

Perceiving Irony in Music: The Problem in Beethoven's String Quartets*

Janet Bourne

The first *move* is to establish the *research gap* that the study addresses. The author does this by setting the context for a definition of *irony* using an integral *citation* and a direct quotation.

Throughout the abstract, Bourne uses *self-mention*, the first person pronoun "I," a rhetorical device more commonly used in the humanities than in the sciences.

The author uses *self-mention* with *reporting verbs* such as "I use," "I create," "I apply," and "I close" to present the self in the writing process. The choice of these verbs highlights the author's authority, persuading readers of her competency to undertake the study.

NOTE: The examples for the (text-only) PDF version of this item are available online at:
<http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.16.22.3/mto.16.22.3.bourne.php>

KEYWORDS: Beethoven, irony, Grice, Gricean Maxims, linguistics, sonata, form, schema, common ground, string quartet, humor, communication, analogy, cognition

ABSTRACT: Hatten (1994) writes that if musical passages are "inappropriate to the context of the movement . . . an ironic interpretation would be one way to reconcile that inappropriateness as a compositional effect rather than a flaw" (185). Is there something systematic that prompts listeners to interpret musical "inappropriateness" as ironic? Building upon Hatten's work, this article explores how a listener might infer irony in Beethoven's music by drawing on cognitive principles and analogies shared by music and language. I create an analytical framework that draws conditions from language psychologists' empirical studies of verbal and situational irony (Colston 2001, Lucariello 1994). The first condition is a violation of expectations established through a norm or schema. I use Caplin's (1998) theory of formal function, Gjerdingen's (2007) schema theory, and Hepokoski and Darcy's (2006) Sonata Theory to measure violation of expectation as defined by Beethoven and his audience's shared stylistic knowledge. Since listeners develop expectations in music simply by listening (Meyer 1956), this paper incorporates "common ground," Clark's (1996) term for the information, knowledge, and cultural norms that the composer and listener share. The second condition is blatantly failing to fulfill one or more of the "maxims" defined by the linguist H.P. Grice (1975), who argues that a person implicitly follows the maxims in any "cooperative" conversation. I apply this framework to analyze three Beethoven string quartet movements that Hatten and others have described as "ironic": op. 95/iv, op. 131/v, and op. 130/i. I close by discussing implications for musical communication as a whole.

Received January 2016

[1.1] In a letter to Sir George Smart, Beethoven mentions his imagined audience for op. 95, the String Quartet in F minor: "NB. The Quartett is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public" (Anderson 1961, 2: Letter 664). In addition to specifying an audience for the quartet, Beethoven (not an editor) titled the work *Quartett[o] Serioso* (Longyear 1970, 649). The finale of op. 95 mostly conveys pathos (fully deserving of a "serioso" title) until a light-fingered, major-mode Allegro coda in $\frac{3}{4}$ meter emerges (more reminiscent of *opera buffa* than a tragic Beethovenian string quartet). Joseph Kerman describes op. 95's coda as such:

Then, as though something silently snapped, a very fast *alla breve* section emerges in the major mode, a

The author follows the opening *move* with a question - a strategy that engages the writer with readers.

Bourne outlines a detailed theoretical framework as a basis for the analysis. Note how in doing so the author occupies the *research gap*.

The author concludes with a *hedged* statement to indicate her *stance* in relation to the findings. This *hedged* claim is in contrast to some of her previous vocabulary such as "blatantly failing," "inappropriateness," and "flaw." By *hedging* the conclusion, the author implies that the findings leave room for discussion.