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“What is Musical Prosody?” (by Caroline Palmer and Sean Hutchins) describes and discusses musical prosody and its relationship to prosody in speech. Prosody can be defined as those qualities of the spoken word or of musical performance – variations in frequency, amplitude and duration – which are not specified in the written word or written notation. These variations are separate from the structural information but can nonetheless help highlight and clarify the structure of language or music. In this sense, musical prosody helps create musical expression, and the two terms are often used interchangeably.

In music, as in speech, prosody is obligatory, i.e. all musical performance involves prosodic elements. Musical prosody is also open to interpretation, and prosodic features may vary from performer to performer or performance to performance. However, evidence suggests that there are common elements between interpretations that point to general principles of musical expression conveyed through prosody.

The article notes both similarities between prosody in music and speech (such as similarities in the temporal aspects of musical meter and linguistic stress) as well as differences (both pitch and duration are much more fixed in music). It goes on to suggest several possible functions of musical prosody, including segmentation (breaking down music into structural divisions like phrases), prominence (highlighting more significant musical events), coordination (helping musicians play together), and emotional response. The latter gets the most attention here, which is not surprising, since emotional response is what most people generally think of when using the term "musical expression."

The article refers to studies showing that structural features of music, such as mode (major/minor), can influence emotional judgments. However, as I understand it, it is fairly well-established that the emotional qualities of the major and minor modes are largely associative and culture-based, and in some genres of music (e.g. klezmer) minor modes are seen as "happy" and major modes are seen as "sad" rather than the opposite. Are prosodic emotional judgments malleable as well, or is prosody more universal/cross-cultural? Nothing in the article addresses this.

The article does, however, describe several attempts to create rule-based models of musical prosody. Generally, these models accept musical notation as input, and generate a performance with prosodic variations in pitch, duration and intensity. While these models seem to have had some success (i.e. people seem to prefer them over “mechanical” performances), they do not, so far, try to account for the role of individual interpretation in performance.

Finally, there is also some discussion of the role of musical prosody in learning, and the possibility of direct links between musical and linguistic prosody, though this is mostly speculative.

As an addendum, I am also curious about prosodic features in music with electronic elements, especially recent pop music. In these genres many of the features of musical prosody discussed in the article are often greatly diminished. For example, programmed beats eliminate tempo fluctuations, autotune eliminates pitch fluctuation, and compression limits the dynamic range (though perhaps not the range of perceived loudness). Despite some backlash, this music remains enormously popular, so people must find it expressive in some way. Does the music compensate for lack of prosodic expression by having extra structural expression (whatever that means), or does it exhibit a different sort of prosodic approach?