The Influence of Situational Context in the Experience of Emotions in Music: The Framework for Adaptable Musical Emotions

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Abstract

The link between music and emotion suggests that music carries expressive cues which can convey or evoke emotional experiences in listeners. Research has explored how these responses converge or diverge among individuals, social groups, and cultures. However, results often vary widely between studies, with few compelling explanations for these inconsistencies. This paper proposes that emotional responses to music are adaptable, arising from a continuous conscious and subconscious processing of the broader situational context in interaction with psychophysical, cultural, and personal factors. By integrating theory and evidence from multiple domains, this paper presents the Framework for Adaptable Musical Emotions (FAME), which explains music-evoked emotions through the mechanism of *emotion adaptability* across a spectrum of timescales ranging from evolutionary to momentary. FAME advances beyond models that mainly decode emotional signals from the music by explicitly integrating situational context and emotion adaptability. It offers testable propositions about how context modulates responses across time-scales, helping to explain previously observed variability and guiding future experimental and computational work.

Keywords: emotion, affect, arousal, adaptive processes, situational context

Introduction

Emotions play a central role in music listening and human life in general. In psychology, an emotion is a brief, coordinated response involving subjective feeling, physiological arousal, appraisal, expression, and action tendencies, typically triggered by a specific situation. Musical emotions are understood here as genuine emotional episodes that occur in aesthetic contexts but engage the same core components. They are distinct from moods, which are longer-lasting and object-diffuse. Understanding musical emotions is important not only for music psychology but also because such emotions can influence listeners' well-being and daily functioning (Juslin, 2025). Despite substantial research, how and why music elicits emotions that can differ so widely across contexts and people remains largely unclear.

In recent years, researchers have made significant strides in identifying the factors that shape our emotional responses to music. These factors are commonly categorized into three domains: psychophysical, cultural, and personal factors (Juslin, 2019). A recent synthesis explicitly formalizes these working definitions and their interactions within context (Susino et al. 2025).

Psychophysical factors (often referred to as cues or musical features) are the acoustic, structural, and expressive elements of the music itself that can convey emotional meaning largely independently of cultural or personal context. Certain musical cues are believed to encode similar emotional content across different cultures, suggesting some degree of universality (Argstatter, 2016; Egermann et al., 2015).

Cultural factors encompass the shared social norms, beliefs, and learned associations that shape emotional responses within particular groups. For example, musical preferences and interpretive tendencies differ across cultures, illustrating how cultural context influences the meaning and intensity of emotions evoked by music (Susino & Schubert, 2019, 2020).

Personal factors include the individual's unique characteristics and current state—their physiology, personality, memories, mood, and other idiosyncratic traits—which cause one person's emotional reaction to diverge from another's (Taruffi et al., 2017). Personal factors can lead to widely varying emotional responses to the same music, as when a piece evokes joy in one listener but sadness in another due to their different experiences.

Over the years, numerous theories and frameworks have emerged to explain how these psychophysical, cultural, and personal factors

contribute to musical emotions. For instance, the Cue-Redundancy Model (Balkwill & Thompson, 1999) highlighted that listeners use psychophysical cues (such as tempo or intensity) to infer emotions even in unfamiliar musical traditions, whereas the Stereotype Theory of Emotion in Music (STEM; Susino & Schubert, 2017) emphasized that we come to understand, interpret, and expect certain musical genres and our emotional response to them as learned expectations and stereotypes, especially when our understanding or fandom of the music is low. A more comprehensive account is provided by BRECVEMAC (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008; Juslin, 2025), which delineates nine distinct mechanisms through which music induces emotion—ranging from automatic brainstem reflexes to evaluative conditioning—thereby spanning both universal psychophysical processes and learned, culture-dependent processes. Notably, BRECVEMAC acknowledged that listener characteristics and situational context can modulate these emotional responses. However, none of these influential models has explicitly modelled the dynamic adaptability of emotional responses across different situations and over time. Recent work centring around the situational function of music in everyday life converges with this emphasis on context and regulation (Eerola et al., 2024).

Main contribution

This paper builds on those foundations and introduces a new theoretical perspective. It proposes that emotional responses to music are not static, but adaptable to context. In the following, it outlines how situational context and emotion adaptability are crucial, yet previously under-specified, components in understanding musical emotion, and then presents the Framework for Adaptable Musical Emotions (FAME) as a unifying model.

Situational context

Beyond psychophysical, cultural, and personal factors, situational context plays a crucial role in shaping emotional responses to music. Situational context refers to the setting and circumstances of a musical experience, including the physical environment, the presence of other people or artifacts, the occasion and social conditions, and the listener's purposes or intentions in that moment. Different settings and listener intentions can dramatically alter the musical experience, influencing how much weight is given to the psychophysical, personal, and cultural factors, as well as how these factors are interpreted. For example, listening to the same piece at a celebratory event versus during solitary mourning can yield very different emotional reactions.

The importance of situational context is widely recognized by music scholars and psychologists alike. Previous research indicates that contextual factors are vital for understanding emotional responses to music (Barrett & Kensinger, 2010; Gabrielsson & Lindström, 2010), and numerous empirical studies have examined how aspects of context (location, activity, presence of others, etc.) influence the emotions listeners report. A comprehensive review of such evidence is provided by Susino et al. (2025). Despite these insights, there has been a lack of a theoretical framework that explicitly predicts *how* situational context interacts with other factors to influence musical emotions. FAME addresses this gap by integrating situational context into a model of emotion adaptability. Placing the situation and listener function at the center of the emotion episode provides a complementary scaffold to FAME's context-first emphasis (Eerola et al., 2024). Similarly, contextualized mapping of affect terms in music shows that interpretations shift with everyday activities and settings (Eerola & Saari, 2025).

Emotion adaptability

Adaptability is a fundamental concept in perception and cognition, referring to the capacity of systems to adjust to changes or perturbations. In sensorimotor domains, for instance, organisms flexibly recalibrate their responses to maintain performance when conditions shift (Petitet et al., 2018). A central premise of FAME is that emotional responses to music are similarly flexible. The term emotion adaptability denotes here the capacity of an emotional response to adjust based on a broad range of relevant factors in a given context. This usage is distinct from "adaptation" in the evolutionary sense, where a trait is shaped over generations for survival value. Instead, here it refers to an individual's dynamic adjustment of emotional reactions and responses in real time or across repeated exposures. Emotion adaptability means that, as the situational context and the listener's internal and external conditions change, the resulting emotion can change as well.

More formally, emotion adaptability refers to the formation of emotional responses that take

into account a comprehensive array of factors in a specific situational context. It is grounded in the understanding that emotions arise from ongoing conscious and subconscious appraisal of one's situation in conjunction with psychophysical, cultural, and personal factors (Barrett & Kensinger, 2010). In other words, music-evoked emotions are shaped by continuous feedback loops between what the music presents, who the listener is, both as an individual and a member of a culture, and the context in which the listening occurs.

Because of this adaptable mechanism, emotional responses to music are not fixed. They can vary across different circumstances and over time. For example, a listener's emotional reaction to a particular song may evolve as they grow older or encounter the song in new contexts. A piece of music that elicited exhilaration in a live performance setting might produce nostalgia or even sadness when heard years later in a different context. Indeed, emotional responses can also exhibit adaptability across cultures, as people draw on culturally specific cues and interpretations over time. In short, emotional responses shift based on changes in any of the contributing factors, allowing the emotional response to adapt to the particular context of a musical experience at any given moment. This dynamic nature of emotional experience helps explain why the same musical stimulus can induce different emotions in different people, or in the same person at different times.

Beyond acoustic cues and learned associations, higher-level goals (e.g., regulation), personal meaning, and knowledge shape perceived expression more than they guarantee a specific felt state, aligning with adaptability (Susino, 2023). These considerations introduce additional variability into how individuals feel and respond to music. Musical emotions thus follow the principle of adaptability: they unfold and change as new information and context become available to the listener (Cespedes-Guevara & Eerola, 2018).

A Framework for Adaptable Musical Emotions

Bringing together the above mentioned ideas of context and adaptability, the present paper proposes the Framework for Adaptable Musical Emotions (FAME) as a comprehensive model of emotional responses to music. FAME explicitly integrates situational context with the traditional psychophysical, cultural, and personal factors, organizing these influences according to their relative adaptability across different time scales. The framework conceptualizes a spectrum of emotion adaptability from low to high, corresponding to the degree to which each category of factors can change or be shaped by context.

Levels of adaptability

Psychophysical factors: These factors (e.g., the limits and capabilities of human auditory processing) exhibit the lowest adaptability. Psychophysical constraints, like our innate sensitivity to certain acoustics, tend to produce relatively consistent emotional effects across listeners and cultures. For instance, very sudden loud noises will startle most people, and a consonant harmony might sound pleasant broadly. However, even these basic responses are not entirely rigid; context can influence their interpretation. For example, a loud distorted solo guitar might be exhilarating in the context of a rock concert but jarring during a quiet meditation session. In general, though, psychophysical factors yield the most constrained and often cross-culturally similar emotional responses (Argstatter, 2016; Egermann et al., 2015).

Cultural factors: Cultural learning and norms have a higher adaptability compared to psychophysical factors. Culture is dynamic and continuously constructed by individuals, so its influence on musical emotions can change as culture itself evolves. Through enculturation, listeners develop expectations and associations (e.g., understanding that a slow minor-key piece might signify sadness in Western cultures). Yet these responses can adapt: for example, a Western listener might typically find a funeral march sorrowful due to cultural convention, but could also feel a sense of comfort or nostalgia if that piece is tied to personal or community memories (Schubert & Susino, 2021). Thus, cultural factors shape emotional responses in powerful but malleable ways, and people can even learn to appreciate music from other cultures by adapting to unfamiliar cues over time.

Personal factors: An individual's personal state and traits show the highest degree of adaptability in emotional responses. Personal factors include transient conditions like mood and longer-term aspects like personality or past experiences. These can lead to significant variations in response to the same music from person to person, or for the same person at different times. One listener may be moved to tears by a song that reminds them

of a loved one, while another remains unaffected without that personal association. Likewise, a piece might thrill a listener in an energetic mood but leave them cold when they are fatigued. Such idiosyncratic influences mean that personal factors often drive the unique emotional experiences that differ most widely among listeners (Taruffi et al., 2017).

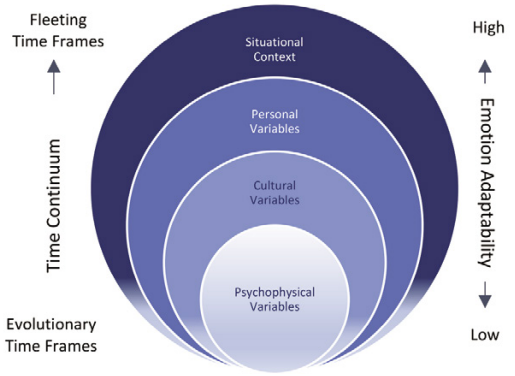

Figure 1. The Framework for Adaptable Musical Emotions (FAME) Reproduced with permission from Susino, M., Thompson, W. F., Schubert, E., & Broughton, M. (2025). Emotional responses to music: The essential inclusion of emotion adaptability and situational context. *Empirical Studies of the Arts, 43*(1), 451–483. https://doi.org/10.1177/02762374241237683.

Situational context: The situational context can modulate all of the above factors' contributions, effectively acting as a lens that magnifies or diminishes certain emotional cues. Context itself comprises many variables (physical setting, social setting, purpose of listening, etc.), that can dramatically change the emotional response to music listening. A striking example is the famous case of violinist Joshua Bell performing incognito as a street busker in a subway station. Most of the people passing by, caught in the informal commuter context, paid little attention and felt no strong emotion, at least strong enough to stop or applaud. In contrast, the very same performance in a formal concert hall context captivated the audience and evoked profound emotional responses (Weingarten, 2007). This example underscores how context can amplify emotional engagement, or dampen even the most potentially moving music. Therefore, situational context factors critically determine which psychophysical, cultural, or personal factors come to the forefront of emotional responses to music.

At the core of the Framework for Adaptable Musical Emotions (FAME) is the concept of a spectrum of emotion adaptability, illustrated in Figure 1 as expanding concentric circles. This representation conveys the increasing levels of emotion adaptability in music, ranging from low to high. Recent theory likewise centres situational function in musical-emotion episodes, offering a complementary structure to FAME's context-first emphasis (Eerola et al., 2024).

Temporal continuum

FAME spans a continuum from slow-changing (evolutionary predispositions and durable cultural conventions) to rapidly changing influences (momentary context and state). Responses dominated by slow-changing influences show lower adaptability, while responses shaped by momentary context show higher adaptability. Emotional responses shaped mostly by influences that have been stable over evolutionary or long cultural time frames (such as reflexive responses to dissonance or loud sounds) will tend to have low adaptability, meaning that they are more uniform and less affected by situational context. By contrast, emotional responses formed over shorter time frames (such as a mood induced by earlier events in the day, or the situational context of a given listening session) demonstrate high adaptability and can vary considerably.

For example, a basic startle reflex to a sudden sound is rooted in our psychophysical and evolutionary heritage and is usually automatic. However, even this can be modulated by context and personal adaptation. Levenson et al. (2012) showed that a Buddhist monk experienced a much smaller startle response to a loud noise during a meditative state than when he was not meditating. The meditation context, combined with long-term practice, allowed the individual to adapt his physiological emotional response, reducing the influence of the acoustic stimulus. This illustrates that what might be considered a "hardwired" response can be altered through situational context over time. Such modulation is consistent with constructionist accounts that treat emotion categories as populations varying with context. In general, as listeners gain experience or encounter music in new contexts, their emotional responses may shift from being driven purely by low-level acoustic features toward being shaped more by higher-level learned associations and context.

Overall, FAME integrates psychophysical, cultural, and personal factors together with

situational context to provide a more complete understanding of how musical emotions arise and change. This perspective aligns with modern constructionist views of emotion, which emphasize the continuous interaction between stimuli, the individual's knowledge, and contextual information in generating emotional experiences (Cespedes-Guevara & Eerola, 2018). In creative practice, intended expressive cues are often designed to shape perceived expression rather than to induce a specific felt emotion, which is consistent with adaptability (Susino, 2023). It is also supported by evidence that there are no invariant physiological "fingerprints" for specific emotions across all contexts. Instead, emotion responses vary, reflecting adaptation to situational context (Siegel et al., 2018). Contemporary mapping of the vocabulary of emotions that music is perceived to express also shows robust effects of everyday activities and use-contexts on interpretation. (Eerola & Saari, 2025.) By framing emotions as inherently adaptable to situational context, FAME helps explain the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of music-evoked emotions.

Conclusion

In summary, the Framework for Adaptable Musical Emotions offers a new way to understand how and why music induces emotions, as well as similar and differing emotional responses from individuals to groups, and even culture bound collectives, by highlighting the crucial role of situational context and the adaptable nature of emotional processing. The key propositions of FAME can be stated as follows:

1. **Situational context is a critical determinant of musical emotion.** Emotional responses to music are systematically influenced by the situation and context in which listening occurs. By evaluating contextual factors (physical setting, social setting, listener goals, etc.) in a structured way, we can better understand their effects on the listener's experience.
2. **Musical emotions are highly adaptable and context-dependent.** Rather than being fixed responses or fitting neatly into "universal" vs. "culture-specific" categories, emotional responses to music result from an interplay of psychophysical, cultural, personal, and situational context influences. There are no strictly invariant emotional responses to a given piece of music; instead, responses continuously adjust to the listener's traits and the situational context, blurring any clear boundaries between those factors.
3. **Focusing on adaptability and situational context opens new research directions.** Incorporating emotion adaptability and situational context into the study of music and emotion encourages innovative paradigms to examine how people respond emotionally under varying conditions. This includes experimental designs that manipulate context or require listeners to adapt (adaptation paradigms), as well as computational modelling approaches (e.g., complex systems modelling) that can capture the dynamic interactions between listener, music, and environment.

By building on previous theories of music and emotion, while explicitly modeling context and adaptability, FAME provides a more nuanced understanding of listeners' emotional processes. This perspective is echoed in a recent study (Susino, 2023), which suggested that composers and choreographers embed flexible expressive cues shaped by genre conventions and cultural factors to guide audience interpretations across diverse listening and viewing contexts. These cues increase the likelihood that certain affective meanings are inferred but do not ensure specific emotions, aligning with FAME's premise that responses remain variable and context-dependent. Framed this way, creators' strategies function as probabilistic scaffolds that shift the distribution of likely responses without fixing a single outcome, converging with context-centred models such as the Episode Model and with multi-level accounts of emotion causation (Eerola et al., 2024; Juslin, 2025). It accounts for a wide array of variables that shape musical experience, organized by their differing degrees of adaptability over time. This approach allows for better predictions of emotional outcomes, helping to explain why the same music might evoke consistent reactions in some situations and divergent reactions in others. In moving beyond classifying emotional responses as simply "universal" or "cultural," FAME suggests that all musical emotions are, to some extent, adaptable responses. Recognizing this adaptability is vital for advancing research in music cognition and emotion.

The framework also has practical implications. As our understanding of how situational factors influence musical emotions grows, it can inform real-world applications in domains such as music therapy, education, and technology. Designing

interventions with explicit attention to participants' immediate context and goals aligns with evidence from group arts interventions showing context-sensitive benefits (Watt et al., 2024). For instance, music interventions for improving mood or well-being can be tailored to consider the listener's situational context and momentary capacity for emotional adaptability. Overall, by uncovering the ways situational context and adaptability shape emotional experiences with music, we gain deeper insight into the psychological mechanisms linking music and emotion, knowledge that can ultimately help us harness music more effectively for positive human outcomes (Juslin, 2025).

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