

The Sounds of Sadness

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What makes a sound sound sad? Kraepelin (1899) described sad voice as quieter, slower, low in pitch, more monotone (narrow pitch contour), and exhibiting more mumbled articulation. Research on sad music has documented these same features, suggesting a close speech-music homologue.

However, this low-slow-quiet configuration fails to offer a complete account. In Samuel Barber's *Adagio for strings*, for example, the passage most likely to evoke tears in listeners involves a high-loud-intense texture. The paradox is resolved when two sadness-related affects are distinguished: a low-arousal quiescent form (melancholy), and a high-arousal crying form (grief). In responding to severe loss, is it common for a person to alternate between periods of grief and periods of melancholy (called the mourning cycle). We will see that Barber's *Adagio* is consistent with a portrayal of the mourning cycle—exhibiting both low-slow-quiet (melancholic) passages as well as high-loud-intense (grief) passages.