

**A Student-Centered Musical Analysis Tool:  
The Emotional Barometer Analytical Technique  
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All too often music students are able to apply traditional analytic techniques to a piece of music and come to a fundamental intellectual understanding of its structure, yet overlook the emotional content that led them to become interested in the piece in the first place. For example, if a student identifies a secondary dominant chord, but does not understand what the emotional impact that particular chord renders in that particular place, as opposed to the infinite choices at the composer's disposal, then the student's analysis is purely descriptive and musically void.

As a means of addressing the situation described above, and as a means of making musical analysis more personal to students, I have developed an "emotional barometer analytic technique" wherein students begin their analysis not by looking at a score, but by monitoring their emotional response to the music. After their emotional response has been defined, they then analyze the music to discover what in the music led them to have that particular feeling. In this manner, musical analysis is framed by their emotional response, and they come to understand what rhetorical aspects in the music led them to have that response. Such an approach allows students to make direct correlations between personal emotional response and specific musical devices, as well as develop a sense of musical aesthetics.

Before proceeding, it should be noted that research shows that no piece of music has an inherent emotional content that will be gleaned by all listeners. Indeed, each listener will bring their own psyche to the listening experience, and the emotions they are feeling at the time will certainly influence the emotions they project onto the music. Music unlocks the emotional portion of the brain in somewhat predictable ways, but *what* emotion is felt in a particular passage will be described in a variety of ways by a variety of listeners. Still, most students have at least similar responses to particular passages. At minimum, by monitoring one's emotional response, students internalize the music and learn how music communicates to them at a fundamental, almost primal level.

The first step in the process is for the students to write the emotions they are feeling while listening to a particular work (it is best to begin with rather short works with relatively stable feelings, like the Chopin Preludes).

Once students have listened to a work a number of times, have the students discuss their emotions and write these on a board for all to see. Next ask the students if they can link any of the listed emotions with any musical elements. For example, in Ravel's *Pavane*,

students often have the feeling of “distance.” This feeling is rendered in part by the use of horn (a reflected sound) and by the use of extended harmonies (used particularly in the melody). In this manner, students examine all musical parameters (pitch, dynamics, timbre, form and text) in an attempt to understand their reaction to the piece. Students begin to discover what musical devices/gestures cause particular emotional responses. Once students understand what musical elements are causing a particular response, then they, as a performer or director, are empowered to either amplify or tone-down the emotional content by altering the correct musical parameters.

Here is a copy of what I give my students when they are first introduced to this concept:

**Mus 43 - Boone**  
**Emotional Barometer Analytical Technique**

**I. Provide Pertinent Historical Background**

Please do not just give information (such as dates and place) without linking it to the composition directly. Ask yourself: How did the time and place in which it was created impact the work? How does this work conform to prevailing styles? How is this work informed by the place and time in which it was created? What can you glean about the mindset of the composer at the time of composition? Under what circumstances did the composer render the composition? What historic information can you provide that will effect your performance/conducting of the piece?

**Emotional Barometer Analytical Technique**

*Monitor your emotions, then discover what musical elements caused you to feel that particular emotion. By doing so, you begin to discover what musical devices/gestures cause your unique emotional responses. You are thus empowered to amplify the emotional content by altering the correct musical parameters. Begin by asking these questions while listening to a work:*

When I listen to this music I feel\_\_\_\_\_.

As the music continues I feel\_\_\_\_\_.

What in the music makes you feel that way?

In what way do the following serve to contribute to this feeling:

Pitch (melody, harmony, key or mode, NHT's, range, tessitura)

Rhythm (surface rhythms, meter, feeling of pulse, tempo, harmonic rhythm)

Dynamics (including accents)

Timbre (instruments used, combination of instruments, chord voicings)

Text (if applicable discuss the relationship between the music and text)

Form (main elements and how they are put together to form a logical whole).

Of these, which elements are the most important to bring out during a performance of the piece?

Having answered these questions, you can then choose the level to which you want to bring out certain elements. For example, if an ascending line makes you feel triumphant, you can enhance this feeling by making sure the ascending line is brought out. You can diminish this feeling by not bringing it out.

*Following is a sample analysis of Chopin Prelude, op. 28, no. 9 using this technique:*

### **Chopin Prelude, op. 28 no. 9**

How do you feel when you hear this work?

Peacefulness vs. anguish

Remorse with slight sense of hope

Struggle and triumph

Disturbed

### **Pertinent Historic Background**

In 1836 Chopin proposed marriage, waited a year for a response, then found out he had no chance. Depressed, he moved to Paris, where he met the author George Sand (a woman using a male pen name – see the movie, *Impromptu*). His health was notoriously bad and getting worse. In the midst of the winter of 1838 and early 1839, he wrote these preludes.

Pitch (melody, harmony, key or mode, NHT's, range, tessitura)

Harmony: At the micro level, very few complex chords (some extensions but mostly tertian triads and seventh chords). Nonharmonic tones, which are relatively few in number and short in duration, are used in a traditional manner. The beginning of the piece clearly establishes the key of E Major (usually a bright and “happy” key) with clear dominant to tonic relationships articulated in the first measure. Clear cycle progressions follow, and indeed, clear I-V-I progressions occur in measures 1 (E), 8 (in Ab), 9 (E), 10 (in F) and 11 (in G/g). After the first bass disturbance in measure 3 (introduces 1<sup>st</sup> non-diatonic pitch, A#), the

chords become more distant, though they are still related to the key. It is as if the bass disturbance in measure 3 effected the smooth chords of the beginning. After the second disturbance in measure 4, we do cadence back in tonic, but then there is a sudden shift of key (F-Neapolitan). In measures 5-8, the downward motion in the bass (first as a single line, then in octaves) provides the sense of direction while harmony is relegated to a coloristic role (linear harmony). Note that the linear elaborations can be viewed essentially as prolongations of B7 (resolving at the beginning of measure 9) and C7 (resolving at the beginning of measure 10). Thus, measures 5-7 display tonal instability. The initial idea and key return in measure 9, but not is all as it was. The A major triad has been replaced by the a minor triad (borrowed chord - the mood is a bit darker in this version). Rapid shift of mode (a duality of emotional response) also occurs in measure 8 (Ab to g#m) and measure 11 (g followed by G). The a minor triad in measure 9 leads us to rapid shifts to F, (G/g) and E. After such flux, the return to E major via an Authentic cadence instills some sense of finality. In short, the chords are not uncommon, but the manner in which they are used gives one a sense of certain direction followed by tonal instability. The relationship of key changes is that of tonic to Chromatic mediant (Ab-where the climax occurs) or Neapolitan (F) rather than from dominant to tonic.

Keys: E, F, E, F (G) E. F is serving as N6.

Melody: Three 4 measure phrases (1-4, 5-8, 9-12) give the work a clear surface structure. In each phrase, the melody rises (stepwise or chromatically). Phrases one and three reach E, phrase 2 reaches G(Ab) (so E-G-E). In phrases one and two the contour then falls rapidly. In phrases 3 the melody ends at the peak of the contour – a pitch which is not the highest it could reach, but higher than it began (symbolizing some net positive change)  
Note that measures 8-9 are in contrary motion.

#### Rhythm (surface rhythms, meter, feeling of pulse, tempo, harmonic rhythm)

While there is a constant pulse (even though played rubato – the continuous triplets give the work a compound meter feeling and provide an inner pulse) the variety of rhythms leading into the beat (triple divisions, sixteenth divisions and thirty-second divisions) disturb our sensibilities and provide rhythmic tension. Also, we do not know WHEN the melody will move to the next note, just that it will (unease)

#### Dynamics (including accents)

Loud at the beginning, then crescendoing (even in meas. 4 where the line is descending) to ff in measure 8 where we get the climax pitch. There is a rapid falling away in meas. 9 (following the contour), then a crescendo to ff at the end. The crescendo makes us feel there is a resolve to come back – a pushing forward, a determination (but only to “E”).

Timbre (instruments used, combination of instruments, chord voicings)

Both in bass range – depth and weight. If played up an octave, would have different feeling. The bass trills seem somewhat incomprehensible b/c of the range – so they seem like a rumble from another place. The melody doesn't have lots of clarity b/c of closeness to chords, so it is muddied (trapped?). Note the lh use of octaves, meas. 6+ // ONLY piano – it is alone...

Text (if applicable discuss the relationship between the music and text)

n/a

Form (main elements and how they are put together to form a logical whole).

Form: ABA'. Note the head motive is different each time it occurs (meas. 1, 5 and 9). This coherent structure makes the piece easy to digest.

**Of these, which elements are the most important to bring out during a performance of the piece?**

See below

**Having answered these questions, you can then choose the level to which you want to bring out certain elements.**

Disturbances between lh and rh – the agitations in lh are “trouble” keeping the rh from being liberated. Accentuate the different affects. Perform the various divisions of the beat accurately – they are meant to seem “frenetic.” Make sure to articulate the dominant to tonic relationships in each key, so that the juxtaposition of keys provides adequate feelings of displacement. Make sure to carry the crescendos through to their climaxes.

