



Music and Memory in Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) (1856–1935)

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The relationship between music and memory is mainly developed in *Music and Its Lovers* (1932), a book where Lee presents interesting psychological and philosophical insights from the analysis of the responses made by 150 people to a questionnaire about the “expressive and emotional powers of music” (1932: 563).

Musical experience depends on memory in many different ways. Inspired by Richard Semon’s analysis of memory, Lee considers that an *atomic* or short memory is necessary to link single sound-sensations into relations of sequence and coexistence between notes. The relation between the note we are hearing to notes previously heard and notes we expect to hear is at the origin of the perception of the musical duration that is implied in listening to a piece of music (1932: 168-169). Lee suspects that the active attention that is needed to listen to music, in contrast to merely hearing music as being an ambiance or a chaos (1932: 167), depends on the more or less development of this short memory capacity (1932: 168). If so, this faculty would also be one condition of the possibility of aesthetic contemplation, given that only when listening to music, instead of merely hearing it, individuals are capable of intellectual and aesthetic activity (1932: 23).

Likewise, Lee speculates that musical memory may be grounded in this short term capacity (1932: 170). Musical memory is the faculty of recalling a piece of music no longer present to the senses (1932: 168), and refers to the musical performances rehearsed in the silent sessions of the mind (1932: 169) or *chant intérieur* (1932: 113-114). As Lee explains, it would be odd if a person incapable of discriminating the patterns and architecture of a piece of music would nonetheless be able to revive it (1932: 170).

Furthermore, memory also plays a key role in the musical experience of listeners and hearers through its affective kind. Affective memory can directly influence the musical experience (1932: 173), by reviving particular affective memories that have a personal reference and are part of the autobiography of the hearer (1932: 196). The musical response rich in personal reminiscences and other kinds of day-dreams is characteristic of

the hearer, whose attention is focused on herself and her emotional responses and not on the music itself (1932: 165, 205-206). On the other hand, affective memory can indirectly influence the musical experience through affective schemata (1932: 173), the abstract version of affective memory that has divorced from past personal circumstances (1932: 205) and has become the “Ancestors” of emotion (1932: 80). This indirect influence can produce different kinds of responses (1932: 85). It can lead us to make the gestures and movements that are distinctive of the attitude of someone who is undergoing a particular emotional experience. Or, through a process of “inner mimicry” (concept that Lee took from the psychologist Karl Groos), it can make us enact in our mind those movements and gestures without actually adopting this attitude (1932: 83-85). Both the actual and the inner movements evoked by certain pieces of music usually tend to induce the corresponding emotional state in us (1932: 87). But there is also a third possibility of indirect influence of affective schemata in musical experience, which does not entail any kind of actual or inner movement. In this case, the affective schemata allows us to know the idea of the emotion embodied by a piece of music, without necessarily feeling that emotion as we are used to feeling it under the normal “human” circumstances of everyday life (1932: 84-85). The recognition that a piece of music expresses a given emotion, and that this emotion exists apart from our particular emotional experiences, happens when the music – and not the self – absorbs our attention as listeners (1932: 205-206). In these cases, we are able to experience what Lee calls the “Emotion of Music”, which differs from the common emotional experiences that are tied to particular circumstances (1932: 96). It is thus the affective memory in its abstract and schematic form that makes (in part) possible the aesthetic contemplation of music (1932: 222), through the specific feeling of the “Emotion of Music”.

Primary Sources:

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