

Title: Do You Chill when I Chill? A Cross-Cultural Study of Strong Emotional Responses to Music

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While research suggests that listeners can infer the mood expressed by the music of a different culture, the question of whether peak emotional responses can also be induced cross-culturally remains unanswered. In particular, the chill response is a sudden increase in emotional arousal that can be measured physiologically through skin conductance and which is typically induced by unexpected acoustic and structural events in music. Preliminary findings show that participants experienced chills – measured through self-report and skin conductance – to both a familiar style, Western classical music, and an unfamiliar style, traditional Chinese music, as much as participants who were familiar with both styles. Additionally, all participants felt more chills to real music than to scrambled music, which acted as a control. This suggests the presence of cross-cultural similarities in the musical structure giving rise to expectations and, therefore, strong emotional responses. An ongoing experiment is expanding this result to Hindustani classical music, and will assess whether there are particular musical elements associated with chills across cultures and across groups of participants. Overall, this research counters the idea of musical meaning as being entirely generated within cultural conventions and supports the claim that some aspects of musical structure may be shared across cultures, similar to the way languages around the world share many grammatical properties.