



POPULAR EMOTIONS IN POPULAR MUSIC: THE HIGHLIFE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract:

While the intimate connection between music and emotion has been variously studied, the focus has predominantly been on Western classical music. Different musical features have often been linked to particular emotions (e.g. Major mode = happy, Minor mode = sad). Comparably fewer studies have investigated the link between Popular Musical forms and the expression of emotion focusing on distinctive features. In this paper, we examine the nature of expressiveness in highlife music in relation to how listeners consciously use it for emotional reasons. We look at the place of lyrics as against other distinctive musical features in the identification of the two commonest basic emotions (happiness and sadness). Analysis of the data reveals that whereas specific musical features in highlife may play a role in the communication of happy and sad emotions, the greater emphasis lies in the lyrics.

Keywords: emotions, highlife music, lyrics, popular music, structure

1. Introduction

Parsing the enormous bevy of scholarly writings that straddle the fluid lines of music and emotion (e.g., Juslin & Sloboda, 2001; Juslin & Zentner, 2001; Koelsch, 2014; Mohn, Argstatter & Wilker, 2010; Randall & Rickard, 2016; Vieillard, Roy & Peretz, 2011), it becomes at once clear from the strength of their convergence that the two variables are highly inextricably interwoven. It appears that irrespective of the initial motives for engaging with music, at least an emotional reason is always present in its day-to-day intentional use. This point is succinctly captured by Juslin and Zentner (2001) who observe that *“literature reviews and factor analyses investigating functions of music have consistently determined emotional functions to be the most important”* (p.2). Sloboda (2001) also notes that *“some sort of emotional experience is probably the main reason behind most*

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people's engagement with music" (p.3). In fact, a plethora of studies (DeNora, 2000; Dunn, 2010; Gabrielsson, 2001; Krumhansl, 1997; Scherer, 2004; Sloboda & Juslin, 2001; Vieillard, Roy, & Peretz, 2012) speak to a known reliable effect of music on the emotional states of listeners. To corroborate this assertion, and to explicate why people select music for emotional ends, Koelsch (2014) unequivocally posits that "*music can evoke stronger emotions than any other stimuli*" (p. 313). Several explanations have been offered from different disciplinary perspectives (e.g., biological, psychological, philosophical, evolutionary, sociological, anthropological, and neuroscientific) on how music is able to have profound and telling effects on the emotional states of peopleⁱⁱ.

From the great philosophers of classical antiquity to the modern day, the link between music and emotion has been a recurrent and pervasive subject of intellectual concern. Writings of Plato and Aristotle, among others, are replete with references to the power of music to induce various emotional states in listeners. Thought is divided however, along two main lines in relation to the source of the emotion in music. In the first school of thought, often labeled as the 'expression theory' (Hargreaves, 2001), the expressiveness of music depends on the composer who captures his or her occurrent emotion through the act of composition. The music is projected as a medium for the composer to express his/her emotional state, so that if the composer is happy at the time of the composition, s/he transfers the emotion of happiness into the music that is being composed (intentionally or unintentionally) via the use of the elements that will make it so. This implies that, there are certain distinguishing universal features in music which help people to identify various kinds of emotions. In table one, we give highlights of certain musical elements and their corresponding emotions. This table was adapted from the studies of Mohn, Argstatter and Wilker (2010), and it's a build-up on the work of Juslin (2001).

Table 1: Structural features of music and the corresponding emotions identified by or elicited in listeners

Emotion	Musical characteristics
Fear	Short, "shivering" vibrato, low volume, fast tempo, ascending and descending movements
Happiness	Vivid expression, staccato, broad timbre, high volume, fast tempo, Major mode, jumping, ascending melody, broad expression, crescendo
Sadness	Legato, light, subdued ascending and descending tones, slow tempo, Minor mode, stepwise intervals, weak touch, medium volume, consonant harmony
Disgust	"Screeching", medium volume, several variations with changing expression and Emphasis, Uncontrolled tones in rapid succession
Anger	Hard touch, staccato, loud volume, rapidly ascending tempo, dissonant harmony, Very rapid touch, ascending volume, tempo, and dynamics
Surprise	Short tones, staccato, jumping ascending dynamics, medium volume, Staccato, low pitch, short intervals between tones, loud volume

ⁱⁱ For reviews see Juslin and Sloboda (2001).

The extent to which these characteristics are true in depicting their corresponding emotions finds substantiation in the *neuro-cultural theory of emotion*ⁱⁱⁱ championed by Paul Ekman. Among other things, the theory explains, in accordance with Tomkins (1963), that six basic universal emotions (as can be seen in the left column of table 1) can be communicated effectively through sound. Resnicow, Salovey and Repp (2004) for example, worked on recognizing emotion in music performance as an aspect of emotional intelligence and found out that four of these basic emotions (anger, happiness, sadness and fear) can be communicated quite effectively through music. Studies of Fritz and his colleagues (Jentschke, Gosselin, Sammler, Peretz, Turner, Friederici, & Koelsch, 2009; Schmude, Jentschke, Friederici & Koelsch, 2013) among the Mafa people of Cameroon which found the identification of similar emotions in musical stimulus across cultures (a European audience and an indigenous African audience who were hearing the selected Western classical music for the first time), clearly testify to the foregoing claim.

The other school of thought, referred to as the 'arousal theory' (Hargreaves, 2001) places the emphasis on the listener as the source of the emotion conveyed by the music rather than on the composer. This theory explains music's expressiveness as "*its propensity to evoke the corresponding emotion in the listener*" (Davies, 2001 as cited in Hargreaves, 2001. p.32). According to Scherer (2004), what makes it true that music is sad or happy is its causal power to bring about these or related responses in the listener. Thus, under the aegis of the arousal theory, the composer does not decide which emotions are 'supposed' to be conveyed by the music (even if s/he composes with such emotional intentions) but the listeners according to what emotions they feel as the music unfolds. To explain this further, Koelsch (2011) suggests that a passage is expressive of sadness if the listeners imagine of their hearing of it that it is a cognizance of their own feelings of sadness. Listeners take their awareness of their auditory sensations to be an awareness of their own feelings, and it is these feelings that the music can be said to express. The arousal theory, unlike the former, explains why different people can feel different (sometimes contrasting) emotions though listening to the same music. The emotion induced in listeners is predominantly a function of their enculturation and musical experiences. As far as these factors vary among individuals, the emotions felt will also be subjective and individualistic. Sloboda (2005) summarizes this well when he avows that "*music does not create or change emotion; rather it allows a person access to the experience of emotions that are somehow already 'on the agenda' for that person, but not fully apprehended or dealt with*" (p.204).

Irrespective of standpoint, the relationship between music and emotion has been firmly established *ipso facto*. "*There is a general consensus that music is capable of arousing deep and significant emotion in those who interact with it*" (Sloboda, 2005. p.203). The purpose of this current paper, therefore, is not to belabor the point. Rather, we intend to contribute meaningfully to the existing knowledge on the subject by exploring a different perspective. It takes no special efforts to realize that the existing empirical knowledge on

ⁱⁱⁱ For details of this theory, see Ekman (1992, 1993, 1994), Ekman and Friesen (1971), Ekman, Levenson, and Friesen (1983).

the connections between music and emotion has largely been based on western classical music. Studies that explore the relationship between other musical forms and emotions are rather exiguous and fragmented. Again, contributions to the topic from African-based studies are almost non-existent. In this paper, we take a step towards addressing the paucity by focusing on the place of emotions in popular music using Ghanaian highlife as a point of reference. Specifically, we examine how the basic emotions of happiness and sadness are communicated or perceived in highlife music. We chose these two emotions in particular because according to Kallinen (2005), they emerge as the most dominant in music research. The use of the term 'popular emotions' in our title, therefore, refers to these two basic emotions.

2. Highlife music: a brief overview

Agawu (1984) categorizes the panoply of musical styles in Ghana into three distinct, but not unrelated, groups: traditional, syncretic and "classical". Under the syncretic tradition, he writes: *"like the 'classical,' (it) is a relatively recent development, and represents all forms of Western-influenced popular music cultivated during the colonial era. These collective genres are epitomized in the well-known "highlife" music"* (p. 38). In line with that thought, Collins (1989) avows that *"Highlife is one of the myriad varieties of acculturated popular dance-music styles that have been emerging from Africa this century and which fuse African with Western (i.e. European and American) and islamic influences"* (p.221). Highlife therefore, is a music genre which was brewed, not just within the confines of Ghana, but in other African countries; particularly Anglophone West African countries such as Nigeria, Liberia and Sierra Leone. This notwithstanding, there are some scholars (such as, Matczynski, 2011; Plageman, 2013; van der Geest, 1980) who regard highlife as a strictly Ghanaian popular musical genre which later spread to other parts of Africa; considering that even the name of the genre "high-life" emerged from Ghana. Matczynski for example states, *"highlife is a distinctly Ghanaian popular music, a style uniquely suited to address the emotions, concerns, and everyday experiences of listeners through its deeply rooted connections with tradition"* (p.56). Various forms of highlife got their names from the indigenous traditional musical forms that influenced them mostly. Examples of these forms include fusion genres like osode-highlife, sikyi-highlife and other forms which represent the assertion of ethnic identity through the incorporation of ethnically coded rhythms, harmonies, songs and so on. It is worthy of note that the things that highlife borrowed from tradition reaches far beyond the few musical elements mentioned. Other aspects of traditional musical arts such as: modes of speaking, themes from traditional song texts, mode of traditional storytelling and so on were all employed by highlife musicians as a means to convey didactic messages, educate audiences, and advise listeners. Van der Geest (1980) summarizes this point by noting that *"Highlife encompasses a variety of artistic expressions: music, dancing, singing, storytelling, and theatre"* (p. 147).

In spite of the inherent nuances attributable to the diverse ethnicity structure in Ghana, three prominent styles of highlife (depending on the particular western musical influence which was assimilated and utilized by the African musicians who fused it with

their own tradition) are identified. First there was the imported influences of foreign sailors that became 'palm-wine' highlife; second, that of the colonial military brass-bands that became adaha highlife; and third, that of the Christianized black elite which became dance-band highlife^{iv}. On the whole, highlife music is characterized by lilting guitar melodies, (perhaps an influence of the Akan *seprewa*), soulful singing, and Ghanaian rhythms, a music located at the intersections of tradition and "modernity." It also employs a fair amount of chromaticism; which according to Amuah, Doe, Fiagbedzi and Amenyo (2014), paves way for the expression of emotions at will in a performance. Although highlife begun somewhere in the 1920s, the period between 1950 and 1980 marked its peak of prominence; a period described by Matczynski (2011) as the "golden age" of highlife. Within that period, hundreds of bands operated across Ghana, nightclubs and dancehalls were filled with dancers moving to live music, and local record labels/recording studios released a staggering number of new and exciting highlife albums. Owing to the diversity of styles in highlife and the wide array of subject matter that the lyrics cover, highlife is performed at almost every social gathering in Ghana. Without a doubt, highlife continues to be a pervasive art form in contemporary Ghana, competing with the relatively modern popular musical style called 'hip-life' (a blend of hip pop and highlife).

2. Method

2.1 Participants and procedure

This exploratory study was non-experimental and principally employed the qualitative mode of enquiry. The selection of data collection sites, sample and materials for analysis were all done using the judgmental and chain-referral sampling approaches. In line with the purpose of the study, we selected two different observational platforms; one for each of the two popular emotions (happiness and sadness). The selection of these platforms was guided by Sloboda and O'Neill's (2003) assertion that "*the impact of music on emotion is not direct but interdependent on the situations in which it is heard*" (p.17). The situations selected in this study were very unambiguous with respect to the emotional intentions. For the happiness platform, we selected wedding settings and for the sadness platform, we selected funeral settings. To be considered for inclusion in the study, these platforms had to have highlife music; either performed by a live band or played by a DJ. Eventually, four different wedding celebrations and six funeral settings were selected within a three-month period in the Central Region of Ghana. In all, a total of 46 participants were directly included in the study who answered a number of open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview: either in the course of the respective program (wedding or funeral) or immediately afterwards. These participants were within the ages of 21 and 72 and were made up of 28 females and 18 males. Four of the interviewees were famous area DJs who had an impressive repertoire of highlife songs and played highlife music at the selected functions. Three were leaders of highlife bands that also performed live at the

^{iv} For further details, see Collins (1989) and Plageman (2013).

selected functions. The remaining 39 participants were made up of various highlife band members (8) and event attendees (31). In addition to the participant observations at the various platforms and the personal interviews, we also analyzed two extensive exclusive interview videos of two of Ghana's best all-time highlife artistes: J. A. Adofo (of City Boys International Band fame) and Adwontofohene Nana Kwame Ampadu (of African Brothers International Band fame). The purpose for analyzing these videos was because it was not possible for us to do personal interviews with these artistes within the time-frame; however, we wanted to know if they considered emotional outcomes of their compositions at the creation stage. The songs of these two artistes in particular, featured extensively in the events that were studied: mostly during the funerals. The exact broader questions we set out to answer in this study were the following:

- a) To what extent do highlife artistes/DJs/band leaders consciously select songs to mirror the prevailing emotional environments (particularly of happiness and sadness)?
- b) What distinguishing features in highlife make them happy or sad?

3. Results and Discussion

Analysis of the emergent data revealed a number of interesting points for discussion. To begin with, the selection of specific highlife songs for the various events was nothing fortuitous; rather, it was the result of a pre-meditated and conscious effort based largely on emotional reasons. There is a shared implicit consensus that whereas weddings are happy occasions, funerals are sad events. In conformity to this axiom, highlife artistes, DJs and band leaders who are invited to perform at these functions consciously select songs that help to create the right atmosphere for the expression of the respective emotions. This is what DeNora (1999) refers to when she averred that "... music is used to cast an aspired state. It is mobilized as a prospective representation of that state" (p.38). The appropriateness of the selection is partly judged from the reactions of the listeners mostly through their overt responses. These responses include shouts of approval (observed only during the wedding events), singing along, clapping, tapping, head-nodding, and especially dancing. This confirms Fiagbedzi's (2005) observation that the African dances to music in sorrow and in joy. It must not be misconstrued however, that the nature of the dances in these different settings is necessarily analogous. The use of elaborate gestures, particularly in the context of the funeral dances, clearly communicates emotional messages of loss, sorrow, pain and grief. Facial gestures as well as hand gestures such as when a dancer spreads out both hands and gradually brings them to rest on the head are symbolic of pain among the Akans of Ghana^v. No Akan who has a fair knowledge of traditional practices will, for example, do the same gesture at a wedding dance. The absence of any of these overt responses to any individual song is a signal to change the song. There are also instances when people request specific songs to be played, or ask for particular songs that are being played to be changed. The implication

^v For details on Akan dance gestures and their meaning, see Adum-Attah and Amuah (2008).

of all these is that there is a high sense of social control on the selection of highlife songs for occasions considered 'happy' or 'sad'. The two snippets below, from interview transcriptions further attest to this fact.

- a) *There are certain songs... hmmm... there are certain songs you dare not play at weddings..... You even risk not being paid for your services because you ruined the mood"* (DJ).
- b) *During funerals, especially during the wake keeping, people are generally very sad... they expect us to perform songs that will help them to cry more... and at the same time, they want to dance... it is not easy, but we know what they want, and we give it to them"* (highlife band leader).

Apart from highlighting the point of social control, the second snippet is a good summary of another point which was expressed variously by almost all the interviewees; the fact that people are aware of the power of the highlife music to help them migrate to desired emotional states. DeNora (2000) expatiates on this potential of music by noting that, music offers a medium in which participants are able to 'work through moods'... music thus *"provides a virtual reality within which respondents are able to express themselves ...to 'scream', 'punch' or 'kick' musically, and thus to have power over one's (aesthetic) environment"* (p.40).

Another important finding which speaks directly to the second research question is that, the emotional expressiveness in highlife music is mostly conveyed through the lyrics rather than specific musical features as it is in many reported studies with western classical music. This is not to say at all that the specific musical features do not play any role in the emotional appeal of highlife music. For one thing, if the same lyrics are narrated and not sung with all the accompanied musical features, it will not have the same effect. The point here is that, although the specific musical features may play a role, it does so in a more covert and unassuming manner. Participants in the study predominantly attributed the emotions they felt to the lyrics rather than to those other features of music. It deserves mention that the musical features in highlife music, such as instrumentation, rhythmic structure, melodic lines, harmonic structures, tempo, phraseology, dynamics, mode, scale patterns, embellishments, and so on, sound very much akin to each other and may not be a good basis for distinguishing whether a song is happy or sad. It is the content of the lyrics that help to make such distinctions possible and realistic. Thus, the tenets of the expression theory, as exemplified in table one; do not neatly apply to highlife music. The emphasis on lyrics as a source of emotion in music is nothing nascent in the music-emotion literature. A study by Fox (2015) for example found that music lyrics have the potential to increase, among other things, positive emotions and meaning. In the current study, the highlife lyrics served the following purposes: help in the recognition of popular emotions in music, conjure visual images for listeners, create and resolve internal conflict, provide analogies and episodic memories that listeners could relate to, sustain and heighten the interest of listeners, move them into some form of action, and provide valuable life lessons. These very purposes appeared to have very profound and telling effects on the emotions of listeners. In terms of content, the songs played during funerals were very much in line with the seven themes identified by van

der Geest (1980), namely: a) mother's death, b) father's death, c) death of a beloved, d) death is inescapable, e) no return from death, f) death as punishment, g) Ego's Own Death and Funeral. The themes in the highlife songs played at the weddings were not as varied. They bordered on love, importance of marriage, children as blessings, and lessons for sustaining a healthy marriage.

To the extent that highlife lyrics play a crucial role in emotions, we find it helpful to invoke some explanations from familiarity theories. Lyrics-based emotions carry an implied assumption that listeners are familiar, at least, with the language involved: its grammar and some usage rules. As already shown in the brief overview of highlife music, it developed from indigenous musical forms and idioms. Till date, the large majority of highlife songs are still sung in their original native languages; respecting the internal tonal inflections and still bridging tradition and modernity. Listening to songs in a person's mother-tongue carries the advantage of an added comfort-factor. General familiarity theories such as the *mere-exposure theory* (Zajonc, 1968; Kunst-Wilson & Zajonc, 1980) and the *anchoring and adjustment heuristic theory* (Kahneman & Tversky, 1973), share common grounds in positing that, an optimum level of familiarity to a stimulus is helpful in attaining appreciable levels of arousal to the stimulus. These theories have often been adopted in substantiating explanations about musical emotions and preferences^{vi}. One such adoption is by Wolf and Weiner (1972) who propose a *habituation hypothesis*: a situation where arousal levels to music are mitigated by levels of familiarity. This situation might just be the case observed in this study. The familiarity here manifests itself in two main ways: familiarity to the highlife genre and familiarity with the song-specific lyrics. From the participant observations, we noted that the songs that mostly moved people to the dancing floor were those songs that they could comfortably sing along. From the analysis of the exclusive videos too, highlife composers demonstrated an awareness of the emotional uses to which listeners put their compositions. In the light of that, they also found ways and means of incorporating such emotional messages. The means that they spoke about also dwells much in the lyrics.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Gabrielsson (2003) states clearly that "*music can be felt to express emotions as well as to arouse emotions*" (p. 431). The observations made in this study firmly supports that claim. Highlife music provides a great platform for the expressions and experiences of emotions, particularly the basic emotions of happiness and sadness. Unlike many of the studies that use Western classical music however, the emotional expressiveness in highlife music does not reside in specific musical features as it does in the lyrics. The musical structure serves to provide the vehicle through which the lyrics are expressed, but it is the lyrics that makes all the difference as in whether the music is a happy or sad one. The overall emotional uses to which highlife music is put correspond to the two-pronged model suggested by Sloboda (2005): *music as a change agent* and *music as*

^{vi} For details, see Hargreaves (2001).

promoting the intensification or release of existing emotions. As a change agent, people consciously exploit the power of highlife to transform their mood from one emotional state to another desired state. For the intensification or release of existing emotions, people use highlife music as a virtual safe-space where they are able to express fully or 'deal with' various emotions. There is a form of social control when it comes to group uses of highlife music; particularly for the expressions of happiness or sadness. To end, it is important to note that highlife music is much more varied stylistically and thematically than the report in this study might make us believe. Much more is left to be studied about highlife.

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