

Expressing Feeling in Music

Roy Ernst, Author

My choice of what music to play and how to play it is largely influenced by philosopher Susanne Langer.

These are the ideas that I extracted from her works: Humans are hard-wired for a basic pattern she calls the struggle fulfillment cycle. We work hard to accomplish something and we experience fulfillment when we achieve it. But we do not stay at that feeling of fulfillment very long. We move on to something else and the pattern keeps repeating itself. It could be earning a degree, finishing a class, winning a game, or finishing a project.

This cycle can be experienced symbolically. It does so when we watch sporting events. Our favorite team struggles to win the game and we feel that struggle. When it wins, we feel fulfilled. Or if they loose, the struggle goes on and the feeling of fulfillment is even greater when at last they win. If you're a sports fan, think about this the next time you watch a game to see if it is true.

In music the struggle fulfillment cycle is expressed symbolically in stress and resolution. We respond to stress and resolution in music with our feelings. I have referred to this in the lesson on sections in music. It occurs on many levels in music. It occurs in large works like symphonies and concertos in the order of movements and the structure of movements. In an AABA or ABA form, the function of the B section is to create stress by moving away from the tonality of the A section. That stress is resolved by returning to the A section. The sense of resolution can be heightened by slowing a little at the end of the B section and a very slight pause before returning to the A section. Try it. It adds a lot of feeling.

Stress and release is also expressed in dissonant chords that resolve to consonant chords. In melody, it is felt in the movement of notes that come to rest at the end of a phrase. The smallest feeling of stress and relief in music is probably the appoggiatura (Italian “to lean”), in which a dissonant note is played on the beat that then resolves to a consonant note. There can be a lot of feeling in a well played appoggiatura. The performer needs to feel the

stress and resolution.

Composers and performers probably did not think philosophically about what they were doing. But they wrote or played music with feeling and the music that lives on tends to have these feelings.

In music, theory follows practice. It is based on analyzing or thinking about music that has been written or performed. Tonal music existed before there were theories explaining it.

There is an example of theory preceding practice in twelve-tone or serial music. The theory is that all tones are equal, unlike tonal music and that interesting patterns can be created using the theory. You probably have never heard 12-tone or serial music because, for most people, it lacks feeling and has never become popular except among a small group of very intellectual musicians. I don't believe most people are looking for an intellectual experience when they listen to music.

When I am picking music to perform or conduct. I look for music that has a potential for this kind of feeling. When I perform or conduct, I try to bring out the elements in the music that express this kind of feeling. I believe that listeners want to respond to music emotionally. They want to feel something in the music. Performers need to feel the emotion in music before they can express it to listeners. In the same way that an actor, for example, needs to feel frightened so strongly that the audience feels frightened, a musician needs to feel the music so strongly that the audience feels it. This is not experienced very often, but it is memorable when it happens.

This is a very simplified, but hopefully useful explanation.

Susanne Langer, 1895-1985, wrote *Philosophy in a New Key* and other works dealing with symbolism in life and in the arts. By all means, read Langer yourself.

(I experienced a little of the struggle/fulfillment cycle in writing this lesson.)

Other Feelings in Music

There are other factors that add feeling to music. Meaning in lyrics of a song, music associated with an emotional event such as a wedding, the songs of our armed services, and college fight songs are a few examples. The way a performer looks and moves can project feeling.

Assignment

Look for stress and release in the music you are playing. You will probably feel it without trying, but try to add more feeling to your performance by emphasizing it and feeling it more.