

Schopenhauer, Rossini, and Musical Imitation of Concepts

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In Schopenhauer's principal work, *The World as Will and Representation*, he presents some striking thoughts about the aesthetic effects of music. He claims that the essence of music is to express the inner nature of the world, which he calls the *will*. He names Gioachino Rossini as a composer whose music "speaks its own language," because Rossini does not mold his music according to the lyrics and the events of the libretto.¹ But even though Schopenhauer indicates that Rossini's music is exemplary, no musical analysis is given to support this appraisal. Furthermore, I have discovered an apparent discrepancy between Schopenhauer's disparaging remarks concerning imitative music and his approbation of Rossini. Schopenhauer rejects imitative music as an inadequate expression of phenomena.² Rossini includes an imitative temporale in *Il Barbiere Di Siviglia*. The question is whether this example should be rejected or approved according to Schopenhauer's theory. In this paper, I examine Schopenhauer's criteria for genuine art music, i.e. music that expresses the *will*. I argue that not only do Schopenhauer and Rossini agree on music's relation to lyrics, but they have a similar attitude toward imitative music. I will explain Schopenhauer's thoughts on the unproductive concept in music and compare them with Rossini's own thoughts. I listen to Rossini's *Il Barbiere Di Siviglia* and analyze the thunderstorm temporale and argue that while it is imitative, it is not directly so and hence would align with Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory. Giving an account of this alignment will be beneficial for understanding how Schopenhauer's aesthetics can be applied to composers and their music.

¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* Volume 1, trans. E. F. J. Payne. (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 262. (Hereafter abbreviated *WWR*)

² Schopenhauer, *WWR*. vol. 1, 264.

To provide background information for my analysis, I will lay out Schopenhauer's conception of musical aesthetics in a general statement.³ For Schopenhauer, music is an immediate objectification of the will, separate in species from the Platonic Ideas. For Schopenhauer, the Platonic Ideas are the eternal intelligible forms of natural bodies which Plato discusses in the *Republic*.⁴ Schopenhauer claims that the Platonic Ideas are meant to be expressed through the art of painting and sculpture but not in music. The profound aesthetic effect music has on the listener comes from its inner significance, the will itself. There is "a distinct parallelism"⁵ between the four harmonic voices and the grades of the will's objectivity in existent things; but this parallelism is meant primarily to explain how music objectifies the will, and the most important expression of the will in music is found in the melody, which stands as an analogue to the intellectual life and secret emotional history of mankind. Finally, according to Schopenhauer, music is a universal language of feeling, which expresses the will immediately, communicating all the subtle gradations and shades of the emotions.⁶ This summary of Schopenhauer's conception of music will be important for explaining his aesthetic criteria and analyzing Rossini's thunderstorm *temporale*.

Schopenhauer lays out criteria for the creation of genuine art music, such as the knowledge of genius. A composer must have that disposition of objectivity which brings one to the knowledge of the inner nature of the world. For music is an immediate objectivity of the will. Schopenhauer defines a "disposition of objectivity" as when an artist engages in continual aesthetic contemplation. This contemplation consists in effacing individual concerns, entering a state of pure perception, losing oneself in perception, and becoming consumed with the

³ See Alex Earich, "Schopenhauer's Conception of Music." (Master's thesis, St. John's College, 2018).

⁴ See Schopenhauer, *WWR*. vol. 1, 169-172 and Plato, *Republic*. Books VI and VII

⁵ Schopenhauer, *WWR*. vol. 2, 447.

⁶ Schopenhauer. *WWR*. vol. 1, 262

object of contemplation.⁷ When the artist reaches such a state of aesthetic contemplation, he or she experiences the immediate objectivity of the will, whether it be the Platonic Ideas or music. For, according to Schopenhauer, art is “the way of considering things independently of the principle of sufficient reason,”⁸ that is, the principle which governs logical, empirical, transcendental, and metalogical truth.⁹

Another criterion, according to Schopenhauer, for the creation of genuine art music, is intuition about man's will and the pantheon of emotions felt by humankind. But this is by no means an abstract conception of the emotions. Rather, it is direct knowledge of what Schopenhauer calls “the negative concept of feeling.”¹⁰ According to Schopenhauer, the concept of feeling has negative content because under this concept are united heterogeneous things (such as religious feeling, feeling for colors, and feeling of power) which nevertheless all agree in the respect of not being abstract concepts.¹¹ The composer needs intuitive knowledge of man's will because melody “relates the secret history of the intellectually enlightened will,” and thus music is considered to be “the language of feeling and of passion.”¹² The intuition of man's will leads to direct knowledge of the will as thing-in-itself,¹³ which is important for the composer because according to Schopenhauer music is “a copy of the will itself.”¹⁴ Schopenhauer describes this direct knowledge of the will (as opposed to knowledge governed by the principle of sufficient reason) as “the reference of a judgement to a relation that a representation of perception, namely the body, has to that which is not representation at all, but is *toto genere* different therefrom, namely will.

⁷ Schopenhauer, *WWR*. vol. 1, 185.

⁸ Schopenhauer, vol. 1, 185.

⁹ Schopenhauer, vol. 1, 102.

¹⁰ Schopenhauer, vol. 1, 51.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 51.

¹² *ibid.*, 259.

¹³ *ibid.*, 109-110.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 257.

[Schopenhauer distinguishes] this truth from every other, and [calls] it *philosophical truth par excellence*.”¹⁵ It is through the genuine expression of the language of feeling that composers reveal this philosophical truth.

The concepts related to musical technique may be helpful for realizing this art, but the abstract concepts of reason are of no use to the composer. For Schopenhauer says that “the composer reveals the innermost nature of the world, and expresses the profoundest wisdom in a language that his reasoning faculty does not understand...in the composer, more than in any other artist, the man is entirely separate and distinct from the artist.”¹⁶ The language of feeling is that in which the composer expresses the profound wisdom of the world, which is impenetrable by the faculty of reason. But it is not the emotions of the composer that are expressed in genuine art, but the emotions themselves.¹⁷ The composer raises himself or herself above the phenomena, and above the individual will, and channels the movements of the will into the creation of genuine art music. The artist is distinct from the individual because of the disposition of objectivity, and the knowledge of *philosophical truth par excellence*.

As mentioned above, Schopenhauer and Rossini agree on music's proper relation to lyrics. Schopenhauer asserts that the lyrics must always be subordinate to the music.¹⁸ The libretto ought to serve the musical ear or “work for” the composer as Rossini also would have preferred.¹⁹ In a late nineteenth century biography, Rossini is quoted as saying: “[The composer] will follow the words only to the point of bringing the melody into agreement with them, without departing from the general character of the music, which he will have established in such wise that the words shall serve the music rather than the music the words.”²⁰ If the

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 102.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 260.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 261.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 261.

¹⁹ Edgar Istel, and Theodore Baker, “Rossini: A Study.” *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (1923): 417.

²⁰ Istel and Baker, “Rossini: A Study,” 421. The quotation comes from Antonio Zanolini’s biography of Rossini.

words serve the music, they are indeed subordinate to it. Hence, Rossini and Schopenhauer agree regarding the relation of music to the libretto. This fact helps to explain Schopenhauer's fascination with Rossini and provides important information for resolving the apparent discrepancy outlined in the introduction. If they have similar aesthetic principles it should be possible to reconcile Rossini's music with Schopenhauer's theory.

In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer explains that the abstract concepts of reason cannot produce genuine art. He argues that music should be free from the imitation of concepts because the concept is unproductive in art. Concepts relate to perception as a curve to its asymptote; and since the knowledge of genius is derived from perception, concepts will not produce genuine works of art.²¹ Schopenhauer gives an example: "If the singer or virtuoso wishes to guide his recital by reflection, he remains lifeless."²² A good account of this "lifelessness" of one who guides performance by reflection is found in Hannah Arendt's discussion of the thinking activity. Arendt concludes that "withdrawal from the world of appearances is the only essential precondition [for thinking]."²³ Since reflection is a kind of thinking, the performer in Schopenhauer's example would be withdrawn from the world of appearances and thus unable to engage with his collaborators and the audience. In this context, the artist must channel pure perception through technique to produce a genuine work of art.

The creation of genuine art is not mediated through rational concepts. For example, Schopenhauer presents Haydn's oratorio *The Seasons* as one composition which exhibits imitation of the concept. But the rejection of imitation in music was a subject of debate long before Schopenhauer wrote his principal work. In fact, Haydn was aware of this debate and was not entirely pleased with

²¹ Schopenhauer, *WWR*, vol. 1, 57.

²² Schopenhauer, vol. 1, 57.

²³ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, One-volume edition, Ed. Mary McCarthy (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1978. Volume One/Thinking), 78.

the overtly imitative parts of his oratorio. Geiringer writes in his life of Haydn that the librettist, van Swieten, after enjoying the success of *The Creation* oratorio, was eager to collaborate with Haydn again. Van Swieten proposed the libretto for *The Seasons*, which included suggestions for imitations of natural sounds. Haydn was aware that such imitations were gradually falling out of favor in certain aesthetic circles, and this made him uncertain of his work. He blamed van Swieten for the overtly imitative passages, making such remarks as “this Frenchified trash was forced upon me.”²⁴ This anecdote from Haydn’s life provides important background information for the comparison of Schopenhauer and Rossini’s aesthetic thought. Imitation of phenomena had been present in music long before Haydn composed *The Seasons*. And his reaction to some of the things he wrote into the score evinces that Haydn rather agrees with Schopenhauer’s view despite having written imitative passages. More importantly, this information sheds light on the fact that the aesthetic opinion regarding such imitation does not belong to Schopenhauer alone. I think Schopenhauer goes farther than others in relating his aesthetic opinion to a metaphysical ground, claiming that the unproductive concepts of reason get in the way of music’s expression of the inner nature of the world. If Rossini shares this opinion, then his music ought to be reconcilable with Schopenhauer’s theory.

There is historical evidence to suggest that Rossini is on the same side of the debate regarding imitative music. In Zanolini’s biography of Rossini, the composer is quoted as saying: “it is a general and gross error among musicians, and more particularly musical scientists, to believe that music is an imitative art. That it is not, but a wholly ideal art as regards its principle, and, as regards its aim, stimulative and expressive.”²⁵ Rossini believes that the “principle” of music is ideal. Rossini’s idealization of music relates to Schopenhauer’s claim that music is an expression

²⁴ Karl Geiringer, *Haydn: A Creative Life in Music*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1946), 156, 315.

²⁵ Istel and Baker, 420.

of the will (the thing-in-itself), because, in so far as music expresses the will, it exists independently of phenomena. It is because of music's status as objectivity of the thing-in-itself that imitation of phenomena is not proper musical expression. But Rossini's reason for rejecting imitative music is that, "Music has neither the intention nor the capacity to convey to the ear an impression of everything mankind hears."²⁶ Again, this idea of the "intention" of music coincides with Schopenhauer's claim that the purpose of music is to express the thing-in-itself. Thus, imitative music should be rejected because it is contrary to the purpose or intention of music.

Rossini gives another reason for the rejection of imitation:

Music can only imperfectly imitate whatever produces actual tone—rain, thunderstorms, dirges, the noises of festivity...Music is a lofty art precisely for the reason that, without possessing means to imitate reality, it soars above terrestrial phenomena into an ideal world and stirs earthly passions with celestial harmony...music is an ideal art, not an imitative one.²⁷

Rossini is claiming that not only is it contrary to the purpose of music to imitate phenomena, but it is also not possible for music to perfectly imitate the phenomena. Hence, the pursuit of a perfect imitation of phenomena such as thunderstorms would be foolish. Nevertheless, in *The Barber of Seville* Rossini includes a temporale which imitates a thunderstorm. Even if Rossini includes it of necessity, because the thunderstorm gives occasion for Count Almaviva to sneak into Basilio's house in an attempt to elope with Rosina, it may be possible to analyze the music and demonstrate that Rossini imitates thunder in a pardonable, if not a laudable way.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 420.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 421.

There are ways to more directly imitate the sound of a thunderstorm, namely with a rain-stick and a thunder-sheet. But Rossini does not use such devices in *The Barber of Seville*. He uses only string and wind instruments for the thunderstorm movement. I suggest that Rossini's music expresses the form of a thunderstorm without direct imitation. Rossini's movement evokes the image of a thunderstorm which develops out of a light rain, breaks into a torrent, and then abates to a light rain again. The beginning section in C major features a melody in the first violin and flute that evokes the image of raindrops lightly falling before the storm breaks. The music modulates to C minor when the storm breaks, and this change of tonality is meant to elicit a different mood. The strings imitate the rolling thunder, but this imitation is not direct because it does not attempt to sound exactly like thunder. The movement reaches its climax with some high tremolos in the violins and viola. Eventually the movement modulates back to C major and the violins and flute play a similar melody to the beginning section. The contrast between the sections indicative of light rain is interesting, because they imitate the same phenomena with distinct emotions. The first rain melody features more chromaticism, which points toward the impending modulation and storm, and expresses a mood of anxious anticipation. The second rain melody does not feature chromaticism, which signals that the storm has ended, and expresses relief from fear and anxiety. A scalar statement in the lower strings, which sets up the $I_{6/4}$ —V—I cadence in C major signals the storm clouds moving into the distance. Here Rossini puts the emotional tone of the piece ahead of the phenomena depicted in the opera—his goal is not to adequately portray the thunderstorm but to let his music, “assume the role of the destiny that pursues [the characters in the opera].”²⁸

Viewed through the lens of Schopenhauer's parallelism Rossini's imitation of the thunderstorm is at least pardonable. Schopenhauer's parallelism consists in an

²⁸ *ibid.*, 421.

analogy between the four harmonic voices and the grades of the will's objectivity in existent things. The bass voice corresponds to inorganic matter and the soprano corresponds to the intellectual life of human beings.²⁹ The natural forces inherent in a thunderstorm are also low grades of the will's objectivity,³⁰ but Rossini places the melody in the violins and flutes. Since these soprano voices correspond to the intellectually enlightened will, Rossini is concerned, according to Schopenhauer, with that will when he places the light rain melody in those voices. The movement is meant to "prepare the mood of the auditors" for the scene,³¹ which involves both natural forces and acts of individual willing. Rossini's thunderstorm expresses the feelings of the intellectually enlightened will as it experiences this phenomenon. With this portrayal of both the lowest and the highest grades of the will's objectivity, Rossini's thunderstorm points the listener to the inner nature of the world. Therefore, Rossini's imitative thunderstorm is reconciled to Schopenhauer's theory.

Emotive content expressed through the melody is critical for this account of the composition of genuine art music. For Rossini, musical expression of the ideal will always be prior to the events of the opera. For Schopenhauer, a genuine expression of the inner nature of the world must include that analogue to the highest grade of the will's objectivity known as melody. Rossini and Schopenhauer are against imitation of the concept and I have argued that Rossini does not attempt to imitate the phenomena directly, but rather sets the tone for whatever action takes place in the drama. For to take great pains to imitate the phenomena gets in the way of melody, which Rossini and Schopenhauer hold in highest regard.

²⁹ Schopenhauer, *WWR*, vol. 1, 258-259.

³⁰ Schopenhauer, vol. 1, 117.

³¹ Istel and Baker, 421.

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