

Empathic Identification: A Theory of Subjective Agency in Western Art Music

Abstract

In this paper I describe how empathy can function as a mechanism for explaining different possible interpretations of virtual musical agency, defined as human-like entities “within” the music that are perceived to act or feel with intentionality. I use identification (a subtype of empathy) as a philosophical means of negotiating between two poles: subjectivity as unchecked idiosyncrasy vs. subjectivity as external nuance applied to compositional structure. In fact, empathic identification can influence the perception of compositional structure when listeners perceive similarity between themselves and any level of Hatten’s (2018) agential hierarchy. I demonstrate this by using my own experiences to present two possible interpretations of Rachmaninoff’s Prelude in C# minor Op. 3 No. 2. Finally, my theory provides a concrete explanation for the ways in which different interpreters (including listeners, performers, and analysts) create their subjective interpretations.