

Stephen Davies

WHY LISTEN
TO SAD MUSIC
IF IT MAKES ONE
FEEL SAD?



Stephen Davies is associate professor of philosophy at the University of Auckland. He has written extensively on aesthetics, often on musical aesthetics. His books include Definitions of Art and Musical Meaning and Expression. Davies analyzes the anomaly that even though sad music makes us feel sad, we enjoy listening to it. Davies argues that negative emotion is experienced in many of our activities, including those we value most highly. The pleasure we take in sad music is akin to that which we experience in many of our other activities. Grappling with difficulty and pain are not just evils to be borne, but are part of what gives these activities their significance.

Let me begin with some assumptions for which I will not argue, though some of them might be regarded as controversial. (a) Some purely instrumental music expresses emotions. (b) These usually are of a rather general character. (c) Music's expressiveness does not consist in its power to move the listener; that is, the expressive qualities of music are distinct from its effect on the listener. (d) Some listeners sometimes are moved, nevertheless, to feel emotions

that mirror the expressive character of the music; that is, happy music sometimes induces happiness in the listener and music expressive of sadness sometimes leads the listener to feel sad.

Now the problem to be discussed can be stated: if it is sadness that sad music makes people feel, why would they bother to listen to sad music? To put what I take to be a related point: why would one value being made to feel sad?

THE DILEMMA POSED BY THE SAD RESPONSE

It seems that one is trapped on the horns of a dilemma. If we enjoy the sadness that we claim to feel, then it is not plainly sadness that we are talking of, because sadness is not an enjoyable experience. On the other hand, if the sadness is unpleasant, we would not seek out, as we do, artworks leading us to feel sad. . . .

. . . At this stage I recommend a new approach, one that calls into question the formulation of the problem. I suggest in this section that one should ask not "Why do people concern themselves with music that makes them feel sad?" but instead "Why do people concern themselves with music?" Part of the puzzle, I suggest, arises from too narrow a focus.

The problem posed by negative responses to artworks frequently seems to be presented as one concerning our interest in a subset of artworks. [Colin] Radford says, "If there is a problem about sad music making people sad, because why then should they want to listen to it, there is no corresponding problem about why people would and would want to listen to happy music." But there is a problem, as I see it, concerning happy music, though I admit the difficulty is less obvious. Much happy music is trite and boring. That a musical work expresses happiness is not, just like that, a good reason for wanting to listen to it, and if a person is addicted to such music their commitment might be no less puzzling than is that of the person who willingly listens to sad music. To see the puzzle as arising only in connection with a subset of artworks is to misconceive the problem and to do so in a way making it difficult to answer.

Whereas there are many motivations for an interest in music, to be interested in music "aesthetically," "for its own sake," is to aim at understanding a work, such as Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, for the piece

it is. Those of us who have this concern have it because we derive pleasure from music in understanding it. Not every work affords pleasure when it is understood, though. To the contrary, it is just because some works are appreciated that they are avoided, for they are revealed to be overblown, lifeless and mechanical in their predictability, or whatever. My point is a general one: much music presents a content such that the deeper one's understanding, the more enjoyable is the experience, and we value as great those works providing such enjoyment.

Now, if it is true that (many) people concern themselves with music for the sake of the enjoyment that comes with understanding it, and if it also is true that works dealing with "negative" emotions are no less worth understanding than those dealing with "positive" feelings, the listener should be as interested in the one kind of work as the other. And in either case, if the listener aims at understanding and appreciating the music, and if the emotional response is an aspect of the understanding she gains, then it is to be welcomed. If one desires comprehension, and if a response of sadness can indicate an appreciation of the nature of the given situation, just because it is appropriate to that situation, then the response, despite being negative, allows the satisfaction that goes with understanding. The response is not merely a by-product of the process of understanding; it is not merely a pleasant bonus or an irritant to be accepted with resignation. The response is not an incidental accompaniment but rather something integral to the understanding achieved. It is not something with which one puts up for the sake of understanding; it is an element in that understanding. If negative responses are no less an aspect of artistic appreciation than are positive responses, and if the concern lies with artistic understanding rather than, say, emotional titillation, and if understanding requires effort and commitment

whatever emotions might arise in connection with it, then the question to be asked cannot narrow the focus to the negative emotions without losing touch with the wider context in which the explanation should be sought. Many people engage with music for the enjoyment of understanding and appreciating it, or at least in anticipation of its meriting these in an enjoyable way. Understanding sometimes leads to responses, some of which are pleasant and some of which are unpleasant. The enjoyment of appreciating art is not reducible to the enjoyment of responding to it with pleasant emotions, no more than it is inhibited by a negative emotional response; the enjoyment of understanding is no less consistent with the one response than the other.

We pursue artworks that are liable to give rise to negative emotional responses no less avidly than those likely to produce positive emotional responses because what motivates our interest is a concern with locating those artworks that merit understanding and these are as likely to be works causing negative as causing positive responses. The works to avoid are those that are unlikely to repay the effort of appreciation—works that are clichéd, banal, boring. Some works might generate pleasant reactions to their expressive character, others unpleasant ones, but the latter works are neither more nor less to be avoided than the former if one is motivated to seek the pleasure that goes with understanding rather than with mere titillation.

Personally, I avoid many films and books depicting gore and violence. Equally, though, there are books and films I avoid no less assiduously because I believe them to be happy in a trite, overly sentimental fashion. Also, there are books and films I seek out though I know in advance that they are gory or violent. The issue for me in these cases is neither that of whether "negative" emotions are dealt with nor that of whether the work might make me feel sad or depressed; it is,

instead, whether I predict that the work presents a content worth appreciating and understanding. The distinction rests on my anticipated judgment of the work's artistic merits. If it strikes me as worth the effort, I accept that what I understand, through its very comprehension, might generate experiences that are not in themselves enjoyable. My attitude is not one of resignation, because I do want to understand works that richly reward the effort involved.

I am not always so high-minded; sometimes I choose mindless entertainment over the artistically demanding (I have nothing against the pursuit of titillation as such). When I do, I prefer those entertainments that I expect to amuse me or make me feel happy over those I expect to make me sad. In the case of art, I doubt that its powerful attraction can be explained merely as a mindless pursuit of emotional frissons.

Some individuals are not much interested in any art, and many of those who are interested in some kind of art are not much interested in all forms of art. But to love music from the late eighteenth-century, say, is to be interested in understanding all such music if it rewards the effort required. For some (good) artworks, negative emotions come with the understanding we seek. These are not enjoyable emotions, but they are, for some people at least, an inevitable aspect of the understanding and appreciation they seek from art. The response would not be better for lacking this aspect because the response would, for the works and people concerned, not then be an understanding, appreciative one. . . .

LIFE AND SUFFERING

I have argued that the issue is not so much why we concern ourselves with a subset of artworks that lead us to feel sad as why we take pleasure in understanding art that might involve a negative response to

some of the properties of the given work. Someone might take the point but claim that it shifts, rather than answers, the problem with which we began. My earlier answer to the problem was that art is enjoyable through the understanding of it. Now, though, the problem is revived in this form: why should we find *that* enjoyable? Why do we enjoy understanding art, given that an aspect of that understanding sometimes can be unpleasant; and, more generally, given that an appreciation of art can require hard work and practice; and, finally, given that the understanding often does not serve obvious, practical goals? The answer to such a grand question lies beyond the scope both of my subject and my powers, but I cannot resist pursuing it a short distance.

Many people watch or listen to the daily news broadcasts (and do so knowing that much of the news will be depressing). Why? Presumably because they would rather know what is happening than not; they would rather know the worst than live in blissful ignorance. Much of what is reported in the news deals with events that do not touch one directly—accidents on freeways in foreign countries and the like—but one attends to the news despite this obvious fact. We are interested in understanding the actions of people and the complex products of human society not always for the sake of the benefits flowing to us from doing so, though there may be many such, but because such things have an abiding interest. Given the importance of information, it is not surprising that curiosity has considerable motivating power. Curiosity motivates us, I believe, even when it is not regarded as a means to some particular end. We are curious on occasions when no obvious, immediate, practical value derives from the trait.

Our interest in art, I have suggested elsewhere . . . , is a spin-off, activated by curiosity. We are a creature concerned (up to a point) with understanding and appreciation for their own sakes, in the sense that not all

the things that concern us are tied directly to specifiable, practical goals. An interest in art in general may have many practical consequences of value (as a source of knowledge, heightened moral sensibility, character development, and so on), and perhaps the arts would not be regarded as a good thing were this not so, but to be interested in art usually is to be interested in works approached not for the sake of their typicality but of their individuality. We are capable of finding enjoyment in attempting to comprehend such works in their particularity; to the extent that the identity of works is relative to context, an interest in their individuality involves a concern with the piece as of a genre, of an oeuvre, of a style, of a school, of an artistic period.

In reply to the question "Why do we enjoy art (and the news for that matter) if the experience sometimes is constituted in part by features leading, through our grasp of their character, to negative responses?" I have said, "We are just like that." One way of elaborating that answer would be explaining why we find interest in human action and the complex products of human agency. In turn, this would involve an account of human nature and psychology in terms of evolutionary theory, the demands of social life, and whatever else might be relevant. Rather than taking that course, I settle for emphasizing how much and how often we are "just like that." If the puzzle is one about the meaning of life (not just about the importance of both art and the broadcast news), I might hope to be excused from answering it.

Loss, deprivation, pain, struggle and discomfort—all are part of life. Sometimes these things are avoidable; sensible navigators on the ocean of existence give rocky outcrops a wide berth. But also, such things are, as it were, inherent to the medium of life rather than merely a part of its content that one might try to skirt. They come unavoidably with life itself, so the living of a

life includes one's dealing with such things as an inescapable part of existence. (So it is that prudence, courage, fortitude, stalwartness, endurance, and commitment are numbered among the moral virtues, or are the stuff from which virtuous actions might be forged, and their opposites are counted as vices. If the world yielded without resistance to our every whim and desire, the virtues as we understand them could have no social significance, for there would be no occasion for the exhibition of the qualities of character they involve.) In this world, to choose life also is to choose loss, pain, and the like. And we do choose life, even at an age when we know what that choice includes. The evidence of attempted suicides suggests that pain, loneliness, grief, humiliation, and the like can be so acute that death is to be preferred to life. But suicide is far from the most common form of death overall. Suffering and discomfort are by no means always worse than death or unconsciousness. Sometimes they are preferable to sensory deprivation, or to being ignored, as is apparent from the behavior of children who, if they cannot attract attention to themselves in any other way, do so by being naughty, even knowing that their actions will lead to penalties.

Negative emotions and feelings are not unavoidably a part of life merely as the price of admission, as an unpleasant extra tolerated so long as it does not prevent our participation in the games that give us pleasure. They are more intimately elements in the activities giving our lives meaning and importance than this view suggests. Some of the projects providing the greatest fulfillment demand fearful risks and known costs. Yet people commit themselves cheerfully to intellectually and physically demanding professions, to intense personal relationships, to birthing and raising children, and so on—and they do so not entirely in ignorance of what the future holds in store. Often the hard work, pain, anxiety, and stress are so

much a part of the project that it would no longer be the same project were their possibility removed. One expects to bring up children, not angels, so one expects all the difficulties and disappointments, as well as all the rewards, that go with trying to teach slowly maturing human beings how to become adults who might respect themselves and deserve the respect and affection of others. There is no gain without pain, as they say. The deepest satisfactions depend sometimes not just on what was gained but on how hard it was to attain.

These observations cannot be dismissed as covering merely the serious side of life. People race in cars at speed, crawl through mud and water in narrow tunnels in the bowels of the earth, wrestle with the intellectual problems posed by chess, crosswords, and the like, throw themselves off bridges with bits of elastic tied to their ankles, attempt time and again to improve their ability to hit a small ball into a slightly larger hole a quarter of a mile away, and so on, and so forth. They do such things not always for money, or esteem, or fame, or glory, or because they have a duty to engage in such activities, or for the sake of their health and character-development (though they may be mindful of such matters sometimes) but also, and mainly, out of love of the activity. These activities are engaged in for fun! Many involve unpleasantness in one way or another, if only as hard work directed to no obvious payout beyond what is found in the activity itself.

In some cases the unpleasant aspects might be regarded merely as inconveniences that must be tolerated, but in others the unpleasant side of the activity is integral to it—integral not in the sense that, masochistically, the unpleasantness is to be enjoyed for its own sake but, rather, in the sense that the activity found enjoyable would no longer be what it is if that unpleasantness (or the risk of it) were absent. For example, the danger faced by the mountaineer is not

tolerated merely for the sake of the view from the top; if it were, the person would opt for a safe helicopter ride if she had the choice. The dedicated mountaineer's enjoyment is taken in the activity of climbing mountains. Now, to ask if climbing would be the more enjoyable if the climb were always without danger is to ask a strange question. Climbing on mountains is inherently dangerous, so it is not clear how to make sense of the question. And to ask if climbing would be more enjoyable for the person if she were always without fear also is to ask a far from straightforward question. If the enjoyment derived from climbing comes from meeting the demands of the activity, then the climber must display the requisite skills, and these include a proper assessment of the dangers posed by the mountain and, in view of this, the adoption of methods making the climb as safe as it can be, given the route, and so on. It is far from clear how someone could recognize the danger for what it is while never feeling fear, though the person might display the courage or nerve required to overcome that fear calmly. The fear comes from understanding the conditions of climbing, and it is that very same understanding that provides point to enjoying the exercise of the skills required in climbing (one among many of which is that of controlling one's own anxieties). The climber takes pleasure in mountaineering—in its challenge and so forth—and, if the activity were to be such that it might be climbing-in-a-context-in-which-fear-could-not-naturally-arise, then it would no longer be the climbing she enjoys; climbing of that kind just is not mountaineering, it might be said. To understand why the mountaineer

takes on a scary sport is to understand how she can find enjoyment in a complex activity including among its elements the possibility of ever-present fear.

Why do people climb mountains for fun? For the same sort of reason they take an interest in the appreciation of music, or marry, or work at carpentry as a hobby. Because they choose the enjoyment that comes with taking charge of their own lives, even if that means taking on the negative as well as the positive constituents making life what it is. One's own life is what one does, and what happens to one, and what one makes of what happens to one, in the time between one's birth and death. A person who rehearsed too hard or waited too long for the right moment would find, not that he was prepared for life, but that the life he had lived was the life that consisted in preparing for something else, not the life he took himself to be preparing for. And a person who tried always to shun confrontation with pain and suffering would miss out on everything normally judged to make life worth living, while condemning himself to the sadness of realizing that the wait was in vain. At least some of the pleasure life can give comes from one's attempting with a degree of success to deal with one's situation and circumstances—controlling what can be controlled, accepting with grace and equanimity the unavoidable. If the appreciation of art is specially important in this process, it is so not because it is a training or a substitute for life (as sometimes is held) but because it is a celebration of the ways people engage with each other and the world in giving significance to their existence.