

Humor in Music

WHAT MAKES US LAUGH?

We laugh when we expect to see or hear one thing and instead are surprised by the unexpected. We laugh when things are bigger, smaller, faster, or slower than we anticipate. Most people make jokes with words and images, but musicians can make us chuckle by surprising us with unexpected sounds. Sometimes the music makes fun of itself and sometimes it makes fun of other music.

Let's explore some ways composers make us smile, chuckle, giggle, or laugh out loud...

USING INSTRUMENTS IN UNUSUAL WAYS OR INCORPORATING SOUNDS WE DON'T EXPECT TO HEAR

James Stephenson perks up our ears in *Deep Dish* with many found sound instruments – most of them from the kitchen. These sounds pop up all through the score, extending his puns about music and making a tasty pizza. He also uses conventional instrument in unusual ways.

In Spike Jones' version of Rossini's beautiful legato morning melody in the overture from *William Tell*, the original flute melody is played by horns, cowbells, and a gargling voice. These are all unexpected sounds. And when you first hear them, they are pretty funny.

PLAYING WRONG NOTES ON PURPOSE

Mozart wanted to make fun of composers whose music was boring and not very well written. So, he wrote a composition called *Musical Joke*. In the piece, Mozart surprises us with a rest when we expect a cadence and has musicians play blatantly wrong notes at the end of the piece.

CREATING A PARODY OF AN EXISTING WORK

Composer Peter Schickel's alter-ego, P.D.Q. Bach, creates many parodies of existing pieces. In each, the original composer's melodies and rhythms are apparent, but they undergo transformation by mixing things up with short quotations of other tunes, funny comedy interpretations of famous classical works, and unique orchestrations. In his interpretation of the 1st Movement of Beethoven's famous 5th Symphony, he adds a play by play narration that puts the music into a football stadium. The really funny thing is, the narration by two sportscasters actually helps listeners follow the music more closely. It even heightens the enthusiasm for what's happening.

