

Comedic Music: The Juxtaposition Between Incongruous Musical Elements

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ABSTRACT

Classical music is a learned art form with exemplary aesthetic value. It is often synonymous with serious music because of the careful consideration required to create and understand the music. The term serious, however, may imply a lack of fun. This thesis explores comedic Western art music, which juxtaposes high-style and low-style musical elements to provoke humor in an audience. In the second section of this document, the different theories of humor are briefly explained. In the third section, the incongruity theory of humor (which necessitates an absurd contrast between components resulting in a violation of expectations) is applied to how contrasting musical elements make a piece of music funny. In the fourth, fifth, and sixth sections, selected works by Franz Joseph Haydn, Robert Lucas de Pearsall, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Tom Johnson are analyzed for their humorous nature by considering their different methods of juxtaposing music elements.

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Introduction

The word “serious” has a somewhat misleading connotation. Usually, when something is described as serious, it implies the “not joking or trifling” or “having important or dangerous possible consequences” definition.¹ A concept relating to such importance – such that there is no joking or trifling – surely suggests an exclusion of fun. It comes as no surprise that “this is serious!” and “it’s not funny!” are often interchangeable phrases to say when it is inappropriate to laugh at the situation at hand.

However, there are other definitions that do not hold those same far-reaching implications. Serious can also mean “thoughtful or subdued in appearance or manner” or “requiring much thought or work.”² These imply a more learned and less foreboding character. Therefore, a “serious” concept may take careful consideration to construct, but there is no suggestion that it must be devoid of pleasure. Of course, many aspects of life are “serious”: marriage, religion, politics, career, education. Yet, there is no obligation for them to be a source of misery. Anyone *can* have some fun with these parts of life, even if they are serious. Music is no different. There exists such a concept as serious music, and it does not always intend solely unenjoyable contemplation from the listener.

Art music – which is generally synonymous with serious music – is considered a learned form with exemplary aesthetic value, whose concept originates from the tradition of Western classical music. Though art music requires more contemplation to appreciate or even understand, it importantly integrates amusement as part of its expression. Art music is separate from other forms of music, such as popular music – a type of music that is more attainable by the common

¹ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “serious,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/serious>.

² *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “serious.”

person. Musicologist Philip Tagg refers to art music as one of the points on the “axiomatic triangle consisting of 'folk', 'art' and 'popular' musics.”³ Art music relied on formal styles and circulated in writing, confining its presence to upper classes that had more access to education and could afford to dabble in the arts.⁴ In contrast, popular music and folk music employ fewer formalities, and the tradition is passed orally, without the need for music literacy that most people do not have. Therefore, music from the common practice period – which almost entirely relies on the written tradition – is considered art music.

Perhaps an obstacle to preference of this type of music is accessibility. Jochen Eisentraut describes three levels of accessibility in *The Accessibility of Music*: “physical access (can I physically connect with the musical sound?), personal reception (does the music engage me in some way?), and participation (can I play an active part in that particular musical sphere?).”⁵ The internet and increased globalization open access to an incredible selection of music from various eras and cultures around the world, no matter where on Tagg’s axiomatic triangle the piece falls. Similarly, there may be live performances of works for listeners to access, depending on location and financial capability. However, these are relevant only to Level I accessibility, as it allows the listeners to physically obtain the connection to the music.

³ Philip Tagg, “Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice,” *Popular Music* 2 (1982): 41.

⁴ Art music originated circulating among a smaller high class, but a growing middle class also enjoyed what is now considered to be classical music.

⁵ Jochen Eisentraut, *The Accessibility of Music*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 15.

Table 1: Three Levels of musical accessibility

Level I – Physical access (LI)	Level II – Personal reception (LII)	Level III – Participation (LIII)
<i>Means being able to:</i>	<i>Means being able to:</i>	<i>Means being able to:</i>
a) Find	a) Tolerate	a) Participate
b) Hear	b) Understand	b) Create
c) Afford	c) Interpret	c) Perform
d) Gain physical access to	d) Gain meaning from	d) Compose
	e) Learn about	e) Be part of
	f) Find relevance in	f) Learn to do
	g) Enjoy	g) Have a use for (socially, including dance)
	h) Engage with	
	i) Mentally process	
	j) Respond emotionally to	
	k) Have significant and/or positive associations with	
	l) Have a use for (personally, including dance)	
	m) Remember	

Figure 1: The three levels of musical accessibility with descriptions are delineated in a chart from Jochen Eisentraut's *The Accessibility of Music*.⁶

Yet, the reasons for one's disassociation with art music may stem beyond physical inaccessibility. Ease of access does not necessarily equate to a *desire* to be accessed. Sometimes people do not like the music, or they do not understand it, which is an obstacle to Level II accessibility. Level I and II accessibility are a sort of prerequisite to Level III participation in music. As Eisentraut frankly states, "someone without access to a jazz venue, who also did not enjoy jazz, would obviously not attend such a venue regularly or become part of its 'scene'."⁷ Level II inaccessibility is very obvious in the modern reception of art music.

Due to the nature of art music, Western Classical music could be seen as haughty. For an art form to be defined by its circulation amongst a smaller high class and requiring some level of

⁶ Eisentraut, *The Accessibility of Music*, 28.

⁷ Ibid., 23.

education to appreciate, it may seem as if it is not meant for the common person. The notion that classical music is highbrow is not as demarcated in the twenty-first century, but there still exists a divide between modern listeners and art music. As Julian Johnson phrases in his book *Who Needs Classical Music?*, some people may perceive art music as “so tainted by association with vacuous and pompous nonsense,” while its “apparent lack of modernity puts many people off.”⁸ Classical musicians and music theorists may be affronted by this statement, but it maintains some accuracy because this type of music is not as sought-after by non-musicians, which is the majority of the public. Likewise, the reason popular music is called *popular* is because of its commonality throughout a population. Much of what is called classical music does not have the same popularity as it did in its time. It is probable that more people in Belgium have heard of Stromae’s “Papaoutai” than Robert Schumann’s “Ich grolle nicht,” as apparent by the charts and hits of the former.⁹ The key attribute is that popular music maintains marketability, a quality that does not apply to art music.

Although “serious” music “implies advanced structural and theoretical considerations,” the end goal of the art form can vary greatly.¹⁰ One seemingly completely unrelated product of serious music is achieving comedy. Comedy is a form of entertainment that is intended to provoke laughter from the audience. Of course, what is considered funny differs amongst socioeconomic groups, education levels, cultures, and age cohorts. For example, trying to make a music theorist laugh with a chemistry joke is much like two electrons residing in the same orbital with the same spin quantum number – it just won’t happen. Similarly, a TikTok reference would

⁸ Julian Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music?: Cultural Choice and Musical Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 7.

⁹ Ultratop provides more detailed official record charts in Belgium. These charts are generated and published in both French and Dutch. <https://www.ultratop.be/fr/>

¹⁰ Jacques Siron, “Musique Savante,” *Dictionnaire des mots de la musique* (Paris: Outre Mesure, 2004): 242.

make perfect sense to someone who is a regular user but could completely go over a non-user's head. Again, it is unlikely (if not impossible) to find something that is universally funny, but some jokes could potentially illicit laughter from diverse audiences, surpassing demographic barriers.

Comedic music has a similar lack of universal appeal. A piece of music may be funny to musicians, but the humor could be completely lost to non-musicians. This thesis will not attempt to define whether or not specific pieces of music are funny – because that is an opinion that depends on the individual listener – but considers pieces that are accepted as comedic. Instead, the focus of this study is to explain *how* musical works provoke laughter in a listener by applying a theory of humor to the elements of the music. In accordance with the incongruity theory of humor, one of the musical elements is identified as “low-style” that juxtaposes the other “high-style” elements, which becomes the source of comedy in selected comedic pieces.

Theories of Humor

In the *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, A. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren describe humor as “a psychological state characterized by the positive emotion of amusement and the tendency to laugh.”¹¹ Defining exactly what makes something humorous is often a psychological and philosophical endeavor, and there exist multiple theories of humor that attempt to explain what makes something funny.

The three main theories of humor, as described by McGraw to “explain all types of humor by supposing broad antecedents,” are superiority, tension-release, and incongruity.¹² The superiority theory can be summarized as “feelings of superiority over other people or over a former state of ourselves” that is expressed in laughter.¹³ It is a somewhat sadistic theory that implies humor arises from others’ shortcomings and misfortunes. This theory is more “focused on scornful and mocking laughter... rather than on comedy, wit, or joking.”¹⁴ Due to its inapplicability to other things that spark laughter, this theory lost its dominance with critiques and the rise of the other theories by the end of the eighteenth century.

Regarding the physiology of laughter, the tension-release theory considers laughter as a literal release of pent-up emotional tension. Herbert Spencer writes nervous energy “always tends to beget muscular motion, and when it rises to a certain intensity, always does beget it,”¹⁵ and John Dewey states resulting laughter “marks the ending ... of a period of suspense, or

¹¹ A. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren, “Benign Violation Theory,” *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* (2014): 75.

¹² A. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren, “Benign violations: Making immoral behavior funny,” *Psychological Science* 21 (2010): 1141.

¹³ John Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/humor/>.

¹⁴ Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor.”

¹⁵ Herbert Spencer, “The Physiology of Laughter,” *Macmillan’s Magazine*, March 1860, 395.

expectation.”¹⁶ Somewhat similarly, Sigmund Freud interprets laughter as the release of the energy used to contain repressed emotions. For example, the resulting laughter of a joke at the expense of a disliked person would be considered the release of the psychic energy used to contain the internally harbored animosity.¹⁷

Today, the most prevalent theory is the incongruity theory, which is the idea that “the perception of something incongruous – something that violates our mental patterns and expectations” elicits laughter.¹⁸ The first philosopher to use the term “incongruous” to analyze humor was James Beattie.¹⁹ He writes that laughter is due to “two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them.”²⁰ In other words, in order to adhere to the theory, something funny must include the absurdity of least two contrasting components that seemingly do not belong together but are paired. It is the violation of the audience’s expectation that is funny. The realization of this mismatch is when the laughter theoretically ensues.

¹⁶ John Dewey, “The Theory of Emotion (I) Emotional Attitudes,” *Psychological Review* 1 (1894): 558.

¹⁷ Morrell, “Philosophy of Humor.”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ James Beattie, “On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition,” in *Essays* (London: Printed for E. and C. Dilly and W. Creech, 1779).

Incongruity Theory of Humor and Music

The incongruity theory of humor can be applied to music. Music theorist L. Poundie Burstein credits “the linking and contrasting of things that are somehow serious, sensible, logical, or ‘lofty’ with things that are trivial, silly, illogical, or base” as necessary elements of achieving humor in music.²¹ Though he does not explicitly state the incongruity theory of humor, his humor equation essentially contains the idea of the incongruity theory. Any elements of the music (dynamics, rhythm, harmony, melody, texture, form, tone color, et cetera) may contrast one another. As long as both the high and low styles are represented, the music *can* be funny.

However, Burstein does not believe that “humor results merely from the reconciliation of incongruities.”²² As James Palmer clarifies, Burstein “accepts the view that incongruity is a *necessary condition* for humor to exist in any medium,” but “rejects the notion that incongruity could be a *sufficient condition* for humor in music.”²³ In other words, all funny pieces of music must contain incongruous elements, but not all pieces with incongruous elements are funny.

Similarly, McGraw also challenges the idea that incongruity (or superiority or tension-release) alone makes a situation funny. He even coined the benign violation theory to add more caveats to refine the existing theories of humor. The benign violation theory “proposes that humor occurs when a circumstance is appraised as a violation, the circumstance is appraised as benign, and both appraisals occur simultaneously.”²⁴ Here, a violation is “anything that threatens

²¹ L. Poundie Burstein, “Comedy and Structure in Haydn’s Symphonies,” in *Schenker Studies* 2, ed. Carl Schachter and Heidi Siegel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 68.

²² Burstein, “Comedy and Structure in Haydn’s Symphonies,” 69.

²³ James K. Palmer, “Form-Functional and Topical Sources of Humour in Classical Instrumental Music” (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2015), 7.

²⁴ McGraw and Warren, “Benign Violation Theory,” 75.

one's beliefs about how things should be.”²⁵ Although violations and incongruity are not synonymous, the implication of violations leans heavily on the incongruity theory, as an incongruity can be a form of violation. Considering a generic joke, the ending is often incongruous with the beginning. Using language of the benign violation theory, the ending of a joke violates the expectations set at the start of the joke. The same applies for a funny musical work; the contrasting high and low elements violate the audience's pre-established expectations of classical music that should solely contain high elements and often result in laughter.

Another psychologist, John Morreall, also rejects the notion that any one of the three big theories can wholly account for humor. Yet, like Burstein and many psychologists, Morreall underscores the necessity of incongruity for the achievement of humor. He refers to a cognitive shift, “a rapid change in our perceptions,” that takes the listener “from what is ‘higher’ to what is ‘lower.’”²⁶ A cognitive shift – which can be thought of as the realization of the joke – is what results in laughter. This concept is more apt to explain the humor in verbal jokes than to analyze humor in comedic music. In music, for instance, the aforementioned elements are utilized simultaneously, so there is no “rapid change in perception” that takes place from one line to the next like in a joke. The humor lies in the continuous contrast between a high element and a low element. One cannot identify a cognitive shift between a logical and illogical element, but the listener can ideally realize the incongruity between the two.

While the considerations of McGraw, Morreall, and Burstein are for defining what is funny and what is not, this is not the goal of discussion here. The more applicable conjecture is the incongruity theory of humor in a consideration of why the juxtaposition of serious music and comic text can be funny. Because the comedic works to be considered are not jokes with a

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 51.

punchline, but rather exist as a perpetual, funny display of incongruity, there will not (and cannot) be an analysis of a cognitive shift. Likewise, the concept of benign violations will not be explored, as there is no actual threat present in listening to music, thus typifying all works as benign. As Palmer states, “listening to music, it seems, automatically places us in a kind of play mode within which we are free to playfully enjoy.”²⁷

Also, the differentiation between humor and wit must be addressed, as it has been a subject of scholarly debate in music literature. Wit is a type of humor and the “ability to say or write things that are clever and usually funny.”²⁸ By definition, wittiness does not always mean funny because wit is *usually* funny. Similarly, Burstein describes wit as “a kind of cleverness that uncovers and expresses paradoxical relationships between unlike things” and states that “though witty statements can be quite funny, they are not necessarily so.”²⁹ Again, there is the caveat that wit may not be funny. The reason that wit may not be funny is because the listener must be intellectually or socially aware of that cleverness required to construct the humor. Another factor that affects the perception of comedy is cultural competency, both between cultures and across time periods. Much like how a joke may not translate well from language to language, something from the eighteenth century might not seem funny now unless the observer has familiarity or knowledge of what could have been considered funny then. These concepts circle back to the philosophical idea that what one person may find funny, another may not since humor varies between ages, education levels, and other demographic barriers.

²⁷ Palmer, “Form-Functional and Topical Sources of Humour in Classical Instrumental Music,” 9.

²⁸ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “wit,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wit>.

²⁹ Burstein, “Comedy and Structure in Haydn’s Symphonies,” 69.

Humor of Rhythmic Timing

Comedic traditions in instrumental music, such as nuanced rhythmic timing, have some roots in *opera buffa*. As the name suggests, *opera buffa* is comic opera. *Opere serie* told heroic tales with fantastical settings that depicted historical and serious themes. In contrast, *opere buffe* portrayed everyday subjects in modern settings to which the common person could relate. Also, *opere buffe* contained many comedic scenes with amusing characters that could not be found in *opere serie*. Characteristics of *opera buffa* found its way into instrumental music. In the first chapter of *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, Mary Hunter writes:

...instrumental music, with its propensity to variety and expressive subtlety and/or multiplicity, was in a sense by midcentury already discursively primed not only to accommodate the topical mélange of opera buffa, but also to turn it into something more finely wrought. In other words, opera buffa was surely a potent resource for topical variety in instrumental music, but sonatas and symphonies also translated the habits of opera into instrumental music's already well-established habits of variety and fluidity.³⁰

Then these habits of *opera buffa* – “musical formulas or clichés with particular cultural commonplaces or stereotypes or with the music that evokes them” – are found in instrumental music and can become sources for comedy. Hunter lists “the juxtaposition of social opposites (most notably high and low...)” as a topical mixture in both operatic and instrumental works.³¹ This topical juxtaposition can then extend to a juxtaposition of musical elements to evoke humor.

The idea of timing exists in many forms of comedy. The timing of the joke – when it is told or how long telling the joke lasts – must be just right to maximize humor. A joke that is untimely may not be as funny as it would have in the past or could even be offensive. In music,

³⁰ Mary Hunter, “Topics and Opera Buffa,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 72.

³¹ Hunter, “Topics and Opera Buffa,” 69.

the humor in rhythmic timing depends on the placement and duration of notes, phrases, harmonies, and rests. Nuanced rhythmic timing can exist in contrast to other musical elements in otherwise serious music. Comedy may arise because the expectations of art music are violated by a juxtaposing “low-style” rhythm. Low-style rhythm is not necessarily poorly written but is rather an unexpected and seemingly out-of-place rhythmic element in the otherwise learned art form. It is handled in such a way to carefully craft an incongruity that sounds “off” or incongruous without sounding too unpleasant.

A famous composer who is exemplary at the usage of rhythmic timing in instrumental works is Franz Joseph Haydn. The list of Haydn’s compositions contains several pieces that exhibit his mastery of wit and humor, providing many viable options for full discussion and analysis of comedy in music. Rather than focusing on a work as a whole, certain movements or even specific moments of a piece are examined as funny, while leaving out the rest of the work which may not contain such characteristics. The focus of this section is the incongruous rhythmic timing in what would otherwise be a serious piece. Excerpts from multiple pieces of Haydn’s repertory are analyzed for their low-style element of rhythm and timing that juxtaposes the rest of the high-style musical elements. The realization of the incongruity between the timing and other elements arises with the violation of the audience’s expectations.

The first and probably most obvious example of Haydn’s comedic music is the String Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 33 No. 2. It is nicknamed “The Joke” because of its bizarre yet funny ending. The entirety of the quartet is not humorous; the first three movements do not have the obvious juxtaposing elements found in the final movement, from where the piece gets its nickname. The entire “joke” – a rather surprising ending – is set up over the trajectory of the movement because it does not end where the piece takes the listeners. Thus, the “punchline” of

the joke actually exists in the last twenty bars of the finale.

The fourth movement of the quartet is in a five-part (*ABACA*) rondo form. It begins with a cute, jovial melody in the first violin with limited accompaniment from the other strings. The first episode (*A*) of the rondo form constitutes that jovial theme (*a*) which is played and repeated



Figure 2: The jovial melody is presented in the first violins in the first eight measures of the fourth movement of Haydn's String Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 33 No. 2.

followed by a different theme (*b*) which increases the use of chromaticism and lower string accompaniment before returning to the jovial theme (*a*). Rondo form necessitates the return of the refrain *A* twice more, with or without variations. Before the next refrain *A*, there must be a contrasting episode (*B*). In this case, episode *B* is where all the modulations of the movement take place. The new key area contains an extra flat, indicating an arrival to A-flat major which then gradually becomes F minor. After these brief tastes of different keys, the episode comes back to E-flat major and remains here for the remainder of the piece. Following this, the return of refrain *A* is as expected and unvaried in melody and accompaniment; the only difference from the first rendition is this one does not have any repeats.

The next refrain (*C*) contains a new theme and should feature another modulation. Here, there is a new theme distinct from those found in refrains *A* and *B*, but there is no modulation. The lack of key change confuses the listener, who likely expects some deviation from E-flat major. Since there is an unattained expectation to go somewhere tonally, it seems as though there

must be more to this section, which foreshadows the true joke of the piece. Alas, the episode continues in E-flat and returns to the final appearance of refrain A.

Again, the jovial theme appears. After the first phrase (*a*), there is a coda which comes as a brief *Adagio* section. Gretchen Wheelock describes the out-of-place interjection as “a somber intrusion at variance with the prevailing climate of the movement” with “mock-serioso imposture.”³² However, this *Adagio* is not as jarring as what comes next. The *Presto* then returns with the phrase *a*, but only the motive of the first two measures is written before a strangely long silence. The theme picks up from where it left off but only for another two measures. Then the silence returns. This pattern – two bars of music then two bars of rest – occurs twice more until the whole phrase is completed. The theme has concluded, and a perfect authentic cadence achieved. Surely the piece is over now. It is not. After an uncomfortably long silence of four measures, the phrase begins anew. After the first two bars, there is a pause again. At this point the listener might expect the two bars of music then two bars of rest pattern to repeat. But it does not. The piece has ended mid-phrase.

³² Gretchen A. Wheelock, “Engaging Strategies in Haydn’s Opus 33 String Quartets,” *Eighteenth Century Studies* 25, no. 1 (1991): 7.

Figure 3: The last twenty-five measures of the fourth movement of Haydn's Joke Quartet contains the out-of-place *Adagio* section followed by the restatement of the starting theme. The theme is interrupted with rests until the piece ends mid-phrase.

Because of the popularity of the piece, there are many analyses of this humorous ending. In one analysis, Wheelock provides a nice discussion of the final sixteen bars, regarding the violation of the listeners' expectations:

Whether in hearing an internal echo of each fragment in the silence that precisely accommodates it, or an echo in the music played of the fragment anticipated, listeners are likely to become increasingly aware of a participatory role in playing out the ending of this finale. That the tune should now continue in a *pianissimo* version with *four*-bar silences between phrases is unthinkable. Or is it? Haydn's use of opening-as-closing in this surprise ending again discloses a subtle ambiguity: the melodic progression, so clearly identified throughout the movement as an opening move, is nonetheless supported by a I-V-I cadential formula. Technically speaking, the close is made in the accompaniment, while the melody remains incomplete at the double bar. The joke of Haydn's de-parting gesture is thus not simply that the opening phrase contradicts presumed closure, but that this beginning implies a continuation even more outrageous than those heard previously.³³

Obviously, the incongruity of this ending is the constant interruption and long pauses within a well-established theme. Wheelock claims that upon first reading, the performers may "blame an inattentive copyist, then question the attention of the other players" because interruptions like these are traditionally not supposed to happen.³⁴ Yet, it is not the result of a mistake or poor writing. Haydn writing this intentionally means a rhythmic element that seems unplanned (representing low-style) exists in an otherwise high-style piece, and it is funny because the listeners begin to understand this clever treatment of timing by the end. The form of the rondo is respected, the melody is catchy and typical, and the incorporated harmonies make sense. This juxtaposition fits McGraw's definition of a violation: "anything that threatens one's beliefs about how things should be."³⁵ The contrasting high and low elements violate the audience's pre-established expectations of classical music that should solely contain high elements and often result in laughter.

Haydn's strange placement of rests is not limited to the aforementioned string quartet and can be found in his symphonies as well. For example, untimely rests interrupt phrases in the third

³³ Wheelock, "Engaging Strategies in Haydn's Opus 33 String Quartets," 7.

³⁴ Ibid., 8.

³⁵ McGraw and Warren, "Benign Violation Theory," 75.

movement of his Symphony No. 104 in D Major. The third movement is a minuet and trio, and the minuet is in rounded binary form. It starts in D majors with two phrases that are eight-measures long, which are conventional lengths. At measure seventeen, however, the overall phrase lengths become longer: they are now ten measures long. This is already an irregular sentence length, but this is not too much of a violation or juxtaposition to be considered funny. Much like in “The Joke” quartet, there are rests that interrupt the phrases of this movement. In measures 45 – 46, there are whole rests that suddenly appear. The motives of this passage feature



Figure 4: The finale phrase of the minuet from the third movement of Haydn’s Symphony No. 104 in D Major features two measures of rest that interrupt the established trajectory of the line.

an anacrusis that leads to a melodic trill over the dominant harmony before arriving on the tonic. The interruption occurs after an anacrusis. Since Haydn has introduced this pattern twice in measures 40 – 44, there is an expectation that the anacrusis would precede a similarly trilled harmony. It does appear, but only after these seemingly misplaced measures of rest. This symphony is not a comedic work like “The Joke” quartet, but it still features the high-style musical elements against a jarring low-style rhythm. This inclusion of incongruity adds expression and contrast to the works.

Haydn does not solely use rests to achieve comedic rhythmic timing; he also employs bizarre harmonic lengths and melodic pathways. His Symphony No. 60 in C Major is nicknamed *Il distratto*, which translates to “The Distracted”. It was written as theatrical music for a play of the same name, *Der Zerstreute*, where its six movements constitute the overture, four entr’actes, and a finale. The purpose of this music is incidental music for the story of an absent-minded protagonist. Haydn uses poor musical timing to portray a character who in the midst of action, seems to forget what is going on, and then reevaluates what he should do from there. For instance, phrases may begin with purpose; they start firmly and drive forward to an anticipated end goal. However, the expectation is violated when that anticipated end goal is not reached. The realization that the audience has been misled ideally results in humor.

One method Haydn achieves this is by excessive prolongation of harmony. In measures 66 – 86 of the first movement, there is a standard progression of harmonies. The overarching outline of the progression simplifies to tonic – subdominant – dominant – tonic, each of which has its expansions. However, the predominant expansion – which may be more appropriately called an excess rather than an expansion – lasts from measures 71 – 82. Twelve measures worth of a prolongation is relatively excessive. The longest prolongations are of the tonic or perhaps a

dominant (such as the dominant lock of the exposition of a sonata) but not often a predominant harmony. The tonic and dominant expansions that occur around this excessive subdominant are expanded with other brief harmonies. For instance, measures 83 – 85 are the dominant prolongation but consist of a first-inversion dominant, tonic, first-inversion supertonic, cadential second inversion tonic, and then root-position dominant. Even though these measures can be simplified to a general harmony of a larger, overarching progression, they contain their own little progression within. The inclusion of these harmonies makes the overall dominant function of these three measures more colorful and interesting. Much like an episode of a show, it contains its own journey that simultaneously contributes to the bigger plotline of the story.

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with three staves (treble, alto, and bass clef). The first system (measures 61-70) shows a complex texture with many notes and rests. The second system (measures 71-82) is marked with 'perdendosi' and features a continuous, repetitive pattern of eighth notes in the piano part. The third system (measures 79-82) shows a transition from a soft (pp) to a very loud (ff) dynamic, with a final measure marked 'ff'.

Figure 5: The excessive and stagnant predominant harmony in this excerpt is found in measures 71 – 82 in the first movement of Haydn’s Symphony No. 60 in C Major.

The predominant harmony in these measures does not do this; it is just a subdominant chord for twelve measures. There is no brief appearance of another harmony, and it is the same note in every voice for twelve measures. There is not any addition of coloristic features such as voice exchange that would at least trade the note in one voice with the notes in another. The only exception is the presence of neighbor tones in the first violin's melody line. In a way, the inclusion of the neighbor tones makes this worse. If each line were completely monochromatic with one note for the entire duration of the "expansion," then the listeners can more patently realize Haydn's stylized wit and release their expectations sooner. However, the appearances of non-chord tones make the audience briefly think the composer is competent but just got lost along the way, just like the distracted protagonist.

Elaine Sisman, who writes of Haydn's theatre symphonies in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, describes another depiction of a distracted protagonist on the larger music scale.

Excessive extension is only part of the joke in the "zerstreute" music. The ways in which the passage is altered in development and recapitulation reveal that it is more than a "one-liner": in the development the same passage begins on D minor (the subdominant of A minor), but then turns gradually into the dominant seventh of C major to prepare the recapitulation (mm. 146-157), while in the recapitulation the resolution is simultaneously speeded up and weakened by a first-inversion tonic (m.215). Finally, an apparent quotation from the opening of the "Farewell" Symphony (no. 45, 1772) in mm. 109-122 requires a different sort of self-recollection, as though Haydn himself had become distracted.³⁶

Here, Haydn displays confusing harmonies and quotations that are incongruous with the rest of the music. One can argue that these moments are a form of comedic timing because the only reason they seem out of place is because of where (i.e. when) they arise in the music. Placement

³⁶ Elaine R. Sisman, "Haydn's Theater Symphonies," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 43, no. 2 (1990): 312.

and occurrences in music are not spatial but temporal in nature. In this music, where the harmonies technically make sense, their appearances are only off-putting relation to what is happening around them.

Utilization of incongruent musical elements is imperative in achieving the story's narrative: portraying an absent-minded protagonist. The unexpected rhythmic timing in the music contrasts the rest of the more predictable musical elements, much like how the protagonist of the play is still a hero even though he is stupid. Both of the incongruities, in the music and in the character, cooperate to form the narrative of the play and create the comedy.

This witty interference with conventional rhythms is what juxtaposes the other high-style elements of the pieces. The humor in these pieces may take a higher level of musical understanding to fully comprehend. The incongruous texts in Mozart's bawdy canons or Rossini's cat duet (which will be discussed in the following section) are more easily noticed than a chord's prolongation or strange harmonic pivots. The latter, as Palmer describes, is "a more controlled and measured deployment of proportional play" that exhibits a higher level of sophistication.³⁷ Haydn's works may be less comedic to a modern audience or an audience of non-musicians, but that does not matter. The comedy exists in the piece because of the timing incongruities that Haydn displays.

³⁷ Palmer, "Form-Functional and Topical Sources of Humour in Classical Instrumental Music," 37.

Humor of Absurd Text

Vocal music has an additional musical element that instrumental music does not: text, or lyrics. Thus, a source of incongruity unique to comic vocal music is between the text and the music. If they are the separate and clashing components, they couple to violate the audience's norms. In most cases, the text can be absurd, vulgar, crass, or anything that completely contrasts well-learned, formulaic music to which the text is set. The incongruous music and text are two obligatory components of the whole – there is no humor without the text because there would not be anything for the music to contrast, and vice versa.

Standing alone, words may elicit humor, which is why verbal jokes and stand-up comedy are funny. But the comedy in comic vocal music often lies in the juxtaposition between its text and the music that the text accompanies. Technically, the music is not necessary if the text is already funny on its own. In these situations, perhaps the text exhibits incongruous components already or even follows another theory of humor. In such cases, there is no need for music to *make* it funny because it already *is* funny. Consider the famous two snare drum, one crash cymbal hit (the “ba dum tss”) that stereotypically follows a joke. In reality, there is no point in it. If a comedian's joke is funny, then the joke (i.e., the text) alone would be enough to provoke laughter. If the comedian's joke is *not* funny, the drumkit sound effect would not *make* it funny; it would just be the sound the audience hears before an uncomfortable silence. The addition of the drumkit does not contribute anything because there is no incongruity between the “music” and the joke.

Undoubtedly, there are compositions in which the text is serious, but another element of the music is not. These pieces are less commonly perceived as funny by a broader audience because much like comic instrumental pieces, the audience will need to notice and appreciate the

low-style element's contrast to the other high-style elements. When the text is the incongruous element, it potentially has greater reception, given the audience understands the language of or the humor in the text. There still exists a limit to how funny the text can be; works whose texts are predictable or even too offensive will lose their humor. Considering the benign violation theory, if the text is too offensive, the violation is no longer benign because it upsets the listeners. Likewise, even if the composer intends for the text to be a benign violation, sometimes the text is not a violation at all because the audience expected joke or saw it coming in some way. Regardless of these possible pitfalls, some composers manage to provoke humor with the superimposition of an incongruous text over serious music.

The *Duetto buffo di due gatti* is one example of a famous comic piece that uses a surprisingly low-style text against music with high-style elements. The translation of its title is *Comic Duet for Two Cats*. Although the duet is attributed to Gioachino Rossini, the piece is actually a compilation assembled by Robert Lucas de Pearsall in 1825 under a pseudonym of "G. Berthold." Wolfgang Birtel writes:

The ingredients he used were the *Katte-Cavatine* (Cats' cavatina) by the Danish composer Christopher Ernst Friedrich Weyse (1774 – 1842) as an introductory *Adagio* (without asking the composer's permission!), an extract from Rossini's opera *Otello* (the *cabaletta* from Rodrigo's aria '*Ah, come mai non senti*' from Act II) and lastly a passage he had written himself – all joined together seamlessly with new words and arranged as a 'cats' chorus' to the general entertainment of performers and audiences alike.³⁸

Depiction of animals in music is not uncommon in classical music and actually has a considerable history. One example out of many is the solo oboe at the end of *Danse Macabre*, a tone poem by Camille Saint-Saëns, symbolizes the rooster crowing at dawn when it is time for all the undead to return to their graves. This piece is certainly not comic, and the purpose oboe

³⁸ Wolfgang Birtel, "Preface," in *Duetto buffo di due gatti*, comp. Rossini (Mainz: Schott Music).

crowing is not supposed to be silly. Nevertheless, imitation of animal sounds functions as a method of pictorialism to depict nature or other animals in serious music. However, the incorporation of animals in Pearsall's duet is not for pictorialism but for humor.

The animals in this song are cats, as evident by the title of the piece and how the two singers are listed as *primo* and *secondo gatto* in the score. Pearsall creates a dramatic story and depicts a plotline of two separated protagonists longing to be together who finally attain unified reconciliation. However, the lyrics of these protagonists are absurd in relation to the rest of the music. There is only one lyric in the entire piece: "miau," the Italian spelling of meow. The whole duet is the two singers meowing at each other. The composer creates an entire narrative by dramatizing definitive affect shifts between sections all the while using meaningless lyrics that contribute nothing to the story. This unexpected incongruity between the strange text and otherwise theatrical music creates humor, designating the piece as a comedic work. Because this piece uses operatic high-styles and deflates its seriousness, it is a caricature that is written for satire but rather for the sake of humorous entertainment.

To open the piece, the singers' melodies and the accompanying piano reflect solemn music of high social status. The *secondo gatto* opens the piece with an almost textbook definition of a sentence. The first four measures are the presentation that establishes and stabilizes the key of D minor. This presentation can be broken into two two-measure melodic segments: a basic idea that opens up melodic content and a contrasting idea that follows. The continuation has an expected increase in harmonic and rhythmic motion that leads to a perfect authentic cadence in D minor. The next phrase is sung by *primo gatto* and is in the same structure. The phrase is also a sentence and repeats the exact same structure and harmony as that of *secondo gatto*, with some variations in the melody. These melodies also feature piano motives of the lament style and

present the initial “conflict” of the story. It features descending minor seconds that represent sighs, longing, and crying. Because the singers almost never sing in unison here, this section establishes a situation in which the two *gatti* are separated. Not to mention, this section is in the minor mode, which is a quintessential marker of sad and lamenting music. The minor and lament music can be interpreted as depicting their longing and desire to be together.

Adagio

PRIMO GATTO
(ERSTE KATZE)

SECONDO GATTO
(ZWEITE KATZE)

Adagio

PIANOFORTE

p

Mia - - u, mi - - au,

mia - - u, mia - - au,

mi - - au, mia - - u,

Figure 6: The opening of the Pearsall's *Duetto buffo di due gatti* features pianto motives with two singers who never sing in unison, portraying a longing separation of two cats.

In the following “developmental section” of the *Adagio*, the key shifts to the relative major and features chromaticism (as secondary dominants and augmented sixth chords) that adds a sense of tension – whether romantic or argumentative in nature – between the cats. Because

these chromatic harmonies occur around cadential points, they dramatize the cadences. Similarly, the shift to a major mode has a noticeable change in mood, foreshadowing a new, happier development in the story. Here, they begin a brief call-and-response, where *primo gatto* interjects after *secondo gatto* presents a short motive. The *gatti* then sing simultaneously for the first time in the piece before returning to another brief call-and-response. The *Adagio* then ends on a half cadence with the *gatti* singing in a sort of unison, ready for the *Andantino*.

Figure 7: The call-and-response passage in F major with dramatized cadences appears at the end of the *Adagio* section of the *Duetto buffo di due gatti*.

Since this piece is a duet, both *gatti* should hold equal importance in the music. The first indicator of their equality is that the opening gestures of both *gatti* in the *Adagio* exhibit the same structure and harmony; neither is longer nor more sophisticated than the other, and they are both

the same length. Similarly, the call-and-response demonstrates their equality because it depicts a conversation between the *gatti*, and neither one is “talking” over the other. These musical elements – form and duration – do not deviate from the expectations of songs from this era. Should the composer wish to make these elements low-style, he could have drastically unbalanced the durations or violated the norms of form. For example, he could have written a duet in which one of the *gatti* does not get a chance to sing for more than a few measures or even at all. However, neither form nor duration creates the incongruity.

In the *Andantino* section, the *gatti* are entirely in rhythmic and melodic unison. They sing in thirds together the entire time, resembling a love duet of the classical era.³⁹ Again, this underscores the equality between the two voices of the duet. Although still in D minor, this section depicts “unanimity after the resolution of earlier difficulties or uncertainties” which were featured in the somber *Adagio*.⁴⁰ This section also samples music from one of Rossini’s operas, *Otello*. The explicit attribution is not apparent in the music, so manipulation of the musical material from this dramatic opera may be homage to Rossini or just a sample. Regardless, the sample is from the *cabaletta* from Rodrigo’s aria ‘*Ah, come mai non senti*’ from Act II. A *cabaletta* in an opera features faster rhythms that depict more emotionally dramatic moments in the story. The *Andantino* in this duet functions the same way. The rhythm is significantly more animated than the opening *Adagio*, and the section links the slow beginning to the even more lively end.

³⁹ *Grove Music Online*, s.v. “duet,” by Michael Tilmouth, 2001, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000008263>.

⁴⁰ *Grove Music Online*, s.v. “duet.”



Figure 8: The *Andantino* section returns to D minor with the singers singing in unison and in thirds, which is a key feature of an operatic love duet.

The mood of the *Allegretto* is significantly different than those of the first two sections of the duet. Firstly and most noticeably, the key is in the relative major. The intimacy of the *Andantino* and the solemnity of the *Adagio* have been replaced by an active, assertive back-and-forth between the *gatti*. They sing another though even more animated call-and-response, as if they are more eager about the subject at hand. The music would fit a light-hearted argument or even the representation of a comic scene in an opera.⁴¹ Again, the duration of the phrases exhibits equal importance between the two voices, and they come together in unison to finish the duet. The plotline then concludes here, where the once separated singers are now reunified and satisfied.

⁴¹ Ibid.

The musical score for the Allegretto section consists of three systems of music. Each system includes two vocal staves and a piano accompaniment. The vocal parts are in a key with one flat (B-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand. The first system shows the vocalists entering with 'mi - u,' and 'mi - au, mia - u,' respectively. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand. The second system continues the vocal dialogue with 'au, mi - au, mia -' and 'mia - u, mia -'. The piano accompaniment remains consistent. The third system concludes with a call-and-response pattern: 'u, mi - au, - au.' for both voices, marked with a forte (f) dynamic. The piano accompaniment includes a crescendo (cresc.) leading to a piano (p) section and then a forte (f) section. The piece ends with a final chord and a fermata.

Figure 9: The Allegretto section contains a livelier call-and-response and ends on a harmonious unison between the two singers, indicating a reunification of the cats.

Within the music, there appears to be no evidence of a low-style element. The melodies are appropriate for singers of the era, there is a logical flow within the form, and the harmonies and keys are sensible. In this piece, it is the text the vocalists sing that presents the incongruity. The expectation established by the *Adagio* would be lyrics that express mourning or longing. The *Andantino* presents an expectation of a love duet, with lyrics “verbalizing” the singers’ affection. Each section has a definitive affect and style – a full narrative with significant shifts in mood – while simultaneously mocking high operatic style by making both protagonists cats. Allusion to cats in the piece is expected, but listeners most likely do not expect the singers to actually meow at each other the whole time. All they perceive in a performance is two vocalists with piano accompaniment. They may question why the piece is called a comic duet for two cats, but it is made very apparent after the opening phrase. In countless performances of this duet, the audience laughs after the *secondo gatto* sings the first *miau*.

The text here is not crass or offensive, but it does violate the expectations of the listeners. This exemplifies Beattie’s discussion on the source of laughter: “two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object.”⁴² The music features elements appropriate to the style of the genre, but the lyrics do not fit the preconceptions of a Romantic era song. Whatever presumptions a listener has about songs or text of the Romantic era it is most likely not meowing. Once the audience becomes aware of the mismatch between the text and the style, the humor is realized and laughter theoretically ensues. For instance, there is chromaticism in the more dramatic parts of the *Adagio* and *Allegretto*. Typically, in these more emotional sections, the chromatic harmony accompanies a word to emphasize it. In this duet, the harmonies always emphasize the word *miau*. No one *miau* holds more significance or meaning than any other because the text is always the same. A listener may

⁴² Beattie, “On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition.”

anticipate a change in text to accompany the change in music, but it ends up as more dramatic meowing.

This duet is a successful example of comic music because it surpasses language barriers and does not necessitate learned knowledge or expectations that non-musicians may not have. There is no need to understand phrase structure or harmonic analysis for an audience member to perceive a mismatch between the lyrics and the music. Regardless of the musical education, there is a perception of classical music, and cats most likely do not belong in it. If the lyrics of the piece are subtracted from the duet, the piece sounds completely in the high-style. Furthermore, this song underscores how music (specifically singing) can communicate meanings and can even shape an overall narrative trajectory, without recourse to the meanings ascribed to words. Again, there is no meaning in the cats' meows in the piece, but the narrative comes from the music. Much like in songs of a different language, the changes in expressions and affect in each section create a story. But unlike a different language, the cats' meows have no communicable meaning in the song and create charming humor.

Although not the topic of this thesis, another consideration regarding the music is the purpose of this piece. A creative work copying and altering an existing idea is considered a parody. This piece *could* be considered a parody because it does sample music of both Rossini and Weyse. The purpose of the parody may vary, but common goals are often satire and or humor. Though satire and humor are not independent rhetorical devices, satire typically involves commentary or ridicule of a person, organization, government, society, or some other entity. The idea that these sampled works are treated in such a way to elicit humor can potentially characterize this piece as satirical. However, there is no evidence to support a claim of mockery of or commentary on the composers, works, or subjects that are represented in this duet. There is

not a sound argument that the comic text ridicules the composers or style because it is just cat sounds. Therefore, this piece cannot be considered a satire.

In cases where a parody is purely comedic, it can be considered burlesque, which is a work that elicits “laughter by caricature of the manner or spirit of serious works or by ludicrous treatment of their subjects.”⁴³ Similarly, burlesque in music applies to musical works that contrast comic and serious elements. Should there be no other purpose but a trivial attempt at making an audience laugh, *Duetto buffo di due gatti* could be considered a burlesque. With a complete dramatic trajectory that starts with the sad separation of two protagonists who progress toward a happy reunification by the end, the song features this comic and serious contrast while being funny for the sake of comedy.

The next song for discussion also features incongruity between the music and the associated text. In this piece, however, the absurdity in the text is not silly but vulgar. The music does not tell a story but instead creates fun with an otherwise gross topic. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s “Leck Mich im Arsch” is a comedic canon that is not necessarily for the entertainment of the public but rather as a profane joke amongst his friends. The piece inappropriately implies anilingus – the sexual stimulation of the anus with the tongue – through ensemble singing. Since that is a very private matter, using the topic for ensemble singing is incongruous and funny. Furthermore, the application of strict and serious rules of counterpoint in the context of these lyrics is even more bizarre and surely elicits humor from the audience and the singers alike.

Without a doubt, Mozart is a very well-known and prolific classical composer. Countless performances of his symphonies, operas, sonatas, and other pieces are heard all over the world, even two hundred years after his death. His works can be found as a subject of study in sonata theory and for harmonic analysis in introductory music theory courses. With such prolific

⁴³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “burlesque,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/24999>.

repertoire of high art, Mozart may not give the impression presenting crass humor in his works. However, there are many evidences of scatology in Mozart's works and letters.

Regarding his non-musical writings, Mozart displays references to scatology in the letters he writes to his family members. Scatology refers to the interest in or preoccupation of obscene matters, namely feces and excrement. Approximately 10.5% of the three hundred seventy-one published letters by Mozart contain references to scatology, according to Benjamin Simkin.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, Mozart's father, mother, and sister reference scatology in only one letter each, resulting in a lower concentration of scatological tendencies per letter than that of Wolfgang Mozart. Simkin, who compiled and tabulated these scatology references in Mozart's and his family members' letters, suggests that Wolfgang Mozart's affiliation with scatology lays in his "plausible affliction with Tourette's syndrome."⁴⁵ Regardless of the reason, the well-renowned composer still exhibits this immature, crass characteristic throughout his adulthood and incorporated it into his music.

David Buch writes that "lewd expressions on the stage were relatively uncommon in this period," indicating that it is unexpected – in both Mozart's time and the modern era – to present obscene themes in performance. In this time in Viennese history, it was also incredibly unlikely for a script that makes use of any "outhouse humor" to pass the official censor in theatre. Therefore, the only works that could possibly contain any explicit scatology would have had to have been published for performance off a stage. Buch explains:

Only one musical genre in this period had the degree of vulgarity depicted in Forman's scene: the bawdy canon. In this genre, a brief vocal piece often notated in one musical line, humor resides chiefly in the shock of crude language and

⁴⁴ Benjamin Simkin, "Mozart's Scatological Disorder," *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 305, no. 6868 (1992): 1563.

⁴⁵ Simkin, "Mozart's Scatological Disorder," 1563.

scabrous topics rather than in the wit characteristic of English songs such as the catch.⁴⁶

There are seven bawdy canons in total that have been attributed to Mozart, as depicted in the figure. Naturally, the textual content of these canons is obscene, which “caused embarrassment among nineteenth-century editors and biographers, who consequently bowdlerized the texts.” To undo the censorship of the editors – while also attempting to maintain the integrity of the original text – “restoration of the original texts in the *Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke* allowed a reassessment of the canons, usually as the musical correlate to scatological humor in Mozart’s letters.”⁴⁷ To a modern audience member who may not know this about Mozart, these bawdy canons are a shock and often funny. Even Mozart intends their performances “for private humor and buffoonery” but “in a closed, inebriated social circle.”⁴⁸ The contrast here clearly lies between the high style of canon and the inappropriate text.

The term canon “is applied to counterpoint in which one melodic strand gives the rule to another, or to all the others, which must, at an interval of time, imitate it, note for note.”⁴⁹ It is considered the “strictest form of contrapuntal imitation” because of the rigid structure that the music must uphold. Because each voice enters at a different time, careful planning is necessary to ensure the voices form proper harmonies. This task becomes more difficult as more voices are added, as there is a higher probability that the pitches present create strange harmonies and or harmonic progressions. Therefore, it takes a certain level of mastery to appropriately prepare the

⁴⁶ David J. Buch, “Mozart’s Bawdy Canons, Vulgarity and Debauchery at the Wiednertheater,” *Eighteenth-Century Music* 13, no.2 (2016): 284.

⁴⁷ Buch, “Mozart’s Bawdy Canons, Vulgarity and Debauchery at the Wiednertheater,” 284-285.

⁴⁸ *Idib.*, 296.

⁴⁹ *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, s.v. “canon,” edited by Joyce Kennedy, Michael Kennedy, and Tim Rutherford-Johnson, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199578108.001.0001/acref-9780199578108-e-1557>.

dux – the leading voice – so that the *comes* – the following voice or voices – can stack harmoniously. Mozart’s bawdy canons are self-perpetuating because when the *dux* ends, it repeats again and can continue doing so as many times as desired. Therefore, these canons can be further classified as perpetual canons, or rounds. A round “consists of a brief melody divided into sections of equal length that serve as the points of entry for each voice,” which is true for the four-bar phrases Mozart creates.⁵⁰

In his most famous “Leck mich im Arsch,” the canon is in six parts, meaning it is written for six individual voices. The *dux* is twenty-four measures long, and the entry-points for each voice are after a four-bar phrase is completed. These points are indicated by the small numbers on the primary melody. “Leck mich im Arsch” is in B-flat major cycles through a consistent



Figure 10: The *dux* from Mozart’s canon for six voices, “Leck mich im Arsch.”

⁵⁰ *The Oxford Companion to Music*, s.v. “round,” by Judith Nagley and Jane Bellingham, 2011, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199579037.001.0001/acref-9780199579037-e-5771>.

tonic-dominant-dominant-tonic pattern. This pattern exists because every first, fifth, ninth, thirteenth, seventeenth, and twenty-first measure independents and simultaneously outlines a tonic harmony. It also true for the second, sixth, tenth, fourteenth, eighteenth, and twenty-second measures that outline a dominant seventh harmony. At no point does an overlap between a tonic and dominant harmony occur because of the strict four-bar spacing. Also, there is very limited use of the sixth scale degree in the melody, as it part of neither a tonic nor a dominant seventh harmony. The few times it appears in the melody are as a passing tone in measure 13, a neighbor tone in measure 14, and an extended appoggiatura in measures 21-22. Careful consideration is necessary to construct the canon because negligence could form strange harmonies by stacking too many non-chord tones into a measure of overlapping lines.

The bowdlerized version of this canon begins with the line “Laßt froh uns sein,” which happens to be the original second line. Only the first line of the canon is censored; the remaining lyrics of the canon remain unchanged from the original:

Bowdlerisation:

Laßt froh uns sein!

Laßt froh uns sein!

Murren ist vergebens! Knurren,

*Brummen ist vergebens, ist das wahre Kreuz des Lebens, das Brummen ist ver-
-gebens. Knurren, Brummen ist vergebens, vergebens!*

Drum laßt uns froh und fröhlich, froh sein! Laßt uns froh und fröhlich, froh sein!

Translation:

Let us be glad!

Let us be glad!

Grumbling is in vain! Growling,

droning is in vain, is the true bane of life, the droning is -

- in vain. Growling, droning is in vain, in vain!

So let us be glad and happy, be glad! Let us be glad and happy, be glad!

These lyrics create an uplifting, celebratory mood for a small company of six men. There is only one melody that all voices would need to learn, and the melody is not terribly complex, so the piece does not take excessive amounts of time to put together as an ensemble. Therefore, it is an appropriate small work for pleasure amongst a group of friends.

However, the unbowdlerized text adds a bit of humor to the work. As mentioned previously, only one line of the text was censored by the publishers Breitkopf & Härtel. The first line, which gives the canon its title, is originally “Leck mich im Arsch” and translates to “lick me in my arse.” Now suddenly, there is an addition of this inappropriate line that colloquially means “kiss my ass.” Based on individual interpretation, this could be interpreted as an immature insult or – if taking the translation literally – as an invitation for anilingus, which is the sexual stimulation of the anus using the tongue. The latter is sexual in nature and much more inappropriate than the former, which functions as an insult. Either way, this verse is phrase that does not seem to belong in a properly composed canon from the Classical era.

Since this is the first verse every voice sings, there is a recurring reminder of what this piece is actually about. While one voice sings “let us be glad” and another sings “growling is in vain,” a new voice enters with an invitation to lick him in his ass too. This line’s repetitive

appearance amidst the text about joy and happiness almost suggests a cheeky narrative: kiss my ass and don't complain about it! This adds insult to injury because "kiss my ass" is already an insult (similar to biting one's thumb), and the celebratory mood of the canon is taunting and patronizing. Moreover, should someone wish to see a significantly more sexual and inappropriate narrative, then Mozart may be suggesting that the joy in life comes from anilingus because droning is in vain, so let us be glad by engaging in this sexual activity.

The scatological nature of the text is the low-style element that contrasts with the other musical elements in a high-style canon. Like the previously explored *Duetto buffo di due gatti*, the humor of the text is more accessible to a wider audience – given the audience members can speak German – because it does not require musical background to understand the contrast. The incongruity is more immediately apparent. Additionally, the humor may be attributed to the contrast between the scatological nature of the text and the reputation of the composer, rather than the actual music. There is reverence for the works of Mozart, and classical music is art music associated with sophistication and high society. Therefore, the association of scatology with Mozart is already jarring in and of itself, let alone its incorporation to his music.

Unlike the *Duetto buffo di due gatti*, however, there is a risk of losing the humor because it is too inappropriate. Again, whether or not the piece is funny to an individual is not the topic of concern, but it is necessary to address that there can be a limit to the comedy of potentially offensive humor. Referring back to the benign-violation theory, the insertion of scatology in classical music is a violation, but an interpretation of anilingus may no longer be benign. Some of Mozart's companions who contributed obscene lyrics to canons, but the "texts have a degree of vulgarity beyond anything attributed to Mozart."⁵¹ These canons are less known and unlikely to be considered funny because they are too crass. "Leck mich im Arsch" is more tame but still

⁵¹ Buch, "Mozart's Bawdy Canons, Vulgarity and Debauchery at the Wiednertheater," 292.

incongruous enough to be funny. This piece though can function as a joke amongst friends who celebrate comradery through profane humor that would otherwise not be displayed publicly. The contrast between the high-style and serious counterpoint with such low-style and crass text and implications surely evokes humor in the listeners.

Both in “Leck Mich im Arsch” and *Duetto buffo di due gatti* are comedic pieces that use contrasting text against high-style music. One is more offensive than the other, but both are categorized as benign violations that can be funny to the listener. Referring back to the incongruity theory of humor, these pieces exemplify Morreall’s cognitive shift: the audience cannot pinpoint the change in perception from the high-style to low-style while listening, but they can identify and understand the incongruity between the musical elements. Because the contrasts between the musical styles and their texts are so apparent, these pieces are funny to a wide variety of audiences and achieve comedic entertainment solely for the sake of humor.

Incongruity in Performance Practice

So far, the pieces discussed have had one obvious contrasting musical element that evokes their comedic nature. When shifting to music of the twentieth century, it becomes necessary for composers to utilize different methods to create incongruity than done in the past because there are fewer formal and pitch-based expectations in modern and contemporary music. As stated before, there can be more than one contrasting element to create the humorous incongruity. In Tom Johnson's most famous work – *Failing: a very difficult piece for solo string bass* – there are many violations of the norms of musical performance which make it a funny and enjoyable work. It is transgressive because it pokes fun at the expectations and standards assumed for performers and performances. Here, Johnson creates theatrical music that celebrates the shortcomings of imperfect performances and turns it into an unconventional display of entertainment.

The first abnormality appears as the title of the piece. Titles for musical works usually reveal a form or depict the topic of the work. As an example, Ernest Bloch's Concerto Grosso No. 1 with Piano Obbligato is, as its name suggests, a concerto of multiple soloists and orchestra with an obligatory piano part. For Johnson's piece, the title – *Failing* – is the gerund of the verb *fail*. This verb holds a rather negative connotation because people typically do not wish to fail at tasks. But even though it is a negative term, it is not as dramatic as, say, *dying* or *sobbing*. If the piece had a negative title like that, then the listeners could expect an emotional piece. But *failing* is so broad that it is not associated with as much tragedy as another negative verb, even though people would still regard failing as a bad thing.

The subtitle of the piece – *a very difficult piece for solo string bass* – functions as a descriptor of the piece. It is, in fact, a solo piece for double bass that happens to be very difficult.

Even though it provides a description, the subtitle is bizarre. Why is Johnson stating that the piece is very difficult to perform? Mily Balakirev's *Islamey: Oriental Fantasy* is considered to be an incredibly difficult piece for solo piano, but he does not label it as so. Johnson's titling is intentional as if he insists that the performer and audience know that the piece is supposed to be very hard. There are reasons to write difficult music – such as for technique enhancement or virtuosic showpieces – but that is not the case here. The name *Failing* hints that the purpose of the piece is to depict failing, and that just so happens to be the case. The program notes read:

One of the themes that runs through my work has to do with testing performers. If there is a real challenge for the performer, and a distinct chance that the performer will not be able to meet this challenge in a particular performance, and if it is going to be clear to the audience whether the performer has succeeded or failed, then a performance takes on a special fascination, a little like athletic events. There is an aria in *The Four Note Opera* where the mezzo has to sing for about four minutes without accompaniment, and come out, hopefully, on the same note that the pianist plays at the very end. There was a whole series of *Risks for Unrehearsed Performers* (1977-79) each of which could be performed only once, where performers were given particular challenges at the performance, without having any idea beforehand what was going to be required. And then there is *Failing*.⁵²

The gimmick of the piece is apparent in the first line of music. The double bassist reads, “In *Failing*, I am required to read a long text while playing music written above the text.” This is true: the performer plays the music on the staff while reading words below the staff. Here, the soloist is both a performer on the instrument and a narrator. It is incredibly unconventional for a work to necessitate the instrumentalist *talk* while playing. This is only a recent development, where new composers are requiring their solo double bassists to talk while playing.⁵³

It is also unique of Johnson to want the performer to fail playing his piece. For whatever

⁵² Tom Johnson, “Program Notes,” in *Failing: a very difficult piece for solo string bass*, comp. Johnson, (Paris: Editions 75, 1975).

⁵³ Other pieces that feature a solo double bassist who must talk while playing are John Deak's *B.B. Wolf* and Joëlle Léandre's *Taxi*.

reason a piece of music may be written, it must be played correctly – i.e. the performer must succeed at playing the piece – for the purpose to be realized. Even the aforementioned works must be played correctly for music to sound nice and for the humor to manifest. Regarding *Failing*, the listeners are anticipating a failure instead of hoping the performance goes smoothly. This convoluted mindset simultaneously raises yet lowers the stakes of the performance. It raises the stakes because not only will the audience members be very aware that the performer failed, but *they are actually expecting it to happen*. In a performance, if a soloist makes an error, the audience is hopefully either oblivious to it or forgets about it as the performance continues. But here, the audience anticipates the errors, so it will notice them when they appear. But the stakes are also lowered in the sense that since the point of the piece is to fail, any mistake will be part of the gimmick. An egregious mistake – although more probable to occur – will be less offensive. Instead of a gasp, the audience might let out a chuckle.

Soloists are vulnerable during a live performance. They spend countless hours refining their craft to present it to a judgmental audience. A mistake is embarrassing, and neither the performer nor the audience wants to bear witness to one. But since a mistake is now a part of the work, it should not feel wrong. It emphasizes that a mistake in a performance is not actually that much of an issue. Making an error during a performance does not have the same far-reaching implications as, say, making an error in a surgery. Here, a mistake becomes funny instead of cringey. The incongruity here lies in the reception to the mistake in performance; what is normally taboo becomes acceptable. Johnson creates a low-style performance element in his piece that contrasts formality and expectations of what a performance should be.

Another incongruity exists between the text and the music. In the previously discussed songs, the texts had low-style words that were incongruous to the high-style music. Here, the

transmission of the text juxtaposes the presentation of the music. The text is not sung but is spoken. Because the text is spoken, it does not match up to the text. This is not necessarily a high-style versus low-style, but it is a non-musical element that is incorporated into the music.

The publisher includes this manuscript:

“Can you talk? Can you play a highly chromatic melody that doesn’t make much sense? Can you do them both at the same time? The composer, Tom Johnson, doesn’t think that you can. And, just in case you can do it, he wrote a piece to prove to you that you can’t. In *Failing* you have to read his very humorous text aloud to the audience at the same time you play the music on your bass; music that has absolutely no relationship to the words you are speaking. In fact, the text you are reading to the audience will describe just how hard this piece of music is and that you will probably not be able to play it correctly. That’s fine because, if you fail to play *Failing* correctly, you have succeeded in playing the piece as the composer thinks it should be played since the composer doesn’t think it can be played correctly.”⁵⁴

The understanding is – according to the publisher and later on in the text – that the music has no correlation to the text. This juxtaposition contributes to its humorous nature.

The music starts slowly. Notes only sound in the natural pauses of the text, and they mostly come in groups of two. This makes it very easy for the performer to talk and play at the same time. As the piece continues, the musical line becomes more active and difficult to manage while speaking. It is not uncommon for a piece of music to become more energetic after a calm start; it could be the central conflict of the story. And much like the resolution that follows the conflict, *Failing* calms until the end of the piece. The notes that appear at the beginning are not disconnected from the rest of the piece. They are fragments of a recurring chromatic line that appears in full a few minutes into the work. At first, the line is broken up into bits that are too small to consider as phrases or motives. But after some time, more notes appear at a time and the

⁵⁴ Jeff Baker, “Trying to fail: speech and string bass,” *New West Symphony*, 14 April 2020, <https://newwestsymphony.org/trying-to-fail-speech-and-string-bass/>.

gaps between them get smaller. Soon, the pattern of repeating notes becomes clear even though they are presented in different ways.



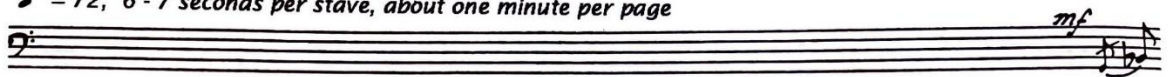
Figure 11: Recurring pitch pattern throughout Tom Johnson's *Failing*, a very difficult piece for solo string bass.

most want to fail, because everybody fails at certain times and in certain ways anyway, and

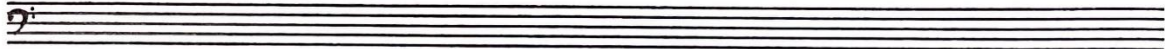
because that is what the piece is about, and because I want to interpret it appropriately. But

Figure 12: One of many examples of the recurring pitch pattern appears in a disjointed fashion on the ninth page of the score.

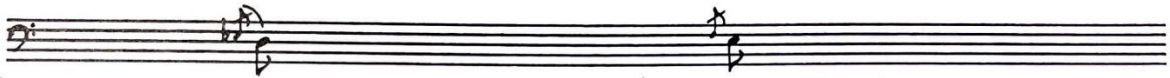
$\text{♩} = 72$, 6 - 7 seconds per stave, about one minute per page



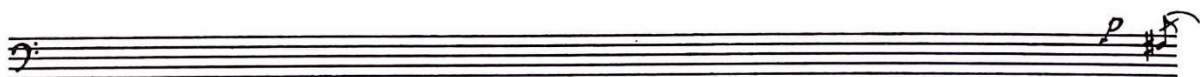
In *Failing*, I am required to read a long text while playing music written above the text. The



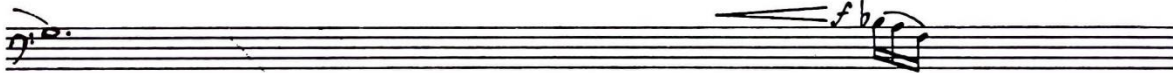
text must be read out loud at a more or less normal pace, and I must not allow the music to



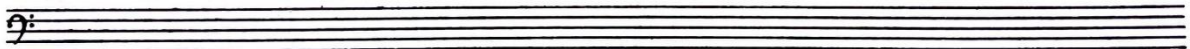
slow me down. The task is fairly easy for a while, because there is not much music, and



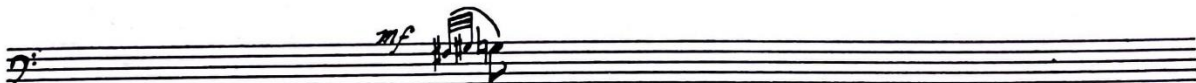
most of it comes at the ends of clauses and sentences, almost like normal punctuation. Later



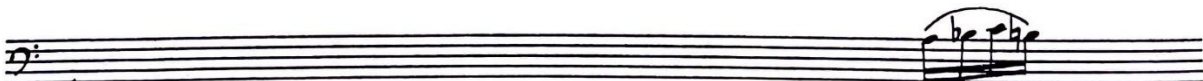
on, there is more music, and the task becomes more difficult - so difficult, in fact, that



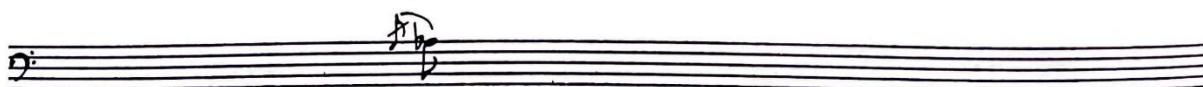
I will probably not be able to do it without either slowing down my reading speed or else



making mistakes in the music. At least the composer feels confident that I will eventually



begin to run into trouble, which is why he called the piece *Failing*. So far, the task



is still not that difficult. But the challenge is that, as the piece becomes more difficult,

Figure 13: The first iteration of the recurring pitch pattern appears on the first page (and continued onto the second page) of the score in a highly fragmented fashion.

The actual pitches chosen seem to be random because they cannot be simplified or interpreted as tonal harmony. Although it is highly chromatic, it does not follow twelve-tone

serialism either. Even the publisher describes the line of music as “a highly chromatic melody that doesn’t make much sense.”⁵⁵ However, the order of these seemingly random notes may be purposeful, as it contributes to the illusion of virtuosity. Because the melody is full of half-step motion, it does not require the double bassist to shift to and from different left-hand positions, which is incredibly difficult to accomplish at fast tempi. The notes are generally all in one area of the fingerboard and can be reached with pivoting rather than full shifts. The illusion of virtuosity, however, comes from the “flying fingers” the audience sees. Of course, to play a chromatic passage of changing notes, the string player must constantly lift and press down his or her fingers on the strings. The constant motion combined with the shifting and pivoting makes the passage look harder than it actually is.

As stated in the piece, “the mood of the music sometimes changes radically.” The music alternates from having a “strong, aggressive quality” to being “lyrical, almost sentimental,” which are jarring contrasts to each other. These sudden forceful passages interrupt the more lyrical ones and vice versa, so they are segregated to different parts of the work. Because the music may be more rambunctious at certain points, the speaking must also get louder for the audience to hear the text. But if the performer speaks too loudly the entire time, the speaking

⁵⁵ Baker, “Trying to fail: speech and string bass.”

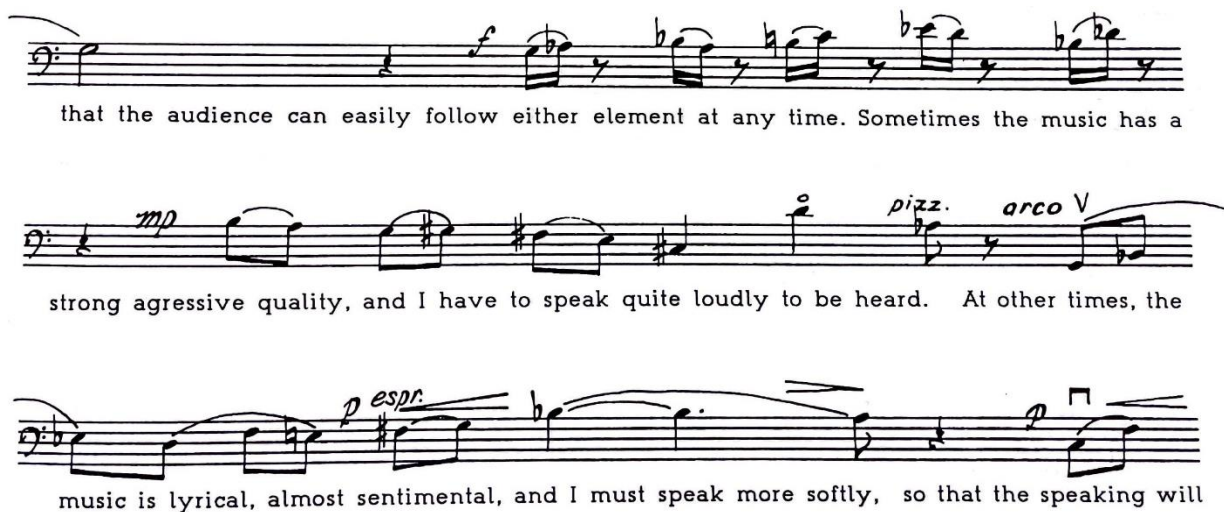


Figure 14: An example of the back-to-back occurrences of strong, aggressive lines and soft, lyrical lines from the second page of the score.

may overpower the softer parts of the music. Johnson utilizes incongruous phrasing that results in forcing the performer to try to dodge an incongruity in performance because the performer is trying to match the volume of the music to make the text as comprehensible as possible. Yet, even this raises some issues because if the performer's "voice fluctuates too much with the rises and falls of the music, the text may become difficult to understand." This constant motion back and forth from loud to quiet in both the music and the text creates an incongruity in the music for the audience to find amusing.

Of course, the performer must be mindful of the volume and phrasing of the speaking and playing in addition to playing the right notes and speaking normally. Since the goal for the listeners is to "easily follow either element at any time," an incongruity arises when the performer fails at one of the tasks at hand. For instance, if the performer starts playing wrong notes or stumbling mid-phrase, the musical element is tarnished. Likewise, if the performer stutters or misses a word, then the text becomes less comprehensible, which is even more glaring of a failure. This would be normal for any piece of music: play all the elements properly so the audience can follow any element at any given moment. Technically, there is no incongruity in

the music except the phrasing contrasts between the aggressive and lyrical moments. But since the work is written in a way to make the performer fail, the incongruity of an erroneous element – which can then be considered low-style – exists in performance practice. Since the outcome of an error is less wincing in this piece than in others, it elicits humor.

In addition to the contrasting phrases written in the music, there are bizarre wordings in the text. Arguably the most humorous part of the piece is the constant description of failing and its relationship to succeeding:

“If I tried to fail, and then failed, that would be a kind of success, and not a failure at all. So I must try to succeed. That way, when I fail to succeed, I will succeed in communicating the essence of the piece, even though I will fail to accomplish the task as it is set up. In other words, I will not be able to fail unless I am trying to succeed, and I won’t succeed in interpreting the piece sensitively unless my performance turns out to be a failure. Or, putting it another way, I will probably succeed in failing to succeed, not only because the music is so difficult, but also because, if I fail to succeed in failing to succeed, I will fail to fail and will miss the point, since *Failing* is obviously about failing, and since any successful performance *must* be a qualified failure.”

If one actually attempts to comprehend the text, it makes sense. Like negatives in math, the double negative of “failing to fail” cancels out into a positive: succeeding. So, failing to succeed at failing to succeed is in fact failing to fail. It takes active thought to process, which is more difficult to do when the performer does not stop speaking. It is practically impossible to follow both the music and text simultaneously because the music is also fast-paced and boisterous. When the focus goes to the text, it shifts away from the music and vice versa.

Audiences are generally very receptive to this piece. As mentioned before, the accessibility of music can be a barrier for some audience members to enjoy some works. When there is text – whether in this piece or in a song – level II accessibility is higher than if there were no text. This is due to the fact that more people have linguistic comprehension skills than

musical understanding. In this piece, the seriousness of the performance is stripped, and it becomes a joke. Since the purpose of the work is to make the performer fail and is supposed to be an enjoyable comedy, the piece is a burlesque of sorts. It pokes fun at the highbrow nature of performance and tears down the vulnerability of giving a flawed performance. It is funny for the sake of comedy – and for the sake of failing.

Conclusion

Attempting to objectively define the selected works as funny would be an impossible task. However, finding the humor in the music is attainable because there exist details that theoretically provoke comedy. The identification of the comic elements in these works is based on a psychological theory of humor: the incongruity theory of humor necessitates an absurd contrast between components that results in a violation of the listeners' expectations. The unexpected juxtaposition occurs between two musical elements that seemingly do not belong together but are paired anyway. Works by Haydn, Pearsall, Mozart, and Johnson are analyzed for their humorous nature.

The incongruity theory of humor is applicable to these pieces because the expectations of classical music are violated with incongruities within the music. Classical music bears the general expectations of art music: high-style and serious with exemplary aesthetic value. In the writing and delivery of this type of music, there is an expectation that all elements are complementary to each other and the learned styles. In comedic classical music, there are still high-style musical elements that adhere to conventions, but there may also be one or more low-style elements that provide a contrast. The former creates an expectation, and the latter violates it. This violation is the necessary condition for achieving humor in music.

One form of incongruity arises with rhythmic timing that contrasts the other elements of the music. "Wit" is a more applicable term to describe this type of comedy because it requires some level of acquired understanding to comprehend the incongruity. Franz Joseph Haydn is renowned for his use of wit in music. In his String Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 33 No. 2, he sets up a full trajectory with a catchy theme in rondo form, just to violate the audience's expectations with constant interruption and long pauses at the end of the work. Similarly, in the third

movement of his Symphony No. 104 in D Major, he incorporates untimely rests that interrupt the high-style, melodic phrases. His treatment of comedic rhythmic timing extends to beyond just strange placement of rests and phrase interruptions. His Symphony No. 60 in C Major, *Il distratto*, includes bizarre harmonic lengths and melodic pathways to portray the story of an absent-minded protagonist who is constantly getting distracted. He achieves this by incorporating harmonies in excess and phrases that begin with purpose but derail to an unrelated ending, which do not satisfy the anticipation of the listeners. In these examples, Haydn creates a direction the audience expects the music to go but uses low-style, out-of-place timing to thwart those expectations. Upon realization of Haydn's cheeky subversions, the audience ideally realizes the witty humor in the work.

Another form of incongruity is that between text of vocal works and the music it accompanies. If all the composed musical elements are in the high style, a contrast will arise with any ridiculous text that accompanies the music. The text can be absurd, silly, crass, or anything that is low-style. In the first example, Robert Lucas de Pearsall's *Duetto buffo di due gatti* depicts an entire emotional narrative starting with a lament in D minor and ending with a reunification of two voices in F major of two vocalists just meowing at each other. While sampling operatic styles and previous works, he creates deflates the seriousness of the high-style of opera with the silly lyrics. Vulgar text is also analyzed, such as in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's "Leck Mich im Arsch." Here the learned style of canon for six voices is accompanied by inappropriate text that would normally not be displayed in a public performance setting. In this case, the well-written work becomes a joke piece to sing amongst friends about an otherwise crass subject. Because these songs are composed in accordance with conventions of art music, the audience should expect the text to compliment the music. Hearing absurdly out-of-place text

– like animal sounds and sexual remarks – becomes funny when the incongruity is realized.

The last piece for consideration, Tom Johnson's *Failing: a very difficult piece for solo string bass*, incorporates multiple mismatched elements throughout the music to create a theatrical piece. The most obvious violation of expectations is the performer must read text while playing music, which is a bizarre task for a double bassist. Regarding the composed music, there is constant contrast between lyrical and rambunctious sections that occur one after another and, the music has no correlation to the text whatsoever. Similarly, the text becomes so verbose that the narration becomes too convoluted to follow while listening to the accompanying music. The display of so many unconventional features is stellar at provoking humor. Furthermore, the purpose of the piece is for the performer to actually fail at speaking and playing at the same time, which deflates the cultivated nature of performance and nullifies the vulnerability of giving a flawed performance. The audience's expectations for the music and the performance are violated in a very entertaining way, which creates an interesting comedy.

All of the works considered violate the expectations of the audience in some fashion. The set-up in the pieces allude to a certain sophistication, but the composers subvert the audience's anticipations by incorporating a low-style element that does not belong amongst the other high-style elements. The audience's realization of the incongruity between those elements evokes humor because its expectations were violated. These violations are not harmful or offensive, as music is not inherently threatening, so the violation becomes playful and funny. Whether due to strange rhythmic timing, absurd lyricism, or unique performance practice, these elements stand out because of their peculiar pairing with other components that are more suited for the style of classical music.

Some of these works are further categorized as burlesques. A burlesque is a caricature

whose main purpose is to be comedic. Therefore, these pieces would need to just be funny – no criticisms, ridicule, or other deeper meaning. Mozart’s “Leck mich im Arsch,” Pearsall’s *Duetto buffo di due gatti*, Haydn’s Joke Quartet, and Johnson’s *Failing* especially seem to fit this description well. They are composed as light-hearted jokes with a clear intention to be playful and elicit laughter. They caricature opera, canon, and rondo but do not function as criticisms of the genres. Therefore, there is no narrative except to create humor for the sake of humor.

The expectations for art music can make it seem classical music must solely be serious and contemplative. It can be a turn-off for those who are not familiar with and or do not understand the style of music. Comedic music can disprove beliefs that classical music is unattainable because it provides a light-hearted source of entertainment that can offer a point of entry to more people. Not only that, but it also serves as a reminder that people from both the modern and older eras can perceive the same jokes. When analyzing the comedy from the past through these pieces, we learn something about that period in time. Yet also, there is an element of timeless jokes, as we recognize our common humanity through his humor. It is comforting to know that our humanities match across centuries, and the resulting laughter is undeniably worthwhile. Art music can be serious, but it becomes very amusing and uniting when we can have some fun with it.

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