



Lesson Plan: Humor in Music

OVERVIEW

Sometimes composers and musicians provide a light-hearted approach to their music, using humor to catch and hold listeners' attention. After students have started rehearsing the piece and are aware of some of its humorous aspects, they will 1) investigate *Deep Dish* for specific examples of Stephenson's humorous approach, and 2) transfer what they've learned about humor in music as they examine other musical works.

LEARNING GOAL

Students will independently identify amusing and entertaining characteristics in a second musical work after identifying the humorous details in *Deep Dish* and reading an article on *Humor in Music*.

RESOURCES & MATERIALS

- Recordings as listed in the lesson plan
- Copies of the "Humor in Music Listening Log"
- Electronic display or copies of the article *Humor in Music*

PROCESS

1. Tell students a musical joke. Select one or your favorites, or try one from the side-bar. When students respond (hopefully laughing/giggling/smiling), ask these questions:
 - Why did you laugh (smile, chuckle)?
 - What made it funny or humorous?
 - If I tell it again, would you still laugh? Why not?
2. Connect your attempt at humor to James Stephenson's *Deep Dish*. Highlight one detail from the piece that is evidence of the humor present in the music.
 - For example: the upward "boing" sound of the timpani played in a non-tradition way plus the visual of the rolling pin centering the dough. Point out to students in other sections that the rolling pins are not causing the sound, but are a humorous visual to go with the sound.)
 - Ask students to name additional examples from the score. This conversation does not have to be a long analysis. You've probably already noted and chuckled over many of the quips and puns as you've rehearsed the piece. Naming the examples helps students recall what they've already noticed in the music.

A Few Tasty Jokes (If you need them)

Want to hear a joke about pizza?
Never mind, it's too cheesy.

Q: How do you fix a broken pizza?
A: With tomato paste.

Q: How many conductors does it
take to screw in a light bulb?
A: No one knows, no one ever looks
at him/her.

3. In small groups, have students to listen to excerpts from other pieces in which composers use humor to catch listeners' attention. Their job is to catch/identify some moments/passages/extra musical sound/etc. that evoke a response, then to list examples on the Listening Log with brief descriptions. As an option, assign the Listening Log as homework. The web links are included in the log.

Here are some musical works to consider for this activity:

- Mozart's *Musical Joke*. This example is fun, but tricky. The jokes are only funny if you know your Mozart or what's musically funny in a subtle way. However, even novices can appreciate the final 30 seconds of the 3rd Movement, especially the final chords. A recording with the string quartet score is available [here](#). The 4th movement begins at 15:33. The final segment begins at 17:51 with fugal passage that goes nowhere.
 - Spike Jones "William Tell" available [here](#).
 - P.D.Q. Bach's Play by Play of Beethoven's 5th Symphony, 1st Mvt available [here](#). The actual work begins at 0:56 with the two narrators providing the introduction. All of it is funny. Read a short synopsis about why this arrangement is funny [here](#).
 - The Major-General's song from *Pirates of Penzance*. The breakneck tempo and intense rhyme patterns are funny. A filmed excerpt of a performance within the operetta is [here](#). The singer moves at a really amazing tempo, especially in the encore. For a version with text on the screen can be found [here](#).
 - Victor Borge's piano jokes available [here](#).
4. Reconvene and take the excerpts one at a time. Ask what each group noticed, then play the excerpt for confirmation.
 5. By now, things may not seem as funny. Close with a new joke – or ask students to search for new material/jokes/stories to share at future rehearsals of *Deep Dish*!

ASSESSMENT

The Listening Log provides informal evidence of students' ability to analyze musical works and summarize what they hear and understand using musical vocabulary.

EXTENSIONS

- Students will not know who Spike Jones and P.D.Q. Bach are. Doing some web research might make an interesting homework topic.
- Start a "Humor in Music" wall in class. Ask students to find cartoons and jokes to place on the wall.
- The subject of Humor in Music is more complex topic. If you or a student want to investigate the topic in more detail, here is an excellent resource:
[Humour in Music - the strange land where music and humour mix.](#)

Teacher Resource: The Humor in *Deep Dish*

Two key humorous elements in *Deep Dish* are:

- The uses instrument and found sounds in unexpected ways
- The extended metaphor where directions for making a pizza are expressed in musical terminology that mirrors or parodies existing terminology in Italian

Here is a summary of some of the ways they are woven into the piece:

- Stephenson used found sound instruments from the kitchen in the score, calling them “pizza accessories.” The percussion section can help identify these found sounds:
Rolling pins, cheese grater played with a spoon, pizza pie servers, dinner bell, garlic press, carrot peeler, sauce pan, cutting board, spatula, and a kitchen timer with a bell.
- He also uses conventional instruments in unusual ways. For example, the opening timpani part is played with a pedal technique, made to look like the sound is produced by pushing a rolling pin across the timpani head.
- Adopting some funny interpretations of traditional Italian expressive markings is another nod to the pizza humor. Ask students to provide the reason why this might be funny.
 - *Moderato*, no knead to rush (bread-bakers favorite word)
 - Formaggio, *poco* con brie-o (rather than *brio* - cheese lovers will know that brie is a creamy textured cheese)
 - *Poco* pepperoni (no need to explain a “little bit of pepperoni”)
 - *Allegro* (fast) marinara (tomato sauce) (*piu mosso*) (a little faster)
 - *Con fuoco* (with fire; it is obviously a wood-fire roasted pizza)
 - Turn it (up a notch) has no Italian musical term but we know it means to turn up the heat
- The big metaphor that making a new piece of music is like making deep dish pizza is a key humorous device. Various sections of the music are intended to mirror the cooking process:
 - Center the dough (do) in the opening section and A (chromatic scale downward in upper instruments, and upwards in lower instruments until all arrive at concert A-flat in measure 18)
 - Layer the cheese (layers of instruments enter at letter B)
 - Add toppings (counter melody in woodwinds plus more kitchen percussion at D)
 - Add the sauce (jazzy sounds, spicy harmony, faster tempo, *allegro* at F)
 - Cook it (letter I has a faster tempo and key changes – the music is ‘cookin’)
 - Rotate the pizza (at L the composer instructs the band to turn and face the audience, increase dynamics to *f*, and “turn it up a notch”)