideas. Intrinsic fundamental dimensions of music are often unstated. "The multiple levels of musical organisation are rich spatio-temporal organisations, i.e. complex dynamic systems [16]." However, as an intangible art form, music does not actually contain any spatial dimension, apart from the aural space induced by particular compositions, such as medieval antiphons, or immersive sound environments. Audiences may hear music, they may actively listen. They will never see it, it does not exist in visual form. Yet music analysis is generally static and score-based, such as Allan Forte's set theory of atonal music [12], in which the analytical structures cannot be heard in the music. Some, such as Kerman [20] acknowledge that listening is important but rely on the score as the basis for their analysis.

The difficulties this introduces into the study of expression in music, are summarised very well by Baker, in her introduction to 'Expression' in Groves Music Online [1]. "In the simplest sense expression is applied to elements of a performance that depend on personal response and vary between interpretations." Yet "It is not clear how we use the term 'expression' relates to the concept that occurs in music criticism (such as when a work is described to express some emotion, outlook, or idea)."

The relationship between musicology and criticism is another matter, however, it might be asserted that the branch of musicology concerned with analysis, often becomes a more elaborate form of criticism, as evidenced by Kerman [20] and Griffiths [13]. I suggest that the major reason for the word 'expression' being used with apparently two different meanings in the different contexts of performance and musicology arise from the problematic relationship that musicology has with music being an intangible aural experience.

Scruton suggests that expression in performance is about "playing music with understanding" [24]. Yet Scruton says the performer's goal is not to "possess knowledge of some emotion, intention or idea that the music is purporting to communicate. The player's knowledge is essentially a practical knowledge, not a species of theoretical insight." Rather, the player aims to understand how to play the music for enjoyment [24]. This reduction of ideas in music to sheer sensation, significantly contributes to the difficulties in establishing how music 'expresses' ideas. It does not resolve the paradox of meaning outlined by Baker [1].

Knowing other information, such as program notes, composer biographical details, or context or composition, may help the listener contextualise when they are hearing music when listening to that music. We also say that if the context of a piece of music is understood during the performance, then the music "...can be understood as a human utterance, in dialogue with other human utterances [26]. This strongly implies a communicative aspect of music. However, I suggest that context is not necessary for the initial description of music as an utterance, for its generic description as an act of communication, it has been made by humans that in itself is enough.

However, the listener still only hears the surface of the music, and what the surface suggests, 'expresses' about the composer's ideas in this work. The specific concepts being expressed will vary in individual work, but emotion and mood, as well as conceptual and experimental ideas are valid concepts to include in analytical evaluations of the surface of the music. Although the listener can never truly know what the composer was trying to do in a work, the listener may hear the music as it is performed and know what they tell themselves what ideas it projects, i.e. 'expresses' to the listener.

Baker [1] implicitly recognises the importance of the performer in realising the experience of music. Yet she is not able to acknowledge that music begins to exist because of the composer's ideas which are to be expressed through the music as aural experience. The performer must, by their very nature as intermediaries, have an impact on the presentation of the ideas, through selection of parameters of the music. Depending on the degree of change implemented by the performer they may be effectively recomposing aspects of the music, or not. It is likely they may be offering their interpretations of basic ideas being expressed by the composer through the music.

Algorithmic music, especially when the music involves the use of electronic technology for sound production, combines composition and performance in the same activity. It is possible that automated sound production does not hold the same nuances between sound events as does acoustic music performance. Criticising algorithmic music on this basis is an elitist algorithmic music with the automation of sound production. It is not a question of the expressiveness of the compositional technique.

Andrew Ford, an Australian composer, has gone as far as to say that when the audience is listening to music [in a concert situation], they are engaging in a relationship with the composer, whereby they understand to concentrate, memorise and engage thoughtfully with the music [7]. However, I contend that composers need to give consideration to the implications of the situation. The composer, by publicly presenting the music, enters into a relationship with the audience, in which they are communicating ideas through a medium of music, as performed by computers or human musicians.
5. ALGORITHMIC MUSIC EXPLICITLY MOVES BEYOND EMOTION

Composer may wish to communicate a variety of whether it is the compositional process itself, or the nuance of the sound/timbre being used in the position, or some other thought, feeling, or situation. Instance, the composer may produce unintelligible specifically to suggest 'nonsense'. In German regions, psychoanalytic thought brought a notion of genius defined such as to be indistinguishable madness. As psychoanalysis emerged as a fable, artists of all types, including Schoenberg, insanity as a model. Serialism is the epitome of the emergence in music between genius and madness, as a very, autonomous, but rigorously integrated [genius] controls the music, however idiosyncratic coherent [insane] it may actually sound [21].

Secondly, algorithmic music is composed to elate ideas other than emotion. For instance, Brian Wilson sets a number of audio processes in place which mimic at different rates in time, which "...resulted in a truly unexpected clusters of sound, ranging from a sense of true calm to gigantic hiatus" [11]. "I use a lot of cold processes. They seem rather senseless...and suddenly these flowers come out, and are surprisingly beautiful and complex..." [25]. Burt espouses a similar philosophy of delight in appearance of the unexpected [4]. Alternatively, composers, such as Bruce Jacob, with generative models, using minimal input data with preconditions and reproductive rules, in an you to produce meaningful and coherent results through automated procedures. While others, such as D Cope, use databases of predetermined materials that are then iteratively combined using extensive set of rules, to produce music in the styles of existing composers [6]. What differs between composers and ads, is the amount of, and which details in one or of the dimensions of music they concern themselves with, the remainder being left to positional algorithms.

The decisions the composer makes will impact on the underlying ideas transfer to the surface of the music, and hence to the listener's (conscious or unconscious) awareness. "...any piece of music is a kind of having a story or series of pictures read into it radiating through a yarn imaginative listener..." [23]. If the composer is sufficiently skilful, there will be possibilities in the listening experience with regard to ideas perceived in the music, just as occurs in any shared human experience of life.

6. CONCLUSION

Musicians, critics, musicologists and psychologists all steeped in common language as well as the technical language of their individual professions, it not be surprising to find that this range of ideas seeps across the use of 'expression' in music usage. This may explain why the use of 'expression' debate about how music functions in relation to 'expression' ranges across the concepts of manifestation, indication, or representation. These are significantly different degrees of expressing an idea.

The ambiguity of the English language, the implications and conflation of possible meanings, the habits of music researchers with their own shorthand terminology in relation to music and expression, along with the impact of the classical concert 'habitus of listening' on academia, becomes particularly pertinent when discussing algorithmic music.

However, as I have argued throughout this paper, the whole notion of 'expression' as a critical response in music discourse is fraught. The problems lie in several domains both of which affect analytical and critical responses to music. The idiomatic use of the term 'musical' builds erroneous expectations, while the pragmatic use of English through the various grammatical constructions of 'expression' tend to lead to different logical conclusions about the causal location of expression. Secondly, the elision of emotion and engagement into 'expression' has led to the usage of 'expression' as an umbrella term which detaches the personal reactions to the music from the author of the discourse. Finally, the split between performance and composition has both contributed to, and been a result of, an unwillingness to confront the reality that music is an aural subjective experience, which requires performance for its existence, but which begins with the composer's ideas. Hence, music seems to present logical difficulties in understanding expression. However, if music is solely regarded as an aural experience then it is clear that the performer/composer split is a false dichotomy.

Together, all these factors, logically lead to the conclusion that the most accurate terminology is to use 'expression through music', while acknowledging that music is an aural experience which depends on human input. Both composer and performer are required in the germination and fruition of music for its existence as a means of expressing ideas. Algorithmic and computer music has brought this constellation of issues into the limelight, not necessarily because the music lacks 'expression', but because this music challenges the conventions in which discourse on Western art music has been grounded.

7. REFERENCES

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Consequently, describing music with the quality of
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The second reason that expression may be a slippery
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A digital thesaurus [5] illustrates how ‘expressive’
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