Varieties of Musical Irony

From Mozart to Mahler

Irony, one of the most basic, pervasive, and variegated of rhetorical tropes, is as fundamental to musical thought as it is to poetry, prose, and spoken language. In this wide-ranging study of musical irony, Michael Cherlin draws upon the rich history of the trope as developed by rhetoricians, philosophers, literary scholars, poets, and novelists. With occasional reflections on film music and other contemporary works, the principal focus of the book is classical music, instrumental and vocal, ranging from Mozart to Mahler. The result is a surprising array of approaches toward the making and interpretation of irony in music. Including nearly ninety musical examples, the book is clearly structured and engagingly written. This interdisciplinary volume will appeal to those interested in the relationship between music and literature as well as to scholars of musical composition, technique, and style.

Michael Cherlin is Emeritus Professor of Music at the University of Minnesota. He has published widely on Schoenberg in particular and is the author of *Schoenberg's Musical Imagination* (Cambridge 2007). He also edited *Music Theory Spectrum* from 2013–2015.

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For James and Noriko

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Musical Examples

Praeludium

> BEGINNING my studies, the first step pleas'd me so much,
> The mere fact, consciousness—these forms—the power of motion,
> The least insect or animal—the senses—eyesight;
> The first step, I say, aw'd me and pleas'd me so much,
> I have never gone, and never wish'd to go, any farther,
> But stop and loiter all my life, to sing it in ecstatic songs.
>
> Walt Whitman

Irony – to know one thing and its opposite, simultaneously – gets all meaning going: to be *and* not to be, to know what it is not to know. To know irony is to know the coupled oppositions of love and hate, sweet and bitter, good and evil, joy and despair. Irony is the beginning of being self-aware, the first limitation of self that gives rise to knowing another. It is the first wound that gives rise to the first healing.

My thanks to Tiffany Skidmore for generating the musical examples; to the generations of students at the University of Minnesota who helped me hone my ideas about musical irony over the past thirty years; to the great Harold Bloom, goad and inspiration, who more than any other made me brood on irony over so many years; and to my friends, to my loving wife Rose, and to my family.

Preface

> Be ready for anything – that perhaps is wisdom. Give ourselves up, according to the hour, to confidence, to skepticism, to optimism, to irony and we may be sure that at certain moments at least we shall be with the truth . . . Good-humor is a philosophic state of mind; it seems to say to Nature that we take her no more seriously than she takes us. I maintain that one should always talk of philosophy with a smile. We owe it to the Eternal to be virtuous but we have the right to add to this tribute our irony as a sort of personal reprisal.
>
> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

> It's not personal, Sonny. It's strictly business.
>
> Michael Corleone, *The Godfather*

The occasion for the initiatory research that eventually led to this book was a sabbatical year, 2009–2010. In previous work, I had studied the roles of some central tropes in the music of Arnold Schoenberg, a composer I have obsessed over for some forty years.[1] I won't go into that work here; suffice it to say that there I explored some basic underlying assumptions about the nature of things that informed Schoenberg's musical imagination, tropes that I called conflict, flux, and imperfection. The last of these, imperfection, might also have been given the name Romantic Irony.

In my current project, I wanted to return to an examination of the musical import of those rhetorical tropes that are recognized as being the most basic by a consensus of literary scholars as well as by music theorists and historians who have been influenced by those scholars. In the early stages of the project, I had thought of including all four of the principal tropes: metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and irony, a sequence that comes down to us from the eighteenth-century Italian humanist Giambattista Vico, but made cogent in twentieth-century thought by Kenneth Burke's influential essay, "Four Master Tropes."[2] It quickly became obvious, however, that the big project was too big. I finally chose to focus on musical irony in large part because it is so lucidly present as an aspect of musical thought. Moreover, there is an aspect of irony that distinguishes it from the other principal tropes and makes it particularly apt for the study

of music: irony has an existential quality not shared with the other tropes. We can speak of "life's ironies" in ways that we cannot speak of life's metaphors, synecdoches, or metonyms. To be sure, there are controlling metaphors that pervade our "common sense," and the same could be said of the other tropes as well. But irony is fundamentally experiential and attitudinal. In that sense irony (or the lack thereof) is part of subjective experience. It is the experience of music – performance, interpretation, and the perceived grain of musical sound – that interests me most, and in this realm irony covers a lot of territory.

Another interesting aspect of irony is in the ways ironic expression can incorporate the other tropes. "You are my sunshine" is a metaphor. "Good morning, Miss Sunshine," applied to a grumpy young person, is an ironic metaphor. To associate an alcoholic with drink is metonymic, but the nickname "Jack Daniels" for a hard-drinking friend is an ironic metonym. To see an individual as representing the whole human race is synecdochic, but "he thinks the world of himself" is an ironic synecdoche.

I began thinking about music in terms of rhetorical tropes some thirty years ago. Around that time, I absorbed Kenneth Burke's "Four Master Tropes," realizing that the same basic strategies for world knowing that were captured in his descriptions for language-based rhetoric (prose and poetry in all its forms) could be applied to music as well. This was also the time when many scholars were reading Harold Bloom's remarkable writings on rhetorical tropes and their correlations with poetic imagery, Freudian defense mechanisms, Jewish mysticism, and strategies for overcoming the one's subordination to those who have come before, Bloom's "revisionary ratios."[3] During the 1980s and 1990s, a number of scholars in music, myself included, applied Bloom's ideas to the study of music.[4]

Burke's "master tropes" and Bloom's "revisionary ratios" are long out of intellectual fashion, but the power of these ideas has never ceased to feed my imagination. Bloom's writings on trope and irony in particular have been a major inspiration for my own work over many years, despite his having very little to say about music per se.[5] Fashionable or not, I have never lost my interest in the shaping force of tropes as basic strategies for knowing – irony, metaphor, synecdoche (part for the whole), and metonymy (associations based on physical proximity or on reducing an abstract idea to physical referents, as in having "lots of heart").

For example, the idea of representing or conjuring up a greater whole through a part, as in William Blake's "to see the world in a grain of sand," has direct analogues in music: once we are acquainted with a musical theme, a small fragment will summon up a memory of the whole. As to origins, we can only speculate. Yet it seems clear that both music and

language share some very basic impulses at their roots, despite the many distinctions between the two forms of symbolic thought.

To be sure, in addition to underlying commonalities, there are mutual influences, musical thought on language and language-based thought on music. Although less foundational than strategies that more radically underlie the two modes of symbolic thought, even these mutual influences are not easily traced. For example, while poetic meters influence musical meters, poetic meter itself is musical at its inception.[6] As with Freud's models for the human psyche and the sources of anxiety, when it comes to the relationships between music and language, we cannot get to the bottom of things.

As we shall see over the course of this study, irony can inhere within music with or without words; of course, irony can also exist in the relation between words and their musical setting. In some cases, the music itself is an ironic commentary on the words; in other cases, both music and words are meant to be ironic, and so while irony is expressed, it is not a result of how the music lies against the words. Music lying against the words will be a recurrent concern of this book, and my conception relies on a pun between two meanings of lie: to be placed next to something or to dissimulate. In texted music, the music always lies against the text in that musical structures are juxtaposed against linguistic structures, but sometimes music lies against the text in the other sense of the word, as when the text says something and the music says it is not so.

A few words should be said about the selection process for the musical literature studied in this book. I have tried to concentrate on music that is significant and enduring, but at the end of the day my choices were based on music that particularly moves and engages me. The music selected is not meant to be encyclopedic or even judgmental, apart from personal taste. I occasionally refer to examples from popular music and film, but that is not my field of expertise or the area of my primary interest. Even if we restrict our sources to classical music, an encyclopedic approach to musical irony would surely include, for example, Dmitri Shostakovich.[7] And while I recognize the skill and impact of Shostakovich's work, his music has not touched me in the ways that Mahler's has, to choose another composer who has irony at his musical core. Although I limited myself to music that would allow me to develop a broad concept of musical irony, my first criterion was always that the music moved me and stimulated my musical imagination.

Not unlike other fields of scholarly inquiry, the literature on irony is dominated by internecine warfare. Each and every scholar of those that

I have consulted on the topic has a set of favorites among other scholars, and each has another set that are set aside, dismissed, or otherwise disavowed, distained, or are deemed not worthy of being mentioned. The tradition starts early – as early as Aristophanes, whose ironic depiction of Socrates in *The Clouds* meant more than the means to get a laugh. Heinrich Heine, the great German-Jewish ironist, characterized God as "the Aristophanes of Heaven," substituting Aristophanes for Socrates, raising the ante, and creating a sense of cosmic irony that is not likely to be surpassed. Of course, history yet to unfold for Heine's generation would make the term "German Jew" bitterly ironic in itself.

That Heine was to be accused of despoiling German literature through the infectious elements of an underlying *Yiddishkeit* will find direct analogues when we come to consider the case of Gustav Mahler. Yet there is a more pervasive relevance that I would like to recognize in closing this preface. Yiddish was the mother tongue of both of my parents, and though my own command of the Yiddish language is pathetically weak, the deeply ironic attitudes of Yiddish culture were basic to the child who fathered the man. Harold Bloom has written elegantly about the ironies of Yiddish:

> But then, irony is endemic in the very nature of Yiddish, a fusion always conscious of its otherness, whether in regard to German, Russian, or American English. Any native speaker of Yiddish (I am one) can sense that the language's curious wealth belies its apparent paucity of vocabulary, when compared to English.
>
> . . . Yiddish speakers speak not so much with individual referring words as with such clusters of relations, ready-made idioms, quotations and situational responses. Since each word may belong to several heterogeneous or contradictory knots, ironies are always at hand. It is precisely the small vocabulary of the language that makes the words more repetitive and more dependent on their habitual contexts, hence weightier in their impact (like the words in the limited vocabulary of the Bible). It is not the range of denotations that the language covers but the emotive and semantic directions of the hearer's empathy. In this mode of discourse, the overt clash, ironic or clever, between words of different stock languages in one sentence is a major source of meaning, impact, and delight.[8]

I think it safe to say that at the inception of this project, my own Yiddish background was far from my thoughts about irony in general or irony as it applied to music. Yet, as I have lived with the topic, its rootedness in my earliest childhood experiences has become more and more evident. Scientists may behave otherwise, but in the arts and humanities the work we care about the most is deeply subjective: it's not business; it's personal.

End Notes

1 *Schoenberg's Musical Imagination*, Cambridge University Press, 2007.
2 "Four Master Tropes" is found as Appendix D in Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, University of California Press, 1969, 503–517.
3 Harold Bloom developed his theories on rhetorical tropes in a number of extraordinary books beginning in the 1970s. The principal works are *The Anxiety of Influence*, Oxford University Press, 1973; *A Map of Misreading*, Oxford University Press, 1975; *Kabbalah and Criticism*, Seabury Press, 1975; *Poetry and Repression*, Yale University Press, 1976; *Agon*, Oxford University Press, 1982; and *Ruin the Sacred Truths*, Harvard University Press, 1989.
4 Significant attempts to integrate Bloom's ideas with music analysis include Joseph Straus, *Remaking the Past*, Harvard University Press, 1990, and Kevin Korsyn, "Directional Tonality and Intertextuality: Brahm's Quintet Op. 88 and Chopin's Ballade Op. 38," *19th Century Music* 7/1 (1983), 63–70; and Kevin Korsyn, "Towards a New Poetics of Musical Influence," *Music Analysis* 10/1–2 (1991), 3–72. I applied rhetorical tropes to musical analysis in an unpublished paper, "Musical Imagination and Other Fictions: Literary Trope as Musical Process," given at the joint meetings of the American Musicological Society and the Society for Music Theory, Oakland, CA, November 10, 1990.
5 Harold Bloom was a major influence on my thinking about Schoenberg, as evidenced by *Schoenberg's Musical Imagination*, passim.
6 Some related problems are discussed in Leo Treitler, "Regarding Meter and Rhythm in the 'Ars Antiqua,'" *The Musical Quarterly* 65/4 (1979), 524–558.
7 A noteworthy monograph has been devoted to irony in Shostakovich's music. Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich: A Theory of Musical Incongruities*, Ashgate, 2000.
8 Harold Bloom, "The Glories of Yiddish," *The New York Review of Books*, November 6, 2008. www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/nov/06/the-glories-of- yiddish/?pagination=false.