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Bungled Schemata, Accent, and Class Prejudice in Haydn's 'Joke' Quartet

ABSTRACT

Background

The eighteenth century was a golden age for satire. Think of William Hogarth's engravings on 'modern moral subjects', James Gillray's cartoons, or the political lampoonery of the Scriblerus club.

The overriding purpose of satire is to deride the vices, follies, and pretensions of individuals and social groups in order to shame them into improvement. It can take the form of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule, but it must expose and criticize behaviours or attitudes that are seen as detrimental to the common good. Comedy is employed as a means to an end, a tool for social criticism. More often than not the targets involve powerful in-groups, possessing wealth, status, and influence.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

I argue that Haydn's Scherzo from the Quartet Op. 33 No. 2 is a musical satire, that Haydn intended it to be heard as such, and that the key to unlocking its meaning is to be found in contemporary schema-driven listening.

On the surface, the comic strategy appears straightforward. Following Wheelock's definition (1992, 57), its conventional air of courtly decorum is corrupted by dysfunctional deviations and incongruous novelties, most noticeably by the surprise turn from a 'high style' in the minuet to a 'low style' in the Trio. The juxtaposition makes the rustic Trio appear ludicrous. It is the punchline of the joke, which consists of little more than a cruel parody of an oafish peasant (or, if you like, oafish peasant music).

Floyd and Margaret Grave (2006, 206) put forward a similar interpretation. They summarize the movement as 'a whimsical blend of high and low styles', in which the conventional minuet 'serves as a platform for the trio's sound-picture of a tipsy village fiddler'.

Taruskin (2010, 549–50) goes further. He claims that the evocation of a folkish style is 'extroversively ironic', in that it serves to emphasize its distance from courtly perfection. The Trio is 'not so much a mock-silly piece as a mock-primitive one — a highly sophisticated composer imitating (thus mocking) the efforts of uncouth village musicians'. This leads to a striking conclusion: 'it is evident that [Haydn's] artistic loyalties and sympathies were entirely aristocratic, and that his frequent evocations of peasant music were no manifestations of class solidarity […] but a bit of humorous rustic exoticism'. In short, we are asked to believe that Haydn invited the genteel consumers of this music to join him in gloating at those less fortunate than themselves and to exult in the measure of their superiority.

That is not the Haydn I know. Nor does it conform to the spirit of the egalitarian Enlightenment, where condescension was the buzzword. Spiteful snobbery was frowned upon in this world of progressive reason and universal human feeling.

Methods

Three considerations run counter to Taruskin's argument. First, the six quartets Op. 33 were not written primarily for an aristocratic audience. They were directed at a broad and anonymous market of sheet-music buyers, beyond the courtly confines of Esterháza. Would mocking a country bumpkin really have appealed to potential subscribers in Paris or Vienna?

Second, Haydn claimed to Griesinger that he often tried to portray moral characters in his symphonies. Sisman (1990) explores the importance of this notion to Haydn's output in terms of the eighteenth-century 'theatre style', which Johann Forkel (1788, 43) defined as 'that method of composition which serves to express moral sentiments'. While Haydn may well have included negative portrayals among the 'moral characters' who populate his music, he is unlikely to have mocked a (fellow-)peasant for traits beyond his control.

Third, Haydn took the extraordinary step of calling this movement a 'Scherzo' rather than a Minuet. By the 1760s this Italian term was most commonly encountered in finales. In attaching it to the minuet-like movements in Op. 33 Haydn was therefore sending a deliberate message. But what did he mean by it? These dance-inspired movements were no more overtly comical in nature than many other pieces by Haydn. Why did he feel the need to single them out as 'jokes'?

One answer may rest upon the common didactic function of the minuet as a model for amateur composition lessons. Because the minuets in Op. 33 often involve deliberate and conspicuous faults, in the manner of Mozart's *Ein musikalischer Spaß* K. 522, Haydn may have applied the label 'joke' to ensure that buyers did not take them seriously, by either emulating them or doubting their composer's abilities. There was a real risk of misunderstanding, given the likely skill level of some of his market.

If we take Haydn's titles at face value, then the 'jokes' in Op. 33 reside in both the minuets and the trios. In Op. 33 No. 2, I argue, this means that the high status voice is the butt of the satire. I suggest that the moral of its musical tale is as follows: Some people may sound educated and authoritative, but speak nonsense; while others may sound uneducated and foolish, but speak sense.

To back up this reading, I make use of an analytical method premised on schema theory, in particular, the theory that originated in the work of Leonard Meyer and that was developed in the writings of Gjerdingen and Byros, which regards replicated patterns in music as culturally and historically determined categories of mind (Byros 2012, 306). My analysis depends upon a wholesale acceptance of Byros' conclusions (2012), which he summarizes thus:

1) that replicated patternings in 18th-century works are commensurate with listeners' knowledge structures; 2) that these knowledge structures are historically contingent and therefore engender a situated psychology of hearing; 3) that these situated psychologies are affected by style change; and 4) that schemata provide access to historical modes of listening today.

To interpret the intended meaning of the Scherzo Op. 33 No. 2 requires more than an identification of its component schemata. Only the most basic and one-dimensional information resides in the shape of the schema itself. To understand the *meaning* once conveyed by a schema in a single instantiation is a tricky business. I make use of a smorgas board of methods:

– First, I identify failures or bungled schemata by placing Haydn's scherzo in dialogic relation to contemporary norms, in this case through didactic solfeggi, which can be assumed always to have taught the 'right' ways to conduct melodies. Defective schemata are marked for meaning;

– Second, I invoke a simple narrative theory, drawn from the work of Abbate, Hatten and Almèn. This music was meant to speak to its audience. The minuet presents shifts in discourse from a primary lyric subject to a narrator, who speaks in a different voice and who comments on the musical actions of the primary agent;

– Third, I propose a semiotic and gestural reading of the music, subsumed within a broader category of musical accent. Here I build upon a metaphor that is explicit throughout Gjerdingen's work: that musicians 'spoke' music as fluently as words and, in consequence, that they spoke it with an accent. Galant music is full of obvious accents: Neapolitan, Scottish, posh, folkish, exotic, foreign, learned, pompous, spiritual, and so on. And solo performers expressed their own personal 'accents'. Accent in this sense is not precisely analogous to linguistic accent — in this work, it operates through semiotic codes (topics and styles), combined with performative gestures.

In this scherzo and trio, Haydn speaks with three very distinct accents: high style, a disapproving maestro, and a peasant. If we accept the notion of Haydn's music having various accents, then sociolinguistic theory can be applied to it. Research has shown that prestige accents have more credibility (Kahane 1986; Eder 1989; Mahony 2002; Mitchell 2003; Keysar 2010; Carlson 2006; Leitman 2010; and Zairab 2013).

I present an alternative analysis. The trio is a recomposition, a correction of the minuet. Reducing the work to schemata reveals the process. The tone of the minuet is pompous, assured, and authoritative — a posh accent. But there are asides, in parentheses, which interrupt the flow of the minuet and comment upon it. The first theme has no clear syntax. Overall, the opening half is incoherent: a Passo indietro followed by a simple cadence with the parallel octaves of folk minuets. It may sound confident, brash and clever, but it is actually rather stupid.

The second half of the minuet sounds learned, but again the schemata are muddled. Starting with a Fenaroli variant in the tonic is unusual, especially after no modulation in the first half. Also, the Fenaroli-Fonte is incomplete. It breaks off into a ludicrous flourish to establish the dominant, without a firm cadence. The narrator offers a wry aside with a perfectly formed and elegantly simple tonic Fonte. That it disapproves or corrects is made clear in the first movement, when a similar pattern comments on the false reprise early in the development. As if to say, wouldn't a Fonte be better suited here, if you want to maintain contact with the tonic?

The Trio, by contrast, sounds ridiculous, with a peasant accent, but it is perfectly correct. It presents a Meyer and a tasteful cadence on the tonic, two dominant Fontes (as appeared in the second half of the minuet) in didactic order as simple do-re-mi followed by more contrapuntal variant, and closes on a Ponte.

Implications

Haydn's satire or social critique depends on schema-driven listening allied with an ability to identify the music's accent. The scherzo in Op. 33 No. 2 is a testament to the humanity and egalitarian spirit of the Enlightenment. It is a moral tale: Don't judge a book by its cover.

Keywords

Schema, Haydn, Satire, Semiotic, Narrative, Accent, Analysis.

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