Handout on Boghossian and Ridley

Boghossian is interested in explaining why we respond to music emotionally.

The Brute Response: Our emotional reaction is caused by music via brute physiological response. This is unsatisfying because it doesn't explain the rationality or appropriateness of these emotional responses.

Kivy's Negative Response: Our experience of music cannot arouse the garden-variety emotions, because the ability of absolute music to support content is at best too limited to supply the necessary preconditions for emotional response.

P1. Music cannot support meaning  
P2. Meaning is necessary to arouse the garden-variety emotions  
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C. Music alone cannot arouse the garden variety emotions.

Boghossian's Reversal of Kivy:

P1. Music alone arouses the garden-variety emotions  
P2. Meaning is necessary to arouse the garden-variety emotions  
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C. Music must be capable of supporting meaning.

This meaning, argues Boghossian, is expressive rather than representational.

Scruton's Metaphorical Account: Sounds have musical properties metaphorically, and this metaphor ultimately cannot be explained. This is a version of musical anti-realism.

Boghossian rejects this given that it does not answer why musical properties engender expressive properties.

Davies' Resemblance Theory: "A passage P is expressive of E just in case P sounds the way a person would sound who was expressing E vocally, or sounds the way a person would look who was expressing E gesturally." Boghossian favors something like this account.

Levinson, however, challenges this view on grounds that the degree of resemblance cannot be specified here.

Levinson 2005 – Dispositional Account: "P is expressive of E iff P, in context, can be readily heard by a listener experienced in the genre in question, as an expression of E."
Boghossian implies that this would amount to a "no-explanation" account, presumably similar to the Brute Theory.

Levinson 1996 – Indefinite Musical Persona Account: "A passage of music P is expressive of an emotion or other psychic condition E iff P, in context, is readily heard by an appropriately backgrounded listener as the expression of E, in a sui generis, 'musical' manner, by an indefinite agent, the music's persona."

Ridley on Davies vs. Levinson 1996

Pro-Persona Position: "A feature, F, of a bearer, B, is aptly to be seen as expressive iff B is seen as if it were a person."

Anti-Persona Position: "A feature, F, of a bearer, B, is aptly to be seen as expressive iff F would be expressive were F a feature of a person."

Ridley brings out the tension between these two positions with the example of a sad-looking weeping willow tree. He argues that there are good points in favor of both of these positions. An instance of this problem is found in the musical domain, where these competing intuitions issue in either theories like Levinson 1996 (Pro-Persona) that privilege the anthropomorphization of the music or theories like Davies (Anti-Persona) which focus on the features held literally by the music that are shared in common with humans expressing emotions.

On Ridley's view, both Davies and Levinson are "hard-liners"; Davies argues that conceptualizing a musical persona is never necessary to the understanding of music, while Levinson argues that it is always necessary.

Ridley's "It Depends" View on Musical Personas: "Whether the construction of a persona is necessary or not (ed. note: for proper appreciation) depends upon the character of individual pieces of music."

Ridley is careful to point out up front that this is not a compromise position – Davies and Levinson are interested in the necessary conditions for musical expression; Ridley is concerned with conditions for proper appreciation.

So then, what are the conditions under which it is sometimes necessary to construct a musical persona to properly appreciate a passage of music? Ridley is somewhat sketchy on the details here, but he seems to think it turns on whether or not doing so provides for "the possibility of richness and depth of musical experience" that would be unavailable if a persona were not constructed. The one point he seems to back quite clearly is that generalization in this area is dangerous, and the proper approach should be to take passages of music on a case-by-case basis.