Relating Perceptual and Feature Space
Invariances in Music Emotion Recognition

Erik M. Schmidt, Matthew Prockup, Jeffery Scott, Brian Dolhansky, Brandon G. Morton, and Youngmoo E. Kim
Music and Entertainment Technology Laboratory (MET-lab)
Electrical and Computer Engineering, Drexel University
{eschmidt,mprockup,jjscott,bdol, bmorton,ykim}@drexel.edu

Abstract. It is natural for people to organize music in terms of its emotional associations, but while this task is a natural process for humans, quantifying it empirically proves to be a very difficult task. Consequently, no particular acoustic feature has emerged as the optimal representation for musical emotion recognition. Due to the subjective nature of emotion, determining how informative an acoustic feature domain is requires evaluation by human subjects. In this work, we seek to perceptually evaluate two of the most commonly used features in music information retrieval: mel-frequency cepstral coefficients and the chromagram. Furthermore, to identify emotion-informative feature domains, we seek to identify what musical features are most variant or invariant to changes in musical qualities. This information could also potentially be used to inform methods that seek to learn acoustic representations that are specifically optimized for prediction of emotion.

Keywords: emotion, music emotion recognition, features, acoustic features, machine learning, invariance

1 Introduction

The problem of automated recognition of emotional (or mood) content within music has been the subject of increasing attention among the music information retrieval (Music-IR) research community [1]. While there has been much progress in machine learning systems for estimating human emotional response to music, very little progress has been made in terms of compact or intuitive feature representations. Current methods generally focus on combining several feature domains (e.g. loudness, timbre, harmony, rhythm), in some cases as many as possible, and performing dimensionality reduction techniques such as principal component analysis (PCA). Overall, these methods have not sufficiently improved performance, and have done little to advance the field.

In this work, we begin by perceptually evaluating two of the most commonly used features in Music-IR: mel-frequency cepstral coefficients (MFCCs) and the chromagram. MFCCs have been shown in previous work to be one of the most informative feature domains for music emotion recognition [2–5], but as MFCCs...
were originally designed for speech recognition, it is unclear why they perform so well or how much information about emotion they actually contain. Conversely, the chromagram appears to be one of the most intuitive representations, as it provides information about the notes contained in the piece, which could potentially provide information about the key and mode. Thus far, chroma has shown little promise in informing this problem. In order to properly assess these features, we construct a perceptual study using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk\(^1\) (MTurk) to analyze the relative emotion of two song clips, comparing human ratings of both the original audio and audio reconstructions from these features. By analyzing these reconstructions, we seek to directly assess how much information about musical emotion is retained in these features.

Given our collected data, we also wish to identify patterns in relationships between musical parameters (e.g. key, mode, tempo) and perceived emotion. By identifying variability in emotion related to these parameters, we identify existing features that respond with the highest variance to those that inform emotion, and the least variance in those that do not. In order to properly assess a large variety of features, we investigate the features used in our perceptual study reconstructions, features used in our prior work\(^2\) [2–5], and 14 additional features from the MIR-toolbox\(^2\).

In investigating these invariances, we explore approaches that attempt to develop feature representations which are specifically optimized for the prediction of emotion. In forming such representations, we are presented with a very challenging problem as music theory offers an insufficient foundation for constructing features using a bottom-up approach. As a result, in previous work we have instead taken a top-down approach, attempting to learn representations directly from magnitude spectra\(^5\). These approaches show much promise but are highly underconstrained as we have little idea of what our features should be invariant to. In this paper, we seek to provide some initial insight into how these problems could be better constrained.

## 2 Background

A musical piece is made up of a combination of different attributes such as key, mode, tempo, instrumentation, etc. While not one of these attributes fully describes a piece of music, each one contributes to the listener’s perception of the piece. We hope to establish which compositional attributes significantly determine emotion and which parameters are less relevant. These parameters are not the sole contributors to the emotion of the music, but are within our ability to measure from the symbolic dataset we use in our experiments, and therefore are the focus of this study\(^6\). Specifically, we want to determine whether these compositional building blocks induce changes in the acoustic feature domain.

\(^1\) http://mturk.com
\(^2\) http://www.jyu.fi/hum/laitokset/musiikki/en/research/coe/materials/mirtoolbox

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We motivate our experiments from findings that have been verified by several independent experiments in psychology [7–9]. When discussing emotion, we refer to happy versus sad temperament as valence and higher and lower intensity of that temperament as arousal [10]. Mode and tempo have been shown to consistently elicit a change in perceived emotion in user studies. Mode is the selection of notes (scale) that form the basic tonal substance of a composition and tempo is the speed of a composition [11]. Research shows that major modes tend to elicit happier emotional responses, while the inverse is true for minor modes [9, 12–14]. Tempo also determines a user’s perception of music, with higher tempi generally inducing stronger positive valence and arousal responses [8, 9, 12, 13, 15].

3 Data Collection

In previous studies (such as [9]), several controlled variations of musical phrases are provided to each participant. Since we are studying the changes in the acoustic feature domain, we require samples that we can easily manipulate in terms of mode and tempo and that provide a wide enough range to ensure we are accurately representing all possible variations in the feature space. To this end, we put together a dataset of 50 Beatles MIDI files, attained online\(^3\), spanning 5 albums (Sgt. Peppers, Revolver, Let It Be, Rubber Soul, Magical Mystery Tour). In order to remove the effect of instrumentation, each song was synthesized as a piano reduction and a random twenty second clip of each song was used for our labeling task.

3.1 Song Clip Pair Selection

Labeling the entire 1225 possible pairs from the 50 songs would be prohibitive so we choose to generate a subset of 160 pairs. Since the Beatles dataset we use contains 35 songs in the major (Ionian) mode and only 9 in the minor (Aolean) mode (with 6 additional pieces in alternate modes), we want to ensure that major-major pairings do not completely dominate our task. Some songs are represented one extra time in order to generate 160 pairs but no song is repeated more than once. Out of these 160 pairs, there are 81 major-major pairings, 33 major-minor pairings, and 7 minor-minor pairings.

For each song, we render the piano reduction of the MIDI file for the 20 second clip, and then compute MFCC and chroma features on the audio. After computing the features, we then synthesize audio from the features. Chromagram features are extracted and reconstructed using Dan Ellis’ chroma features analysis and synthesis code\(^4\) and MFCCs using his rastamat\(^5\) library. The MFCC

\(^3\) http://earlybeatles.com/

\(^4\) http://www.ee.columbia.edu/~dpwe/resources/matlab/chroma-ansyn/

\(^5\) http://www.ee.columbia.edu/~dpwe/resources/matlab/rastamat/
reconstructions sound like a pitched noise source, and the chroma reconstructions have an ethereal ‘warbly’ quality to them but sound more like the original audio than the MFCC reconstruction (examples are available online\textsuperscript{6}).

3.2 Mechanical Turk Annotation Task

In order to annotate our clip pairs, we use the Mechanical Turk online crowdsourcing engine to gain input from a wide variety of subjects\textsuperscript{[16]}. In our Human Intelligence Task (HIT), we ask participants to label four uniformly selected song pairs from each of the three categories: original MIDI rendering, MFCC reconstructions, and chromagram reconstructions. For each pair of clips participants are asked to label which one exhibits more positive emotion and which clip is more intense. The three categories of audio sources are presented on three separate pages. The participants are always comparing chroma reconstructions to chroma reconstructions, MFCC reconstructions to MFCC reconstructions or MIDI renderings to MIDI renderings. Subjects never compare a reconstruction to the original audio. For each round, we randomly select a clip to repeat as a means of verification. If a user labels the duplicated verification clip differently during the round with the original audio, their data is removed from the dataset.

4 Experiments and Results

Our first set of experiments investigates the emotional information retained in some of the most common acoustic features used in Music-IR, MFCCs and chromagrams. As described above, users listen to a pair of clips that was reconstructed from features (MFCC or chroma) and rate which is more positive and which has more emotional intensity. We seek to quantify how much information about musical emotion is retained in these acoustic features by how strongly emotion ratings of the reconstructions correlate with that of the originals. We first relate the user ratings to musical tempo and mode, and then we explore which features exhibit high variance with changes in tempo and mode or are invariant to altering these musical qualities.

4.1 Perceptual Evaluation of Acoustic Features

Running the task for three days, we collected a total of 3661 completed HITs, and accepted 1426 for an approval rating of 39\%, which is similar to previous work annotating music data with MTurk\textsuperscript{[16–18]}. The final dataset contains 17112 individual song pair annotations, distributed among 457 unique Turkers, with each Turker completing on average \(\sim 2.5\) HITs. With a total of 160 pairs, this equates to \(\sim 35.65\) ratings per pair. HITs are rejected for completing the task too quickly (less than 5 minutes), failing to label the repeated verification pairs the same for the original versions, and failing too many previous HITs.

\textsuperscript{6}http://music.ece.drexel.edu/research/emotion/invariance

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While repeated clips were presented for both reconstruction pairs and originals, requiring identical ratings on the reconstructions ultimately proved to be too stringent, due to the nature of the reconstructed clips. For the original clips we required the repeated pair to have the same ratings for both the higher valence and higher arousal clips, and reversed the A/B presentation of the clips to ensure Turk users were not just selecting song A or song B for every pair to speed through the task.

For each pair and for each audio type, we compute the percentage of subjects that rated clip A as more positive (valence) and the percentage that labeled clip A as more intense (arousal)

\[
p_v = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{n=1}^{N} \mathbb{1}\{A_n = \text{HigherValence}\}, \quad p_a = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{n=1}^{N} \mathbb{1}\{A_n = \text{HigherArousal}\} \quad (1)
\]

where \(N\) is the total number of annotations for a given clip, \(p_v\) is the percentage of annotators that labeled clip A as higher valence, and \(p_a\) is the percentage of annotators that labeled clip A as higher arousal. For each song pair, we then compare the percentage of Turkers who rated song A as more positive in the original audio to those who rated song A more positive in the reconstructions, yielding the normalized difference error for all songs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audio Source</th>
<th>Normalized Difference Error</th>
<th>Valence</th>
<th>Arousal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MFCC Reconstructions</td>
<td>0.133 ± 0.094</td>
<td><strong>0.104</strong> ± <strong>0.080</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chroma Reconstructions</td>
<td><strong>0.120</strong> ± <strong>0.095</strong></td>
<td>0.121 ± 0.082</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Normalized difference error between the valence/arousal ratings for the reconstructions versus the originals.

In Table 1, we show the error statistics for the deviation between the two groups. The paired ratings of each type are also verified with a paired Student’s t-test to verify that they do not fall under the alternative hypothesis that there is a significant change, but as we are looking for proof that there is no change, average error remains the best indicator.

4.2 Relationships Between Musical Attributes and Emotional Affect

Next we analyze the data for trends relating major/minor modes and tempo to valence and arousal. In Section 2, we discussed the general trend of major tonality being associated with positive emotional affect and higher tempo corresponding to an increase in arousal or valence.
We divide our entire dataset $S$ into a subset $M \subset S$ that consists of pairs that contain one major mode song and one minor mode song, as well as a subset $T \subset S$ in which pairs differ in tempo by more than 10 beats per minute (bpm). For subset $M$, we calculate what percentage of users labeled the major song as more positive and what percentage of users label the major song as more intense. For subset $T$, we similarly determine whether the faster song is more intense and whether the faster song is happier according to the users. Looking at Table 2, we conclude that the results are commensurate with the findings from the various psychology studies referenced in Section 2, namely that major songs are happier and faster songs are more intense.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Null Hypothesis</th>
<th>Agreement Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major Key Labeled as More Positive Valence</td>
<td>0.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faster Tempo Labeled More Positive Valence</td>
<td>0.570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Key Labeled as More Positive Arousal</td>
<td>0.528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faster Tempo Labeled as More Positive Arousal</td>
<td>0.498</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Percentage of paired comparisons that yielded the desired perceptual result for mode and tempo.

One area where we expected larger agreement is the relationship between tempo and intensity. We only have the beats per minute for each song, and we label the faster song as the one with a higher bpm. The note lengths and emphasis in relation to the tempo are disregarded in this analysis and may be a source of uncertainty in the result. Depending upon the predominant note value (quarter/eighth/sixteenth), a slower tempo can sound faster than a song with a higher number of beats per minute. These are two different compositions, not the same clip at two different tempos.

### 4.3 Identifying Informative Feature Domains

When using features to understand certain perceptual qualities of music, it is important to know how those features relate to changes in the perceptual qualities being studied. We want to find appropriate variances and invariances as they relate to a perceptual quality. For example, if emotion is invariant to key, if the key changes, the features should also be invariant to that key change. We want correlation in variance as well. If the emotion of the audio changes, we want the features that describe it to change in conjunction with it. In order to investigate these variances and invariances, we use a feature set from prior work [3], as well as a set of features from the MIR-toolbox. Using the Beatles’ clips, we generate changes in key, tempo, and mode to investigate possible corresponding differences in features. For key, the original was compared with transposed versions a 5th above and below. For tempo, the original was compared with versions at 75% and 133% of the original tempo. For mode, we shifted all the minor songs...
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to major and all the major songs to natural minor and compared the full dataset in major vs. the full dataset in minor.

Because the features contain different dimensions and have different ranges, looking at differences in their direct results does not allow for proper comparison between them. In order to draw proper comparisons, the features are normalized over dimension and range.

Given 2 feature vectors over time $F_1 \in \mathbb{R}^{M \times N}$ and $F_2 \in \mathbb{R}^{M \times N}$, we normalize the content over the vectors’ shared range.

$$F_1' = \frac{F_1 - \min(F_1 \cup F_2)}{\max(F_1 \cup F_2)}, F_2' = \frac{F_2 - \min(F_1 \cup F_2)}{\max(F_1 \cup F_2)},$$

The mean for each dimension is calculated, creating mean vectors $\mu_1 \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times 1}$ and $\mu_2 \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times 1}$. The average feature change across all dimensions is then computed.

$$FeatureChange = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{n=1}^{N} |\mu_1(n) - \mu_2(n)|,$$

If this $FeatureChange$ value is low, it means that the feature is invariant to the musical change being presented. In Table 3 we observe that features that exhibit higher variance to the specified change (tempo up/down, key up/down, and mode shift) should be more effective in computational models that are sensitive to these parameters. Several intuitive features including onsets, RMS energy, and beat spectrum emerge as the most variant features to tempo. Conversely, it is intuitive that features like mode and tonal center do not vary much with tempo.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tempo Up</th>
<th>Tempo Down</th>
<th>Key Up</th>
<th>Key Down</th>
<th>Mode Shift</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feature</td>
<td>Feature</td>
<td>Feature</td>
<td>Feature</td>
<td>Feature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain</td>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Domain</td>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onsets</td>
<td>0.127</td>
<td>Onsets</td>
<td>0.126</td>
<td>Key</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beat Spec.</td>
<td>0.081</td>
<td>Beat Spec.</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>Beat Spec.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMS Energy</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>RMS</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>Tonal Cent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HCDF</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>HCDF</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>MFCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xChroma</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>xChroma</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>Zerocross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roughness</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>Roughness</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>Chroma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zerocross</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>SSD</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>Contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brightness</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>MFCC</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>Regularity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSD</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>Brightness</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>xChroma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MFCC</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>Zerocross</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>Mode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chroma</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>Chroma</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>Brightness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>Key</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>SSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Contrast</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>Regularity</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>Attacktime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regularity</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>RMS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roughness</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>Roughness</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>SSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluctuation</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>Fluctuation</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>Roughness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attacktime</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>Attacktime</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>Onsets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
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<td>Attack Slope</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>HCDF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonal Cent.</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>Attack Slope</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>Attack Slope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Slope</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>Attack Slope</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>Fluctuation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Normalized feature change with respect to musical mode and tempo alterations.
5 Discussion and Future Work

In this paper, we have provided a perceptual evaluation of emotional content in audio reconstructions from acoustic features, and at the time of writing we know of no other work that has performed such experiments. In addition, we have related our findings to those of previous work showing correlation between major keys and increased positive emotion as well as increased tempo and increased positive emotion and activity. For tempo, mode and key we have provided a variational analysis for a large number of acoustic features. The findings we presented should be informative for future computational investigations in modeling emotions in music using content based methods.

References

