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Pieces of Music That Evoke Different Connections

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Emotions can be described as complex reactions that the brain discharges based on the context of any given scenario. There are many different materials that can evoke emotions from within someone – for example, music, artefacts, and poetry. According to Paul Ekman PHD “emotions are a process, a particular kind of automatic appraisal influenced by our evolutionary and personal past” (Paul Ekman Group, 2020). Research completed by Avis-Riordan found that scientists discovered that each person is capable of feeling 27 different emotions (Avis-Riordan, 2017). Due to the high quantity of feelings, it can be hypothesised that the same piece of material cannot evoke emotions that typically clash (i.e., happiness and sadness). In this essay, I will be writing about a piece of music that has evoked these different and contrasting emotions from within my mind due to the varied connections I’ve experienced with the piece during my lifetime.

The musical piece I will be discussing is ‘You Raise Me Up’ by Westlife. This is a piece of music that I’ve listened to countless times during my lifetime and due to the different scenarios in which I’ve heard the song, I’ve experienced different kinds of feelings, feelings that would typically clash. When listening to this song, I can recall times when I’ve been both happy and sad, but the reasons why I’ve felt these emotions is down to context. Growing up, my mother was a huge fan of Westlife and loved listening to their music, so from a young age I remember singing along with my mother as these songs played, experiencing joy. As I grew older, I attended my first funeral (my uncle Stanley) and ‘You Raise Me Up’ was played as his coffin was carried through the church, giving the song a sad memory. Upon review, this song has different connections to my personal past, so I will identify how an artefact like this can evoke such differing emotions.

Researching further into the song, I’ve discovered that ‘You Raise Me Up’ is one of the most popular pieces of music played at funerals, especially men’s funerals. (Dignity Funerals, 2020). Delving into the lyrics of the song, some phrases such as ‘I am strong, when I am on your shoulders’ can be viewed as the singer having a connection with someone who they feel brings out a stronger energy when they are around them. Based on lyrics like these (combined with the context of someone dying), the song can be viewed as sad as they no longer have that figure in their life who can bring out the best in them. According to

Kimberly Sena Moore PHD of 'Psychology Today', "tempo is used as a way to express emotions, with fast music portraying happiness and slow music portraying sadness". (Psychology Today, 2017). Reviewing 'You Raise Me Up', the song undoubtedly has a slow tempo, playing into Sena Moore's ideology that sad songs have slow tempos. Though it can be classed as a sad piece of music, personal experiences also determine someone's emotions towards a song.

In order to ensure that my research was balanced, I decided to delve more into why sad songs can be viewed as happy to others. According to Stieg, "listening to sad tunes allows you to connect with your feelings, promoting acceptance and offering consolation" (Ebscohost.com, 2015). Based on this, it is possible for the feeling of happiness to be reached when you've accepted your feelings, allowing you the chance to build on and overcome them. As previously mentioned, it's also someone's experiences with a situation that can determine their feelings. In my experience, I had listened to 'You Raise Me Up' in a happy environment with my mother as a child, so in some terms, I do see the song as one that brings out happy emotions. Memories help people to remember positive experiences rather than negative ones, so memories that bring out happy feelings overpower sad ones (MONQ, 2018).

In terms of societal themes, 'You Raise Me Up' has gathered a general reputation of being a sad song that is popular amongst funerals, however when analysing the lyrics and sound of the song, it can be viewed as an inspiring piece. Other lyrics like 'you raise me up, so I can stand on mountains' suggest determination as a theme from the writer, once again proving the true intent of the song is to be inspiring. According to Pettijohn of 'Sage Journals', some of the most successful songs include lyrics that have meaningful themes and content (Pettijohn and Sacco, 2009). Even though a piece of music is capable of evoking emotions that typically clash because of your experiences, it's important to note that people may perceive it differently. A song that brings out more than one emotion is capable of having different meaning to someone else, however there are other aspects of the song that can still make it universally enjoyed.

My chosen piece of music is one example of how a song can evoke various emotions, with thousands of other possible examples proving that music can be perceived in unusual ways. 'Pumped Up Kicks' is a popular song that was released in 2010 by 'Foster the People'. As previously mentioned, Sena Moore PHD of 'Psychology Today' believes that tempo expresses emotions, with fast music representing happiness and slow music representing sadness (Psychology Today, 2017). The tempo of 'Pumped Up Kicks' is not one that can be described as slow (with the song including an excitable beat), however the lyrics of the song reveal the true intent from the writer. Mark Foster from 'Foster the People' revealed to MTV that the dark message behind the song is hidden by its cheery tune (Songfacts, 2020). The aim of 'Pumped Up Kicks' is to raise awareness of school shootings in America, however

like with 'You Raise Me Up', the way the song sounds compared to its lyrics are capable of evoking contrasting feelings, with 'Pumped Up Kicks' sounding cheerful, but having a darker meaning.

Researching examples of other pieces of music that are capable of bringing out various emotions that typically clash, I found that there were a lot of examples I could have used. 'Pumped Up Kicks' perfectly visualised the opposite of 'You Raise Me Up', but still had the same affects in terms of it being a song that has the capability of sounding both happy and sad when applied to different context. The difference between the songs is that 'Pumped Up Kicks' is really a song about a sad scenario, but sounds upbeat, with 'You Raise Me Up' sounding sad but having inspiring lyrics. Despite the content of both pieces, they prove how music can have the ability to discharge multiple emotions that don't typically tend to be felt simultaneously.

Further researching into the debate of whether music can evoke contrasting emotions, I found an investigation that carried out an experiment on whether artifacts affected the mood of participants. In this investigation, participants brought with them music and images that related to their experiences. The investigation found that music typically brought out happier emotions due to their perceptions, whereas images induced negative emotions (ScienceDaily, 2018). More often people choose to listen to sad music when they're alone or in emotional distress (Uwtsd.ac.uk, 2015) and when people choose to do this, it's because of situations they're facing. This proves that more than the contents of a song, it is perception that attaches a particular emotion to a piece of music. Regarding 'You Raise Me Up', my own experiences attach multiple emotions that contrast due to hearing the song in more than one context and I found this was a similar result to participants from the experiment, suggesting it is not uncommon for music to have the capability of evoking numerous emotions.

In reflection, the research I have carried out has assisted me in concluding that whilst it may be more likely for a song to evoke one emotion, it is the person's experiences that determine any additional feelings they may have relating to the piece. As a creative thinker, I have learned that whilst the contents of an artefact are important, it is ultimately perception that leads a person to their own conclusion. When researching the theme of music evoking various and contrasting emotions, I found that there were an endless number of songs that fit this narrative. Whilst the contents of a song can certainly help in bringing out this ideology, I have determined that experiences have a larger impact on how the listener feels about the piece of music. From the research and discoveries I have made, I've learned that music affects everyone differently based on the type of person they are. Some may find comfort in listening to sad music, whereas others may prefer not to do so. From the overall research I have performed, I've learned the importance of music in regards of

the emotions that pieces can connect to and as a filmmaker, it is important to include appropriate soundtracks to work I complete in the future.

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