

THE COMEDY EXPRESSION AND STYLE AUTONOMY OF ABSOLUTE MUSIC IN THE  
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

*A EXPRESSÃO CÔMICA E A AUTONOMIA ESTILÍSTICA DA MÚSICA ABSOLUTA  
NO SÉCULO XVIII*

*LA EXPRESIÓN CÓMICA Y LA AUTONOMÍA ESTILÍSTICA DE LA MÚSICA ABSOLUTA  
EN EL SIGLO XVIII*

Cai LIN<sup>1</sup>

e-mail: clzlxxy@126.com

**How to reference this paper:**

LIN, Cai. The comedy expression and style autonomy of absolute music in eighteenth century. **Rev. de Letras**, Araraquara, v. 64, n. 00, e025007, 2025. e-ISSN: 1981-7886.



| Submitted: 23/09/2024  
| Revisions required: 15/11/2024  
| Approved: 26/04/2025  
| Published: 28/12/2025

---

**Editor:** Prof. Dr. Claudia Fernanda de Campos Mauro

---

<sup>1</sup> Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai – China. Ph.D. School of Humanities.

---

**ABSTRACT:** The western instrumental music culture in the 18th century presents a unique ‘comedy’ style. This article attempts to start from the musical manifestation layer (the influence of comic opera and the new trend of instrumental music), pass through the aesthetic concept layer (the combination of Enlightenment thought and comic consciousness), and then looks back to the musical style layer (the growth process of instrumental music ‘comedy’). In this way, we ‘restart’ the ‘field’ of western civilization in the 18th century, construct a circular chain of meaning generation of musical expression and cultural association, explore the conditions and reasons for the formation of comedy expression and style autonomy of absolute music in the classical period, and try to analyze this seemingly relaxed, but actually complex and profound topic interpretation in detail.

**KEYWORDS:** Comedy. Absolute music. The eighteenth century. Instrumental music. Autonomy.

**RESUMO:** *A cultura da música instrumental ocidental no século XVIII apresenta um estilo singular de “comédia”. Este artigo propõe partir do plano das manifestações musicais (a influência da ópera cômica e a nova tendência da música instrumental), atravessar o plano dos conceitos estéticos (a articulação entre o pensamento iluminista e a consciência cômica) e, em seguida, retornar ao plano do estilo musical (o processo de desenvolvimento da “comédia” na música instrumental). Dessa forma, “reabrimos” o “campo” da civilização ocidental no século XVIII, construindo uma cadeia circular de geração de sentidos entre expressão musical e associação cultural. Investigam-se as condições e as razões para a formação da expressão cômica e da autonomia estilística da música absoluta no período clássico, buscando analisar de maneira detalhada um tema aparentemente leve, mas, na realidade, complexo e profundo.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Comédia. Música absoluta. Século XVIII. Música instrumental. Autonomia.*

**RESUMEN:** *La cultura de la música instrumental occidental en el siglo XVIII presenta un estilo singular de “comedia”. Este artículo propone partir del plano de las manifestaciones musicales (la influencia de la ópera cómica y la nueva tendencia de la música instrumental), atravesar el plano de los conceptos estéticos (la articulación entre el pensamiento ilustrado y la conciencia cómica) y, posteriormente, regresar al plano del estilo musical (el proceso de desarrollo de la “comedia” en la música instrumental). De este modo, “reabrimos” el “campo” de la civilización occidental en el siglo XVIII, construyendo una cadena circular de generación de sentido entre expresión musical y asociación cultural. Se examinan las condiciones y las razones para la formación de la expresión cómica y la autonomía estilística de la música absoluta en el período clásico, procurando analizar en detalle un tema aparentemente ligero, pero en realidad complejo y profundo.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Comedia. Música absoluta. Siglo XVIII. Música instrumental. Autonomía.*

---

## Introduction

The comedic expression of absolute music is different from the semantic expression of literary and dramatic works, as well as the intuitive and perceptible experience of visual art. There is no title content or textual cues, and it seems to be a metaphorical rhetoric and cultural connection that is difficult to convey and clarify, but one can indeed feel that special interest and meaning in listening to music. This experience is particularly prominent and rich in the instrumental music composition of the classical period. Wit and humor, farcicality and satire, irony and grotesque, such comedy aesthetic expressions of music style frequently appeared in the compositions of the 18th century.

## The Influence of Comic Opera and New Trends in Instrumental Music

In the 1720s and 1730s, the changes of musical language and grammar, the adjustment of musical expression domain and paradigm, and the novel pulse and rhythm of comic opera all provided many inspirations for the comic expression of absolute music, and the self-sufficiency of the musical language brought the originality opportunities for the formation of comedy music style.

## The Strong Contention of Comic Opera

In the early 18th century, a new and more modern genre of opera began to emerge in Naples, advocating for a simple and natural style of reality, rejoicing in the insight into daily life, and dealing with comic characters and situations. By the 1750s, it had spread to almost all of Europe, and the focus was still mainly on parody of human frailties (Opera buffa, 2001). The success of comic opera greatly weakened the power of opera seria and caused a great influence, which naturally immersed in the instrumental music genre. It is not only a timely appearance as the antithesis of the terminally ill opera seria but also a timely musical product of the Enlightenment ideology advocating for natural expression and opposing the pursuit of supreme rights. In 1752, the Italian *opera buffa* *La serva padrona* (1733) from Naples was staged several times in Paris, which ignited the dissatisfaction and resentment of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and others against contemporary French literature and art, while advanced Britain, as early as 1728,

when *The Beggar's Opera* was born, had directed its spearhead at the then popular Italian opera seria. Most of the tunes were based on the ancient British folk songs, and of course, there were also parodies of the aria of the opera seria. It can be seen that opera had turned to the public!

In 1753, Rousseau not only composed *Le devin du village* (1752) but also published a manifesto, the text *Letter on French Music*. The French 'encyclopedists' actively admired comic opera, and they saw the effectiveness of comic opera in the struggle against feudal despotism and the 'dawn' of a new era. In French comic opera and other forms of dialect dialogue, the dialogue is always full of verbal banter. However, after the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the enhancement of emotions, fantasies, and multiple situations, the musical drama expression of comic opera was oriented towards the complex reality of human nature in the field of 'non-hero.' Comic opera was evolving from a pleasant and amusing public entertainment culture to a metaphor and rhetoric with more social and political implications, and from a single gag to a hybrid situation that is both solemn and humorous (Downs, 1992, p. 194). There was no doubt that this kind of civic opera was shaking and disintegrating the autocratic status with a growing trend of ideological connotation. Pierre-Alexandre *Monsigny* (1729-1817), François-André Danican *Philidor* (1726-1795), and André-Ernest-Modeste *Grétry* (1741-1813) all devoted themselves to the composition of opera comique (Lang, 1941, p. 551-552).

In the 1780s, opera buffa in Italy presented an extremely prosperous scene. At that time, what was popular in Italy was the *dramma giocoso* advocated by Carlo Goldoni, which was more inclined to *sentimental comedy*, unlike traditional comedies that only criticized and satirized ridiculous characters in life. Instead, it used gentle humor to write about human weaknesses, causing ridicule from the audience while also advocating for their slightest sadness and sympathy. Niccolò Piccinni (1728-1800), Giovanni Paisiello (1740-1816), Domenico Cimarosa (1749-1801), and others all composed such opera buffa. *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, written in 1782, was one of the most successful, and he was also the first composer to perfectly combine this plot comedy with character comedy and bring it to the opera stage (Downs, 1992, p. 399).

Comic opera also enjoyed great success in Vienna from the 1770s to the 1790s. According to incomplete statistics, from the first comic opera composed by Antonio Salieri (1750-1825) to the premiere of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* in Vienna, there were at least 128 comic operas performed in turn during this period. With the exception of Gluck's reformed works and a few court operas, opera seria almost no longer appeared in the Viennese public (Hunter, 1999,

p. 6-7). The above-mentioned two tendencies of comic opera can be seen here: the pure pleasure of entertainment and the political and moral educational significance of edutainment. At this time, comic opera gradually broke through the qualitative cognition of the representative of the Third Estate of music culture. It was not enough to only cheer for joy and could not be confined to entertainment. Besides pleasure, it should also show more serious content and social moral orientation, and it should have a more complex emotional quality and social efficacy.

Social reversal, reconciliation, and coexistence of different social classes, and the hybrid pattern of tragicomedy have all introduced a series of powerful rhetorical devices to comic opera, and irony is one of them. The arias, which were supposed to be serious, were now disguised as hypocrisy and caricatures, and the hybrid model undermined this noble style, making it hard to turn serious again. As a result, conservative critics complain about this mix of styles, while innovators greatly appreciate it. It can be seen that comic opera is more flexible and smoother, more willing and easier to innovate style, and Mozart's comic opera is the unique interpretation of this. No matter if it is negative parody, positive wit and humor, or even more modern consciousness of irony and grotesqueness, he develops this kind of mixed style of comedy into a complete fusion. They are the free expression of human nature and the imagination of individual characters, rather than stereotypical genre depictions, and have the significance of independent 'expression' of music with aesthetic modernity consciousness. More importantly, this concept of musical drama directly influenced the composition of instrumental music.

### **The New Fashion and Grammar of Instrumental Music**

At the same time, the aesthetic taste of music in European society was also quietly changing. The public preferred the aesthetic qualities of dexterity and variety, intimacy and elegance, intellectual interest, and natural audibility. Under the trend of this new 'fashion,' it brought about the transformation and reconstruction of the music language system and grammar principles. To this end, composers have explored the various possibilities, and instrumental comedy music has gradually emerged in a delicate mixture of pleasure and sentimentality.

*Galanterie's* pursuit of exquisite and elegant quality makes its expression have its set range, that is, the representation of the elegant and funny situation of the court culture in the classical era. In the 1750s, D. Scarlatti, Johann Joachim Quantz, J.C. Bach, Giovanni Battista

Sammartini, and so on were all immersed in this clear, natural, pleasant, and singing lyrical fashion. Popular in the French court aristocratic social, elegant, ceremonial, moderate speed, slim texture 3/8 minuet is a typical embodiment of this style. However, in the ball scene, the finale of Act I of *Don Giovanni*, Mozart's minuet cadence intentionally changed the traditional impression of elegance and pageantry. The modern *galant* is different from the common I-V-I, which is replaced by the 'quick step' harmony of II6–I6/4–V-I, but still steps on the triple minuet, which seems like a modern parody of the elegant minuet of court culture (Galant, 2001).

It can be expected that comic opera music, which is naturally secular, quickly entered instrumental music. Regular symmetry and periodic movement of *rococo* or *galant*, pleasing combinations of melody and accompaniment are all current fashion. The light harmonic texture, short melodic motif, periodic melody, and patterned cadence represent early elegance, while the new trend allows people to regain freedom from rigorous counterpoint and break free from the constraints of church style. However, this 'simplification' was later unconsciously put in a 'shackle,' and the drawbacks gradually emerged—there were more and more common elements, while the typical personalized elements tended to fade away, and later 'looked back' on baroque's polyphonic heritage. Charles Burney<sup>2</sup> once described music as a purely auditory and sensory entertainment enjoyment based on changes in social and artistic trends in the 1770s. Although it was unfair and obscured the deep humanistic connotations and moral consciousness implied by some musical works, it illustrated the purpose of the vast majority of music at that time, which was pleasant and comforting on the surface (Lockwood, 2003, p. 170).

Criticism of this style of pure elegance soon emerged in Germany, where Schulz<sup>3</sup> argued that the music was suitable only for light, flattering emotions, but not for serious, sacred compositions, and that the subsequent abuse of the style led to the degeneration of the music. Other complaints were more specific on the moral level, pointing out that in the early 18th century, *galant* referred to a new fashion of light-hearted elegance. Later, he gradually 'degenerated' into an empty, contrived aristocratic fashion towards the antithesis of middle-class pursuit of 'nature' (Galant, 2001). While the Germanic people, under the weaving of this sensitive new language, put more emphasis on the emotion and expression of music. The sensitivity of the French soon became the sentimental style of the Germans, that is, the

---

<sup>2</sup> Charles Burney (1726-1814) was a British musician, composer, and music historian.

<sup>3</sup> John·Abraham·Peter·Schultz (1747-1800) was one of the important composers of the Berlin School in North Germany, as well as a conductor and writer.

*empfindsamer stil* in the northern German literature in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which is often regarded as having a romantic spirit.

Perhaps only the small group in North Germany discovered and grasped the true meaning of comic opera music like treasure, as if they had obtained a treasure, and quickly put it to use. Based on the new vocabulary of *galanterie*, they were dissatisfied with the public acceptance tendency of aristocratic emotional depiction and broadened the tension and depth of emotional expression. They are ‘self-centered,’ bold and innovative, and the unpredictable development of music is shocking, surprising, and even rude. The acceptance of this style also belonged to a minority group and therefore caused a lot of ‘abuse’ and confusion at the time. But with its free imagination and casual ‘gags’ that we quickly associate it with the free-form hybrid style of Shakespearean comedy admired by the Germans. Therefore, it can be understood that the connection between comedy (comic opera style) and *empfindsamkeit* lies in their subjective yearning for free human expression. In other words, *empfindsamkeit* plays a crucial and irreplaceable role in the development and maturity of the whole instrumental comedy style, such as connecting the past and the future, changing and transforming, etc., which lays the foundation for the formation of the instrumental comedy style in the classical period.

C.P.E. Bach’s improvisational, bold, unconventional, and even eccentric musical expression was unique under the domination of the exquisite and elegant *galanterie* of the time. Indeed, his music has shown a lot of anti-classical tradition, and he has shown an enlightened attitude to asymmetry. There is a non-permanent style of abnormal expression; originally smooth, elegant, docile music has been ‘for no reason’ to produce a number of branches. He dissed the sentimental fashion that tended to be mediocre and pursued the ‘sensitive’ telling of personal style. Instead of the unified, serious ‘tragedy’ tone of baroque instrumental music and the entertainment presentation of aristocratic court life, he paid attention to the free creativity of details. Based on the new instrumental music grammar derived from the *rococo* and *galant*, he produced flexible and diverse ‘comedy.’ In the course of this musical civilization, C.P.E. Bach is undoubtedly one of the ‘stars,’ and both Haydn and Mozart had deep reverence for him. His keyboard sonatas not only presaged the important motivational development techniques of the classical period, but more importantly, his cognition of meaning expression really turned to active rational self-expression. In his opinion, pure instrumental music can also express the connotation and concept of drama and show personal emotional needs, rather than just staying in the kind of typed emotional rhetoric. In addition, supporters of *empfindsamkeit* advocate the

use of absolute music to tell the heart, so in his works can be seen a lot of instrumental recitative expression techniques and the free meter of Klopstock's<sup>4</sup> poetic style (Carl [...], 2001).

It is important to note that while C.P.E. Bach's startling language and the chaos of *Sturm und Drang* convey his inner unease and dramatic desires, it fails to achieve a true sense of comic spiritual purification effect. The surprise and ridicule appeared from time to time, but in an exaggerated and crude way, the truly graceful comedy presentation should be handed over to the 'classical style' that had mastered the techniques of 'tacit' comparison and balance, after which his *avant-garde* concept was recognized and refined by the three masters of the Viennese Classical School.

Indeed, the instrumental music fashion in the 18<sup>th</sup> century experienced the overlap and succession of these three styles: the late baroque show-off style, the elegance style of court entertainment and the expression style of the civic class (Balet, Gerhard, 1979, p. 310). The yearning for unlimited rights of the princes gradually retreated, replaced by the need for entertainment, and pleasure in daily life, and they 'descend' the feelings of religious belief from above, quietly providing a 'landing' for the real subjective emotional expression in real life in the world. The gradually growing citizen class was no longer willing to imitate the *galanterie* of the court to achieve the 'equality' in appearance and was dissatisfied with this 'self-deception' type of change, but to re-recognize their musical language expression symbol, which conveys the problem awareness and critical reflection of the subject of the citizen class, and shows their active participation in social progress and historical development.

The Enlightenment in music grew up in this complex and diverse 'mannerism.' *Rococo*, *galanterie*, and *empfindsamkeit* actually demonstrated the development of comedic human intellectual expression in music. The comedic aesthetic examines the retreat of music to the divine domination of religion through multiphase, mixture, tolerance, and integration, and finally realizes the balance and unity of reason and sensibility. This does not affect its thinking on profound and serious issues, but only changes in language techniques. Secular music should also play a role in edifying, improving, and enlightening the mind. This is the result of the citizens' re-understanding of their social moral responsibility and civic culture and their efforts to promote it, which reflects their interpretation and efforts to the new culture that represents humanity. It also contributed to the maturity of the classical style after the 1780s.

---

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724-1803) was a German poet. His best known work is the epic poem *Der Messias* ('The Messiah'). One of his major contributions to German literature was to open it up to exploration outside French models.

## The Correspondence between Enlightenment Thought and Comedy Consciousness

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Enlightenment that swept across Europe launched an attack on the feudal authoritarian system, and the bourgeoisie held high the three banners of freedom, equality, and fraternity, setting off great changes in politics, philosophy, literature, and art and naturally giving birth to the Enlightenment's pursuit of science, humanity, and reason. They turned their eyes away from the sovereign, the representative of God who was endowed with privilege, and turned back to the secular human society in reality. They gradually broke away from the worldview that was obsessed with metaphysical theology and religious domination in the past and began a journey of radical transformation of the worldview. A new secular, scientific, natural, emotional, and human defense and debate is in full swing, and the middle class is the biggest beneficiary of this movement. People confidently and humorously resist the shock and awe of God, reflect on the injustice of the social hierarchy, and re-recognize the social living environment.

Enlightenment-rational spirit influenced the thought development of the whole 18<sup>th</sup> century and became the dominant trend of aesthetic care in this era. In France, the center of the European Enlightenment, Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, and other outstanding representatives of Enlightenment thought all believed that the religious forces for a long time were the root of the feudal society, so the reform of the social system must first get rid of religious superstition and the rule of the dark forces of the church, re-illuminate people's minds, and 'push aside' chaotic thoughts. In order to realize them, it is necessary to publicize modern natural science knowledge and advocate reason. However, rational norms should not become 'barriers' and pedantic laws of natural imaginative creation.

The Enlightenment in Germany happened relatively late. After the catastrophe of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), the German nation was divided, and the feudal ruling force was strong. The German bourgeoisie, which grew up under the support of the 'mercantilism' policy, had a more moderate attitude towards the absolute monarch and hoped that the enlightened monarch would lead to achieving the goal of reforming society. Therefore, the elite intellectuals in Germany used philosophical debate as a 'weapon,' relied on literary and artistic forms to civilize citizens and change society, and advocated the spiritual direction of morality and education rather than violent revolution to overthrow the regime. It can be seen that the German Enlightenment mainly occurred in the field of ideology and culture, with literature and art as the carrier, different from the political entity changes in Britain and France, and the

concept of 'aesthetics' was first proposed by the German scholar Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762) in 1750.

As for the attitude of literature and art, the Enlightenment fighters greatly emphasized and gave play to the social critical role of advanced literature and art in the feudal autocratic culture and strived to create a self-conscious citizen class culture. This cultural enlightenment in the 18th century laid the ideological and theoretical foundation of rationality, morality, and humanity, and the citizens left serious issues such as human education, social improvement, and philosophical thinking to literature, art, music, and drama. Lessing attaches great importance to the educational role of drama. Like Diderot, Lessing aims to establish a bourgeois civic tragicomedy, facing the real life of ordinary people, and criticizes the deep-rooted hierarchical consciousness of classical drama.

The ideals, tastes, and modes of imitation of the civic class were almost all very different from those of the court aristocracy, intent on getting rid of their early arty clowns and growing into 'autonomous' individuals. Therefore, they used the folk secularization language completely different from the aristocracy, and the Enlightenment was a secularization movement that fought against the absolute monarchy. In the process of liberation of language and thought, progress is not achieved overnight. From the imitation of the funny words and deeds of the secular objects, from the tradition of laughing at folk gags, to the education of moral mockery and irony, to the development of witty imagination and the cultivation of humorous generosity, it has experienced the growth of the subject's comedic consciousness and the manifestation of the subject's personality. The mature development of the comedy consciousness of the subject was highlighted with the rise and growth of the citizen class in the Western world in the second half of the 18th century, especially the elite intellectuals constantly bravely and boldly pursuing the independence, freedom, and equality of the subject. It depicts the wonderful 'picture scroll' of human nature interpretation by the frame in a vivid, natural, and appropriate way, leading the trend of Western literature and art. The prosperity of comedy theory, the prosperity of comedy and comic opera works, and the infiltration of comedy style in the composition of instrumental music all show that the comedy aesthetic and Enlightenment thought 'double swords' have become a real edge to stab the authoritarian culture.

During the Enlightenment, the study of man gradually took center stage. At the same time, philosophy also appeared as a trend of popularization, not satisfied with the metaphysical abstract debate existing in a small group, hoping to influence and persuade the public more, and achieve a public cause. However, the intention of such 'clamor' despotism can only be carried

out in a euphemistic ‘curve,’ because under the repression of despotism, they must first do a good job of self-protection and ‘disguise,’ in order to secretly criticize and teach. Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, and so on are good at using innuendo to spread their ideas of social reform. Therefore, music, which seems not to reflect any concept of content, has become a good ‘disguiser.’

In comedy, the appropriate theme is secular, unsacred, and a happy ending and a dialect style are the distinguishing features of the comic work, which is very much in line with the taste of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century civic class of expression. But with their growing sense of self-sufficiency and pursuit of freedom and equality, dialect singing may be able to parody holiness, and the use of simple language on noble subjects has subverted our conventional assumptions about noble and vulgar wording.

The finale of Pergolesi’s *La serva padrona*, the duet of Serpina and Uberto is a dancing gigue theme, with a lively and brisk 3/8 beat rhythm that conveys elated situations and ritualized celebrations, merging acceptance and wedding scenes. The question is whether it is appropriate for a maid to become a mistress. Our questions are also left unresolved in the final joyful ritual scene duet, in which the cunning, scheming maid and her violent, haughty master suddenly become a couple with vastly different backgrounds who share their joyous union at the end. Of course, this is the general rule of 18th century comic novels, suitable comedy always ends with the meeting or union of lovers in the journey, the literary reconciliation scene has a perfect equivalent in the opera buffa *le mariage de Figaro*, and the happy ending is also found in the instrumental music. The finale of Mozart’s violin concerto No. 4 in D Major (K. 218,1775) is a rondo in double beats, an elegant andante (gavotte) in 2/4 beat that periodically gives way to a cheerful 6/8 gigue, with a nearly silent gigue at the end taking on a celebratory function. In other words, the use of gigue and other cheerful triple time dance rhythms provides a semantic context of reconciliation, as is often the case in comic opera.

However, there is an important distinction between divine euphoria and worldly pleasure, and the expression of worldly joy can be ambiguous and full of ambiguity, not a remarkable return like the Elysium of heaven, but a serendipitous, acute, and ephemeral real adjustment. Musical ‘comedy’ seems to lack the reasoning inquiry, but has gained other energy, vigour, vitality, dialect mode, social reconciliation spirit, etc., which provides another interpretation space for the lofty and serious instrumental music.

It can be said that Enlightenment thought is an ‘east wind’ formed by the comedy style. The Enlightenment thinkers realized that the comic consciousness of the subject can be used

as a powerful weapon to break the feudalism and obscurantist thought. It is the most lively and full of vitality in the process of Enlightenment, and it is also the most suitable way of expression for citizens with humanistic moral intelligence and Enlightenment effect. The rational critical consciousness of the Enlightenment coincides with the imaginative creation logic of comedic subjects, both of which are in line with the concise and natural expression of free personality, striving for the balance and integration between sensibility and rationality.

Thinking about the essence of the phenomenon, we will find that the comic process of the appearance of 'nature' is not smooth, but in the contradiction and one-sided and narrow understanding of the continuous progress. From the imitation of ugly and vulgar folk roles to the display of creative comic consciousness, from exposing and making fun of or even discarding physical or personal defects to the release or glorification of human nature that is intellectually and spiritually purifying. It shows the development from the description of the object things to the expression of the subject's unique emotions, in which the complex situation is both demeaning and praising, both unexpected and difficult to understand, and 'complicated and confusing' situation. Its flickering, sadness and joy present the exploration process of 'truth self-manifestation' of the subject's comic consciousness.

It is in such a broad cultural situation that the comedy aesthetic slowly moves forward. Although the paranoid concept of opposites between tragedy and comedy has been dominant for a long time, our understanding of it cannot be limited to the traditional cognition of laughter and jokes, but we should take care of it with a more inclusive and open attitude, because it is the closest to life and the most tangible and natural portrayal of human nature.

## **The 'Comedy' Process of Absolute Music**

### *The Imitation of Comic Opera by Instrumental Music*

As mentioned above, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the expression of secular and pleasant comic opera has complied with the needs of the trend and soon entered the rhetoric of instrumental music, and the secular expression space of instrumental music has become more and more prominent. Looking back on the prehistory of the classical style, most of them are imitations of comic opera music, aiming to highlight the self-amusement and liberating feelings of the existence of the secular man or even the subject, and no longer 'trapped' in the divine domination that the functional carrier attempts to reproduce. This kind of art imitation theory from Plato, Aristotle has been continued to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, still effective. In spite of this, there

have been some changes in the connotation and form given by human history. From the dominant ‘tool’ of social and cultural functions, it is gradually transformed into a practical and effective aesthetic way to establish contact with individuals, from the ‘macro’ type object presentation to the ‘micro’ subject expression. Whether it is satisfied with the imitation of individual self-entertainment behavior, or the paradoxical imitation between the idea that provokes reflection and the apparent action (the former is more inclined to the objective presentation of a funny state, the latter is a deep metaphor of the development process and behavioral existence of the subject’s thinking), there is no lack of people’s purposeful and meaningful choice and thinking, which is determined by the advanced nature of human mental thinking and cognition. The fact is that in aesthetics, imitation, and expression are not completely separate; you have me there, and I have you here, but the weight of each is different.

The mere imitation of comic opera’s language and style by instrumental music was initially not favorable, and some people thought that comedy invaded serious musical patterns. The fretful, irritable tone of C.P.E. Bach in a letter to the publisher confirms the discontent of the time and indicates the proliferation of comedy in the musical taste, which is full of the ridiculousness of being fooled everywhere. Such criticisms are everywhere, such as ‘incomprehensible mishmash,’ ‘ear-tickling jingle-jangle,’ ‘mere noise,’ and so on (Allanbrook, 2014, p. 24). Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was equally indignant: Instruments may enliven the song and enhance its expression but they can never supplant it. To understand what all the din of a sonata is above we would have to do what the incompetent painter did, when he wrote beneath his works, “This is a tree”, “This is a man” and “This is a horse” (Huray; Day, 1981, p. 4).

In other words, although instrumental music adds expressiveness to a song, it can never replace it, and music without lyrics, while pleasing, is a sound without meaning<sup>5</sup>.

In fact, the criticism and questioning here reflect the two main problems in the aesthetics of instrumental music at that time. First, for the relationship between language and music, those who adhere to the principle of Aristotle’s ‘artistic imitation theory’ believe that the production of music stems from the imitation of language tones, which is an instinctive and practical mode of action. At the same time, it also forms a long-term perception that music is lower than language, indicating that music is subordinate to language. Music without a clear concept and semantic expression is unable to complete any cognitive role in the world. Pure instrumental

---

<sup>5</sup> Enlightenment thinkers, such as Rousseau, showed a conformist insight into the cognition of instrumental music, believing that music should be dominated by vocal music and showing contempt for instrumental music. For him, the concept of ‘music’ at that time more refers to vocal music, which is the contradictory embodiment of the aesthetic ideal of the Enlightenment thinkers.

music cannot tell and convey thoughts and concepts, and lacks reflection and intelligence, and has no real effect at all. Therefore, vocal music is superior to instrumental music, which cannot communicate moral messages as effectively as words and intonation.

Second, as the representatives of the ‘expressionism’ of music in the late 18th century, they were repulsive to the imitative language of comic opera without meaning in instrumental music, and such use of instrumental music language was merely a meaningless and clumsy ‘follower.’ Although the imaginative allure provided by comedy captures the kaleidoscope of imitation, it is not truly instrumental music expression. Contrary to the previous view, they tried to promote the autonomous status of instrumental music, so they were dissatisfied with the parody attitude of instrumental music to comic opera and believed that absolute music had the potential to become the most authentic poetry. The rejection of words is an extreme reversal of two thousand years of dominance, and wordless music is not a manifestation of artistic decline, but of a new musical philosophy that, without the constraints of language, can open up infinite realms that words have never reached. But in the first half of the 18th century, this was not accepted, and the situation slowly changed in the second half.

Thus, it can be seen that the whole 18<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic transformation is quietly filled with the dispute between imitation and expression of interest. In the reference and imitative sovereignty of ‘ancient’ art, the autonomous vision of ‘new’ art is constantly emerging. Music tries to go beyond the traditional established cognition of the rules of emotional representation of things, and freely choose and ‘fly’ the value of self-existence, whether it is emotion, concept, or content, which is the romanticization process of instrumental music. The self-sufficiency of instrumental music is a manifestation of the counteroffensive existence of the art of music that began in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century (especially after the 1780s) so as to prove that music is no longer a technical functional carrier, and it is this competition that contributed to the development of the classical period of the musical comedy style. In other words, the development of instrumental music from the imitation of comic opera to the creation of self-contained ‘comedy’ style is a mirror image of the cause of instrumental music ‘liberation’.

## The comedy expression of instrumental music

### *The Meaning of Expression*

At the time, some more modern-minded scholars argued that “expression” must mean “self”. As Wye Jamison Allanbrook has observed, in the late 18th century, romantic expression had eclipsed imitation, which was plagued by a contemptuous, disdainful “replica.” meaning that it meant only a direct depiction of natural intonation. To avoid this negative feeling, the term ‘expression/*empfindungen*’ began to replace ‘imitation’ (from Greek mimesis) in some late 18th century texts. Imitation can no longer be endured, and expression becomes the chief strength of music, which, through sound and its interpretive symbolic text, must engage in emotion. However, this does not mean that the imitative event has disappeared; in fact, at this time, the imitative aesthetic still has a strong influence, which is also an important reason why *empfindsamkeit* is more niche and elitist. There are also people who make a clear distinction between emotional expression and typified feelings (Allanbrook, 2014, p. 75-78). Music should not be confused between expressing individual subject emotions and evoking feeling states towards objects. ‘Expression’ should shift from the imitation and representation of objects to the independent manifestation of subject consciousness, highlighting the subject’s sense of self-existence and creativity.

At the time, the aesthetic purport of music in Germany, especially in northern Germany, was regarded as the expression of radical elites, which Carl Dahlhaus understood and noted:

Now the theory of imitation, which had assigned composers the role of prudent observers, was rejected as narrow-minded and trivial by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Daniel Schubart, Herder, and Heinse. Now a composer’s task was no longer to portray passions, but rather “to force out his selfhood in music,” as Schubart expressed it in language as drastic as his meaning (Dahlhaus, 1982, p. 31)

It can be seen that their social status has gradually changed, transitioning from a craftsman like servant to a ‘genius’ like creator.

However, it should be noted that this expression is still different from the romantic emotional expression of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Dahlhaus further pointed out that these expressionists, advocates of the *Sturm und Drang*, in their minds, the self is not a real self, but an ideal, conceptualized ‘me.’ However, the formation of ‘expression’ cannot be a mirage, arbitrary delusion, it should fulfill two tasks:

on the one hand, in order to make itself understood, music must develop formulae (in opera a whole vocabulary took shape, which overflowed into instrumental music); on the other hand, as “outpouring of the heart” and expression of someone’s own inner being, expressivity demands avoidance of whatever is usual and taken for granted (Dahlhaus, 1982, p. 33)

This reaffirms the dialectic between commonality and individuality, and late 18<sup>th</sup>-century instrumental music was taught to resonate with human imagination rather than scientific observation. In fact, ‘expression’ is not limited to emotion; although this is our usual understanding of musical expression, it can also refer to broader concepts, rationalities, spirits, etc. But no matter what, it is always inseparable from the creation of the subject in order to distinguish the imitation and reproduction of the object.

Therefore, the real comic expression is the natural manifestation of the perceptual individual in the rationalist era and the equivalent expression of the subject reason advocated by Kant. It should not be limited to the passive imitation of the comic sound to the funny behavior, but should present the autonomous expression. From a certain point of view, the instrumental music of the 18<sup>th</sup> century has been transformed in the aesthetic process of comic mixing and reconciliation. In the last 20 years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Johann Gottfried Herder<sup>6</sup>, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder<sup>7</sup> and other influencers of *Sturm und Drang* have expressed their recognition of the independent authority of music, which no longer needs the basic support of words or ideas and has gotten rid of the status of vassal and obtained the status of self-contained and independent ‘self-discipline’ (Downs, 1992, p. 342).

### *The Style of ‘Comedy’*

However, the recognition and happy acceptance of the ‘comedy’ instrumental music style belonged more to the radical North German expressionists. Because of the heterogeneity and polyphase of the comic style that is exactly opposite to the overall unity of the Baroque music spirit, its complexity, diversity, accident, abnormality, and ambiguity cannot be understood and included by rococo’s simple pleasure. In *The Oxford History of Western Music*, Taruskin creatively used the ‘Comic Style’ to interpret the musical style at that time, thinking that this new instrumental music style (that is, comic style) (Taruskin, 2005), which is

---

<sup>6</sup> Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) was a German philosopher, theologian, poet, and literary critic. He is associated with the Enlightenment, *Sturm und Drang*, and Weimar Classicism.

<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder (1773-1798) was a German jurist and writer. With Ludwig Tieck and the Schlegel brothers, he co-founded German Romanticism.

completely different from the vocal style, originated from the elder son of J. S. Bach, W.F. Bach.

The rebellious court musician Reichardt<sup>8</sup> also found and clearly pointed out that the emergence of C.P.E. Bach as a serious humorist and Haydn as a representative of romantic comedy injected new life into the musical life of Berlin and Vienna. Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht<sup>9</sup> agrees and quotes it in his article (Dalmonte, 1995, p. 171). It can be said that Haydn and the Viennese style as a whole are experiencing a tendency to mix serious and comedic elements, and this seeming dissonance is one of the ‘qualities’ of Haydn’s style, which is different from the vulgar imitation and foolish ridiculousness of pure entertainment in instrumental music.

In terms of Haydn’s stylistic development, Michael Spitzer<sup>10</sup> believes that Haydn’s music underwent an important transformation in 1772-1773. The earlier approach was marked by synchronization and consistency, after which parameters and conventional patterns gradually separated, and conflict and inconsistency ruled form and content. Haydn’s most dramatic hybrid reversal is that the *Sturm und Drang* can become calm, and the *galanterie* can also present a violent surge. The synergy of language construction and the ‘peripeteia’ of comedic style are the unique features of Haydn’s reversal (Spitzer, 2006, p. 217). Webster therefore regarded Haydn as the central figure of the first Viennese modern school and the inventor of a new type of rhetoric, of which he produced exemplary works and in which Beethoven was a follower (Webster, 1991, p. 367).

Haydn always carried out various experiments in his music career, and his writing ability mainly depended on self-study. Because of this, he always boldly imagined and tried his own ideas in composition and injected the social and cultural influences of the time into the form of music for metaphorical presentation and reshaping. The influence of the *Sturm und Drang* in Haydn’s music before 1780 should not be seen as an immature stage in the development of his personal style, but rather as a sign of his stylistic maturity. He has been constantly exploring and boldly transcending all his life, and this spirit is a valuable example in the entire history of Western music. It is precisely this kind of musical vitality of continuous innovation and integration and the unremitting spirit of always exploring the truth that has deeply influenced later composers. Mozart dedicated six string quartets to Haydn, showing his deep respect for him, and Beethoven also expressed his love and esteem for the teacher in his later years.

---

<sup>8</sup> John·Friedrich·Reichardt (1752-1814) was a German composer and music critic.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht (1919-1999) was a German musicologist and professor of historical musicology at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität in Freiburg.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Spitzer (1966-) is a British musicologist and academic.

At present, although there is a certain degree of recognition of Haydn's comedic musical expression, the study of the comedic style of music is extremely lacking. Spitzer believes that the main reason is that the existing comedic aesthetic theoretical framework has not been established, so it is difficult to support the in-depth understanding of the comedic expression of music (not limited to the category of rhetorical metaphors). In addition, the subversive development of comedic aesthetic psychology puts forward higher and more subtle requirements for audience acceptance, and its internal complexity is not a superficial 'simplified' reaction that is laughed off, but comes from deep psychological control and transcendental processing (Spitzer, 2006, p. 179). However, the maturity of this comic rhetorical style was already revealed in the *Sturm und Drang* movement of the 1770s, rather than the 'classical style' period of the 1780s, as we usually think. It can be seen that the mid-1770s is quietly carrying on the transformation of music fashion, but for this, there is a clear lack of research and embarrassment in the academic circle.

The instrumental music works of Mozart and Haydn took the lead in entering this new paradigm, but their approach is implicit rather than radical, as evidenced by the mild and harmless expression of comedy, and the expression of comedy style can be a mixture of ways, contents, techniques, etc. Hofmann called the three classical masters the first romantics (Eggebrecht, 1996, p. 479), who contributed to the perfect counterattack of instrumental music in their different directions, and the concept of 'classical style' assembled by these three individuals contributed to the unprecedented trend of 'dominance.' What does classical mean? Is it merely a synonym for the perfection of form, model, balance, proportion, drama, etc.? It should also have another meaning: music constantly pursues the independent status of autonomy and self-sufficiency, the process of humanistic consciousness that gets rid of the attachment and becomes the master.

This gradual evolution is illustrated by Amadeus Wendt<sup>11</sup> through a comparison of musical content and form. From Haydn's early works that still show the 'form ruling the material' to Mozart's 'complete penetration of form and material' to Beethoven's late 'materials gaining advantages over form,' forming a perfect 'transformation' of the advanced journey, Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht read this as a 'three-step' cycle progress (Eggebrecht, 1996, p. 475-476). So, what about the process of music from imitation to expression to self-sufficiency? Can it be analyzed with the help of comic style physical images? The harmonious unity of form and content in the classical model is no longer the prominence of imitation, but more the

---

<sup>11</sup> Johann Amadeus Wendt (1783-1836) was a German philosopher and music theorist.

manifestation of originality. In fact, imitation, stimulation, and self-sufficiency are not completely independent aesthetic attitudes. In most cases, they complement each other, but the emphasis is different in different historical periods and under different aesthetic attentions.

## Conclusions

To sum up, the presentation of the clear concept content is different from the text, but it must have its own meaning metaphor that is not inferior to the text so that the unique meaning of the pure instrumental music comedy expression can be generated. Intangibly, this subjective meaning appeal promotes the change and development of musical language and grammar, and also puts forward more flexible and rich expression of the new musical language's individual intellectual needs. And this demand is not overnight, its long transformation through the changes of human philosophy, culture, ideology, etc., of course, as a form of style, but also the product of multi-party consensus, collaborative cooperation. In the first half of the 18th century, the change in the pleasant taste of the court began to gradually break the long-standing dominant theocracy yearning, and the attention to human taste that grew up in the cracks of the autocracy, although at first it seemed to be frivolous and obsequious, and the lack of deep thinking in laughter, but this transformation was undoubtedly huge in culture and art compared with the baroque's fascinated yearning for 'divinity', and even made a clear 'break' in musical language and grammar.

Interestingly, this tendency to real life cycle events and flexible short statements evokes the joyful, playful feeling of music falling back into the world, and they even gradually 'lose' their musical self in this exciting carnival of returning to the world. But in any case, we should not completely deny the positive and progressive effects of this 'comedy' of pure pleasure over a period of time, but if it stays there or indulges in euphoria, it will be eliminated from history.

The musicians and theorists with more aesthetic modern consciousness were not satisfied or confined to this. Fortunately, the vigorous rise of the German cultural elite in the second half of the 18th century greatly surpassed and led the trend of Western literature and art. In their view, the new instrumental music language and grammar must be explored again for its expressive meaning and human potential to strive to break away from the dominance of the small aristocratic groups of the absolute monarchy culture, and realize that this flexible new music language is capable and suitable to complete more expressive tasks beyond emotion. The

confrontation between the autocratic culture of Germany and Austria and the ideology of the middle class did not appear as a direct confrontation of force, but chose to turn into a more hidden literary and artistic form. So far, the theory of art imitation has been ‘recognized’ by far-sighted intellectuals, and the Enlightenment spirit (dare to use reason to re-understand things) has inspired these artists to yearn for the expression of human nature in music. It is this existential situation that makes the comic expression no longer only stay in the funny imitation of behavior, but also go deeper into the free expression of the subject’s comic consciousness and the direction of the civilized moral connotation, such as social improvement.

At the same time, it can also be seen that people are trying to explore their own cultural expression of public consciousness. The comic concept is more in line with the thought of the enlightener. An intellectual and euphemistic way of expressing humanity points to the harmony, reconciliation, and coexistence between different social classes. No matter how adventurous and novel it is, no one claims that comedy is crazy and disintegrating. Comic opera and instrumental music ‘comedy’ have achieved common prosperity under the circumstance of ‘classical style,’ which pays attention to cohesion and proportion. They resist the comedic hidden decomposition and imitate, reflect, and transcend with imaginative freedom and tolerant rational gestures. Through this process, the equivalence of instrumental and vocal music is realized, and the more immeasurable potential expression of pure instrumental music is ‘induced.’

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:** This work was supported by 2019 Humanities and Social Sciences Research Project ‘A study on the comic expression and aesthetic efficacy of absolute music’ (19YJC760003) of the Ministry of Education in China.

## REFERENCES

- ALLANBROOK, W. J. **The Secular Commedia: Comic Mimesis in Late Eighteenth-century Music**. Oakland: University of California Press, 2014.
- BALET, L., GERHARD, E. **Die Verbürgerlichung der deutschen Kunst, Literatur und Musik im 18. Jahrhundert**. Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1979.
- DAHLHAUS, C. **Esthetics of Music**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- DALMONTE, R. Towards a Semiology of Humour in Music. **International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music**, [s. l.], v. 26, n. 2, p. 171, Dec. 1995.
- DOWNS, P. G. **Classical Music: the Era of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven**. New York: Norton, 1992.
- EGGEBRECHT, H. H. **Musik im Abendland: Prozesse und Stationen vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart**. München: Piper Verlag GmbH, 1996.
- GALANT. *In*: HEARTZ, D., BROWN, B. A. **The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians**. London: Macmillan, 2001.
- HUNTER, M. **The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart's Vienna**. Princeton University Press, 1999.
- HURAY, P. L.; DAY, J. **Music and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- LANG, P. H. **Music in Western Civilization**. New York: Norton, 1941.
- CARL PHILIPP EMANUEL BACH. *In*: LEISINGER, U. **The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians**. London: Macmillan, 2001.
- LOCKWOOD, L. **Beethoven: the Music and the Life**. New York: Norton, 2003.
- SPITZER, M. Haydn's Reversals. **Haydn Studies**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- TARUSKIN, R. Chapter 8: The Comic Style. *In*: TARUSKIN, R. **The Oxford History of Western Music, Vol. 2: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- WEBSTER, J. **Haydn's 'Farewell' Symphony and the Idea of Classical Style**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- OPERA BUFFA. *In*: WEISS, P. **The New Grove Dictionary of Opera**. London: Macmillan, 2001.

### ***CRediT Author Statement***

---

- Acknowledgements:** No.
  - Funding:** None.
  - Conflicts of interest:** None.
  - Ethical approval:** No.
  - Data and material availability:** No.
  - Authors' contributions:** The author is responsible for the production of the complete work.
- 

**Processing and editing: Editora Ibero-Americana de Educação**  
Proofreading, formatting, standardization and translation

