# What makes sad music sad?

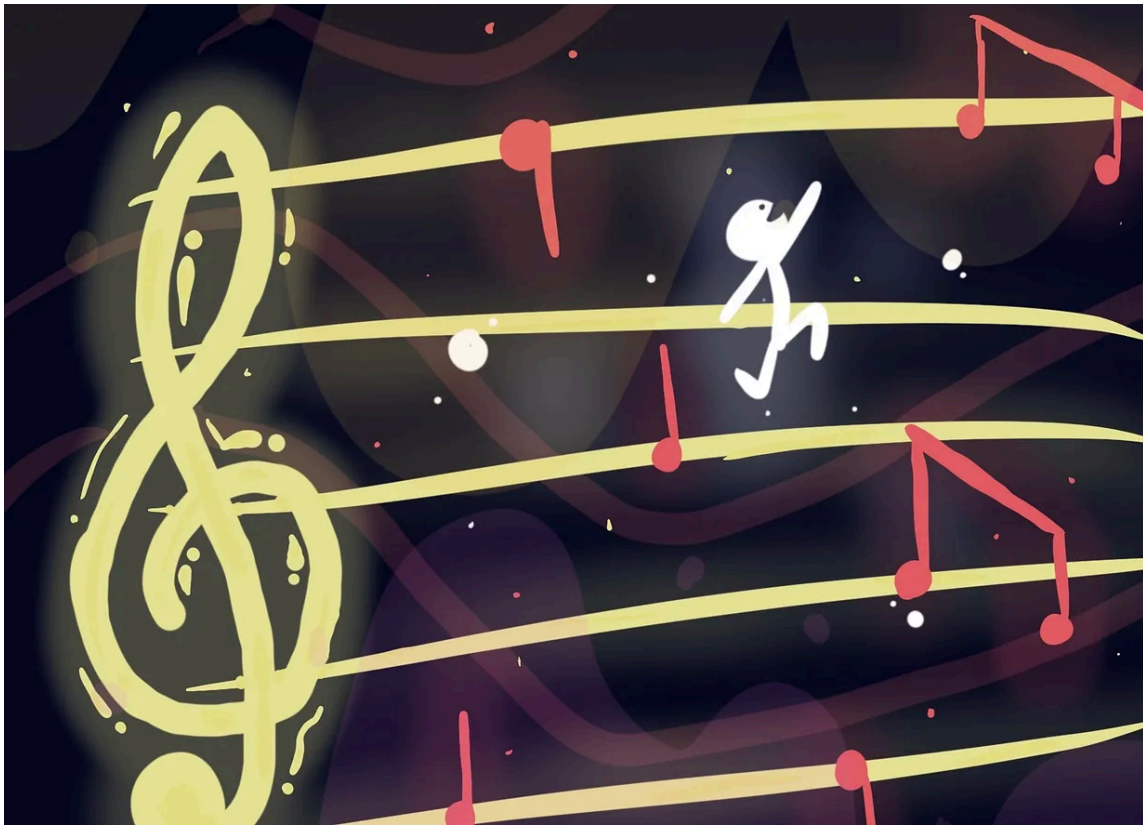
## On Appearance Emotionalism



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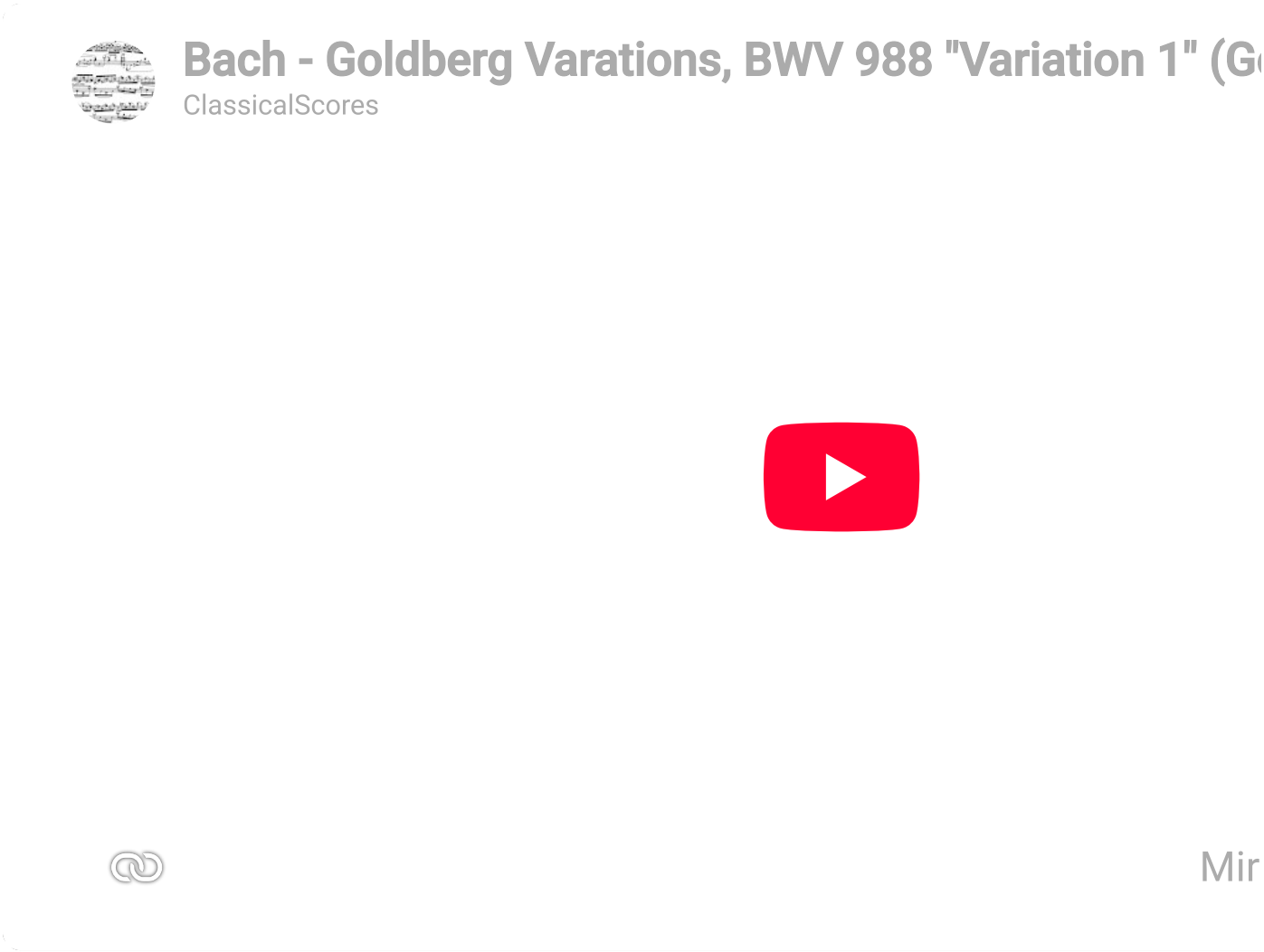
Art by Elliot Skow

The bass guitar line of David Bowie's "Sound and Vision" wiggles uncontained joy. It's a happy piece of music. The word "happy" is applied to people, as in "Jones is a happy guy," but here it has bee

home use. Such meaning spread is attested elsewhere. We say tha
a happy expression on their face, or that their crumpled posture r
slouch. Here "happy" and "sad" have been spread to their effects:
one characteristic of people who are feeling happy; it is an expres
natural one for someone showing their happiness in their face to
slouch is a natural one for someone showing their sadness in thei

Can emotion terms, when applied to music, get their meaning by
mechanism? Focus on melodies, which "move through musical sp
ascending step-wise from C to G, some leaping down from G to E
**Emotionalism** says that a *happy melody* is one that *moves in a way t*
*someone showing their happiness in their behavior to move.* Same for a
on.

Variation 1 of Bach's Goldberg Variations, especially in Glenn Go
is joyful, exuberant. Appearance Emotionalism says it moves in a
joy would move, if they showed their joy in their motion. I've alw
explanation convincing. In the first half the melody runs, climbs,
effortlessly, before racing home.




I said that in “happy expression on their face” the meaning of “ha
spread to an effect, but that’s misleading. I can wear a happy face
effect of my feeling happy, and not every face that is an effect of r
happy face. My happiness might cause me to frown, if I am trying
everyone who lives among humans knows, one can put on a happ
inside is darkness and turmoil.

Nevertheless, if understood in a looser, or generic, sense, it is true
expressions are caused by happy feelings. A happy expression is a

someone showing their happiness in their face to wear. If someor expression *because* they are showing their happiness in their face, the expression is caused by their happiness.

The philosopher Alan Tormey, in a book on expression, wrote tha

> there is a surface to expressive behavior that may become deta pretends, the actor who portrays, the mime who imitates, and feigns, all attempt, in different ways, to strip the surface of exp from the character it normally reveals.

Emotion adjectives can be used to describe those surfaces, even w become detached from the inner feelings that, in normal cases, ca

Could Appearance Emotionalism be right? One might worry abo *of expression.* Imagine a community that carefully trains its memb happiness in a very slow step-step-skip gait. To them, walking tha second-nature; it requires no thought or deliberation. The first ti baffled, but after living among them for a few years we "see happi just as much as you ever saw it in a smile. Must Appearance Emo falsely, that a melody that moves through musical space in that st is a happy one?

I'm not sure that community is so much as possible; nor, if it is, tl false. What emotions are in a piece of music, may be relative to th

emotion familiar to the listener, or the composer. But Appearance not even grant that much. In its original form, it says that a happy *natural way* for showing happiness: one that is built in to human n means of showing are, therefore, excluded.

A harder objection is that no melody in fact moves in a way in wh move. Whatever exactly "musical space" is, "Twinkle Twinkle Lit move through it, in just the way any person moves through physi Appearance Emotionalism entails that no piece of music is happy

The theory may be saved by the distinction, between more and le doing something. If I raise my hand, I do so in some perfectly pre example, of two inches per second. You might raise your hand, an a slightly different way. But ways can be less precise, and there is raising that our hand-raisings share. I raised mine slowly; so did y

Similarly, maybe no human can move in the *precise* way that the n Twinkle" moves, not least because they move through different sp themselves are quite different (musical space is not continuous). S Twinkle" begins with a leap, and I can also begin my afternoon ja

Stephen Davies, one of the main defenders of Appearance Emotic who gave it that name, mentions Saint Bernards.



Saint Bernards have sad faces. Certainly, that's not because they a dogs to wear when sad: Saint Bernards are not beset by an epiden Appearance Emotionalism is right, they must be natural faces for their sadness in their face to wear. But how can that be? No one e Bernard for a human. The answer (again) is the distinction betwe precise ways. No human wears their face in the precise way a Sai physiology makes that impossible. But there is a less precise way —which includes a certain droopiness to one's features—that hu Bernards can both exemplify.

An earlier version of this essay was published in April, 2023.



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