The question of how pure—i.e., non-lyrical—music evokes emotion in an audience is at the heart of expressivism. That music conveys this emotion is a given. When one listens to the sparkling notes of Aaron Zigman’s “Into the Forest”, the ideal listener feels emotions of peace and wonder. The opening notes of Beethoven’s 5th evoke a sense of stately power. However, the question of how this happens is a mystery. How does music—nonverbal and unable to present a message in the same way as a poem—convey X emotion to its listeners? Three theories attempt to explain this phenomenon. Arousal theory claims that the music the listener feels is equal to the music that the composer felt at the time of composition. The music simply transports the emotion, unchanged, from creator A to listener B. Persona theory claims that the listener views the music as a person expressing X emotion. Resemblance theory claims that the music resembles X emotion as it would be expressed by a person; the sounds of Beethoven’s 5th are stately because they resemble the bearing and tone of a stately person. My paper will briefly endorse a form of arousal theory, but primarily defend persona theory. It will do so partly by expanding resemblance theory and attempting to prove that the latter is simply a derivative of the former.

Persona theory, the belief that we listen to a certain musical piece and imagine it as a person expressing X emotion, which then transmits X emotion to us as listener, is the foundation for my paper. As such, it bears elucidating. According to Cochrane, “Persona theory argues that when we hear a piece of music as emotionally expressive, we necessarily imagine or have an illusion that a person is appropriately connected to that emotional expression” (18). Thus, when we listen to Bach’s “Air on a G String”, we can imagine the music as a sad, perhaps crying, person. This allows the music to express its emotion to us as a transfer between like and like—human and human—rather than like and unlike—human and musical note. It makes the emotion inherent in the music compatible with our sense of emotion, which allows it to convey that emotion to us. A cursory examination of persona theory would equate it to synaesthesia—we hear something and re-imagine it as though we were seeing a person, thus blending sound and sight. The reality, however, is more complex. I support Cochrane in his analysis of where persona theory comes from:

There are two possible strategies here: The first is that it is a fairly automatic illusion. The second is that it is a more deliberate imaginative activity. As justification for the first possibility, it is very likely that whenever we approach works of art we have a background belief that it has been deliberately constructed by a human being. As such, we will tend automatically to interpret that work as the product of certain mental states, and derive the nature of those mental states from the characteristics of the work. In neurological terms, this means that we confront works of art in just the same way as we confront people.

The second strategy deals with music that has not been created by an artist; for example, the sound of a tap. This is not the focus of my essay and I will not delve into it here, although the interested reader should consult “A Simulation Theory of Musical Expressivism” by Cochrane.

There are several defenses of persona theory. First, the obvious argument that constructing a persona for a piece of music allows us to identify more closely with it. We see the person in Bach’s piece feeling sad, we empathize with him or her, and we find ourselves feeling sad. Identification is a key to the transmission of emotion; one cannot feel empathy for an entity
one does not identify with. The second defense of persona theory is the recognition that only personas can evoke what Davis calls higher emotions: emotions, which express “cognitively complex content” such as patriotism or envy. Davis claims that music cannot do this, and on this basis argues against the persona. However, Davis’ argument is based on a flawed assumption. In reality, music can evoke these higher emotions, as we have seen with Beethoven’s 5th (stateliness is surely not a low emotion). Given this, one can reasonably argue—drawing on Davis’ reasoning, elucidated in Ridley’s article, “Persona Sometimes Grata”—that personas exist.

The analytical reader will have determined by now that the theory of persona I am sketching out is insufficient an answer to the problem of how music expresses itself to its audience. After all, persona theory tells us that a persona exists, and how the listener feels empathy for its emotion X and in turn, feels that emotion; but how does the listener recognize that the persona’s emotional state is X? If Bach’s “Air on a G String” arouses in us the image of a sad persona, why do we see this persona as sad? Why is it not a happy persona, which would arouse in us emotions of joy?

To answer this question, we turn to resemblance theory. Resemblance theory is, quite simply, the idea that Bach’s “Air on a G String” expresses sadness because it sounds similar to a person expressing sadness. To quote Boghossian in “Experiencing Musical Expressivism”, “A passage P is expressive of E just in case P sounds the way a person would sound who was expressing E vocally, or sounds the way a person would look who was expressing E gesturally” (10). Two things are immediately apparent from this definition. First, the idea that sad music is only sad because it sounds the way a sad person does. This in itself argues for persona theory. After all, if we are to equate the sad sounds of Bach’s piece with the sadness a person expresses, we could simplify the whole thing by granting Bach’s work a persona. We automatically grant credence to persona theory by embracing resemblance theory. In this sense, resemblance theory is simply a defense for the persona theory it presupposes. This gets to the heart of the second half of my thesis: that resemblance theory is a necessary derivative of persona theory, not a true and competing theory in and of itself.

The second thing that becomes clear from Boghassian’s definition is the implicit claim on which it relies: that, “persons have characteristic ways of expressing their inner states” (Boghassian 10). It implies that, if a person wishes to express sadness via their voice, he or she will resort to several classic means of doing so: soft keening, drawn-out syllables, sighs, and others. I return, again, to Cochrane’s argument, which recognizes that the role of tone in emotion is scientifically proven. Infants, for instance, respond to tonal inflection in their mother’s voice; they do not respond to her actual words. They have no knowledge of the meaning of her words. The mother could say “rat” or “racecar”, either way, if the word was said with a “slower, falling pitch” (Cochrane 9), it would soothe the infant. Similarly, the mothers use “sharp, staccato contours” (Cochrane 9) to indicate disapproval. The infant, like all listeners on an intuitive level, does not concern itself with the words spoken. It responds entirely to tonal inflection. On a more analytical level, certain vocal mannerisms also provide meaning. The rise in pitch at the end of a sentence, for instance, denotes a question. These factors—tonal inflection and vocal mannerisms—are what convey emotion to us on an intuitive and even analytical level. Thus, if Bach’s “Air on a G String” expresses sadness, it does so by mirroring the vocal mannerisms and tonal inflections of a typical sad person.

However, this resemblance to tonal inflection and vocal mannerisms is only part of the picture. It can only explain pieces like Bach’s, wherein the music expressed strongly resembles the corresponding emotion of a human persona. It leaves unanswered the question of how, for
example, Aaron Zigman’s sparkling “Into the Forest” stirs the listener to wonder and peacefulness. To answer this problem, Davies and Kivy argue that certain music resembles bodily postures. Melodies can jump to evoke joy—as a human would—or discord, and chords can act gentle or harsh. This argument, however, poses the difficult problem of how a sound can resemble a movement or a posture. Cochrane attempts to supply an answer, relying on synesthesia. However, I find this argument unconvincing. Rather, I would posit a claim more in line with Scruton:

It does not seem strained to suggest that Smetana’s music expresses the shining and silken qualities that we hear in it. Smetana’s music is not literally shining or silken. But its expressive power is revealed in its ability to compel these metaphors from us, and to persuade us that they fit exactly. (Scruton 96)

In this sense, Zigman’s score evokes peacefulness because it expresses tranquil qualities that likely evoke Nature: a tree or a rock. Even the descriptor, “sparking”, implies that it possesses crystalline qualities. Obviously, the score is not literally crystalline, nor is it literally tree-like. However, it evokes those qualities via what Scruton terms “metaphor”; these qualities cause the corresponding persona to evince peaceful emotion. This emotion, per the persona theory I have sketched out, allows the reader to empathize with the persona and feel peaceful.

Unfortunately, Scruton’s terminology poses a problem. He claims that the music evokes Q qualities via metaphor. This language leaves him open to several lines of criticism. Boghossian argues that any metaphor is inherently intentional, whereas Scruton’s phenomenon is not. Further, “metaphor” implies that the piece has a literal meaning it is attempting to illuminate; music does not. The metaphor is the meaning. These criticisms are justified, but can be easily averted with a simple terminology change. I would propose renaming Scruton’s phenomenon non-human physical resemblance. I will be the first to admit that this is a cosmetic change, and an ugly one, but it will be worth it if it defends an otherwise fine theory from Boghessian’s claims.

Scruton’s metaphor can be buttressed by what Matravers calls “experienced resemblance”. This theory posits that, when you hear a sound, it resembles another sound with which you have associations. When you hear a foghorn, it resembles the sound of a whale. Our cultural experience with whales—the fact that we hunted them almost to extinction in the 1800s, the tragedy of an intelligent life-form’s death—evokes a feeling of sadness. This presents, perhaps, a fuller characterization of the emotion in Zigman’s “Into the Forest” than does Scruton’s metaphor. Zigman’s crystalline score can be characterized as such, because it resembles crystals—in this case, the sound of crystal chimes striking each other. “Experience resemblance” thus works together with metaphor—both subsets of resemblance theory—to provide a fuller understanding of how music can express itself without recourse to a human persona.

The primary problem with resemblance theory, espoused by Levinson and echoed by Boghassion, is one of degree. After all, as Boghassian recognizes, “everything resembles everything else to some degree” (10). Bach’s “Air on a G String” resembles a sad persona no more uniquely than a dog resembles a pig (or a tarantula, since dogs and pigs are both mammals and thus resemble each other more closely). The question is: to what degree does Y (the music) resemble X (the emotional expression of its persona)? Levinson claims that this leads to a “whatever it takes formulation”: whatever resemblance is necessary to equate Bach’s piece with the emotional expression of Bach’s persona, is ipso facto the resemblance between the two. For Levinson, this is a powerful counter to resemblance theory. I find it less convincing. After all, the ideal listener can certainly determine whether Bach’s piece resembles sadness, or does not. He or
she may not know exactly where the line between the two is, but they do know when that line is crossed (i.e., when Bach’s piece no longer evokes sadness in the individual). I would offer that we leave the question up to the individual listeners of each individual piece, who are amply qualified to answer it.

The question remains: where does the music’s emotion originate? If Bach’s “Air on G String” expresses sadness, then it must at some point be endowed with sad emotion; who endowed it so? Does it derive its emotion from the listener, from the artists, or, as Levinson posits, does emotion exist in the music independent and external to both? The possibility that emotion derives from the listener would be at odds with persona theory, which makes the implicit argument that emotion exists first in the music—via its persona—and is then translated to the listener. It would be bizarre if emotion originated in the listener, was transmitted to the music, and was then transmitted back to the listener. Thus, we can rule out this first possibility. The second possibility—that music derives its emotion from its composer—seems to me more plausible. Cochrane’s first explanation of the cause of the persona recognizes that whenever we approach art or music, “we have a background belief that it has been deliberately constructed by a human being” (Cochrane 19). This background belief is surely justified, for you cannot have a work of music without a composer. Cochrane’s persona theory goes on to equate the persona with the composer by claiming that we see in the former the emotional states of the latter. Given this, it is no stretch to call the composer the sole origin of a piece of music’s emotion. A potential counter-argument is that the author could create a work expressing an emotion he or she did not feel. In the television series Studio 60, for example, Matthew Albie writes a comedy show while suffering from depression. However, I would posit that, as an artist, Matthew tapped into non-primary emotions; he could, with an effort of will, remember a time when he was feeling particularly joyous, infuse himself with the memory, such that he actually experienced that same sense of joy, and use that dredged-up sense of joy to write comedy. This certainly mirrors my own experience as an artist. The artist needs not pour only his or her dominant emotional state—in Matt’s case, depression—into their work; they have access to a wealth of contrasting emotions that they can tap into, and can infuse their work with that emotion. In this way, Bach need not have been primarily sad when composing “Air on a G String”; he need only have tapped into some previous time when he experienced sadness, re-summoned that state of mind, and used it to motivate his sad music.¹

In this paper, I have attempted to answer the question: “how does music express itself, i.e., transmit its emotion unto the listener?” I have endeavored to illustrate that the solution is a combination of persona and resemblance theory—although this can be better categorized as simply persona theory, since resemblance theory is merely a defense of said theory. I have attempted to expand resemblance theory by synthesizing work by Scruton and Matravers. Ultimately, I have claimed that the origin of emotion in a piece of work is the composer, and hence all emotion and expression stems from him or her.

¹. This theory resembles the argument made by Green in , “Replies to Eriksson, Martin and Moore” inasmuch as both claim that the artist can express a non-dominant emotion
WORKS CITED


