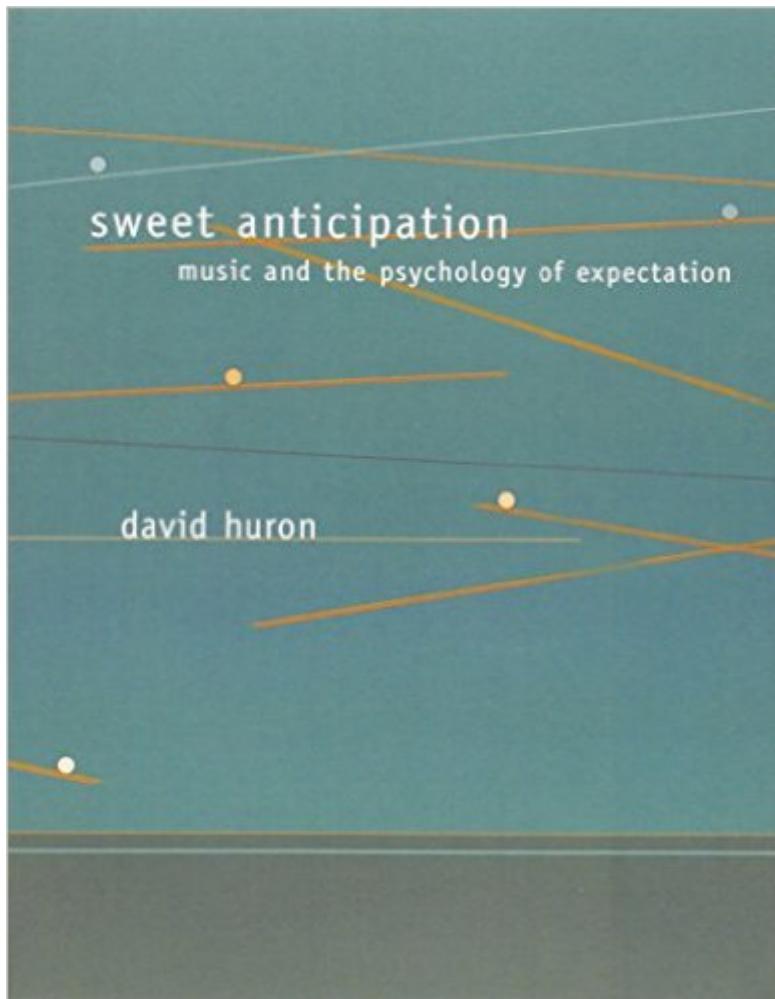


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Sweet Anticipation: Music And The Psychology Of Expectation (MIT Press)



Synopsis

The psychological theory of expectation that David Huron proposes in *Sweet Anticipation* grew out of the author's experimental efforts to understand how music evokes emotions. These efforts evolved into a general theory of expectation that will prove informative to readers interested in cognitive science and evolutionary psychology as well as those interested in music. The book describes a set of psychological mechanisms and illustrates how these mechanisms work in the case of music. All examples of notated music can be heard on the Web. Huron proposes that emotions evoked by expectation involve five functionally distinct response systems: reaction responses (which engage defensive reflexes); tension responses (where uncertainty leads to stress); prediction responses (which reward accurate prediction); imagination responses (which facilitate deferred gratification); and appraisal responses (which occur after conscious thought is engaged). For real-world events, these five response systems typically produce a complex mixture of feelings. The book identifies some of the aesthetic possibilities afforded by expectation, and shows how common musical devices (such as syncopation, cadence, meter, tonality, and climax) exploit the psychological opportunities. The theory also provides new insights into the physiological psychology of awe, laughter, and spine-tingling chills. Huron traces the psychology of expectations from the patterns of the physical/cultural world through imperfectly learned heuristics used to predict that world to the phenomenal qualia we experienced as we apprehend the world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Finally, a real five-star book about music. For some reason, there are thousands of books about language, but almost no serious ones analyzing the biology and psychology of humanity's other communication systems. Every society has a highly developed musical tradition, every society uses music in countless ways including the most sacred religious ceremonies, and yet hardly anyone has stepped forward to analyze it as a basic communication channel for humans. David Huron's book is on surprise in music. He shows how music creates expectations of pattern, from simple rhythm up to very complex patterns (the concerto, the symphony...) that only sophisticated listeners know. Musicians notoriously love to play with these patterns, to surprise the listeners and thus create new pieces and prevent boredom. Huron distinguishes several types of surprise, on the basis of a highly sophisticated evolutionary and cognitive psychology as well as an astounding knowledge of music. He knows everything from the complexities of Beethoven and Schoenberg to the joik songs of the Saami of arctic Europe, and even knows what happens when you play the latter to rural folk in southern Africa. By contrast, such earlier works as Robert Jourdain's *MUSIC, THE BRAIN AND ECSTASY* were greatly limited by confining their attention to western classical and classical-derived pop forms, thus missing everything from cross-rhythms to alternative scales. Surprise presupposes a whole file of knowledge of patterns and schemas, and a deep cognitive and emotional investment in same. Huron takes these mostly for granted. Obviously, the next step is to figure out why people love complicated musical patterns in the first place.

I learned about this book from a reference in Matthew Hurley's excellent book "Inside Jokes" in which he tackles the age old question of "what is humor?" Unlike Hurley's, work most theories of humor, in my opinion, are more observations of humor and not really a theory of some active mechanism which explains **why** it exists. David Huron's Sweet Anticipation is a superb example of answering just this kind of hard question, in this case applied to the equally tricky topic of music. Many of the elements of Hurley's humor theory are foreshadowed in Huron's book including a pretty sophisticated foundation for a theory of humor. It may seem that the two topics are unrelated, but Huron shows that there are common themes in both humor and music. Not only does he use humor as an example of other phenomena with the operating characteristics of music, but he explicitly explores humor in music itself. It's not a common occurrence but the fact that a piece of music can make one laugh is indeed an interesting fact. Rather than ignoring these edge cases, Huron thinks that musical humor may be fundamental to the mechanisms of music in general. He goes so far as to claim that a good test (as good as anything) whether a listener "gets" a musical

performance/style/genre is whether the listener finds extant musical jokes funny. The reason humor and music are linked, according to Huron, is that they both involve expectation. Huron makes a case that predicting the future is valuable to evolving organisms and mechanisms arise to maximize the utility of predictions. In the case of humor the positive feedback of finding something funny is an incentive to correct faulty mental models as they're forming (Hurley recognizes this as important and develops it extensively into his book).

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