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Humor in Western European Instrumental Music: How Humor Works, Its Usage Over Time, and Accessible Teaching Strategies

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Humor in Western European Instrumental Music: How Humor Works, Its Usage Over Time, and
Accessible Teaching Strategies

By

Hunter Thompson

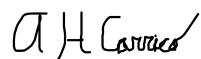
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Abstract

This research's purpose was to examine the perception of humor, both generally and musically, and to provide an overview of how humor has been incorporated into Western European instrumental music from the Medieval Age to the 20th century. In order to evaluate this, the researcher conducted a listening survey to gauge how well college music majors perceive humor in instrumental music. The survey consisted of eleven total listening excerpts approved by the Music History faculty at the University of South Carolina School of Music. Nine excerpts were coded humorous, and two excerpts were coded non-humorous for control. There was a total of twenty-seven respondents, but only nine were usable (N = 9). The remaining eighteen survey responses that were unusable were not included due to incomplete surveys or extremely low survey completion times. The survey results indicate that exposure to humorous music and knowledge of historical and cultural conventions of the time period increases the perception of humorous elements in the music. Finally, the researcher outlines potential teaching strategies for incorporating humor in Western European instrumental music into high school music appreciation curriculum.

Introduction

Victor Borge, a Danish-American pianist and comedian, once said that “laughter is the shortest distance between two people.”¹ Laughter is a biological response that often results from humorous stimuli. In his well-known hierarchy of needs Abraham Maslow proposes that a desire to connect with others falls into the category of the need for love and social belonging.² Laughter is one bridge that connects all life, but the compositions of the bridges that connect humans through laughter differ from individual to individual and from situation to situation. Some may laugh as a response to an event or joke they believe to be humorous; others may laugh to relieve their feelings of stress and anxiety. According to Tonglin Jiang, Hao Li, and Yubo Hou, “humor is a universal phenomenon but it is also culturally tinted,” which means that even though laughter is a natural response to humorous stimuli, the factors that make people laugh differ across the world.³ Music also differs across all cultures, and the ways that composers incorporate humor into their music differs as well.

An obvious way that a composer may garner laughs from an audience is to incorporate humorous lyrics into their music, but to understand the humor, one would also have to comprehend the language. In this case, the text accompanying the music is humorous; however, the music itself may not be humorous at all. Again, without speaking the language of the text, one may not understand the humor. Consider purely instrumental music as a form of communication that connects the composer, musicians, and audience members together. During

¹ Roger Abrantes, “Laughter is the Shortest Distance Between Two People,” Ethology Institute, April 23, 2014, <https://ethology.eu/laughter-is-the-shortest-distance-between-two-people/>.

² Abraham H. Maslow. “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 380-81, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>.

³ Tonglin Jiang et al., “Cultural Differences in Humor Perception, Usage, and Implications,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 10, (January 19, 2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00123>.

a performance, a musical language is spoken that might convey specific emotions, stories, and even aspects of humor (irony, parody, satire, puns, and wit). Thus, those trained in the Western musical tradition would be able to notice humorous adaptations to the pitches, rhythms, timbres, and articulations without having to understand a certain language.

This thesis is largely based on the interpretation of humorous stimuli; therefore, it is crucial to understand the cognitive processes at work when humor is being interpreted. Psychologists have long studied the relationship between humor and the brain. Humor is developed through the acquisition of skills developed during processes related to social cognition.⁴ These social cognition processes engage numerous areas in the brain. The perception of humor differs from the appreciation of humor, and many neurologists have used neuroimaging studies to document the different areas of the brain that are activated when perception and appreciation occur.⁵

Numerous theories have been developed over time to explain how humor works. First, it is important to note that humor differs from culture to culture. Many characteristics and structures of humor may carry over, but there are unique subtleties that appear in various parts of the world.⁶ Although these cultural differences exist, philosophers developed many theories throughout history to explain what makes humans perceive and appreciate humor. Some more

⁴ Nils Kohn et al., "Gender Differences in the Neural Correlates of Humor Processing: Implications for Different Processing Models," *Neuropsychologia* 49, no. 5 (February 12, 2011): 888-97, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2011.02.010>.

⁵ Kohn et al., 888-97.

⁶ Tonglin Jiang et al., "Cultural Differences in Humor Perception, Usage, and Implications," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10, (January 19, 2019): 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00123>.

significant theories include superiority theory, incongruity theory, contrast and intermixture theory, and relief theory.⁷

This study is primarily focused on Western European instrumental music. Fortunately, humor in this tradition of instrumental music has been well-documented over time. The characteristics and uses of humor in specific genres change throughout each style period, often due to the increased importance of instrumental genres over time.⁸ Recently, there have been efforts to establish a taxonomy of humor in instrumental music.⁹ Additionally, many scholars have taken great interest in specific composers who frequently incorporated humor into their music.¹⁰ Examining these findings helps point out what specific elements of music listeners should pay attention to in order to interpret and perceive humor in instrumental music.

The purpose of this thesis is to explain if humans psychologically perceive humor in instrumental music, to examine how humor is utilized in Western European instrumental music over time, to measure if collegiate music majors perceive humor in instrumental music, and to identify pedagogical approaches and strategies that can make teaching musical humor more accessible to student musicians based on the results of the listening survey completed by collegiate music majors. Humor in instrumental music may not be the first thing someone thinks about when listening to classical music but understanding when humor is present enriches the listening experience. The fact of the matter is that humor in instrumental music is not essential to understanding classical music, but it is like an author peppering advanced figurative language

⁷ L. W. Kline, "The Psychology of Humor," *The American Journal of Psychology* 18, no. 4 (October 1907): 421-44, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1412574>; Asbjørn Ø. Eriksen, "A Taxonomy of Humor in Instrumental Music," *The Journal of Musicological Research* 35, no. 3 (2016): 233-63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411896.2016.1193418>.

⁸ Enrique A. Arias, *Comedy in Music: A Historical Bibliographical Resource Guide*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001).

⁹ Eriksen, 233-63.

¹⁰ Gretchen A. Wheelock, *Haydn's Ingenious Jestings with Art*, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992).

such as similes or synecdoche into their prose. If one can understand the humor, then it will make for a much more entertaining listening experience. Learning how to actively listen for humor in instrumental music will also help students transfer listening skills into other facets of life.

This thesis is divided into four chapters that explore different facets of humor in instrumental music. The first chapter investigates the psychology of humor by providing a survey of various theories that examine how humans perceive and understand humor broadly. This includes theories from a variety of fields such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology, and spans from the great philosophers of Ancient Greece to 2016. The second chapter is a historical overview of humorous instrumental music composed in the Western European tradition from the Medieval Age through the 20th century. Both broad and specific instances of humor in Western European instrumental music are discussed in this chapter. The third chapter is an explanation of the listening survey given to collegiate music majors and an analysis of the listening survey results. Using the results discussed in the third chapter, the fourth chapter outlines how to incorporate the teaching of humor in Western European instrumental music into high school music appreciation classes. This includes the skills and concepts students will need to understand prior to learning about humor in Western European instrumental music and ways that educators can still introduce this concept to classes that do not have extensive musical training.

Chapter One: The Psychology of Humor

Music, like any form of art, has the capacity to draw upon emotions in order to elicit a response from the listener, and specific emotions are strongly linked to certain regions of the brain. Therefore, it is critical to understand the relationship between humor and the brain. In psychology, humor functions in the sphere of social cognition, which is “the way in which people process, remember, and use information in social contexts to explain and predict their own behavior and that of others.”¹¹ The need to interact socially with other humans is common across the world, but the method of connection differs depending on the location. Humor, albeit complex and often formulated by a variety of factors, is one way that connections are made.

It is virtually impossible for an individual to formulate a humorous interaction without experiencing one first. Upon the first perception of humor, an individual will try to detect any patterns in subsequent humorous interactions to formulate their own sense of humor. Many researchers believe that the detection of humorous stimuli occurs in the temporoparietal junction (TPJ) of the brain. According to Kohn et al., the TPJ is activated as a response to both verbal and visual humorous stimuli.¹² The TPJ also works largely in conjunction with the Anterior Cingulate Cortex (ACC) to process humor, and the ACC is considered “an important hub more generally for theory of mind (ToM) or mentalizing,” which is a process that aids in the perception and interpretation of human behavior and cognition.¹³ The perception of humorous stimuli over time helps to develop an individual’s sense of humor; however, the detection of humorous stimuli differs from the appreciation of those stimuli. Kohn et al. state that the

¹¹ Daniela Bulgarelli and Paola Molina, “Social Cognition in Preschoolers: Effects of Early Experience and Individual Differences,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 7, (November 14, 2016): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01762>.

¹² Kohn et al., 888.

¹³ Kohn et al., 888.

appreciation of humor is more closely “associated with activation in the insula and the amygdala while detection elicited activation in posterior temporal and inferior frontal areas.”¹⁴ The different areas of the brain that correspond to activity related to humor appreciation and humor detection are linked to different processes that are associated with the two. The insula and amygdala are related to affective processing while the posterior temporal and inferior frontal areas are related to semantic processing and the detection of incongruities.¹⁵

There are many theories regarding what makes something humorous. Humor, in a sense, is both individualized and general. Some people may have a stronger response to certain types of humor, making humor appreciation dependent on the individual’s past observations regarding humor. However, the detection of humor is a more general process. Most people are able to detect when someone intends to be funny, but that detection does not always lead to appreciation. For example, if a comedian is on stage performing their comedy act, it is very seldom that one person will truly appreciate every aspect of humor that the comedian presents. Humans are naturally drawn to certain joke structures and humorous topics that often are determined by past experiences with humor. Once one finds what makes them laugh, it is easier to latch on to certain styles of humor.

One of the earliest theories that explores why something is humorous is the superiority theory, which dates back to the writings of Aristotle and Plato. Essentially, this theory states that “we laugh when we feel superior to other people, or to ourselves in relation to a situation we experienced in the past.”¹⁶ This theory is only applicable to certain situations and is oftentimes utilized in hostile and antagonistic situations. Another way to describe superiority theory is

¹⁴ Kohn et al., 889.

¹⁵ Kohn et al., 889.

¹⁶ Eriksen, 234.

degradation. The stimuli that elicit a humorous response in this case are often at the expense of someone else's dignity or worth. Some scholars also group "the mechanization of organic movements [or] the insertion of mechanism in life processes" with the degradation of superiority theory.¹⁷ This mechanization is particularly associated with people learning something new. For example, a new karate student trying to move from their white belt to a yellow belt might not have the best karate technique. If an older, impolite karate student, perhaps a student with a brown belt, sees the younger student moving awkwardly while practicing, then superiority theory and degradation might be how the older student chooses to respond. Superiority theory is heavily based on the spirit of rivalry, but not all humor has to work like that.

Another theory used to explain humor is incongruity theory, which also is referred to as contradiction theory. Incongruity theory goes back to the eighteenth century, and it states that "the comical effect is a result of a perceived incongruity or discrepancy between the constituting elements of a situation."¹⁸ Incongruity theory is based heavily on a collective understanding of societal norms. Recognizing when something is out of the ordinary can often lead to a humorous reaction. Wit, a common form of humor, has strong associations with incongruity theory because wit "functions as a shock to the psychophysical organism."¹⁹ There is an inherent shock when noticing something incongruous, and that shock does not always result in the appreciation of humor. John Morreall, a philosopher whose research is largely focused on humor, notes that there are three kinds of reactions to incongruity: negative emotions, reality assimilation, and humorous amusement.²⁰ Although humor appreciation is one reaction people can have to

¹⁷ Kline, 422.

¹⁸ Eriksen, 234.

¹⁹ Kline, 423-24.

²⁰ Eriksen, 234-35.

contradictions, it may not be their primary reaction. Finding humorous amusement from the incongruity theory ultimately depends on the context of the individual's situation.

It is important to note when discussing superiority theory and incongruity theory that some scholars group the two theories together, and their reasoning for this is outdated and frankly problematic. Karl Groos, a German philosopher and psychologist whose work centered around animal play, is one of the earliest to group these two theories as one. According to Groos, superiority theory and incongruity theory “are by no means exclusive the one of the other, but that they are only opposed in that each accuses the other of failure to cover all the facts.”²¹ Essentially, Groos believes these theories work better in conjunction with one another. To combine these two theories, Groos says one must consider “the appreciations of the comic as a form of play grounded on the instinctive indulgence of the fighting impulse, aided and enlarged by the ideas of contrast.”²² The French philosophers Sully and Ribot argue that the superiority and incongruity theories can be combined due to evolution. Sully and Ribot associate superiority/degradation theory with the “primitive mind – the mind that [glories] in the sudden sense of physical power and physical victory;” in contrast, they associate incongruity theory with the modern mind, which easily “finds enjoyment in incongruities.”²³ Groos, Sully, and Ribot all associate these theories with the idea of the *primitive mind* engaging in violent acts, which results in humorous amusement for the unevolved mind. Again, it is important to note that the basis of this logic is built upon harmful stereotypes that are discouraged today. The term “primitive” is historically associated with instances of powerful white European men using the word to describe people who were categorized as “other,” or more specifically, non-white, non-

²¹ Kline, 424.

²² Kline, 424.

²³ Kline, 424.

Europeans. Additionally, the term “primitive” has roots in classism and the term was often used by members of the economic and social elite to disparage those of lower socioeconomic status.

The contrast and intermittence theory is another theory used to explain what makes certain things humorous. The German psychiatrist Ewald Hecker developed this theory in 1873, and it focuses more on the biological processes that occur in response to humorous stimuli. Hecker theorizes that as a humorous stimulus is detected, the vasomotor nerves “narrow the calibre and increase the tonus of the cerebral blood vessels, the result of which is to force the blood from the brain cavity, thereby inducing anæmia.”²⁴ Hecker claims there must be a biological response to correct the induced anemic condition. The response must prolong expiration to correct the anemic condition.²⁵ One way to correct it is with laughter, a biological response developed over time due to natural selection. Laughter is a “powerful reflex movement which compensates for the diminished blood pressure.”²⁶ Therefore, the contrast and intermittence theory is cyclical in a sense. Laughter is a physical process, but it has strong connections to emotions. Hecker asserts that the cyclical production of the anemic condition and the correction of the anemic condition with laughter produces humor. It is essentially a “fluctuation between the pleasant and unpleasant in which the unpleasant aspect is neglected, that is, is unconscious.”²⁷ According to this theory, the positive aspects of humor can overpower what would typically be considered harmful to the body.

Similar to the contrast and intermittence theory, the relief theory deals with the physical aspects of humor. The main tenant of the relief theory is that laughter, and other physical

²⁴ Kline, 425.

²⁵ Kline, 425.

²⁶ Kline, 426.

²⁷ Kline, 426.

responses to humor, is considered a “discharge of emotional energy.”²⁸ Some may take that definition even further and specify that laughter is a release of nervous energy. According to Herbert Spencer, “a large mass of emotion [is] produced” as a result of an incongruous situation, and the mass will continue to grow and create pressure until the energy is discharged.²⁹ An increased amount of pressure forces one to discharge the energy and laugh, which will in turn bring relief to the nervous system.

Outside of music, humor is derived from speech or action that has a specific meaning, which elicits a humorous response. With instrumental music, there is no spoken language tied to the music through a text, but there is a language that connects instrumental music to historical and cultural expectations. Additionally, there is usually no action for the audience to attach themselves to that indicates humor.³⁰ It is just the sounds of the music itself and the modifications of those sounds that create humor. So how does one comprehend the humor within instrumental music? Two nineteenth-century schools of thought emerged regarding how and if humor could be perceived in instrumental music. In a series of essays published in German musical journals from 1827-1835, Stephan Schütze and K. Stein argued about whether all instrumental music could be humorous. Schütze, who was the leader of the traditional school of thought, believed “that only music with literary associations (text or program) could be comic.”³¹ Schütze believed that humor in its very nature is quite intellectual, and that humor must be

²⁸ Eriksen, 234.

²⁹ Herbert Spencer, *Essays on Education and Kindred Subjects*, (Auckland: The Floating Press, 1911): 595.

³⁰ Most instrumental musical humor is purely based on hearing the music. However, there are some instances throughout the history of Western European music where composers instructed the musicians to take part in humorous action. For example, Franz Joseph Haydn instructed the musicians to slowly leave the stage during the final movement of his “Farewell Symphony,” and Erik Satie also included instructions for the musicians to physically elicit humor in his music.

³¹ Tilden A. Russell, “‘Über das Komische in der Musik:’ The Schütze-Stein Controversy,” *The Journal of Musicology* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1985-1986): 70, <https://doi.org/10.2307/763723>.

representative of ideas or events. His view of music was that it spoke more to the emotions of the individual; therefore, “music cannot be comic because it does not represent ideas or events, but expresses feelings.”³² On the other hand, Stein was the leader of the more progressive and Romantic school of thought which “insisted that instrumental music could be comic.”³³ Stein framed his beliefs around the notion that Schütze’s theories were based on outdated beliefs. According to Russell, Stein “says that Schütze’s theory is based on an outmoded belief in the preeminence of vocal music, whereas in modern times instrumental music has gained much ground.”³⁴ For clarification purposes, Stein’s conceptual definition of modern times is what we now associate with the transition from the Classical to the Romantic period. To combat Schütze’s view that music is not based in intellect, Stein argued that the manipulation of harmony, melody, and rhythm can “appeal directly to intellect” because they are based on mathematical principles.³⁵ Overall, Stein believed that humor can be found in all instrumental music regardless of whether it is based on a text or not. To find the humor, one must think intellectually about what is happening within the music. This study takes Stein’s theory as a point of departure for exploring the presence of humor in instrumental music regardless of connection to literary or textual sources.

There are no specific rules or guidelines that composers have consistently used throughout history to incorporate humor into their music, but there are many general characteristics in instrumental music that are indicators of humor. Humor is historically and culturally bound; therefore, the humor perceived by an audience in the Baroque period might not be as humorous to a 21st century audience listening to the same piece. However, if the 21st

³² Russell, 78.

³³ Russell, 70.

³⁴ Russell, 79.

³⁵ Russell, 80.

century audience is well-studied and enculturated to Baroque musical practices and idioms, then they might identify humor in the piece. Musicians study music history to not only learn about important composers and trends in music, but also to understand what historical audiences valued in the music being performed during their lifetimes.

When discussing humor in instrumental music, one can speak in terms of general categories of humor or specific examples of humorous moments in the music. Leonard Bernstein, in his Young People's Concert titled "Humor in Music," outlined "wit, satire, parody, caricature, burlesque, and just plain clowning around" as the general categories of humor commonly used in music.³⁶ These categories of musical humor are perceived when something incongruous occurs within the music, and the incongruity that occurs is usually contrary to the stylistic conventions of the time period during which the music was composed. This notion of subverting audience expectation by upsetting stylistic conventions has resonances with the aforementioned incongruity or contradiction theory that developed during the eighteenth century.

Asbjørn Ø. Eriksen outlines five at-large characteristics of humor in instrumental music. Eriksen points to imitations of phenomena in the outside world, musical quotations, departures from stylistic norms, excessive repetitions of melodic or stylistic clichés, and incongruities in relation to the premises of the composition as characteristics of musical humor that he has observed over time.³⁷ The incongruities that are violated throughout history become more commonplace as time goes on. Rossana Dalmonte also points to technical indicators as a sign of humor in instrumental music. The usage of signs and markings such as "*Allegro, Scherzo, Divertimento, Capriccio, [and] Parodia*" has become an easily recognizable indicator of a piece

³⁶ Leonard Bernstein, "Humor in Music," Leonard Bernstein Office, accessed September 6, 2022, <https://leonardbernstein.com/lectures/television-scripts/young-peoples-concerts/humor-in-music>.

³⁷ Eriksen, 251-52.

with humorous connotations.³⁸ Modifications to the tempo as well as unusual effects of texture, dynamics, rhythm, and melodic design are also common humorous stimuli in instrumental music.³⁹ In certain Renaissance and Baroque polyphonic compositions and later in 20th Century aleatoric music, the usage of “visually curious notation” is a way that the musicians performing the music can interpret humor, but this specific tool of humor is more difficult for audience members to detect.⁴⁰ Additionally, the delivery of the performance is also an indicator of humor to audience members just as the delivery of a joke is crucial to understanding its humor.

When we observe something humorous, whether it be musical or not, our brain is not wired to take us through the step-by-step process of humor detection and humor perception. We observe and react without any extensive thought. We may ask ourselves what made that specific observation funny, but more often than not we will just move on. Humor in instrumental music requires an understanding of the compositional techniques and idioms of the time period as well as a firm understanding of the theory behind the music. General humor and musical humor share some similarities, the biggest being the importance of incongruity. However, musical humor requires a special set of observational skills and a wealth of knowledge about music. An increase in social interaction leads to a better understanding of the social conventions of humor in one’s own society, and similarly, an increase in exposure to humor in music will help to increase one’s understanding of humor in instrumental music. The following chapter will explore this concept through specific exploration of how musical humor varied throughout time periods in Western European music from the Medieval Age to the 20th century.

³⁸ Rossana Dalmonte, “Towards a Semiology of Humour in Music,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 26, no. 2 (December 1995): 174, <https://doi.org/10.2307/836999>.

³⁹ Arias, 4.

⁴⁰ Arias, 5.

Chapter Two: Overview of Western European Musical Time Periods

Humorous music, also known as comic music in academic settings, is oftentimes pushed aside from what musicians consider to be serious art. The constraints society placed upon composers during their lives often dictated what their music could sound like, and those constraints often limited the amount of humor that could be incorporated into the music. This is especially true given the number of composers whose primary source of income came from the patronage of the Catholic and later Protestant church, which required a larger focus on sacred music. Because humor was not always present in instrumental music, it is not always appreciated and viewed as serious art. The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of the components of humorous instrumental music during each time period and to disprove the notion that humorous instrumental music is not a serious form of art. Although the excerpts used in the survey come from the Baroque period, Classical period, Romantic period, and 20th-Century, it is beneficial to explain how humor in instrumental music evolved throughout earlier style periods.

During the Medieval Age in Western Europe (500-1400), there was a thriving culture of instrumental music, but it was often shared through oral tradition. Instrumental music was rarely documented using written notation, and instrumental music was more closely associated with secular music during a period of history where sacred music from the Catholic Church dominated the musical landscape of Western Europe. Therefore, it is difficult to know what instrumental music sounded like during the Medieval Age. There are some clues about instrumental music that can be gathered from written works describing performances, tapestries

and forms of visual art that model how instruments were played, and even instruments that still exist from the time period that can indicate how they sounded.⁴¹

Sacred vocal music was the most dominant musical genre of the time due to the power of the Catholic church, and vocal music took precedence over instrumental music for many reasons. Notated music was recorded on handwritten manuscripts, which were extremely time-consuming and labor-intensive to make. The Catholic church was one of the only institutions in Western Europe with the ability to provide the necessary resources in terms of time, money, and educated workers to create the manuscripts. According to Enrique Arias, “instrumentalists were viewed with suspicion by ecclesiastical authorities.”⁴² In visual art, instrumentalists and depictions of instruments were symbolic of the devil, and the way instrumentalists were illustrated implied a sense of “lust and avarice.”⁴³ Instrumentalists during this time were not trusted, and it is because the majority of the music being composed was not for them. Humor found its way into the vocal works of many composers during the Medieval Age, often through creative text setting methods, but there are very few recorded instances of humor in instrumental music during this time because there was an extremely low demand for manuscripts of instrumental music.

Contrary to the Medieval Age, instrumental music experienced a surge in popularity in Western Europe during the Renaissance due to the development of the printing press. During the Renaissance, manuscripts of solely instrumental music as well as treatises and manuals for how to play and take care of instruments were published and circulated. As stated by Arias, “music during the Renaissance was viewed as a form of pleasure intimately related to the theory of the

⁴¹ The study of musical culture through visual art forms such as paintings, tapestries, and wood prints is called iconography.

⁴² Arias, 13.

⁴³ Arias, 13.

four humors,” an ancient theory that outlined a desired balance between the four main bodily fluids (blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm).⁴⁴ The music of the Renaissance was often segmented so that specific portions of the music would be associated with a certain feeling. Therefore, much of the music considered humorous during the Renaissance was written in a mode that had strong ties to the “humor of jollity.”⁴⁵ New genres of instrumental music, such as abstract instrumental pieces, became more present near the end of the Renaissance; however, there was not a more robust purely instrumental tradition until the Baroque period. Composers of new abstract genres of instrumental music that came about during the Renaissance intended for their music to be listened to as a form of enjoyment (as opposed to serving a functional purpose like instrumental dance music). One genre of instrumental music that developed near the end of the Renaissance that was quite welcoming to forms of humor is the instrumental battle piece. Many battle pieces used certain instruments as a form of imitation; for example, Arias uses Matthias Werrecore’s *Battaglia taliana* as a model because it “vividly imitates the sounds of horses running and cannons firing.”⁴⁶ Imitation was a common way for composers to incorporate humor into their music during the Renaissance, but again, instrumental music was just beginning to develop outside of functional purposes such as dance accompaniment and introductory fanfare.

During the Baroque period instrumental music began to blossom as its own form of art independent of function. Music during the Baroque period was heavily based on human emotions, and composers embraced the Doctrine of Affects, an aesthetics theory that states that specific emotions and passions could be aurally depicted within music. This 17th-century theory

⁴⁴ Arias, 15.

⁴⁵ Arias, 15.

⁴⁶ Arias, 25.

stems from Ancient Greece and the Doctrine of Ethos, which asserted that music could speak directly to the ethical character of an individual. Because certain pieces had ties to specific emotions, it was slightly easier for composers to incorporate more humor into their music than before. During the Renaissance, imitation of nature was an easy way for composers to incorporate humor into their music, and this practice continued during the Baroque. During the Baroque, “the instrumental capriccio also invited special, ‘capricious’ effects,” which often involved some sort of natural imitation.⁴⁷ Such imitation was prevalent in the instrumental music of the Baroque period, which featured a strong tradition of imitating birdsongs. This can be heard in the music of Girolamo Frescobaldi, Johann Kaspar Kerll, and even Johann Sebastian Bach.⁴⁸ Composers also continued writing music in the tradition of the Renaissance battle piece. Although imitation is an easily noticeable way that Baroque composers embedded humor into their music, it is not the only way. Some composers began to use titles that would indicate to audiences that their music was intended to be more comical. Johann Jacob Walther composed his *Scherzi da violino solo: X “Imitatione del Cuccu”* (“In Imitation of the Cuckoo”), which utilizes the word *scherzo*, which is “the Italian word for joke.”⁴⁹ The joke in Walther’s piece is that the violin soloist uses virtuosic bowing techniques to imitate a nightingale’s song. Composers also began composing burlesques, which juxtaposed serious and comical music. The word burlesque is derived from the Italian word *burlare*, “which means to make fun of.”⁵⁰ Other composers would designate serious music styles with comical titles to show that “even serious styles could be transformed.”⁵¹ For example, William S. Newman labeled some of his dances as “Fugue gay”

⁴⁷ Arias, 36.

⁴⁸ Arias, 36-37.

⁴⁹ Arias, 36.

⁵⁰ Arias, 38.

⁵¹ Arias, 37.

and “Allemande comique.”⁵² A fugue is a composition that utilizes counterpoint and imitation, and it was considered quite a virtuosic and complex genre during the Baroque period. An allemande is a popular Baroque dance that has a more stately and serious tone. The fusion of serious and comical styles was more emphatic in the Baroque period than it had ever been before, mainly because composers had more freedom to compose more secular music that was not strictly tied to a functional purpose. Instrumental music could be composed purely for artistic value and enjoyment.

One Baroque composer whose music features a combination of serious and comic styles is Johann Sebastian Bach. An excellent example of Bach combining the two styles in one piece is his *Goldberg Variations*, which according to Arias, “alternate humorous [variations] with the canonic variations; thus, there are variations that contrast with the serious canonic variations by featuring rapidly alternating chords and the crossing of hands.”⁵³ Bach also utilized unusual instrumental effects in his *Brandenburg Concerti* to achieve a humorous effect. For example, in Bach’s *Brandenburg Concerto* No. 1, he ends the piece with a minuet “featuring trios with raucous horn passages.”⁵⁴ The effect created by the horn’s unconventional part in this concerto creates a sense of incongruity between the horn’s stereotypical role in orchestral forms and its usage here, and this incongruity could have been perceived as humorous to audiences of the time. Bach’s embrace of the humorous in conjunction with the serious inspired composers in generations to come.

The Classical period brought about more instrumental genres that are conducive to incorporating humor. Arias says that the most popular humor during this time was “mimicry, wit,

⁵² Arias, 37.

⁵³ Arias, 38.

⁵⁴ Arias, 39.

parody ('placing a serious topic in a more or less ridiculous light'), and artful imitation of musical bungling."⁵⁵ As a whole, there were more distinctions between high and low art styles during the Classical period, but several composers would later begin to mix specific characteristics of the low style into their high art compositions.⁵⁶ The symphony was a relatively new genre of instrumental music during the Classical period, and this was one genre where the high and low styles often bled together. Sometimes composers would group their symphonies into cycles, and it is in these cycles that many of the overlaps between serious and humorous styles can be seen. Mozart's Symphony No. 39 is widely regarded as humorous and his Symphony No. 40 is well-known as tragic, but his Symphony No. 41 (*Jupiter*) utilizes both "comic and heroic gestures."⁵⁷ Comic symphonies also drew upon the techniques used in *opera buffa* (Italian comic opera). For example, the use of "extensive pauses and distant key juxtapositions" in Haydn's Symphony No. 90 is indicative of its ties to comic opera.⁵⁸ Concerti also had ties to humor, especially if the composer incorporated a hunting style, military style, or even a national style such as a Turkish style. Lighter genres of instrumental music like dance suites, divertimenti, and cassations also utilized specific styles that were associated with humor.

Franz Joseph Haydn is one of the world's most widely known Classical composers and was regarded as a musical humorist. Haydn was a natural at composing music that combined the high and low styles of the Classical period, but some scholars also argue that his humor was not accessible to all groups during his life. According to Gretchen A. Wheelock, "the personal humor of Haydn's music is identified with ingenuity of invention and more refined tastes."⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Arias, 41.

⁵⁶ Arias, 41.

⁵⁷ Arias, 48.

⁵⁸ Arias, 48.

⁵⁹ Wheelock, 48.

Supposedly, only those in the upper class who had detailed musical training to comprehend the compositional idioms of the time (so-called connoisseurs) were able to identify the humor in Haydn's music. This may not be entirely true, but to understand Haydn's sense of humor one must have a decent understanding of eighteenth-century musical conventions. Wheelock states "that Haydn's teasing manner was recognized in his own day as a salient trait in his compositions."⁶⁰ Overall, Haydn's role as a humorist in the Classical period helped to normalize the inclusion of humor in high art forms.

Romantic composers continued to expand upon the comic techniques that Classical composers were employing in their compositions. Symphonies continued to be a place for composers to experiment with humor during the Romantic period. In fact, "all nine of Beethoven's symphonies include comedy."⁶¹ Symphonic humor was often dictated by contrast; composers could have toyed with contrast in style, contrast in articulation, contrast in dynamics, or contrast in orchestration thanks to Classical era composers, such as Haydn, who established models of humor in instrumental music. Composers continued to draw upon these established conventions for influence while also developing new styles of musical humor such as caricature. New innovations in technology led to more opportunities to include parody in instrumental music. According to Arias, "parody, sometimes involving toy instruments, is found in a number of instrumental works."⁶² Pedagogical music written specifically for children learning the piano often had comedic undertones. Additionally, macabre humor, a darker style of humor whose origins come from the plague era, made a resurgence during the Romantic period. An example of this is Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, "which turns the symphony's *idée fixe* into a

⁶⁰ Wheelock, 87.

⁶¹ Arias, 65.

⁶² Arias, 66.

can-can and includes references to the ‘Dies Irae’ chant from the Gregorian Requiem Mass.”⁶³

As a result of the many styles of humor being utilized during the Romantic period, many instruments developed strong ties to certain forms of humor. The xylophone, for example, was often used “to depict bones knocking together,” such as in *Danse macabre* by Camille Saint-Saëns.⁶⁴ Although today’s audiences might not associate the xylophone with bones clacking together, there are still some instances of ties between specific instruments and imitations. There are examples of the flute imitating bird calls and bird songs dating back to the Baroque period, and the association between the flute and bird calls has survived the test of time as it is present during the Romantic period and even in modern day.

During the 20th Century, there was an abundance of musical experimentation that led to many different compositional styles converging. There was not a clear, dominant style; however, one common thread among 20th Century composers was the desire to incorporate the human experience into their music. According to Arias, “comedy and tragedy form twin poles of the human experience—the one would be impossible without the other.”⁶⁵ There were many new musical styles that lent themselves well to more humorous idioms throughout the 20th Century. For instance, Luigi Russolo and F.B. Pratella’s new musical style known as Futurism, which included *intonarumori* or noise-makers, was perceived as a humorous style of instrumental music by those unfamiliar with the blossoming genre. However, to Russolo and Pratella, Futurism was a serious genre of music and was representative of musical progress.⁶⁶ 20th

⁶³ Arias, 71.

⁶⁴ Arias, 72.

⁶⁵ Arias, 99.

⁶⁶ One of the goals of Futurism was to squash the notion that noise is not serious music. Futurists argued that noise can be perceived as music. Audiences at the time were used to traditional forms of classical music, so when they heard the music of Russolo and Pratella, they might have perceived the concept as ridiculous and a joke. In this case, the line between music being humorous and non-humorous becomes a debate between progress and the status quo.

Century symphonies often incorporated elements of irony, dark humor, and satire. Many composers would contrast Baroque or Classical compositional styles with the dissonant harmonies widely used throughout the 20th Century. Percy Grainger was one composer who frequently did this. Several of Grainger's piano pieces that were later turned into works for wind ensembles, such as *Molly on the Shore* and *Handel in the Strand*, "are examples of what Grainger referred to as 'fripperies.'"⁶⁷ Grainger believed that his "fripperies," which were often light-hearted, humorous, and dance-like, were not a serious compositional genre. Hence, Grainger used the term "fripperies" to describe those compositions. Many of Grainger's works for wind band are from his "fripperies," and are widely regarded today as serious concert literature even though they are humorous in nature. The advent of the prepared piano gave way to new avenues for composers to incorporate satire and irony into their solo piano music.⁶⁸ There were even some composers who specialized in humorous music during this time. Peter Schickele (b. 1935), also known as P.D.Q. Bach, is famous for satirizing the music of "the 17th and 18th centuries."⁶⁹ As more musical styles developed throughout the 20th century, more opportunities for incorporating humor into music presented themselves. Arias says with regards to Postmodernism, "collage, parody, multiculturalism, and combinations of high and low art are typical, obscuring the divisions between esoteric and popular practice."⁷⁰ Such styles that encourage compositional creativity and bricolage foster more space for humor to become common in instrumental music. This increase in greater creative license was due to the shift in patronage structures for composers. In the 20th Century, composers did not have to create music for public appeal, and they often focused on increasingly progressive musical genres. Many 20th

⁶⁷ Arias, 95.

⁶⁸ Arias, 95.

⁶⁹ Arias, 85.

⁷⁰ Arias, 99.

Century composers were interested in composing music that was experimental and part of the new avant-garde movement, and they found a place to do that in academic institutions that would support the creation of these new styles of music. However, there still were some composers, such as P.D.Q. Bach, who intentionally composed experimental parodic music for public appeal, furthering the argument that humorous music can be commercially successful in the same ways that “serious music” is successful.

When choosing the excerpts of humorous instrumental music to be included in this survey, the intention was to select excerpts spanning multiple genres and compositional time periods. In total, there were eleven excerpts chosen (nine of which were coded as humorous, and two of which were identified as non-humorous). The two 20th Century non-humorous excerpts included in the survey were used to gauge the participants’ attention to detail while completing the survey. Out of the nine humorous excerpts, two of them were from the Baroque period, two of them were from the Classical period, two of them were from the Romantic period, and three of them were from the 20th Century.

The Baroque excerpts used in the survey were both pieces for solo keyboard. The first Baroque excerpt is “La Poule” (“The Chicken”) from Jean-Philippe Rameau’s *Nouvelles suites de pièces de clavecin*. This excerpt is part of an instrumental harpsichord suite. The humor in this excerpt can be found in the imitative nature of the ornamentation added to the melody, which rhythmically resembles the sound of a clucking chicken. The imitation is not only achieved through the use of ornamentation but also through the use of sudden pauses in the phrases, which mimic the sense of unpredictability one would experience with a live animal. The second Baroque excerpt is Johann Kaspar Kerll’s organ piece entitled *Capriccio sopra il Cucu* (Cuckoo

Capriccio). Like the Rameau excerpt, this example utilizes rhythm, ornamentation, and timbre to create a humorous melody that imitates a cuckoo bird and/or cuckoo clock.

The Classical excerpts used in the survey both came from larger orchestral works. The first Classical excerpt is from a portion of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's divertimento entitled *A Musical Joke*, K. 522, "IV. Presto." One can already assume the humorous nature of the excerpt based on the title, but the combination of a traditional Classical form and a stereotypical Classical melody juxtaposed with the unconventional harmonies of the final cadence adds a punchline to Mozart's joke. The other Classical excerpt included in the survey is from Franz Joseph Haydn's Symphony No. 94 in G Major, Hob.I.94 "II. Andante," also known colloquially as the "Surprise Symphony." This excerpt utilizes sudden changes in dynamics to surprise the audience. The loud outburst from the orchestra in conjunction with typical Classical rhythms, melodies, and harmonies creates a sense of incongruity, which makes this excerpt witty.

The two Romantic excerpts used in the survey come from different genres of music. The first comes from a tone poem by Richard Strauss—*Don Quixote*, Op. 35: "Sancho Panza's theme—Maggiore." This example utilizes the bass clarinet, tenor tuba, and viola to carry the melodic line. The fact that these instruments are tasked with the melody can be considered humorous since these instruments typically do not play the melody, but the humor in this excerpt is also derived from the rhythms, articulations, and wide leaps in pitch played by the bass clarinet and tenor tuba that help the listener picture Sancho Panza riding his donkey. Compared to Don Quixote's heroic theme, which is much dreamier and stoic, Sancho Panza's theme is contrastingly goofier to represent the humorous sidekick trope because of the uneven feel of the melody. The second Romantic excerpt used in the survey is a movement from one of Ignacio Cervantes' piano suites called Six Cuban Dances for Piano, "III. Pst!" This excerpt utilizes

extreme dynamic contrast to imitate the sound of a whisper. The syncopated rhythms also give the excerpt a whimsical feel that can be equated with comical music.

The excerpts used in the survey to represent the 20th Century come from a variety of styles and genres. The first is a short orchestral prelude by Igor Stravinsky entitled “Greeting Prelude, K085.” This excerpt uses pointillistic compositional techniques to incorporate a humorous quotation of the “Happy Birthday” melody with 20th Century serialist harmonies.⁷¹ The randomness of the orchestration adds another layer of humor to the excerpt. The second excerpt from the 20th Century is *Préludes, Livre 1*, “La sérénade interrompue” (*Preludes, Book 1*, “The Interrupted Serenade”) by Claude Debussy. To elicit a humorous response in this piece, Debussy incorporates humorous interruptions into the main theme. The interruptions to the theme often involve an abrupt change in dynamics, articulations, and rhythms, which creates a different texture within the music. The final humorous excerpt from the 20th Century used in the survey is from Sergei Prokofiev’s Symphony No. 1, op. 25, “Gavotte: Non troppo allegro.” This excerpt utilizes Classical dance styles in conjunction with unconventional harmonic progressions, which Leonard Bernstein describes as a musical pun because the listener’s brain tries to predict what cadence is coming next, but Prokofiev takes the harmony in an unexpected direction.⁷² The juxtaposition of well-known forms and quick-paced, unexpected harmonic progressions is considered quite humorous. Additionally, the bouncy articulations give the melody a humorous connotation.

⁷¹ Pointillism is a style of visual art developed and popularized by Georges Seurat which utilizes small dots a color to create larger forms and images. In music, Pointillism is a compositional technique where individual notes of the melody are spread across the ensemble, and those isolated notes come together to form a larger phrase.

⁷² Leonard Bernstein, “Humor in Music,” Leonard Bernstein Office, accessed September 6, 2022, <https://leonardbernstein.com/lectures/television-scripts/young-peoples-concerts/humor-in-music>.

As previously stated, there were two non-humorous excerpts included within the survey to gauge how much the survey participants were paying attention to each excerpt. The first non-humorous excerpt included is from Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings, Op. 11a. The second non-humorous excerpt comes from Antonín Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95; B 178, "II. Largo." Both excerpts are in a more lyrical style that has strong connections to what is traditionally considered "serious music."

Humor in instrumental music is historically and culturally bound. What might have been perceived as humorous in the Baroque period might later turn out to be common compositional practice in the Romantic period. However, some aspects of humor in instrumental music remain constant over time. For example, humorous imitations of the natural world are present in music spanning from the Baroque period to the modern day. Understanding humor in Western European art music requires musical competence and strong inference skills, which is why the listening survey is key to understanding how collegiate music students perceive humor in instrumental music. As Peter Kay points out, "the listener must understand the language of the joke and create some form of intellectual representation based upon this understanding."⁷³ Thus, understanding the musical language in the context of the time period is essential to understanding musical humor.

⁷³ Peter Kay, "Music and Humor: What's So Funny?", *Music Reference Services Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 37, https://doi:10.1300/J116v10n01_03.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Survey Findings

The intent of this survey was to gauge humor identification and perception in undergraduate music majors. Thus, this survey was sent to students enrolled in History of Western Music I, History of Western Music II, and History of Western Music III (MUSC 353, MUSC 354, and MUSC 455 respectively) and all music education student teachers from the Spring 2022 semester at the University of South Carolina School of Music. This group of students was selected because of their background knowledge about Western European music theory and music history, and the fact that many likely have experience performing music from the Western European tradition. Originally, there were 27 survey respondents; however, after examining the data, the number of usable survey responses was reduced to nine due to incomplete surveys and extremely low survey completion times. In the survey, participants were asked to listen to eleven total excerpts that spanned between the Baroque period to the 20th Century, though for the sake of survey accuracy these were presented out of chronological order. Each excerpt ranged from about 45 seconds to three minutes. Any participants who completed the survey in less than 18 minutes and 30 seconds would not have listened to each excerpt in its entirety. As a result, responses with a duration less than that specified minimum were not included in the analysis of the results.

Out of the nine usable responses, one respondent's primary instrument was violin, one respondent's primary instrument was viola, one respondent's primary instrument was cello, two respondents' primary instrument was voice, one respondent's primary instrument was clarinet, one respondent's primary instrument was trombone, and two respondents' primary instrument was tuba. At the time of the survey, five respondents were classified as sophomores and four respondents were classified as seniors. Six respondents had only completed MUSC 353, one

respondent had completed MUSC 353 and MUSC 354, and two respondents had completed MUSC 353, MUSC 354, and MUSC 455.

The same six questions were posed for each of the eleven excerpts in the survey. Survey participants started by listening to one excerpt in its entirety before moving on to the questions. The first question asked survey participants to rate the amount of humor they perceived in the excerpt on a scale of one to ten (one being not at all funny and ten being extremely funny). An even number scale was used so survey participants could not choose a neutral option in their rating. Next, survey participants were asked to select what musical elements they found humorous in the excerpt and were able to select all that they believed were applicable. The list the survey participants chose from included: melody, harmony, rhythm, title, articulations, ornaments, dynamics, orchestration, form, timbre, tempo, and other. After that, survey participants were asked to summarize their reasoning for their selections in the previous question. The fourth and fifth questions used a “yes” and “no” format. The fourth question asked if the survey participants had heard the excerpt before while the fifth question asked if they had performed the excerpt before. The final question asked whether the survey participant believed the excerpt came from the Baroque period, Classical period, Romantic period, or 20th Century.

Each excerpt was confirmed as either humorous or non-humorous by members of the Music History faculty at the University of South Carolina School of Music. For the excerpts used in the survey, specific musical elements in the nine humorous excerpts contributed to the humor found in each excerpt. These elements were discussed in detail in Chapter Two. For a full breakdown of the survey responses, please see Table 1 in the Appendix. For a breakdown of the musical elements perceived as humorous for each excerpt, please see Table 2 in the Appendix. For demographic information about the survey participants, please see Table 3 in the Appendix.

The first excerpt in the survey was from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *A Musical Joke*, K. 522, "IV. Presto." For this excerpt, the mean rating of humor perceived was 6.56 with a standard deviation of 1.13, and the maximum rating was 8 while the minimum rating was 4 (indicating a range of 4). As stated in Chapter Two, the humor in this excerpt is derived from the juxtaposition of typical Classical forms with unconventional harmonies. Six participants indicated the harmony as humorous and only two participants indicated the form as humorous. The two participants who selected the form also selected harmony in their responses. Six participants also selected the melody as humorous, and five participants selected rhythm as a humorous element. Five out of the nine participants had previously heard this excerpt before taking the survey and no participants had ever performed this excerpt. When asked to choose what time period this excerpt came from, eight respondents correctly selected the Classical period while one respondent selected the Baroque period.

The second excerpt in the survey was a movement from one of Ignacio Cervantes' piano suites called *Six Cuban Dances for Piano*, "III. Pst!" The mean rating of humor perceived in this excerpt was 3.50 with a standard deviation of 1.77. The maximum rating was 6 and the minimum rating was 2, indicating a range of 4. The two musical elements that were predicted to garner more selections in this excerpt were dynamics and rhythm. Five participants indicated the rhythm as humorous, and two participants selected dynamics as a humorous element. Two participants also indicated the articulations as humorous in this excerpt. No survey participants had ever heard of or performed this excerpt prior to participating in the survey. Two participants correctly categorized this excerpt as Romantic while seven participants chose the 20th Century.

The third excerpt in the survey was "La Poule" ("The Chicken") from Jean-Philippe Rameau's *Nouvelles suites de pièces de clavecin*. The mean rating of humor perceived was 5.00

with a standard deviation of 2.24. The maximum rating was 8 and the minimum rating was 2, which means the range was 6. For this excerpt, the melody, rhythm, articulation, and ornamentation were all predicted to contribute greatly to the humor perceived in this excerpt. Four respondents selected the melody and articulations as humorous, and five respondents selected the rhythm and ornamentation as humorous. The title and tempo also were selected by respondents four times. One respondent had heard this excerpt prior to taking the survey, but no respondents had ever performed it. Three respondents correctly selected the Baroque period, three respondents selected the Classical period, and three respondents selected the Romantic period.

The fourth excerpt used in the survey was from Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, Op. 11a, which was one of the two non-humorous excerpts in the survey used to gauge whether survey participants were truly paying attention while completing the survey. The mean rating of humor perceived in this excerpt was 2.33 with a standard deviation of 2.31, and the maximum rating was 5 while the minimum rating was 1 (resulting in a range of 4). There were no predicted humorous elements in this excerpt; however, one person, who had not heard or performed this piece before did find the melody, form, and tempo humorous. In their explanation, they attributed their rating to their perception of the excerpt as a parody of a movie score. Additionally, two survey respondents indicated in their explanations that the excerpt was not funny or that there were no humorous elements present. Seven survey respondents had heard this piece prior to completing the survey, and three survey respondents had performed this piece before. Six survey participants correctly selected the 20th Century while three selected the Romantic period.

The fifth excerpt used in the survey was Igor Stravinsky's "Greeting Prelude, K085." The mean rating of humor perceived by survey participants in this excerpt was 4.63 with a standard deviation of 1.92. The maximum and minimum rating of humor perceived in this excerpt were 8 and 2 respectively, which means the range is 6. The main musical elements that contribute to the humor in this excerpt are the melody, harmony, rhythm, orchestration, and title. Five survey participants selected the melody as humorous and four selected the orchestration as humorous. Three survey participants selected the harmony and title as a humorous part of the excerpt and two participants attributed some of the humor to the rhythm. Interestingly, three survey participants also selected the form and timbre as humorous elements of the music. Several of the adjectives the survey participants used to describe what they heard are also important to note. For example, they described the excerpt as "quirky," "misleading," "gruffy," and "random." Although it was not specifically asked within the survey, two participants indicated in their explanations that they recognized the "Happy Birthday" melody that Stravinsky used. One person had heard this excerpt prior to the survey and no survey participants had performed it before. Six respondents correctly selected the 20th Century while one respondent selected the Classical period, and one respondent selected the Romantic period. One respondent left this question unanswered.

The sixth excerpt used in the survey was a selection from Franz Joseph Haydn's Symphony No. 94 in G Major, Hob.I.94 "II. Andante." The mean rating of humor perceived for this excerpt was 6.56 with a standard deviation of 1.51. The maximum rating of humor perceived was 8 while the minimum was 3, indicating a range of 5. The juxtaposition of unconventional dynamics with Classical harmonies, rhythms, and melodies are the driving factors of humor in this excerpt. As predicted, a substantial number of survey participants (eight) selected the

dynamics as a musical element that contributed to the perceived humor in this excerpt. Five survey participants also selected the melody, and four survey participants selected the rhythm. Harmony, which was the other element predicted to garner a large response, was selected by two survey participants. Six survey respondents had heard this excerpt before and three had previously performed it. Eight survey respondents correctly selected the Classical period for this excerpt, and one selected the Romantic period.

For the seventh excerpt, *Préludes, Livre 1*, “La sérénade interrompue” (*Preludes, Book 1*, “The Interrupted Serenade”) by Claude Debussy, the mean rating of humor perceived was 4.29 with a standard deviation of 1.29. The maximum rating was 7 while the minimum rating was 2, resulting in a range of 5. Sudden changes in dynamics, articulations, and rhythm contribute to the humor in this excerpt. Four survey participants selected the rhythm as a humorous element, three selected the dynamics, and one selected the articulations. Additionally, three participants selected the melody and title as humorous aspects of the excerpt. One participant selected the other option and added that the stylistic directions added to the humor. No survey participants had heard or performed this excerpt before taking the survey. Four survey participants correctly chose the 20th Century, one survey participant chose the Classical period, and three survey participants chose the Romantic period.

The eighth excerpt used in this survey was from Antonín Dvořák’s Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95; B 178, “II. Largo,” which was the second non-humorous excerpt in the survey. This symphony is also nicknamed “Symphony for a New World.” The mean rating of humor perceived in this excerpt was 3.5 with a standard deviation of 1.73. The maximum rating of humor was 5 and the minimum was 1, meaning the range was 4. Although this was a non-humorous excerpt, two people indicated that the title was humorous. One respondent who rated

this excerpt as a 5 also explained in their response that the musical elements are not what make the excerpt humorous. Rather it is the irony behind the title and the piece's ties with nationalist music that make it humorous. Five survey participants had heard this excerpt prior to completing the survey. Three survey participants performed this piece prior to completing the survey. Five survey participants correctly selected the Romantic period for this excerpt. One survey participant selected the Classical period and three selected the 20th Century.

The ninth excerpt in the survey was Johann Kaspar Kerll's *Capriccio sopra il Cucu* (Cuckoo Capriccio). The mean rating of perceived humor in this excerpt was 6.14 with a standard deviation of 2.54. The maximum and minimum ratings of this excerpt are 9 and 3 respectively, which means the range is 6. The main musical elements that contribute to the humor in this excerpt that were predicted to be chosen by most survey participants are rhythm, ornamentation, and timbre. The rhythm was selected by seven survey participants and timbre was chosen by four; however, ornamentation was only selected by one survey participant. Interestingly, the melody was selected by six survey participants. In retrospect, it is difficult to discuss the rhythm in this excerpt without discussing its connection to the melody. No survey participants had heard of or performed this excerpt prior to this survey. Five survey respondents correctly selected the Baroque period, two survey respondents selected the Classical period, and two survey respondents selected the 20th Century.

The tenth excerpt used in the survey was from Sergei Prokofiev's Symphony No. 1, op. 25, "Gavotte: Non troppo allegro." This excerpt had a mean rating of 4.29 for humor perceived and a standard deviation of 1.80. The maximum rating was 7 and the minimum rating was 2, which indicates a range of 5. For this excerpt the form, articulations, harmony, and melody were all considered humorous. Two survey respondents selected the form, three survey respondents

selected the articulations, and 4 survey respondents selected the harmony and melody. Additionally, three survey respondents selected the dynamics as an element that also made this excerpt humorous. Prior to completing the survey, five participants had heard this excerpt before, but no participants had ever performed it. Four survey participants correctly chose the 20th Century for this excerpt. One participant chose the Classical period, three participants chose the Romantic period, and one left this question unanswered.

The eleventh and final excerpt in the survey was Richard Strauss' *Don Quixote*, Op. 35: "Sancho Panza's theme— Maggiore." The mean rating of perceived humor in this excerpt was 5.86 with a standard deviation of 2.34. The maximum rating was 10 and the minimum rating of 3. Therefore, the range was 7. The melody, rhythm, articulations, orchestration, and timbre were predicted to be frequently chosen for this excerpt. The orchestration, melody, and rhythm all scored highly, being chosen by six participants, five participants, and four participants respectively. Three survey participants chose timbre, and two survey participants chose articulations. Five survey participants had heard this excerpt before, but none of the survey participants had performed it. Four survey participants correctly selected the Romantic period, three survey participants selected the Classical period, and two survey participants selected the 20th Century.

Several trends appeared after analyzing the data gathered from this survey. The humorous excerpts that most of the survey participants had heard before had a mean rating of perceived humor greater than 5. The only exceptions to this were the Kerll excerpt and the Prokofiev excerpt. No one had heard the Kerll excerpt prior to completing this survey, but the mean rating of perceived humor was 6.14. Five people had heard the Prokofiev excerpt prior to the survey, but the mean rating of perceived humor was 4.29. Even considering these two outliers, the

survey results imply that familiarity with the music is important in understanding the humor within a piece. In addition, knowing the context of the piece can increase one's perception of humor. Although the music of the Dvořák excerpt is not humorous in and of itself, some survey participants found this excerpt to be humorous based on their prior knowledge about Dvořák's intentions to establish an "American" national style of music even though he was Czech. Additionally, the Cervantes, Stravinsky, Debussy, and Prokofiev excerpts were all humorous; however, they had mean ratings of humor perceived that were less than 5.

After the window for completing the survey closed, I realized there are several improvements that can be implemented to improve the quality of this survey in the future. The order of each excerpt was the same for every survey participant. This is concerning because the responses at the beginning of the survey might be more detailed than the responses at the end simply because the level of engagement a participant has at the beginning will naturally be higher than at the end of the survey. Therefore, it would be beneficial to randomize the order of the excerpts presented in the survey. Another way this survey could be improved is by using dials to measure the perceived humor of an excerpt. The current way the survey measures perceived humor requires the participant to give a singular rating to the entire excerpt but using a dial tool to measure the perceived humor would allow the survey participants to express their perceived humor at multiple points throughout the excerpt. Another improvement that could be made is using multiple collegiate schools of music to increase the sample size. Participation in this survey was incentivized by entering participants in a drawing for a \$10 Starbucks gift card upon completion of the survey. This survey was also released near the end of the Spring 2022 semester, so the sample size might have increased if the survey was released at a time closer to the beginning or the middle of the semester when college students are not as busy or stressed.

Changing the release date to an earlier time would also increase the window for students to access the survey, effectively allowing more flexibility for students to complete the survey.

In conclusion, the results of this survey offer helpful insight into how collegiate music students interpret and perceive humor in instrumental music. Different humorous musical elements can be discussed individually when it comes to humor, but they oftentimes work in conjunction with one another. For example, it might be difficult to discuss the melody of a humorous piece without also discussing how the rhythm is connected to that melody. This is evident in the survey results. Additionally, exposure to a piece of humorous music typically increases the chance of perceiving humor, and knowledge of the historical conventions of the time also aids in humor perception. The following chapter will discuss how these survey results can guide best practices, strategies, and techniques for teaching high school students how to identify humor in instrumental music.

Chapter Four: Teaching Humor in Instrumental Music

Although the survey used for this study was conducted with collegiate music students, teaching how humor is used in instrumental music is still appropriate for a high school music appreciation class. The South Carolina College and Career Ready Standards for General Music Proficiency state in Anchor Standard 8 that “[The students] can examine music from a variety of stylistic and historical periods and cultures,” and Benchmark GM.C AL.8 states that “[the students] can analyze a diverse repertoire of music from a cultural or historical time period.”⁷⁴ Diverse repertoire does not only mean music from composers of different nationalities, genders, races, religions, and creeds, but it also can mean humorous and non-humorous music. Even though the state standards give educators the ability to teach how to identify humorous instrumental music in a high school music appreciation class, the students still might wonder why this information is important for them to learn, which could lead to motivation issues. Jere Brophy states that “issues relating to the value that individual students place on engaging in a learning activity or gaining whatever benefits successful completion will bring” are one of three major issues surrounding motivation in education.⁷⁵ The question becomes “what is the value of learning how to recognize humor in instrumental music?” Humor is both universal and local, meaning that humor found in one part of the world is often humorous because of the cultural ties to that specific area. Learning about humor in instrumental music expands one’s global perspective since it exposes students to other cultures. Additionally, to find the humor in instrumental music, one must listen with an observant and critical ear, and listening skills are essential in virtually all aspects of life. This chapter provides some baseline recommendations for

⁷⁴ South Carolina Department of Education, “South Carolina College- and Career-Ready Standards for General Music Proficiency,” (Columbia, SC: 2017), 225.

⁷⁵ Jere Brophy, “Developing Students' Appreciation for What Is Taught in School,” *Educational Psychologist* 43, no. 3 (July 22, 2008): 132, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520701756511>.

teaching students to identify musical humor in Western European instrumental repertoire within music appreciation classes.

Listening is an active process, and according to Christy Thomas, active listening “[requires] a heightened level of engagement from the observer or listener.”⁷⁶ As a teacher, it is important to model for your students, and modeling excellent listening practices is a good way for your students to develop active listening skills. Thomas also advocates that in order to aid your students in developing active listening skills, instructors should repeatedly give students listening exercises to practice and develop their skills, even if this means “playing [the same] examples multiple times.”⁷⁷ Additionally, giving your students specific listening targets will be beneficial in developing their active listening skills for finding humor in instrumental music.

Before students get to a high school music appreciation class, it is crucial that they have exposure to music of different tonalities, modalities, and meters in elementary school. Even if students did not participate in a music class during middle school, the basic foundation of musical vocabulary needed to succeed in a music appreciation class should ideally be built in elementary school. In elementary music classes students are introduced to common tonal and rhythmic patterns spanning centuries of Western European music. Audiation, as defined by Edwin E. Gordon, is what occurs when “we assimilate and comprehend in our minds music that we have just heard performed or have heard performed sometime in the past.”⁷⁸ The musical experiences that students had in elementary school directly impact their ability to use audiation

⁷⁶ Christy Thomas, “Active Listening: Teaching with Music,” *Center for Teaching and Learning Fellow Blog* (blog) (Yale Center for Teaching and Learning, November 30, 2015), <https://campuspress.yale.edu/yctl/active-listening/>.

⁷⁷ Thomas, “Active Listening: Teaching with Music.”

⁷⁸ Edwin E. Gordon, *Learning Sequences in Music: Skill, Content, and Patterns; A Music Learning Theory* (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2003), 4.

to make predictions and inferences about what logically should occur in music. When students are able to create aural inferences about what is to come next in the music (based on the music they have heard and performed before), they are able to notice incongruities that could potentially be indicative of humor in instrumental music. At the very least, elementary students should be familiar with recognizing I-V-I, I-IV-V-I, and i-iv-v-i harmonic progressions; distinguishing melodies in major and minor tonalities; and identifying rhythms in duple, triple, and irregular meters. When students have a foundation of the basic tonal, rhythmic, and harmonic patterns that are commonly found in Western European art music, they will be able to understand basic and obvious forms of humor in instrumental music.

Though ideally students would enter a music appreciation class with a basic understanding of the musical patterns and vocabulary found in Western European art music, this is not always the case. If the skills learned in an elementary general music class are not put into practice, then those students might forget that information. Thus, the music appreciation instructor is often faced with the unique task of teaching a class with students who vary from those who have had a great deal of exposure to these concepts to those who have had little to none. In a high school music appreciation class, there may be a combination of students who have participated in band, choir, orchestra, or other musical ensembles and students who are only taking the class to fulfill a graduation requirement. It is important to note that while music appreciation classes are growing to be more inclusive of musical traditions outside of the Western European sphere, these classes primarily focus on Western European musical traditions. The following recommendations will apply to music appreciation classes that specifically focus on the Western European tradition.

To introduce the concept of musical humor, instructors should start with something that is easily accessible to students with less musical experience, such as sound effects. The sudden dynamic changes in Haydn's "Surprise Symphony" can be understood as a form of sound effect, and most students would be able to easily recognize the humor between the sharp contrast in dynamics. Once an educator has found this entry point, they can scaffold in different musical concepts in lessons that will be applicable to humorous listening excerpts presented in the curriculum. Sometimes students learn best by understanding what something is not. Therefore, one can present students with examples of those musical concepts in excerpts of music that is traditionally considered more serious so that when they appear in a humorous excerpt the musical concepts are obviously funny. The students with a strong understanding of music might be bored at first by the simplicity of these listening examples, but one way to counteract their boredom is to assign them leadership roles in listening activities. Eventually, instructors will be able to make the listening excerpts more complex if they intentionally provide the resources and supports necessary to build concepts of basic musical humor in prior lessons.

This begs the question, "can one perceive humor in instrumental music without having a strong grasp of the Western European theory behind the music?" In short, yes, they can. However, a deeper understanding of this music theory can make understanding more subtle humor in instrumental music easier. For example, part of the humor in one of the survey excerpts, Sergei Prokofiev's Symphony No. 1, op. 25, "Gavotte: Non troppo allegro," is derived from Prokofiev's frequent and unexpected modulations to different keys. It would be difficult for a high school student with limited formal music theory training to understand the humor in this excerpt. When working with students who do not have extensive knowledge of music theory, which would probably be a large majority of students in a high school music appreciation class,

it might be beneficial to use humorous excerpts that are not as difficult to understand and build up to more complex examples.

The historical, cultural, and social context of the time periods that humorous listening excerpts come from are also important when trying to identify the humor in instrumental music. Most students, including those that participate in other music ensembles at school, probably do not have experience learning about these contexts. However, students do not need to know every single fact about the Baroque period or every one of J.S. Bach's important achievements to understand a humorous fugue. Prior to giving students listening activities with the intent of discussing the humor, introduce important contextual facts about the composer, the time period, the style of music, and the social and cultural trends of the time to prepare students for that particular listening excerpt. Work to develop the skills that students need in order to be successful at the tasks you assign them.

Additionally, music educators should work to increase students' musical literacy. If students are unable to converse using music-specific academic language and vocabulary, then you must plan lessons that teach students how to use words such as melody, timbre, and ornamentation. This can look like discussion-based assignments, writing-based assignments, or reading-based assignments. Once students can use musical terms in the correct context, then they will be able to discuss them in greater detail when it comes to musical humor.

Humor in instrumental music is a multi-dimensional concept. It can be elementary or extremely complex. If instructors intend to teach music appreciation students about this concept, then they must be intentional in lesson planning to scaffold from more accessible listening excerpts to more complex excerpts. The suggestions provided in this chapter are aimed at making humor in instrumental music more accessible to students that do not have tremendous

music training, and the suggestions are based more in generalities. It is always important to take the individual needs of students into account when teaching, so it is crucial that teachers have assessments in place to gauge how students are progressing through each listening excerpt. This type of assessment could take multiple forms such as a listening quiz, a class discussion, or a written reflection. The results of these assessments are determinant in choosing whether to move forward to new listening excerpts or to revisit prior listening excerpts for clarification.

Conclusion

In this study, the psychological process of perceiving and appreciating humor, the usage of humor in instrumental music in Western European art music, and general strategies of how to teach humor in instrumental music in a music appreciation class were all examined and discussed. Humor often brings joy and levity to those who appreciate it, and music as an art form can express a range of emotions. Learning to identify and appreciate the humor within instrumental music can help us to appreciate the artistry of both the composers and performers of the music. Additionally, even though humorous music typically has a lighter and more jovial connotation, it is still a serious genre of music that deserves to be studied.

Humor is strongly connected to social cognition and the way humans use previous experiences to determine how they will proceed in later social settings. Throughout history, there have been numerous theories that address what makes something humorous. These date back to the times of Aristotle and Plato and have been developed by later scholars into the twenty-first century. While some theories are outdated and have been disproven, others remain valid today. However, it is a fact that humor is culturally and historically bound. Humor in instrumental music is based on a variety of factors such as incongruities with common musical practices of the composer's time and the historical context surrounding the piece.

Humor in instrumental music has changed over time, and to understand how it has changed instructors must understand how music has changed throughout history. Based on the results of the survey given to undergraduate music majors at the University of South Carolina, knowledge about the context of humorous instrumental music, whether it be the social norms of the composition's time or the common musical practices and idioms of the period, are crucial in perceiving and understanding the humor of an instrumental piece of music. The choices

composers make to modify certain musical elements to create humor within instrumental music can be discussed in isolation, but they often interact with each other to form a larger, humorous picture. For example, a composer could utilize melody, rhythm, and articulation to incorporate humor into the music.

Some may question why this topic is important. After all, humor in instrumental music is not a very present topic in today's world. Learning to appreciate music from a variety of cultures and times is important for today's students and developing strong listening skills in a music class can be transferable to other scenarios. Humor is a concept that many students enjoy, and one way to help students develop an appreciation for music that they might not initially feel connected to is to show them the role that humor plays in these traditions. Though humor in instrumental music may not be a primary focus of a music appreciation curriculum, highlighting the presence of humor in the musical curriculum could be effective in motivating students' learning and aiding them in connecting to the historical and cultural contexts of different musical time periods.

Appendix

Table 1. An Overview of the Listening Survey Responses

Excerpt	Era	<i>M</i> Humor Rating	<i>n</i>	Heard Before	Performed Before	Correct Era Guessed
Mozart	Classical	6.56 (1.13)	9	55.56%	0.00%	88.89%
Cervantes	Romantic	3.50 (1.77)	9	0.00%	0.00%	22.22%
Rameau	Baroque	5.00 (2.24)	9	11.11%	0.00%	33.33%
Barber	20 th Century	2.33 (2.31)	9	77.78%	33.33%	66.67%
Stravinsky	20 th Century	4.63 (1.92)	9	11.11%	0.00%	75.00%
Haydn	Classical	6.56 (1.51)	9	66.67%	33.33%	88.89%
Debussy	20 th Century	4.29 (1.60)	9	0.00%	0.00%	55.56%
Dvorak	Romantic	3.50 (1.73)	9	55.56%	33.33%	55.56%
Kerll	Baroque	6.14 (2.54)	9	0.00%	0.00%	55.56%
Prokofiev	20 th Century	4.29 (1.80)	9	55.56%	0.00%	50.00%
Strauss	Romantic	5.86 (2.34)	9	55.56%	0.00%	44.44%

Table 2. Percentage of Musical Elements Found Humorous in Each Excerpt

Excerpt	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Mozart	67%	67%	56%	44%	22%	56%	33%	44%	22%	11%	33%	22%
Cervantes	11%	11%	56%	22%	22%	0%	22%	11%	0%	11%	11%	22%
Rameau	44%	22%	56%	44%	44%	56%	11%	0%	11%	11%	44%	0%
Barber	11%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	11%	0%	11%	0%
Stravinsky	56%	33%	22%	33%	11%	0%	22%	44%	33%	33%	11%	11%
Haydn	56%	22%	44%	11%	22%	0%	89%	33%	11%	11%	11%	0%
Debussy	33%	11%	44%	33%	11%	22%	33%	11%	22%	11%	22%	22%
Dvorak	11%	0%	0%	22%	0%	0%	0%	11%	11%	0%	11%	11%
Kerll	67%	11%	78%	44%	22%	11%	0%	33%	11%	44%	11%	0%
Prokofiev	44%	44%	33%	0%	33%	11%	33%	22%	22%	11%	22%	0%
Strauss	56%	11%	44%	11%	22%	0%	22%	67%	11%	33%	11%	0%

Note: Column headings are as follows: (1) Melody; (2) Harmony; (3) Rhythm; (4) Title; (5) Articulations; (6) Ornementation; (7) Dynamics; (8) Orchestration; (9) Form; (10) Timbre; (11) Tempo; and (12) Other.

Table 3. Demographic Information of Survey Participants

Participant	Primary Instrument	Class Level	Highest Level of Music History Course Completed at USC
Participant A	Tuba	Senior	MUSC 455
Participant B	Tuba	Senior	MUSC 455
Participant C	Clarinet	Sophomore	MUSC 353
Participant D	Cello	Sophomore	MUSC 353
Participant E	Violin	Sophomore	MUSC 353
Participant F	Voice	Senior	MUSC 353
Participant G	Trombone	Sophomore	MUSC 353
Participant H	Viola	Sophomore	MUSC 353
Participant I	Voice	Junior	MUSC 354

Note: Participants are listed in order of survey completion.

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