

Contradicting Contours: The Problem with Contour Theory

Peter Kivy's theory of emotion in music, "contour theory," says that a piece of music is representative of a garden-variety emotion in virtue of its contours bearing resemblance to the movements and expressions of individuals experiencing that emotion.¹ In this paper, I will argue that musical contours alone cannot be the sole indicator of emotion in music because sometimes the music may not appear to be representative of a particular garden-variety emotion, even though musical contours that resemble said garden-variety emotion are present. In other words, the indicators of a garden-variety emotion may be present in a musical work, but the associated emotions may not. This highlights a problem with contour theory: it cannot account for more complex emotions present in music. If musical contours alone can be used to explain why we hear garden-variety (or, simple) emotions in music, why can they not function the same way with regard to complex emotions? After all, complex emotions still have garden-variety parts. I will use Franz Liszt's *La Campanella* to illustrate my thesis, focusing on three particular musical features: the treatment of the theme, the issue of register and the upward endings of phrases. I will explain how each of these features, particularly the last, pose a problem for the contour theorist. I will then propose an alternative that focuses on a context-based approach—rather than a purely contour-based approach—to the analysis of emotion in music. In my discussion, I will assume listeners agree that musical works can display emotions.

To precede my discussion, I will first explain what I presume Kivy means by a "garden-variety emotion." According to the American Psychological Association, a simple (in other words, ordinary or garden-variety) emotion is one that cannot be reduced to any other emotion.² Some

examples include happiness, sadness and fear. Simple emotions differ from complex emotions in that the latter are made up of multiple emotions. For example, grief—a complex emotion—can be made up of fear, sadness, anxiety and frustration.³ Due to Kivy’s vagueness on what constitutes a garden-variety emotion, I will assume his definition of a garden-variety emotion aligns with the American Psychological Association definition of a simple emotion. I am intentionally defining the term “garden-variety emotions” rather than simply using the term “emotions” because, throughout his discussion of emotion in music, Kivy is concerned with how individuals look and sound when they express *the garden variety emotions* in particular.⁴ From this specification, I will assume Kivy’s focus is on the garden-variety emotions only. As such, in my own discussion of emotion in music, I will focus on the resemblance of musical contours to garden-variety emotions rather than complex emotions.

I must also disclose that my understanding of simple emotions in this context relies solely on the definition given above. I do acknowledge that some garden-variety emotions can be interpreted to be complex emotions. For example, sadness may be interpreted to be made up of other emotions such as shock, disappointment and confusion. Despite this, I will assume that “pure, unmixed” emotions exist, and that happiness and sadness are examples of such emotions.

A MUSICAL EXAMPLE

La Campanella (“little bell” in Italian) is the third piece in Franz Liszt’s set of six piano études, *Grandes études de Paganini, S. 141*, a set based on compositions for violin by virtuoso violinist Niccolò Paganini.⁵ *La Campanella* is based on a musical fragment from the third and final movement of Paganini’s Violin Concerto No. 2 in B minor.⁶ Both Liszt’s and Paganini’s composition bear the nickname, “La Campanella,” which was given due to Paganini’s use of a little bell to reintroduce the main theme.⁷

The complexity present in Paganini's second violin concerto is similarly present in Liszt's composition for piano. The étude contains many difficult, virtuosic features typical of Liszt's style, most notably quick, large jumps and long chromatic runs.⁸ Since *La Campanella* is based on a virtuosic work, I surmise Liszt was focused on creating a similarly virtuosic work rather than one that expresses any particular emotion. However, this is purely an assumption based on my understanding of Liszt's works, which are known for requiring a notoriously high technical ability from the performer. Although I am not aware of any evidence that suggests Liszt was or was not aiming to express any particular emotion in *La Campanella*, that is not to say emotions are *not* present in the music; it is probable that a listener may hear emotions while listening to *La Campanella* simply due to the virtuosic nature of the piece, even if Liszt did not intend for any emotions to be present at all.

CONTOUR THEORY

Contour theory is Kivy's attempt to explain why listeners *hear* a certain garden-variety emotion in a musical work, not why listeners may *feel* said emotion as a result of, or whilst listening to, a musical work. Kivy writes,

“However, because there is general agreement that this piece of music is melancholy in virtue of its dark, minor tonalities, subdued dynamics, slow, halting tempo, dropping, halting melody [...] does not solve the problem of how or why the music is in the first case melancholy [...] Why, after all, don't I just hear the dark, minor harmonies, the subdued dynamics, the slow, halting tempo, the dropping, halting melodies? Why do I *also* hear the *melancholy*? This is the problem.”⁹

As a response, Kivy claims emotions “get into” music through musical contours (or, in other words, musical features):

“In other words, there seems to be a direct analogy between how people look and sound when they *express* the garden-variety emotions (at least *some* of them) and how music sounds or is described when it is perceived as *expressive* of those same emotions.”¹⁰

To illustrate Kivy's thesis, for example, a contour theorist would consider a piece of music to be expressive of sadness if features of the music sound the way sad individuals sound or move the way sad individuals move.¹¹ Such musical features may include soft dynamics, *legato* (or smooth) phrases and downward melodies. These features may resemble the sounds of sad people in that, generally, sad people may speak quietly, have slurred (or at least non-staccato) speech and a "droopiness" to their verbal tone. Further, there are numerous musical features that are widely known to represent sadness; for example, downward melodies have often, throughout music history, been said to resemble falling tears.¹² Certain musical features are also considered to resemble visible aspects of human expression. Such features include tempi, articulation and register.¹³ These features may resemble visible aspects of human expression in that, generally, "happy" individuals are more likely to walk and speak quickly, have a "lighter bounce" in their step and have a bright expression on their face.¹⁴

While Kivy is not necessarily saying a piece of music cannot express more than one emotion—in fact, he does not even mention this possibility—it is important to observe that the garden-variety emotions, such as happiness and sadness, seem to have characteristics that are completely opposite of each other. For example, a fast, bright tempo cannot be associated with sadness for a contour theorist because, in general, the movements of sad people are simply not bright and fast-paced.

So, in short, Kivy claims there is a "direct analogy" between the way humans look and sound when expressing the garden-variety emotions and how music sounds when it is expressive of the same garden-variety emotions. From this, he concludes that the way humans express the garden-variety emotions must explain why humans hear said emotions in music.¹⁵

CONTOUR THEORY APPLIED

La Campanella contains significant musical contours that bear resemblances to two garden-variety emotions (namely, happiness and sadness) simultaneously. This is problematic for a listener who wishes to claim *La Campanella* is expressive of one garden-variety emotion as opposed to another. For example, consider the opening theme, which moves stepwise in a downward shape.¹⁶ A contour theorist may consider this to resemble the “droopiness” of a sad person. Further, the soft dynamics and minor key may resemble the way sad individuals sound: speaking quietly with a sombre, soft voice that trails off. However, each note of the downward theme is interrupted by a sharply articulated high D-sharp. Surely, the emotive expression of a sad individual would not likely be said to resemble the “playfulness” of notes played staccato in a high register. Already, we can see that within one single musical idea—and the first musical idea of the piece, no less—there are contradicting contours present.

This issue of contradicting contours persists throughout the piece. For instance, despite being in a minor key, much of the piece is played in a high register. This includes the downward theme. While a contour theorist would associate a high register with expressions of happiness and cheer, this “cheerfulness” is certainly contradictory to the contour expressed by the downward theme.¹⁷ This is particularly troubling for Kivy, especially considering the stress he places on the importance of the melody.¹⁸ Kivy says the melodic line is the aspect of a musical work that bears most resemblance to the rise and fall in pitch of the human voice, citing cheerful melodic lines as generally high, fast and “running.”¹⁹ While the fast octaves in a high register would, for a contour theorist, be indicative of “happy” human expression, the downward theme in a minor key would not.

Aside from the droopy musical theme, another large-scale musical feature of *La Campanella* that impacts the shape of the music is the tendency of the phrases to end with an

upward motion.²⁰ For the contour theorist, an upward motion (especially at the end of a phrase) would undoubtedly resemble the movement and physical shape of “happy” individuals. Likewise, an upward ending to a phrase may resemble the rising of an excited individual’s voice at the end of a sentence. This feature is present in many moments throughout the piece. Because of how often they occur, the rising phrase-ends are, in my opinion, just as important as the theme in terms of emotive expression.

We now have two large-scale motion-related contours: the drooping theme and the rising phrase-ends. These contradicting shapes pose a problem for Kivy, who says music is “described in terms of motion.”²¹ Unfortunately, contour theory provides no explanation of which shape to favour—and if a listener wishes to insist that *La Campanella* is expressive of a certain garden-variety emotion, she *does* need to favour one of these shapes in order to support her thesis. Consider a listener who hears sadness in *La Campanella*: according to Kivy, she hears sadness because sad contours are present. However, there are also happy contours present, so why does she not hear happiness? Thus, if a listener wishes to claim the musical contours are the reason for hearing sadness, she must find a way to give more importance to the sad musical contours rather than the happy ones, since both are present.

A REVISED THEORY AND A PERSISTING PROBLEM

In my discussion of the relevant musical features present in *La Campanella*, we see a clear issue for the contour theorist: sometimes, contours associated with certain garden-variety emotions may be present, but a clear emotional label is not. This highlights the issue that features that are conventionally associated with the garden-variety emotions may not always be associated with said emotions and moreover that it is unclear which features are *the* defining features of said

emotions. This suggests the mere presence of musical contours alone cannot be the sole indicator of garden-variety emotions in music.

One possible solution is to refine contour theory by taking into account the musical context in which the musical features are presented. In other words, by considering the overall musical context, a musical feature that is representative of happiness in one instance does not need to be representative of happiness in *all* instances. This would avoid the issue of contradicting contours, since we can “rule out” musical contours that do not support our emotional assessment. Further, this new approach would allow us, as listeners, to explain why we may hear more complex emotions in the music.

For example, on one analysis of *La Campanella*, the constant high-register D-sharp interrupting the opening theme may not be considered representative of happiness because (1) it is embellishing a theme in a minor key, (2) the theme being embellished (which is also the melody) bears other, more prominent qualities of a sad individual, and (3) the high jumps to the D-sharp may only be for virtuosic effect and, thus, would not be relevant to the emotional assessment of the piece. By considering the high D-sharps (or, any musical contour that is indicative of happiness) in this way, a listener can still perceive the emotion of sadness even though other musical contours are present that are unsupportive of the emotional assessment.

One worry with this suggestion is that contours—and emotions— can be interpreted in different ways. After all, although garden-variety emotions like happiness and sadness are considered simple emotions, they are still highly subjective. There may be ways in which my idea of happiness is not compatible with your idea of happiness. For example, a listener may interpret the high-register D-sharp as indicative of happiness because (1) the D-sharps, as well as the theme, are played detached, (2) the tonal, rolled chords in the left hand are present in a moderately-high

register as well²², and (3) the repeated note is a constant affirmation of the dominant of the key.²³ It could be that, when I experience happiness, I experience a rise in the pitch of my voice and a “persistence” of a feeling of happiness.²⁴ You, however, may not experience the rise in vocal pitch or associate such a change with happiness. Moreover, for you, the placement of the D-sharp may only be for virtuosic effect because, after all, Liszt was known for his particularly virtuosic composition style. For you, this choice of repeated note could be simply for virtuosic effect whereas, for me, this repeated note is intentionally affirming a “perfect” relation within the key.

MOVING FORWARD

Now, before a sceptic rightly points out that musical features such as fast tempi can be associated with *other* emotions—such as anxiety—he must remember that Kivy is concerned only with the garden-variety emotions. Since anxiety can be a mixture of other emotions—such as doubt and fear, for example—it does not match our definition of a garden-variety emotion and thus it is not an emotion of interest in this context. This is a notable problem for contour theory because, surely, there are many complex emotions expressed in music, and we as listeners are interested in investigating why we hear *those* particular emotions in music as well. Furthermore, while contour theory claims to provide an explanation for garden-variety emotions themselves in music, it fails to provide an explanation of instances of complex emotions that have garden-variety *parts*. This is problematic because when we, as listeners, encounter the same musical contours that are the backbone of Kivy’s theory in *other* situations—namely, situations where complex emotions are being heard by the listener—they do not always bear the same importance. As such, Kivy’s theory fails to do what we expect of a theory of emotion in music; that is, it simply fails to provide a complete account of emotions in music. While I do not believe aspects of contour theory need to

be abandoned altogether in a cohesive theory of emotions in music, I believe such a theory must include a basis on which a listener can account for *all* emotions in music.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I evaluated three salient musical features of Liszt's *La Campanella* and demonstrated how they pose a problem for the contour theorist. I discussed the downward, "droopy" shape of the main theme and the contradicting high D-sharp present between each note. I evaluated the relation between key and register: the piece is in a minor key, yet most of the piece is played in a high register. Most problematically, I addressed two contradicting large-scale musical shapes (the "droopiness" of the theme and the many upward-ending phrases). Through this analysis, I observed an issue with contour theory, which is the issue of deciding *which* contours are the ones to favour in an emotional analysis. To remedy this issue, I suggested a context-based approach which evaluates each contour based on its function in the piece as a whole. This approach allows for a calculated analysis of emotion in music and is more fine-grained than Kivy's definition of contour theory. Unfortunately, this solution bears issues as well. This may point to a bigger problem: basing an emotional analysis of a musical work off of the contours present in said work is simply not sufficient, since the idea of happiness for you may not equate to the idea of happiness for me.

REFERENCES

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- ¹ Kivy, P. "Emotions in the Music," in *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 40.
- ² American Psychological Association, 2020. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.apa.org/complex-emotion>.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Kivy, 37. The specifier "garden-variety" when regarding emotions is used throughout.
- ⁵ For clarity, I will refer to this piece as simply *La Campanella* throughout.
- ⁶ Alexandre Dubach, Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo & Lawrence Foster. 1994. "Violin Concerto No. 2 in B Minor, Op. 7: III. Ronde à la clochette." Paganini: Violin Concertos Nos. 2 & 5. Claves Records. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDr5EqztV4A>.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 0:45-0:50.
- ⁸ Arnold, Ben. *The Liszt Companion* (Greenwood Press, 2002), 101.
- ⁹ Kivy, 36.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 36.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ¹⁴ One normally associates high register with "brightness."
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ¹⁶ Lisitsa, Valentina. 2012. "'Grandes études de Paganini, S. 141: No. 3 in G-sharp minor, 'La Campanella.'" Valentina Lisitsa Live at the Royal Albert Hall. Decca. 0:00:0-19. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JxNs_BAHYo
- ¹⁷ Kivy, 39. Lisitsa, 1:15-1:31.
- ¹⁸ Kivy, 39.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Some instances of rising phrase-ends are Lisitsa 0:19, 0:33, 1:15, 1:31, 2:12, 2:57 and 3:49.
- ²¹ Kivy, 40.
- ²² Although the rolled chords do not begin in a high register, the final notes of each chord do. Further, the top notes of each chord (B, D-sharp and F-double-sharp) spell out an augmented chord, and the "rising" nature of an augmented chord would not, for a contour theorist, be indicative of sadness.
- ²³ The dominant note (or, the fifth) of a minor key is still a perfect fifth from the tonic. A contour theorist may be more inclined to say this repeated note is indicative of sadness if, say, it was the third that was being repeated. Repeating the third (a *minor* third, in this key) would likely reaffirm the quality of sadness more than repeating the fifth (a perfect fifth, in this key).
- ²⁴ On this evaluation, the "persistence" of a feeling of happiness is attributed to the repeated D-sharp (or, perfect fifth).