

# The Positive Emotional Impact of Sad Music



Statue of Beethoven at Beethoven-Haydn-Moz Art Memorial.

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**A new multinational survey suggests listening to melancholy music has multiple rewards.**

A personal memory: One day during my teen years, a period when I was discovering classical music, I put on a recording of Brahms' wistful "Clarinet Quintet." I distinctly remember my mother's reaction to what she was

hearing: "It's beautiful, but why would you want to listen to something so sad?"

Why indeed? Few people seek out sadness, but most of us do turn to melancholy music from time to time. What do we get out of the experience?

A newly published study provides a multifaceted answer to that question. Liila Taruffi and Stefan Koelsch, who study music and the brain at the Free University of Berlin, surveyed 722 people from various parts of the world on the subject of sad songs. They discovered a series of variations on a few common themes.

"For many individuals, listening to sad music can actually lead to beneficial emotional effects," they write in the online journal *PLoS One*. "Music-evoked sadness can be appreciated not only as an aesthetic, abstract reward, but (it) also plays a role in well-being, by providing consolation as well as regulating negative moods and emotions."

The researchers collected detailed data from 772 people. The majority—408—

grew up in Europe, but sizable numbers were from Asia and North America. Participants revealed how often they listened to sad music, what situations compel them to listen to it, and what emotions it tends to evoke in them.

The results reveal that sad music brings up “a wide range of complex and partially positive emotions, such as nostalgia, peacefulness, tenderness, transcendence, and wonder,” the researchers report. Nostalgia was the most frequently reported emotion evoked by sad music (although it came in number two among Asians, behind peacefulness).

“The average number of emotions that participants reported to have experienced in response to sad music was above three,” they write. “This suggests that a multifaceted emotional experience elicited by sad music enhances its aesthetic appeal.”

In terms of timing, “our data suggest that people choose to listen to sad music especially when experiencing emotional distress or when feeling lonely,” the researchers report. “For most of the people, the engagement with sad music in everyday life is correlated with its potential to regulate negative moods and emotions, as well as to provide consolation.”

In other words, sad music is “a means for improving well-being,” they write. “Listeners frequently engage with sad music when experiencing emotional distress to facilitate venting of negative emotion or mood.”

At the same time, “music-evoked sadness has pleasurable effects due to the engagement of imaginative processes,” they add. The realization that unhappiness can be expressed—and perhaps even transcended—through creativity is stimulating; it points to a pathway out of the pain.

Participants were also given the option of naming their favorite sad piece of music. While their responses covered a wide range of genres, “the average tempo was relatively slow,” suggesting sluggish tempos are linked with sadness across cultures.

The works that got the most mentions: Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata; "Moon Reflected in the Second Spring," by the Chinese composer Ah Bing; and Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings." If you're in the mood, take a listen, and have a good, cathartic cry.

Tom Jacobs (*Pacific Standard*) / November 3, 2014

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