

**BOOK OF ABSTRACTS**



**POSSIBLE WORLDS OF CONTEMPORARY AESTHETICS: AESTHETICS BETWEEN HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY AND MEDIA**

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#### AFFECTIVE QUALITIES OF MUSIC: CONTOURS IN THE LIGHT OF CORE AFFECT

**Abstract** | One of the most credited theories aiming to account for the experience of music expressive of emotions is the *contour theory*. Abstracting from its various versions, contour theory accounts for expressiveness of music in terms of those resemblances that hold between its contour (the external, superficial and perceivable dynamic properties) and the typical contour of human emotional expressions (classical accounts are Kivy 1989; Davies 1994). Two dimensions of the musical contour are particularly relevant. First, some musical features sound like a human moved voice. Second, some features of the contour, such as melody, rhythmic cadence, agogics, resemble visible aspects of human behavior, like postures, gestures and bodily movements (Kivy 1989; Davies 1994, 2010). Within infant research and clinical psychology, Daniel Stern (2010) pursued a very similar path, theorizing the existence of “Forms of Vitality”, gestaltic forms that paradigmatically vehicle emotional expressions whose musical nature comes to light through their linguistic qualification: *crescendo*, *diminuendo*, *staccato*, *legato*, *vibrato*, and so on.

Opponents of contour theory standardly challenge its capacity to account (a) for the perceptual nature of emotional expression – as opposed to imaginative, projectivist or affective origins – and (b) for the allegedly predominant role of those resemblances holding between music and human expressions – as opposed to the many possible resemblances that make music similar to other objects.

In this paper we appeal to constructivist theories of emotions to reply to these objections. In particular, we rely on the notions of *core affect* (CA) and of *affective qualities* (AQs). CA “is a neurophysiological state that is consciously accessible as a simple, non-reflective feeling that is an integral blend of hedonic (pleasure–displeasure) and arousal (sleepy–activated) values” (Russell, 2003:147). In other words, CA is the most elementary component of emotional episodes qualifying them according to a bidimensional schema. AQs, instead, are those properties of the world whose encounter can produce an instantiation or a modification of CA. Notably, CA and AQs share the same dimensional space.

On this basis we provide contour theory and vitality forms approach with an consistent account of the pre-reflective level of the experience of expressive music. This allows us to deal with the above mentioned challenges in a fruitful way, arguing (a) for the perceptual nature of expressive qualities and the related experience, and (b) for the primacy of affective contours over other perceivable resemblances. Additionally, our proposal offers a precious contribution to a scientifically informed music therapy.

**Index terms** | *affective qualities; contour theory; core affect; emotions; forms of vitality; musical expressiveness.*

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**Cristina Meini** is Professor of Philosophy of Mind and Philosophy of language at the University of Eastern Piedmont, Italy. Her research interest in the role of emotions in social cognition, together with her love for music, led her to approach some central subjects in philosophy of music. In her researches, music is taken as a special language of emotions that is accessible also to people with relational problems. In this sense, music is a sort of emotional scaffolding for improving emotional and cognitive abilities. More recently, she wrote some papers on the perceptual nature of emotional recognition in music.

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