

Proposal for an International Conference on:
Imagination, Expression, and Depiction

University of Fribourg

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1. Aim and Motivation

1.1. Summary

The main aim of the conference is to bring together young and promising researchers at the beginning of their academic careers with more established scholars and enable them to present and discuss their current and on-going research on issues surrounding the topic of how we experience pictures, as well as their emotional expressiveness, and whether the imagination is involved in one way or another in these experiences.

This topic has been mostly - but regrettably and unjustifiedly - neglected in contemporary aesthetics. In response, the meeting is meant to lead to the publication of a collection of essays by the participants, with the intention to set a new standard of discussion in the field of philosophy concerned.

The conference is planned as part of a SFN-funded research project, which is based at the philosophy chair of Prof. Gianfranco Soldati at the University of Fribourg, and which investigates the relationship between our conscious experience and the normativity of values and, in particular, deals with the role of imagining in the aesthetic experience and evaluation of art.

The format of the conference, to be held at the University of Fribourg in 2007, will be that of a one-off workshop stretching over two to two-and-a-half days and including about eight or nine long sessions, one for each of the participants' work.

1.2. Scientific Motivations and Goals

As already indicated, the purpose of the conference is to pursue certain important issues concerning our experience of the emotional expressiveness of pictorial art and its relationship to, and potential involvement, of imagining. It is common ground that we often experience artworks - notably pieces of music, but also poems, paintings, and so on - as expressive of emotions, such as joy, sadness, exuberance, gloom, or despair. And this aspect of our engagement with these artworks often contributes essentially to the unique values that we attach to them.

The discussion of the capacity of art to express emotions has been discussed in recent years almost exclusively with respect to music and, notably, pure music (i.e., music which is neither programmatic, nor accompanied by sung or spoken text). Although there has been no clear consensus within philosophy on how precisely to explain the expressiveness of music and the nature of our experience of it, it has become a very popular - and perhaps the predominant - approach to the topic to focus on our capacity to imagine and its seemingly central role in our experience of expressiveness.

We want to use the conference as a forum to discuss new ideas concerning the imaginative approach to artistic expression and to assess it both with respect to its general merits and with respect to its specific application to pictorial art. Surprisingly, none of these issues has attracted much discussion in recent aesthetic debates (a

notable exception is Wollheim (1987)). But the planned conference is meant to make good for this and to illustrate how the questions involved are central to aesthetics and link up with many important issues concerning our emotional and imaginative experiences of artworks and their impact on our evaluations of them.

In what follows, I will first summarize the state of the art of the research concerning the imaginative approach to musical expression and then move on to outline the questions about this approach and its application to pictorial expression, as they are to be addressed at the conference.

2. The State of the Art

2.1. Musical Expression

Initially, the main problem for any account of artistic expression stems from the fact that - in the case of music as well as of other forms of art - there is usually no real person expressing her emotion through the artwork. For instance, sad or gloomy music is in most cases not composed or performed by sad or gloomy people. Accordingly, neither the composer, nor the performer has to feel a certain emotion for the music to be heard by us as expressive of this emotion.¹ This also means that there is typically no real emotion to be expressed. That we experience music as expressive of sadness or gloom does not indicate that there is an instance of sadness or gloom which is actually expressed.

Now, these and similar considerations are in tension with the also widely endorsed idea that musical expression is very similar, and closely related, to human expression. It is commonly accepted that our talk of expressive music is derivative on our talk of expressive faces, manners of behaviour, and so on²; and that any successful account of musical expression has to pay justice to this important link (cf. Levinson (1996)). But in the case of human expression, we normally take the occurrence of such an expression as indicative of the actual presence of an expressing person, as well as of an expressed instance of felt emotion. That is, in normal cases, there is always a real person with a real emotion behind human expression (cf. Vermazen (1986); cf. also Levinson (1996): 101)).³ And this intimate connection to persons and their mental states has arguably become part of our notion of expression. However, since such a connection is typically missing in what we have come to call 'musical expression', the latter cannot easily count as a genuine instance of expression, at least not according to our common understanding of expression.

Different attempts have been made to reconcile musical expression with the fact that our notion of expression is primarily concerned with the indication of actually existing mental states of real people. Some have claimed that our talk of music as expressive is

- 1 Though it has been argued that the composer must have felt the emotion at some moment, or at least must have a good grasp of what it might mean to feel the emotion.
- 2 Thus, the similarities in expressive features are often stressed; and it is sometimes held that we take music to be expressive because it reminds us of normal emotions and their expression (cf., e.g., Kivy (1989) and Budd (1995) for similar ideas).
- 3 Some might even go so far as to claim that the occurrence of an expression of an emotion by a person requires the presence of a respective emotion in the expressing person. But such a proposal has difficulties to deal with cases like those involving actors or children just pretending to have certain emotions. For example, the actor of Hamlet may very well express gloom or hate without actually feeling these emotions. Not surprisingly, it has become more fashionable to account for the (pretend) expression of pretend emotions in a similar way as for the musical expression of emotion (cf. e.g., Walton (1994)).

only metaphorical: music does not really express emotions, though we treat it as if it would express them (cf. Goodman (1976) and Scruton (1997)). Others have postulated that music is literally expressive, say, because it arouses in us the respective emotion (which we then perhaps project back onto the music; cf. Wollheim (1987), Wollheim (1993) and Matravers (2001) for positions long these lines), or because we experience it as resembling our experience or expression of that emotion (cf. Kivy (1989) and Budd (1995)).

2.2. The Imaginative Approach: Five Proposals

However, since these solutions have been regarded as problematic (cf. Budd (1995) and Levinson (1996)), it has recently become popular to follow a different route: namely to give up on the strong idea that expression is always indicative of the presence of a *real* emotion of a *real* person and allow also for the artistic expression of *imagined* emotions of *imagined* people. As a consequence, the notion of expression may still literally apply to music. But musical expressiveness is now said to be primarily a matter, not of arousal, projection or resemblance, but of imagining.⁴ Proponents of this approach have maintained that imagining is essential to (at least some) experiences of expressiveness in the sense that (certain forms of) experiencing music as expressive of a certain emotion necessarily involve(s) imagining the music to be expressive of that emotion. In other words, the representation of the expressiveness of the music is taken to be imaginative in its nature.

According to many versions of this approach, the postulated imaginative representation involves, or is supplemented by, a further imaginative specification of the person whose emotion is imagined to be expressed by the music. Three proposals have enjoyed particular plausibility and popularity.⁵ According to the first, we imagine - when we hear music as expressive of an emotion - ourselves as feeling the emotion and thus imagine the music to be expressive of our own emotion (cf. Budd (1995)).⁶ In the same spirit, it is sometimes said that we imaginatively identify with the music (cf. Trivedi (2001)). Hence, the imagined bearer of the emotion are we ourselves. The second proposal is that we imagine a musical persona as feeling the emotion and expressing it by means of the music. A musical persona is thereby an indeterminate type of a person that is taken to be somehow found 'in' the music - perhaps not dissimilar to how a voice may be 'in' or speak through a poem. Accordingly, the imagined bearer of the emotion is some abstract type of individual distinct from, but intrinsically linked to, the music (cf. Vermazen (1986), Levinson (1996) and Trivedi (2001)). The third proposal claims that we imaginatively animate the music and imagine itself as a (probably very reduced) person or person-like being that feels and expresses the emotion (cf. Trivedi (2001); Budd

4 Note, however, that some accounts in terms of imagining make use of these phenomena as well. An experience of resemblance is often recognized as underlying and guiding the imagining (e.g., determining what we imagine when hearing the music; cf. Budd (1995) and Trivedi). The arousal of an emotional feeling may equally prompt us to imagine the music as expressive of that emotion (cf. proposal (i) below; cf. Budd (1995) and Trivedi (2001)). And when we imagine music to be expressive, we may seem in some sense to project its expressiveness onto it (cf. Wollheim (1993) for the idea of (though non-imaginative) projection) - perhaps in the sense in which our visual perceptions colour the world.

5 Other suggestions have been that we imagine the instruments, or the group of performers, or the composer, as feeling and expressing the emotion. But apart from the fact that these suggestions have not been well-developed, it is unclear whether these forms of imagining are really sometimes essential to our experience of expressive music. Of course, these forms of imagining - just as any other - might simply accompany this experience.

6 There might be also rare cases in which we really feel the emotion which we imagine the music to express.

(1995): pp. 148 and 151, and Kivy (1989) seem also to be sympathetic to this view).⁷ Therefore, the imagined bearer of the emotion is the music itself.

But it has also been suggested that the imaginative representation of the expressiveness can remain completely unspecific in respect to the person whose emotion is expressed, or can perhaps even represent the expressed emotion as impersonal or disembodied, that is, as disconnected from any person or mind (cf. Budd (1995)). According to this particular view, we can imagine music to be expressive of a certain emotion without also imagining (or otherwise thinking) that the emotion is had by a person, or by any otherwise specified person.⁸

In short, there are at least five different - though possibly compatible - proposals about how imagining may play a central role in our experience of the expressiveness of music: (i) we may imagine music as expressive of emotions which we imagine ourselves as feeling, and we may thereby imaginatively identify with the music; (ii) we may imagine music as expressive of the emotions of the musical personae; (iii) we may imagine music as expressive of its own emotions; (iv) we may imagine music as expressive of the emotions of some completely unspecified persons; (v) or we may imagine music as expressive of impersonal emotions (i.e., emotions which do not belong to any person).

2.3. Specific Objections to Each of the Five Proposals

As has been noted, however, each of these views faces its own difficulties.

Proposal (i) is problematic because, among other things, it focusses too much on the potential involvement of the listener (cf. Robinson (1994) and Levinson (1996)). But the feature of expressiveness and emotionality seems to pertain to the music itself, and not to any particular listener (or the composer, for that matter). And it also remains unclear how the music might be linked to the listener in such a way as to properly license talk of the former as the latter's imagined means of expression. It appears that we would have to imagine things about the sounds (e.g., their being produced by, or part of, the listener), which we normally do not imagine while hearing music as expressive of emotions.

Proposal (ii), on the other hand, has problems to make sense of the idea of a musical persona, and also of the idea that the expressed emotion may pertain to a type of person, rather than to a particular person.

Some of the main challenges for proposal (iii) are to further elucidate the idea of animating music and to contrast it with the idea of a musical persona (cf. Levinson (1996)), as well as to draw the distinction between the various sets of elements of the music which are involved in, or essential to, its being a person, its feeling the emotion and its expression of the emotion, respectively. The latter issue is important because, in normal human expression, the three are clearly distinct (e.g., emotional feelings are mental states, while we express them by means of, say, our bodies and what we do with them). But in the case of music, we do not seem to have much more than its sound properties to fall back on (cf. Trivedi (2001) for a discussion of this objection).

In addition, the proposals (i) and (iii) have to make plausible how we can really imagine the impossibility of a person (e.g., ourselves) being identical with the music, or of the music being (part of) a person. For instance, the music itself (i.e., its sounds rather than

7 Cf. Trivedi (2001). The idea of imaginatively 'animating' the music can also be found in Kivy (1989) and Budd (1995).

8 Kendall Walton clearly endorses proposal (i). But he also seems to be sympathetic to the ideas central to the other four proposals (cf. Walton (1988) and Walton (1994); cf. also Levinson (1996): p. 94).

its performance) would have to be part of, or otherwise intimately linked to, ourselves for us to be able to use it as a vehicle for our expression, similar to the way in which we use our body or voice to express our emotions.

The proposals (iv) and (v) have been met with the objection that they cannot make sense of why the imagining concerned would count as an experience of expressiveness, given that there is no specific representation of an expressing person, and given that our notion of expression seems to presuppose a specific expressing person (cf. Trivedi (2001)). With respect to proposal (v), it furthermore remains unclear what it would mean to imagine an emotion without imagining (or otherwise thinking of) a person whose emotion it is. After all, occurrences of mental phenomena such as emotions seem to be inseparable from the subjects or minds to which they belong (cf. Trivedi (2001)).

2.4. General Objections to the Imaginative Approach

But the imaginative approach - that is, the idea to conceive of the experience of music as expressive of emotions in terms of imagining it to be expressive - faces also more general objections.

First of all, none of the proposed forms of imagining seem to be necessary for the experience of expressiveness (cf. Budd (1995) and Trivedi (2001)). As a consequence, it is becoming more and more accepted that they constitute different kinds of experiences of expressiveness, and establish different notions of musical expression (cf. Budd (1995), Levinson (1996) and Trivedi (2001)).⁹

Then, it is unclear whether the postulated forms of imagining really exist. They cannot simply amount to propositional imagining: simply supposing or assuming that certain sounds are expressive of some emotion does not suffice to establish an experience of the sounds as indeed expressive of that emotion. What would be lacking is an integration, perspicuous on the level of phenomenology or consciousness, of the recognition of expressiveness with the underlying perception of the sounds. These two aspects of the experience of expressive music are phenomenologically inseparable: hearing the sounds and noticing their expressiveness are elements of a single and unified experience.¹⁰

Accordingly, it has been proposed that at least some of the postulated forms of imagining are instances of non-propositional imagining, such as sensory, affective or otherwise experiential imagining (cf., e.g., visualizing a red square, or imagining the feeling of a pain). The main contender has been a form of non-propositional imagining, which identifies one's real auditory perception of the music with a feeling of the expressed emotion (e.g., in proposal (i)) or with an experience of the emotion's expression (e.g., in the other proposals), and which thus promises to intimately link the two elements of the experience of expressiveness (cf. Walton (1994) and Budd (1995)). However, it is doubtful whether there indeed can be such a form of non-propositional imagining, that incorporates both real auditory perception and imagined experience of feeling or expression in a unified mental phenomenon. At least, there is no such imagining among the commonly accepted forms of imagining, such as visualizing, supposing, daydreaming, or imagining seeing or feeling something (cf. Dorsch (2005) and Dorsch (2006a)).

Furthermore, it is still unclear how an *imagined* emotion of a (possibly *imagined*) person can be thought to be expressed by something *real*, namely the sounds of real music. The

⁹ Some proponents of the imaginative approach also allow for essentially non-imaginative experiences of musical expression (cf., e.g., Budd (1995)).

¹⁰ We, so to speak, 'hear' the expression of the emotion 'in' the music (cf. Wollheim (1987) on 'seeing-in'). Cf. also the fact that the noticing of the expressiveness is auditory, but propositional imagining is not.

worry is that to experience music as expressive necessarily involves the projection of any imagined expressiveness onto the music as a (seemingly) real feature of it which is then there to be perceived - similar to the way, say, many have thought that we project colours onto the world and then see them. But if this is really so, the recognition of the expressiveness of the music will be perception-like, rather than imaginative, even if it originates in some form of imagining (cf. Wollheim (1987)).

And finally, imagining seems to be essentially an instance of agency (cf. Dorsch (2005)) and, in particular, seems to allow us - at least in principle - to control what we imagine. But it appears that we can never decide whether we hear a given piece of music as expressive, or which particular emotion we hear it as expressive of. Instead, these facts seem to be solely causally determined by how the music sounds to us.

However, the main alternatives to the view that the experience of musical expressiveness is essentially imaginative - such as the arousal theory according to which a piece of music expresses a certain emotion primarily because it induces this emotion in the listeners (cf. Matravers (2001)), or the metaphor theory according to which music does not literally express emotions (cf. Goodman (1976) and Scruton (1997)) - have their own serious problems (cf. Budd (1995) and Levinson (1996)), with the result that the account in terms of imagining seems still to be the predominant one, and worthy of further discussion and scrutiny.

3. The Aims of the Conference

3.1. Summary

The primary goal of the conference is to pursue important and until now often neglected issues, which arise out of the debate about musical expression, and which concern the role of imagining in the experience of expressiveness both in general terms and with respect to pictorial art. There has already been much detailed discussion of each of the various proposals of how imagining may be essential to our experience of the expressiveness of music (i.e., whether each of the proposals can on its own contribute to an account of musical expression); while both non-musical expressive art forms and the merits of the imaginative approach more in general have by no means received the same amount of attention. Hence, the focus of the conference will be on the imaginative approach as a general account of artistic expression, as well as a specific account of pictorial expression. More specifically, the focus will be on the following major issues:

3.2. The Unity of the Imaginative Approach and Its Five Proposals

Assuming that the imaginative approach is generally correct, one such issue is whether the various proposed forms of imagining have a feature in common and can thus be captured by a single account of expression. Trivedi, for instance, has argued that the first three proposals) are unified because their involvement of imagining music as expressive of some person's emotion (cf. Trivedi (2001)), while Budd thinks instead that the unity of all five proposals is due to a common non-imaginative element (i.e., an experience of the sounds as resembling the human feeling or expression of emotion) underlying each of the kinds of imagining (cf. Budd (1995)). Walton, on the other hand, takes imagining of one's perception of the music that it is one's feeling of the expressed emotion to be central to the imaginative experience of music as expressive (cf. Walton (1994)). And others, like Levinson, have again be much more sceptical about the prospects of discovering a common element of the various forms of this experience (cf. Levinson (1996)). The question to be addressed is thus:

(a) Is there any unity to the various ways in which we are (said to be) able to

imaginatively experience music as expressive?

3.3. The General Prospects of the Imaginative Approach

The second issue is whether the imaginative approach is at all tenable, that is, whether the more general objections against accounting for expression in terms of imagining can be met. The particular focus will be on the following question:

- (b) Is there really a (passive) form of imagining which can constitute an experience of expressiveness in response to perceiving some real artwork?

3.4. Pictorial Expression

A third issue is whether the discussion of musical expression and its relation to imagining can be extended to pictorial art. As noted above, the recent debate about the expressiveness of art has concentrated on pure music - with the notable exception of Wollheim (1987) presenting a projectivist account of pictorial expression in non-imaginative terms. This gives rise to three closely related questions:

- (c) Can the arguments and conclusions of the recent debate be easily transferred from the realm of music to the realm of pictures?
- (d) And how does an account of artistic expressiveness in terms of imagining fare in this second realm - for instance, in contrast to and in comparison with non-imaginative accounts, such as Wollheim's?

3.5. Pictorial Experience

Whether our experience of pictorial expression is imaginative may be closely related to the further issue of whether our experience of pictures as pictures is already essentially imaginative in other ways - notably on a more fundamental level, namely concerning our recognition of what is depicted (cf. Walton (1990)). Perhaps the most plausible answers to one of these questions will shed light on how best to answer the other. Hence, it will be worthwhile to ask:

- (e) Does our experience of pictures as pictures involve imagining as an essential aspect? And if so, in which particular way?
- (f) And how is the nature of our experience of pictorial expression related to the nature of our experience of pictures, more generally conceived?

3.6. Underlying Assumptions about Imagining and Emotion

The fifth issue concerns the general relationship between imagining and emotion. Proposal (i) usually requires us to imagine feeling a certain emotion in order to experience art as expressive. And the other four proposals demand of us at least that we imaginatively establish a link between our experience of the artwork and some emotion, and presumably by means of some non-propositional or experiential form of imagining (cf. above).

But it has often been questioned whether our respective imaginative capacity can really so easily link up with emotion. On the one hand, it seems very difficult, if not impossible,

to imagine feeling emotions, in particular if they are complex and culturally determined.¹¹ One important reason for this is that emotions do not seem to be correlated to particular kinds of feeling. For instance, each time we feel fear, it may feel quite differently. And it is not uncommon that we feel an emotion without being able to tell, just on the basis of the feeling, which kind of emotion it is (e.g., anger or jealousy). On the other hand, it is unclear what it means to imagine someone else (or no one) as feeling a certain emotion in such a way as to imaginatively connect this with one's perception of an artwork. For the reasons mentioned above, the respective imagining of the emotion cannot be merely propositional. But there is no obvious way in which some other form of imagining may be able to play this role instead. For instance, it seems equally implausible that we non-propositionally imagine the emotional feelings of others. Hence we get the last question:

- (g) Do our emotional and imaginative capacities even allow for our experience of emotional expressiveness to be imaginative?

3.7. Underlying Assumptions about Imagining and Pictorial Experience

The sixth and last issue raises the same question with respect to the potential involvement of imagining in other aspects of our experience of pictures, notably our recognition of what is depicted. Among the various problems are (cf. Dorsch (2006a)): the fact that, while pictorial experience seems to be passive and perception-like, imagining appears to be a kind of mental agency; and the fact that it seems very difficult to identify the kind of imagining supposedly involved in pictorial experience (cf. the similar problems, noted above, with respect to the kind of imagining supposedly involved in our experience of artistic expression).

- (h) Does the nature of imagining even permit that our experience of pictures - and, more specifically, of what they depict - is essentially (if only partially) imaginative?

3.8. Plans for publication

One particular aim is to ultimately publish a collection of high-quality essays on the interrelationship between imagination, expression and depiction with a renowned academic publishing house or philosophy journal.

The workshop is meant to serve as a forum for the detailed discussion of preliminary versions of these essays, which will help the participants to improve and finalize their essays by the middle of 2008.

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