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MUS 493 12/7/16
Paper 2 Final Draft

Subtle Irony in Personal Growth: Beethoven and Prokofiev's "Classical" Symphonies

A composer's work always responds in some way to the tradition that arose before it. By using pre-existing musical procedures - whether formal, harmonic, melodic, or rhythmic - a composer encounters the history and associations behind previously established practices and composers. Technically, anything a composer writes is a response to tradition. Sometimes, however, composers are more explicit in their reference to the past, intentionally recognizing tradition through imitation, adaptation, or even rejection. Thus, the *way* in which a composer chooses to respond to tradition can tell us something about their attitude towards it and how they believe their work relates to it. Both Ludwig van Beethoven and Sergei Prokofiev wrote works that highlight their relationship to the Classical symphonies of Haydn and Mozart - Beethoven's Eighth Symphony in F major, op. 93, and Prokofiev's First Symphony in D major ("Classical"), op. 25. Beethoven and Prokofiev deliberately try to emulate the Classical style in these symphonies, but through their own interpretive lens. Both these works, on the one hand, demonstrate a successful navigation and mastery of the Classical symphonic form. Yet, on the other hand, Beethoven and Prokofiev also subvert expectations through techniques such as startling thematic contrasts and unusual harmonic juxtapositions, creating frameworks that simultaneously represent both sincere homages of respect and ironic statements. Despite the near century that separates these compositions, both Beethoven's Eighth and Prokofiev's First display a subtle irony that extends beyond Haydn's overt wit while also providing opportunities for the composers to explore their own personal development as composers.

The concept of irony is generally understood as “saying one thing and meaning another” (Bonds 67). Applied to music, Mark Evan Bonds describes irony as the act of the composer “calling attention to the very artificiality of their own work” (Bonds 58). How do scholars characterize irony in the works of Beethoven and Prokofiev? Rey Longyear suggests that Beethoven was particularly attuned to the “Romantic” irony characterized by the work of German writers such as Schlegel and Tieck. He cites techniques that Beethoven used throughout his oeuvre, such as juxtapositions between “prosaic roughness and poetic beauty,” “blunt destruction of sublime moods,” and in practical jokes made on musicians and audiences (Longyear 647). Irony also regularly features in Prokofiev’s musical language. In his autobiography, Prokofiev discusses five main “lines” that can be detected in his early music. The “grotesque” is Prokofiev’s self-acclaimed fifth line. Considered by Prokofiev as more of a secondary addendum to his main styles, the “grotesque,” represents a type of “scherzo-ness,” encapsulated by “joke, laughter, and mockery (Shapovalov 18). Citing pieces such as Op. 18 “The Ugly Duckling” and *Love For Three Oranges*, Dmitri Shapovalov characterizes irony in early Prokofiev as the process of “splitting the work into at least two layers of meaning” (Shapovalov 21), creating a “semantic alienation” between a false surface layer and a deeper ironic layer.

Notably, irony plays an important and even central role in Haydn’s works themselves. Bonds notes how Haydn and other composers of the late eighteenth century began to move from an understanding of art, from composing “in such a way that one notices no art at all” to an act of making the listener “aware of the very act of listening.” One well-known example of this can be heard in Haydn’s finale of the String Quartet op. 33, no. 2, when Haydn plays with the listener’s expectations of where the movement will end by changing the tempo to an adagio and repeating

the opening theme with progressively longer rests (Bonds 47, 70). When irony is considered as a signature technique to Haydn – the symbol of the classical model Beethoven and Prokofiev emulate in their works, Beethoven and Prokofiev’s strategies become less rejections of Haydn and more re-interpreted continuations of Haydn’s pre-existing practices. But is there anything about Beethoven and Prokofiev’s jokes that make them different from Haydn’s? In Beethoven’s Eighth and Prokofiev’s First, the types of jokes used are not Haydn’s but the composers’ own personal stamps that reveal differences in some of the fundamental ways in which Beethoven and Prokofiev approach composition as individual artists.

To begin with, however, both Beethoven and Prokofiev create a structural Classical scaffold from which they can later frame later ironic departures. This begins with the utilization of a relatively small scale. In terms of performance length, Prokofiev’s First clocks in at just over 14 minutes, and Beethoven’s Eighth is about 26 minutes, the shortest of his symphonies. Both symphonies use small orchestras with strings and paired wind instruments without trombones, the standard size of a Haydn symphony. In terms of large-scale form, both composers employ a standard four-movement structure with (mostly) typical classical forms: Beethoven with a sonata form first movement, an Allegretto scherzando (in a quicker pace and humorous tone but a lyrical theme in the vein of a slow movement), a folkish Tempo di Meuetto third movement, and a rousing Allegro vivace finale in a sonata-rondo form. Prokofiev’s first features an Allegro sonata-form first movement, a lyrical two-part Larghetto, a dance-like Gavotte in ternary form for the third movement, and a sonata form Molto vivace finale.

Within these stable Classical frameworks, departures from expectations only sound more obvious. One departure shared by both Beethoven and Prokofiev is the ambiguity of the recapitulation in the first movement. In Prokofiev’s First, the opening melody begins in two four-

bar phrases in D major. In m. 11, however, a parallel version of the first theme is suddenly restated in the key of C major, which serves as a prolonged lower-neighbor to the transition, which begins in m. 19 in D major. This diversion to C major has important later implications. The recapitulation begins in m. 150 with the same “Mannheim rocket” (ascending broken chord) that kicked off the movement, but the theme is now in C major, not the expected tonic of D major. When D major does arrive, the orchestra has already moved on to the transition. The reappearance of the Mannheim rocket tricks the listener into thinking they are hearing an exact parallel of the exposition. It is only when the transition appears without a restatement of the first theme that the listener realizes the D major version of the theme was omitted entirely. Without a score in hand or maybe perfect pitch, however, only a few listeners might immediately recognize the false recap upon the first hearing, a type of ironic subtlety that also appear in Beethoven’s Eighth.

At the end of the Eighth’s development (m. 190), Beethoven gives the opening theme to the basses, cellos, and bassoons, but buries it under *fortissimo* sustained lines in the upper winds and strings. Viewing this as an error of scoring for the beginning of a recapitulation, conductors have attempted to “correct” this problem by lowering the dynamic level of the upper parts. However, Scholars such as Broyles and Lockwood suggest that m. 190 for Beethoven is only a false recapitulation before a full return at m. 198, supported by the fact that the m. 190 tonic F major sonority remains in an unstable 6/4 inversion, with the timpani continuing to beat a C until a resolution to F in m. 198, this time the theme in full *fff* orchestration and with all 12 measures included (the middle melodic cell being omitted in m. 190) (Lockwood 176). Broyles even suggests that the real climax does not come in until the coda, where a point of intensity at a

fermata and a steady crescendo to a German sixth chord at m. 350 brings the orchestra to the second and final *fff* of the movement before it is brought to a conventional close (Broyles 45).

The debate about where the “true” recapitulation lies, however, seems to me beyond the point. By obscuring the initial return of the first theme, Beethoven’s very objective was to make the location of the recapitulation ambiguous. In doing so, Beethoven calls attention to the larger structural rhetoric of the movement – a strategy Bonds sees as key to Haydn’s own musical wit and humor. For Bonds, the adherence of a composer to stereotypical patterns “will facilitate the listener’s comprehension of smaller-scale events.” Large-scale deviations and ambiguities like the false recapitulation, which abounds in Haydn’s music, cause the form to “openly [call] attention to itself” and “draw the listener attention away from the content of the composer’s argument and toward the technique of its presentation” (Bonds 70).

However, it could be argued that only the astute listener might notice this anomaly, the passive listener not concerned with the technicalities of sonata from simply following the increasing dynamics, intensity, and ascent by step in the upper woodwind parts into m. 190. Thus, the layperson might be satisfied with hearing a m. 198 recapitulation, while the trained ear remains uncertain. The effect of this might be one semi-alarmed audience member suddenly looking around in confusion while others continue to hold an amused glaze in their eyes. This scene in itself is humorous to me and seems to also fall into the taste of Haydn’s wit, who wrote a number of false recapitulations of his own, including Symphony nos. 11, 22, 36, 38, 41, 43, and 48. But unlike both Prokofiev and Beethoven’s recaps, Haydn’s sound more obviously false to the listener, with clear textural disturbance before they occur via an abrupt shift to either a caesura, single part, or thinner texture immediately preceding the “recap.” By making their recaps less obvious to the unassuming ear, Beethoven and Prokofiev take advantage of a subtler

irony that acts more like a shared inside joke between friends than a laugh-out-loud comedy show.

Another key method by which Beethoven and Prokofiev employ irony through deviation from the Classical norm is through unexpected harmonic departures. Both principal themes start out innocently enough, but take on unexpected melodic and harmonic shifts as they progress through their transitions to the second subject. Prokofiev's opening line is based on a simple descending D major scale – but instead of landing on the tonic it extends down to B (m. 7), the submediant, bringing the harmony with it to B minor (vi) (Brown 19). As the main theme proceeds, Prokofiev inserts a broken D major arpeggio on top of the B minor that continues in m. 10, without any attempt to prepare it, only to swerve a whole tone shift down to the aforementioned C major by the downbeat of m. 11. The second parallel period of the main theme goes from C major to its corresponding submediant, A minor (m. 15), which provides the dominant that leads back to a cadence in the original D major (Brown 20). Thus, just as Prokofiev obediently heeds to standard classical orchestration, he maintains the conventional Classical movement from dominant to tonic – but within this framework, his series of harmonic diversions make the return to D major seem almost unexpected.

Similar harmonic shifts can be seen at the start of Beethoven's Eighth. George Grove notes that after the 12-bar melody of the principal theme, a single bar of rest leads to “a very sudden change of key” from F to D with the onset of the second theme (Grove 155). However, Beethoven does in fact prepare for a key change – but towards the conventional dominant (C major), further highlighting a sense of surprise. Interestingly, both composers chose the submediant as a signature deviant key of the movement. Prokofiev's second theme is similar in that it also diverges to the submediant, moving from A major to F major (bVI) and F# minor (vi).

Malcolm H. Brown notes that this interplay between the tonic and submediant is more characteristic of a romantic gesture than a classical one (Brown 23). Putting the usage of the submediant in a more historical perspective, Beethoven essentially looks forward, while Prokofiev is still looking back. Regardless, the use of a distinctively romantic gesture constructs both Beethoven's and Prokofiev's pieces as less an ironic response to 18th century Classicism and more of a broader commentary on the expectations of the listener – but again, only if they are listening closely enough. In his analysis of Prokofiev's First, William Austin remarks that “many people suppose they know [the First] without ever listening closely” – they glaze over the subtle unexpected twists of harmony that appear startlingly obvious when Austin makes a direct comparison by abstracting out a passage from Prokofiev's Gavotte into a more rulebook “academic” version (Austin 451). I find myself slightly victim to Austin's comment.

Beethoven's Eighth and Prokofiev's First have always been personal favorites of mine simply because they are fun and exciting to perform and listen to. It was only when I began reading musicological accounts and analyses of the symphonies that the inside jokes became apparent. The amount of irony experienced by the listener only grows as they learn more about the piece (or receive a university education in music). Where for Haydn the punchline of the “joke” often hits the listener right away, for Beethoven and Prokofiev it slowly reveals itself over time.

How, then, should one go about listening to the First and Eighth? According to Austin, following the melody is key to understanding Prokofiev's work as a coherent whole. In the first movement and throughout the symphony as a whole, Prokofiev's melodies are lengthy, often spanning across many phrases, repetitions, and thematic contrasts. In this way, the melodies help give the piece a longer-range coherence. For Austin, a listener who gets caught up in labeling each harmonic jolt as a modulation has to constantly “reorient his sense of tonality” and lose the

momentum and sense of direction if the melody is followed all the way through to the final tonic (Austin 454).

Brown, however, seems to have a more negative view of how Prokofiev treats his melodies against the rest of the form when he proposes that Prokofiev fails to capture “the crux of classicism,” what he refers to as a theme’s “thematic process” (Brown 15). According to Brown, a classical thematic process normally proceeds as a “series of short figures” that appear successively as distinct rhythmic parts and ultimately integrate into a single coherent whole (Brown 16). Throughout the First Symphony, however, Prokofiev repeats the same patterns across extended phrases and even whole periods. For Brown, resulting succession of symmetrical closed forms creates a sectionalization that fails to portray the Classical style’s “dynamic continuity” that Austin asserts can be found in the melody (Brown 21). Nevertheless, if we view this “sectionalization” through the lens of irony, its abruptness contributes to an underlying tone of playful sarcasm. To me, Prokofiev’s formal and harmonic sectionalization is less a Classical failure and more a deliberate strategy to create contrast with the long-term continuity of the melodies. While we may not have the evidence to justify Prokofiev’s motives for this specific technique, it is telling that Prokofiev has expressed in regards to his First Symphony, “It seemed to me that if Haydn had lived into this century, he would have retained his own style of writing *while absorbing things from newer music*. I wanted to write the kind of symphony that would have such a style” (Nestyev 145). What could be interpreted as a “failure,” then, to follow Classical form can also be interpreted as an expansion of artistic freedom.

Interestingly, Beethoven also plays with the juxtaposition between melodic continuity and sectionalization the first movement of his Eighth. Characteristic of Beethoven, the movement is tightly motivically unified, especially through the use of the opening six-note

motive to both begin and end the work. Within the exposition, however, there are six distinct thematic sections, some more rhythmic, some more lyrical. Lockwood calls the play between these contrasting sections an attempt to integrate dissimilarities “linking together a chain of highly diverse thematic segments” (Lockwood 174). In this way, the Eighth represents both a manifestation of Beethoven’s tendency towards organicism and an idiomatic expression of humor through contrast.

The exploitation of extreme contrast to exert a sense of Classical irony can also be found elsewhere in Beethoven’s Eighth and Prokofiev’s First. Israel Nestyev notes that throughout his First Symphony, Prokofiev carries out the traditional Viennese device of sudden shifts from *piano* to *tutti fortissimo* (Nestyev 146). However, Brown charges Prokofiev with going beyond this tasteful contrast, displaying “fidgety changes which telescope the conventional rivalry of classicism” (Brown 18). One such instance can be heard in the second theme of the exposition “a blend of dance-like elegance and quaint awkwardness” (Nestyev 146) via a combination of gaping two-octave leaps and grace notes against staccato eighth notes in the bassoon. In this case, irony is achieved through emulating a distinct Classical feature, but then going too far.

In the exposition of the first movement of Beethoven’s 8th, the three-phrase opening theme also encapsulates this contrast, the first and third *forte* phrases with the full orchestra and the second *piano* phrase restricted to the winds. Extreme dynamic shifts, *pp* to *ff* within a single phrase in the fourth “thematic segment,” and the polarity between two new thematic ideas that follow (a syncopated dotted eighth/sixteenth rhythm and a more lyrical line in the winds) also contribute to an exaggerated sense of contrast. In the finale, as well, Beethoven’s sudden insertions of the *ff* C# “sore note” (beginning in m. 18) completely change the texture from a sneaky *ppp* to a rampant *tutti ff*. The extent to which these contrasts can be interpreted as a

specific technique of ironic commentary on the Classical style, however, can only be taken so far when considering that contrast previously accepted as trademark technique regularly used by both Beethoven and Prokofiev in their other non “Classical” works. Nestyev, for example, notes that Prokofiev’s use the “piquant harmonic contrasts and amusingly awkward melodic leaps” were already a familiar feature of his earlier works (Nestyev 145). Grove describes the aforementioned staccato eighth-note motor in Beethoven’s exposition as a humor characteristic of Beethoven’s personality; his “love of rough fun, and bursts of laughter” (Grove 156), and Lockwood describes Beethoven’s ubiquitous insertion of the C# as not merely another ironic strategy but a reflection of his rough personality, “comedy bordering on rage” (Lockwood 185). The above scholars point out these more inherent personality quirks as if they detract from the ironic effect. For me, however, the ability of Beethoven and Prokofiev to incorporate an ironic Haydn-esque effects into their pre-existing artistic idiom is what makes these works so skillful, unique, and entertaining.

Understanding Prokofiev’s and Beethoven’s use of exaggerated contrasts and other techniques as an extension of their own idioms helps frame their First and Eighth symphonies as works that relate to Classicism as both ironic and personal way. This sentiment seems to be supported by Prokofiev’s own stated intentions on what he wanted out of his First, driven by “Neither esthetic nor intellectual motivation, but simple utilitarian consideration inspired the choice of idiom” (Blok 16). Composing the First was a means of testing how well he could compose without the aid of a piano. In this way, Prokofiev looked backwards in the First to the benefit of his own artistic development - a strictly successful imitation of the Classical style was not Prokofiev’s goal. As Prokofiev noted in a 1918 *Musical Observer* interview, shortly after the composition of his First Symphony, “I have always felt the need for independent thinking for

pursuing my own ideas. I was always in conflict with my professors at the Conservatoire as I never wanted to do anything just because the rules demanded it..." (Blok 27). Irony as only a secondary goal in Prokofiev's first also seems to show through in its initial reception. Composed in the midst of one of his most productive years, Prokofiev recognized that his First was a miniature, not "much in the way of a symphony" compared to other larger-scale projects such as the *Scythian Suite* (1914-16) and the First Violin Concerto (1916-17) (Brown 14). Still, according to Nestyev, the First Symphony was "one of Prokofiev's first works to receive universal critical acclaim" (Nestyev 146). Ironically, the very piece Prokofiev contrived as a joke would later become a classic in itself.

The same, however, cannot necessarily be said for Beethoven's Eighth, which was overshadowed by the Seventh Symphony and Wellington's Victory when it was initially performed at Beethoven's 1814 Academy and remains one of Beethoven's most underappreciated works (Solomon 276). According to a critic of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, "the applause which it was received was not accompanied by that enthusiasm which distinguishes a work which gives universal delight; in short – as the Italians say – it did not create a furor" (Solomon 277). Nevertheless, Grove remarks that while Beethoven's Eighth, "may not touch the extreme heights and depths of the spirit as some of the nine do... it has no less its own place in the circle, which nothing but itself can fill" (Grove 165). Why then, relative to Prokofiev, were Beethoven's contemporaries seemingly unable to fully appreciate the subtle witticisms of his Eighth? For Bonds, successful irony "establishes a quality of aesthetic distance between the artist and his work, which in turn calls into question the basic premises of the traditional relationship between the artist, his work, and his audience" (Bonds 68). To Bonds, this creates the effect of increased distance between the composer and his creation.

Seen in this light, the critical reception of the Eighth suggests to me that Beethoven had fulfilled his purpose of distancing through irony. As Longyear observes based on Schlegel's irony, "one who cannot understand irony takes the joke seriously and the serious elements as a joke (Longyear 648). Beethoven might have had this idea in mind when according to Czerny, he attributed the Eighth's poorer reception to it being "so much better" than the Seventh (Solomon 277). This also suggests that Beethoven was aware that the connoisseur listener, already intimately familiar with the classical idiom, would pick up on every subtlety in the Eighth. Beethoven seemed to know that later listeners of Lockwood would see beneath his "surface appropriation" of classical features underlying "subtleties and forward-looking features" (Lockwood 169). Prokofiev, on the other hand, seemed eager to make his irony public to all. Later on in his life, at least, Prokofiev was known for his adherence to music as "for the people." As Prokofiev described in a 1937 notebook, "The masses want great music... They understand far more than some composers think, and they want to deepen their understanding" (Blok 42). Ultimately, however, even if they may have been motivated by different conceptions of how they wanted irony to reach their audience, Beethoven and Prokofiev's Eighth and First symphonies exemplify how looking back to tradition through a lens of both humor and personal innovation challenges the listener's relationship towards the work and its composer.

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