

“’Tis not so sweet now, as it was before”: Origins and Significance of A Musical Topos

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Why is it that when we are ravenously hungry, there is almost no smell more delightful than that of our favorite food—and yet, having eaten that same food to excess, almost no smell more likely to make us feel sick? The difference in response could scarcely be more extreme, yet it obviously does not reside in objective things such as the smell itself, or the functioning of our noses. Rather, it is our *subjective* perception that has changed: when we have become sated, the very thing that was previously so alluring has become disgusting.

Cicero is famous for having applied this idea of satiety to the art of rhetoric, urging aspiring orators to bring variety to their speeches lest hearers overdose on the same literary devices repeated *ad nauseam*. Indeed we would still think less of a speaker or writer who used the same rhetorical gambit over and over again.

Yet the analogy is much harder to draw in music, if only because repetition is, in fact, among the most powerful musical devices, and many composers have made a virtue out of using it. More fundamentally, music is not like food in one obvious respect: there is no physical appetite for it to quench, there is no known harm in “consuming” it without moderation, and, for that very reason, it is hard to know what would constitute “excess” on the part of listeners and performers.

And yet, this very idea, that musical pleasure can almost instantaneously turn into disgust, is famously expressed in Count Orsino’s opening lines to *Twelfth Night*:

If music be the *food* of love, play on;
Give me *excess* of it, that, *surfeiting*,
The *appetite* may *sicken*, and so die.
That strain again! it had a dying fall:
O, it came o’er my ear like *the sweet sound*,
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour! *Enough; no more:*
’Tis not so sweet now as it was before.

Such delicate sentiments may have reflected aesthetic truth for Elizabethans, yet Medieval writers would have considered them absurd and illogical. If the same music has a “sweet sound” at one moment, yet is “not so sweet” the very next, then what does the perception of sweetness tell us about the music itself, rather than merely about the listener’s appetite? And if the latter, then what was actually praiseworthy about the music the first time we heard it, and how trustworthy was our perception of its sweetness then?

These are only some of the objections that Medieval authors could have raised against the idea of satiety in music, and they help to explain why it was so slow in developing. Still, at what point did this idea become influential, and how did it manage to survive such powerful objections, eventually to become immortalized in *Twelfth Night*? This issue, I suggest, represents more than merely a footnote to Shakespeare, and in this paper I propose to shed new light on it.