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***The Epistemic Value of Sad Music:
Reflection as a Motivation to Listen to Sad Music***

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ABSTRACT. Why do people enjoy sad music? Recently, empirical studies on this issue exploded and offer valuable insights into the paradox of sad music. Importantly, it appears that people listen to sad music *especially when they feel sad* (contextual issue). Personal traits, notably empathy and absorption, predict the enjoyment of sad music (personal issue). And the perils of sad music, particularly rumination, are well documented (dysfunctional issue). This article uses these findings to refine the paradox of sad music. I argue that the main philosophical accounts fail to address the refined paradox. As a remedy, I offer a solution that relies on the epistemic function of sadness. Sadness motivates reflection and comes with epistemic benefits, such as more realistic beliefs and an analytic mindset. I claim that sadness' epistemic value illuminates the allure of sad music. People listen to sad music, especially when they feel sad, because they exploit the reflective mindset of sadness. I offer three arguments that pertain to the contextual, personal, and dysfunctional issues raised by the refined paradox: the reflective mindset nicely illuminates these issues. As sad music helps us to reflect on what truly matters, it is no wonder that people often deem it profound.

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Let us start with a vignette case that will guide my investigation.

Breakup: It's been a while since my partner and I had issues. And today we broke up. I am heartbroken and devastated. I can't help thinking: Why did this happen? What am I going to do with my life? Back home, I decide to relax by listening to music. I put a playlist on, and Los del Rio's *Macarena* pops up (the application was on shuffle mode and we hosted a party last night). I immediately cover my ears out of annoyance. This ridiculously happy song doesn't fit my mood at all – I am so desperate. I thus switch to the next song. This time, it's Max Richter's *Sarajevo*, an intense ambient piece crystallized around musical screams and vocalizations that poignantly evoke suffering, grieving, and despair. I decide to give this piece a chance. I listen to it, and I cry and cry and cry. What a delight. I find it ethereally beautiful. I even feel frissons. It helps me breathe deeply and calms me down. It's *exactly* what I needed to the point that I spent the entire evening listening to Max Richter. After having cried rivers and thought about love all night, I peacefully fell asleep on the sofa.

As this example illustrates, many people love sad music, i.e. music that is expressive of sadness and that tends to induce sadness (§1). Yet, when it comes to ordinary life, except pathological cases, people usually avoid sadness and sad situations, i.e. situations that involve or elicit sadness. Now, the appreciation of sad music doesn't seem to be pathological. There is nothing wrong or masochistic in preferring to listen to *Sarajevo* rather than the *Macarena* when one is heartbroken; listening to sad music sounds like the perfect thing to do in such circumstances, at least for some people. Why do we enjoy sad music? What do we gain by listening to sad music? This paradox of sad music has fascinated philosophers since Antiquity. Recently, empirical studies on this issue exploded and offer valuable insights (see Garrido, 2017 for a review). Curiously, it appears that people listen to sad music *especially when they feel sad*, just like in our vignette case. Sadness and distress are the best predictors for choosing to listen to sad music. Studies also reveal that listening to sad music *intensifies* sadness (Vuoskoski & Eerola, 2011). This renders the puzzle even more perplexing. Why do people seek sad music especially when they feel sad? Why do

people not choose to listen to joyful music instead, such as the *Macarena*, as this would cheer them up, put a smile on their faces, and distract them from their misery? This article addresses this *refined* puzzle: Why do people seek *sad music*, as opposed to music expressive of other emotions (particularly *joyful music*), *especially when they feel sad*?

In fact, not everybody enjoys sad music, and some people do resort to cheerful music when they feel sad. According to recent studies unraveling the personal profile of sad music lovers, the main personal determinants of the appreciation of sad music are high levels of empathy, high capacity of absorption and imagination, introversion, openness to experience, and neuroticism (§1). Clinically depressed people have a strong preference for sad music. This often results in cognitive rumination or obsessive thinking about negative situations, which is dysfunctional. However, as observed, not all love for sad music is pathological. On the contrary, sad music can be used as a means of emotional regulation and thus may contribute to well-being. How?

Building on these findings, this article offers a refined formulation of the paradox and examines the most influential accounts – particularly Davies (1997), Levinson (1982) and Sizer (2019) – in light of it. It appears that these accounts leave the refined paradox unexplained and fail to capture the specificity of sadness. This is not to say that there isn't a grain of truth in these proposals. Indeed, studies suggest that there are various motivations to listen to sad music. In principle, there is no reason to think that people choose to listen to sad music for *one* reason only. Several considerations play a role, such as aesthetic values and preferences, emotional communion (“misery loves company”), relaxation, or the need to weep, among other factors (Van den Tol, 2016). If one embraces a pluralist framework, it appears that the main philosophical accounts nicely capture the appeal of sad music in some cases. That being said, I offer a new motivation to listen to sad music which can help to address the refined paradox and which relies on the epistemic value of sadness. Studies reveal that sadness has epistemic benefits (§3). When feeling sad, people tend to reflect carefully. They form more realistic beliefs, are less prone to epistemic biases, and approach problems in a more analytical way than when they are happy. In a nutshell, sadness involves the reflective mindset; its function is epistemic. I propose that the epistemic value of sadness illuminates the allure of sad music, at least in some cases. People choose to listen to sad music, especially when they feel sad, because sad music intensifies and guides the reflective

mindset. As sad music helps to reflect carefully, listening to it comes with long-term benefits. Although the appreciation of sad music can exploit other facets of sadness, particularly the relief afforded by weeping and the calmness of low arousal, sadness's epistemic value affords more straightforward benefits and illuminates key features of the allure of sad music.

This article is divided into 4 sections. Section 1 formulates the refined paradox by raising the contextual, personal, and dysfunctional issues. Section 2 examines influential accounts in light of these issues. Section 3 dives into sadness and its epistemic function. Section 4 defends my proposal by disentangling the three issues.

1. The Refined Paradox

Traditionally, the paradox of sad music is formulated as follows: why do people enjoy sad music, as they usually avoid sadness and situations that elicit sadness? Let me start with three clarifications.

First, I assume that sad music can elicit sadness (*pace* Kivy). People report feeling sadness, nostalgia, peacefulness, or tenderness when listening to sad music, and emotions elicited by sad music are similar to sadness regarding physiology, expressions, and neuronal activity (Young, 2014). I thus assume that sad music can elicit sadness, although the experience can consist of mixed feelings that encompass sadness and pleasure, such as nostalgia or being moved.

I also assume that sadness is unpleasant. This is compatible with the idea that sad music can be pleasant, as the experience may be a mixed feeling. Still, the pleasure we feel is intimately related to the presence of sadness. Otherwise, we would seek happy music, as the latter tends to elicit pure pleasure. It seems, then, that we gain something from feeling sad.

Lastly, the original paradox is formulated in terms of enjoyment. Yet, conceptually speaking, three issues should be distinguished. Why do people *enjoy* sad music? Why do people *seek* sad music? Why do people *value* sad music? Although these issues are related, they are not identical. For instance, a listener may decide to listen to sad music but fail to enjoy it. In this case, one could not explain the motivation for listening to sad music by actual enjoyment, as there isn't any. Conversely, one may hear sad music unintentionally and enjoy it, in which case the enjoyment

cannot be explained by the motivations to seek sad music, as there weren't any. These observations reveal that the issue of *enjoyment* differs from the issue of *seeking* sad music. One may also *value* sad music, yet refrain from listening to it on some occasions (say, a cocktail party). In this paper, I shall be mostly concerned with the question of why people seek sad music, as recent findings offer new insights into this puzzle.

In fact, in the last decade, empirical studies on the motivations for listening to sad music exploded. Philosophers have not paid sufficient attention to this body of evidence (see Young, 2023 for an exception), although it offers the barebones of an informed philosophical theory. Three sets of findings are particularly relevant and can be used to raise three refined issues.

First, as observed, people listen to sad music especially when they feel sad (Garrido, 2017). Arguments, failures, frustrations, death, love-sickness, or break ups are among the typical situations in which people seek sad music. People also listen to sad music when they feel alone, miss somebody, feel homesick, want to retrieve memories, need to be understood, need consolation, are in an introspective mood, want to relax, are tired, or in nature (Van den Tol, 2016). Why? Call this 'the contextual issue'.

Second, we are not all equal in our love of sad music. The allure of sad music emerges quite late, as 3-8 years old children tend to dislike it. A parent offers a poignant description of the paradox of sad music: "[A]t church, the hymns make him sad, and he wonders why in the world do we need to have so sad songs" (Saaraikallio, 2009, p. 461). In adults, the chief personal determinants of the love for sad music are high levels of empathy, high capacity of absorption and imagination, introversion, openness to experience, and neuroticism (Garrido & Schubert, 2011). Low emotional stability and the tendency to ruminate are also significant predictors. Why? Call this 'the personal issue'.

Lastly, studies document the vices of sad music, particularly in the depressed population. Listening to sad music can prompt cognitive rumination or dwelling about negative situations, which is dysfunctional. How are we to explain the peril of rumination? Call this 'the dysfunctional issue'.

We are now in a position to refine the paradox. Why do people listen to sad music *especially when they feel sad* (contextual issue)? How to account for the *personal traits* predictive of the

appreciation of sad music (personal issue)? How can the solution illuminate *dysfunctional* uses of sad music, particularly the tendency to ruminate (dysfunctional issue)? As I will argue, the main philosophical accounts leave these issues unexplained.

2. The Refined Paradox and the Main Solutions

This section examines three influential accounts – Davies (1997), Levinson (1982) and Sizer (2019) – in light of our refined paradox. For reasons of space, I only highlight and criticize the core idea of each account so as to motivate my proposal (see Lauria, 2024 for a review).

Davies (1997) argues that people are generally interested in music for the enjoyment of *understanding* music. People can then enjoy sad music even when it makes them feel sad, because this response yields understanding of the music. The emotion felt is welcome because it constitutes understanding. Sadness is the price to pay for understanding the music.

Turning to the refined paradox, this proposal appears to be silent on it. Why would people enjoy understanding *sad*, as opposed to, say, happy music, especially when they feel sad? Happy music can also constitute a source of musical understanding. One may as well choose to listen to well-crafted and interesting happy music so as to attain and enjoy musical understanding.

Likewise, why would the traits mentioned impact the love for sad music if the latter is explained by musical understanding? It is unclear that, say, empathy, neuroticism, and absorption play a special role in musical understanding. And even if they do, it is not straightforward that their role is specific to understanding *sad* music as opposed to music expressive of other emotions.

Lastly, consider the dysfunctional issue. Vices of musical understanding pertain to musical abilities, such as failure to understand music. This is one way in which things can go wrong. However, this is far from the vice of rumination described earlier. Although Davies's proposal may be true in some cases, it fails to capture the specificity of sad music and is at pains at illuminating the specific issues raised by the refined paradox.

Levinson (1982) has offered an influential solution to the puzzle that relies on eight rewards offered by sad music. The first reward is that of *savouring* sadness, just like we savour wine, for instance. Although the feeling of sadness is unpleasant, we can appreciate it because it is not

accompanied by the strong unpleasantness of everyday life sadness. This affords the rewards of *understanding* sadness and feeling *self-assured* about one's emotional abilities. Other rewards depend on imagination. As music induces sadness via imaginative involvement with a persona, the feeling is an empathetic response. In identifying with a persona, listeners imagine feeling the same emotion while listening to the progress of the music, which elicits a rewarding sense of satisfaction and control. Because of this identification, listeners are also under the impression that they are expressing their own emotions. In some cases, they may even feel connected with the artist, when they experience the music as the expression of the author or performer's sadness.

This proposal is rich and has been empirically tested (Taruffi & Koelsch, 2014). People report that they listen to sad music in order to *express* sadness, *savour* it, *understand* it, and feel *reassured* about their emotional abilities. To a lesser extent, people report that sad music makes them feel connected and less lonely (*emotional communion*). Imaginative involvement is also among the most frequently mentioned motivations, although this holds for happy music as well.

Levinson's account fits well the role of empathy and imagination in the appreciation of sad music. Thus, it partly addresses the personal issue, although it is unclear how it illuminates other personal determinants, such as introversion and neuroticism.

More importantly, it leaves the core of the refined paradox unexplained. Music-elicited sadness is still an unpleasant feeling, although to a minor extent than real-life sadness. Why would people want to savour sadness, or have a sad companion, considering that sadness feels bad? Even more strikingly, why would one want to savour sadness especially when one is already sad? The puzzle strikes back (I return to expression of sadness in §4.2).

Finally, it is unclear how this proposal captures dysfunctional uses of sad music. It allows for some pathological uses. For instance, one may savour sadness too much, like people do with wine. Or listeners may fail to express or understand sadness. Yet, the link with rumination remains to be articulated.

Let me close this section by discussing a recent account. Sizer (2019) argues that sad mood and sad music reinforce each other. Sad music induces a sad mood that involves a particular focus on the music, which in turn reinforces the mood. This particular focus on sad music explains its appeal.

This proposal is informed by interesting studies on the cognitive effect of sad moods, but it hardly generalizes. As argued by Young (2023), studies reveal that listeners tend to mind-wander when they listen to sad music (Taruffi et al., 2017). This mind-wandering dimension, Young argues, does not square well with the idea that listeners focus on the music. Moreover, Young observes that Sizer's account is at pains at explaining the personal determinants predicting the enjoyment of sad music, particularly empathy. Why would empathetic skills have an impact if the enjoyment is explained by the focus on the music?

More importantly, the account does not straightforwardly explain why people listen to sad music especially when they feel sad. Focused listening is not restricted to sad music; well-crafted happy or anxious music can be conducive to it too. The gain of sad mood is thus unclear: sad people may as well opt for focused listening of happy music.

Lastly, the proposal does not fully capture the vicissitudes of sad music, as it suggests that the main dysfunction pertains to attentional flaws of focused listening. Although rumination can be seen as a mental action that prevents one from properly attending to the music, there are other ways of losing focus on sad music (e.g. one may simply be distracted). And it is not clear that these other ways of losing focus are dysfunctional, let alone pathological. The perils of rumination remain to be explained more straightforwardly.

It appears that the main accounts leave the refined issues unsolved and do not capture the specific appeal of sadness, as opposed to other emotions, in musical appreciation. A detour into a characterization of sadness will thus prove instructive.

3. Sadness

What is so special about sadness that may explain the allure of sad music? Four dimensions of sadness – namely, physiological, expressive, cognitive, and functional – are relevant to our discussion.

Physiologically, sadness involves low arousal (see Huron, 2024 for a detailed exposition on the distinction between sadness and grief). This is one way in which sadness contrasts with joy, as joy involves high arousal. Low arousal is manifest in physiological reactions (e.g., slow heartbeat,

respiration), lumped posture and slow movement, and the prosody of sadness (low volume, slow tempo, low pitch, descendant intonations, tendency to stay silent, etc.). Low arousal is not specific to sadness; calmness and relaxation also involve low arousal. This will be relevant later.

A second paradigmatic feature of sadness pertains to emotional expressions. Typical facial expressions of sadness involve tears, crying, weeping, and flushed face (see Huron, 2024 for more details). These facial expressions impact the vocal expression of sadness. For instance, crying involves modifications in nose and larynx that explain the breaking voice of sad people (Huron, 2024). Tears are not exclusively the expression of sadness: there are tears of joy, of being moved, and of irritation.

Third, in light with cognitivist-evaluativist conceptions of emotions (Tappolet, 2016, Deonna & Teroni, 2012), sadness involves cognitive appraisal. In feeling sad, one appraises a situation in a negative light, namely as a loss or as unfortunate. Typically, this involves appraising the situation as goal-relevant, goal-obtrusive, and as falling beyond one's control. For many scholars, cognitive appraisals of this kind are specific to sadness.

Most importantly, sadness has a functional role. The role of emotions typically pertains to their specific action tendencies. For instance, anger has the function of reinstating justice; fear's function is to avoid threats, etc. What is the function of sadness? Intuitively, sadness does not involve action tendencies, as it is typically characterized by apathy and lack of motivation. Interestingly, studies reveal that the function of sadness may be cognitive. Sadness has epistemic benefits. When feeling sad, people are prone to reflect and analyze situations (Nesse, 1991). They thus tend to form more accurate beliefs, to avoid the pitfalls of cognitive biases, and to carefully scrutinize situations (so-called “depressive realism”, Huron, 2024). Call that “the reflective mindset”. Sadness contrasts with the epistemically shallow mindset characteristic of positive emotions which correlate with biases and epistemic irrationality, such as wishful thinking and self-deception. This opens the path for an epistemic function of sadness. The function of sadness lies in reflection and the careful analysis of situations; it pertains to the epistemic value of sadness. I suggest that this function is key to our appreciation of sad music.

4. The Epistemic Value of Sad Music

This characterization allows for various motivations to listen to sad music that recruit various features of sadness. Yet sadness's epistemic function plays a paramount role.

4.1. Arousal

One may listen to sad music in order to induce low arousal, i.e. feelings of relaxation or calmness. Although this is true at times, this does not exhaust the appeal of sad music.

First, one may achieve the same goal by listening to calm/relaxing music. Although listeners tend to conflate calm and sad music (Huron, 2024), sad music cannot be equated with calm music. Some relaxing music is not sad (consider calming music with nature sounds), and some sad music is not calm (e.g. intense grieving music).

Second, as observed, sadness typically involves low arousal. Why would people want to induce feelings of low arousal especially when they already are in such a state? True, agitated sadness and grief can involve high arousal. In these cases, listeners may recruit sad music to decrease arousal levels. But sadness isn't typically like that.

Third, this proposal does not clearly illuminate the vices of sad music. It allows for the vice of apathy: listeners may indulge in low arousal and be apathetic. But this differs from rumination.

Fourth, the account does not capture the relevant personal traits predictive of the enjoyment of sad music. Low arousal plays no special role in traits such as empathy and neuroticism, among others.

4.2. Expressions

One may think that the expressive profile of sadness offers a more promising account. People tend to cry when listening to sad music. This emotional release may result in pleasant relief. Listeners may thus opt for sad music to regulate their emotions through emotional expressions.

This may be true of some cases but it hardly generalizes. For one thing, when feeling sad, people already are inclined to cry. Although sad music intensifies this tendency and may render it irresistible, the already existing sadness often achieves the same result.

More importantly, although crying may confer short-term pleasure, studies suggest that it does not have long-term benefits (Huron, 2024). Typically, the benefits of crying pertain to the assistance that observers are inclined to offer to crying individuals. Such benefit is of little help to understand why people listen to sad music (particularly when they are alone), as it is unclear how music could properly assist them.

Lastly, the account is silent on the personal and dysfunctional issues. For instance, although excessive crying may be a vice, this offers only a partial account of dysfunctional uses of sad music. And the shedding of tears does not seem to be particularly relevant for traits such as imagination, introversion, or openness to experience.

4.3. Reflection

Recall that sadness involves the appraisal of unfortunateness and the reflective mindset. This offers a new perspective on the allure of sad music. As sadness involves epistemic benefits, it can help to reflect on unfortunate situations. People may then recruit sad music in order to enjoy these epistemic benefits.

This can take various forms. Sad music may be used to reflect, understand, reappraise, remember, or accept sad things. Indeed, studies suggest that acceptance is the main motivation for listening to sad music (Van den Tol et al., 2016). My proposal also nicely fits the role of mind-wandering, as the latter is an important dimension of reflection. The proposal is in line with the idea that sad *songs* help listeners to understand sad things (Smuts, 2011) and extends it to pure sad music. Listeners may use sad music to reflect on their own situations or on sad situations in general, such as the tragedies of life. They may also reflect on their own emotions or sadness in general, yet the reflection can extend to the subject matter of these emotions, namely sad *things*. My proposal thus goes beyond Young (2014)'s account of the value of expressiveness in terms of emotional knowledge, as it incorporates knowledge about evaluative significance.

Most importantly, it can disentangle the three issues raised by the refined paradox.

First, it can explain why people listen to sad music especially when they feel sad. When one feels sad, one tends and needs to reflect. By attending to sad music, this tendency is intensified, which results in stronger epistemic benefits. In addition, listening to sad music may also help to guide one's reflections thanks to lyrics or the development of musical structures. By intensifying and guiding reflection, sad music may thus result in long-term benefits that are specific to sadness. It is no wonder that people tend to listen to sad music when they are sad, in nature or alone; these contexts are conducive to reflection.

Second, the proposal nicely captures dysfunctional uses of sad music. Rumination importantly differs from reflection: whereas the former is dysfunctional, the latter is functional. Sad music may prompt poor reflection and obsessive dwelling on unfortunate things and negative experiences, which is sub-optimal. The proposal naturally lends itself to illuminating the perils of rumination as distortion of the epistemic function of sadness.

Third, it addresses the personal issue. Introversion, imagination and absorption, neuroticism, and openness to experience all involve cognitive elements. Reflection is a key dimension of these traits, notably when considered in the context of sad music. With regard to empathy, I conjecture that the personification of music allows for collective reflection of sad situations. As in social life, sharing one's sadness (say, with friends or therapists) may result in various benefits such as acceptance, understanding, and emotional communion that are partly achieved through reflection. By contrast, young children may be averse to sad music, as they may not have the cognitive resources to reflect on sad things and exploit the value of sadness.

This proposal is compatible with the idea that sad music elicits the emotion of being moved (Vuoskoski & Eerola, 2017), i.e. a mixture of sadness and pleasure. But why would listeners want to be moved? Here again appealing to epistemic benefits is promising. Being moved involves appreciation of one's core values. Listening to sad music may then prompt reflection on one's core values and reinforce them.

This proposal can be developed further to account for musical preferences pertaining to expressiveness more generally. Why do people want to listen to, say, happy, angry, or hate music? I propose that listeners' choices importantly depend on the function of particular emotions: love

for music expressive of emotion E recruits the function of E. For instance, one may enjoy angry music (consider its use in political protests) in order to intensify anger's function, say, retribution. One may prefer happy music and exploit the explorative function of happiness (say, by jumping in one's living room). One may enjoy hateful music as it reinforces the function of hate, say contempt and exclusion of some groups. The function of emotions is not all there is to musical preferences, yet it confers a great deal of value to expressive music.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have used the insights of empirical studies to refine the paradox of sad music. There are various motivations to listen to sad music, and the philosophical proposals capture some of them. After all, sadness involves several dimensions, such as low arousal and expressions, which explain the appeal of sad music in some cases. Still, I have argued that one important motivation pertains to the epistemic value of sadness. The reflective mindset characteristic of sadness has the resources to account for the key features of the love of sad music. In making us reflect on what truly matters, it is no wonder that sad music is often deemed profound.

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