

Facial expression more important to conveying emotion in music than in speech

24 February 2015

Regular concert-goers are used to seeing singers use expressive and often very dramatic facial expressions. Indeed, music and speech are alike in that they use both facial and acoustic cues to engage listeners in an emotional experience. McGill researchers wondered what roles these different cues played in conveying emotions.

To find out, they did an experiment where participants were offered recordings of short phrases (neutral statements, all of which were seven syllables long, such as "children tapping to the beat" or "people talking by the door"), which were then spoken or sung with a variety of emotions. Participants were then offered these recordings in three different formats: either audio alone, video alone (with no sound), or full audio-video recordings, and were asked to identify the emotions that the performers' intended to convey.

The researchers discovered that when it came to song, although the participants had a hard time recognizing the emotion based on the audio recording alone, once visual cues were added, the observers' understanding of the emotions the music sought to convey improved dramatically. In contrast, participants were much better able to recognize emotion in speech, whether they were listening to audio alone, watching a video without sound, or seeing both at the same time. As a result, the researchers believe that [visual cues](#) play a much more important role in the understanding of the emotions being conveyed by music than they do in the understanding of speech.

Provided by McGill University

APA citation: Facial expression more important to conveying emotion in music than in speech (2015, February 24) retrieved 12 April 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-02-facial-important-conveying-emotionin-music.html>

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