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Teatro di suoni.
Spazi acustici teatrali e territoriali

A cura di

Martino Mocchi, Lorena Rocca, Demis Quadri and Carlotta Sillano

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Music and Clowning in Europe, 20th-21st centuries

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ABSTRACT

This research project explores the interactions between music and clowning from two perspectives: first, by investigating the uses and functions of music and sound in European clowning traditions, and second, by revisiting the notion of musical humor and introducing the category of the ‘clownesque’ – taking Gustav Mahler’s Seventh Symphony as a case study. Clowning practices can inform modern instrumental music, I suggest, because of the cross-fertilization of ‘cultivated’ and ‘popular’ genres characteristic of this era. My musicological perspective on clowning will throw new light on this tradition; and, in turn, interpreting musical humor in the 20th century through the lens of clowning practices will emphasize the physicality of musical gestures.

Keywords: clowning; music; humor; Grock; Mahler.

1. INTRODUCTION: SOUND AND MOVEMENT

The concept of ‘sonic theater’ is concerned with the relationship between space and sound. Like movement, sound can define and shape space, filling or emptying it, marking proximity or distance, horizontality or verticality. If sound defines space, the opposite is also true: sound is

partly characterized by its internal movements, which in turn define its spatiality. Sound can move up or down, in a linear or circular way, and musical gesture can be perceived in terms of physical movement (Lecoq 1997) ¹.

The relationship between sound and movement lies at the heart of my research project “Music and Clowning in Europe, 20th-21st centuries”, currently under way at the Accademia Teatro Dimitri (Swiss National Science Foundation). At the intersection of musicology and clown studies, this project explores the interactions between music and clowning from two perspectives: on the one hand, by investigating the uses and functions of music and sound in European clowning traditions, and, on the other hand, by revisiting the notion of musical humor and introducing the category of the ‘clownesque’.

1.1. *Mahler's theatricality*

This project originates in the context of my research on composer Gustav Mahler (1860-1911). A particular aspect of his symphonic music raises unique interpretative issues: his “happy endings”. Theodor Adorno condemned Mahler’s “affirmative movements” on the premise that they were «vainly jubilant» and denounced a «subjective incapacity for the happy end» (1992, 137-138). The Finale of the Seventh Symphony (1905) presents a striking example of such jubilant conclusion, and Adorno’s critique of this movement concentrates on the following points: there is a “disproportion” between form and content; the movement is “too theatrical” and displays an “excessive joy”, which leads to an inevitable collapse (1992, 137).

Mahler’s jubilant music thus calls for new interpretative keys that would allow us to redefine its theatricality. His theatrical impulse takes different forms, including characteristics that are typical of operetta – such as a quick succession of musical tableaux and play with musical quotations or parody. But more significantly, I argue, specific aspects of Mahler’s theatricality evoke another kind of performance, highly popular around 1900: the circus.

¹ Jacques Lecoq evokes the perception of ‘internal movements’ of music in his teaching practice: «Lorsque la musique se groupe, se met en spirale, chute» (p. 78).

1.2. *The Greatest Show on Earth*

The circus becomes a significant cultural phenomenon towards the end of the 19th century, and the arts, characterized at this period by the cross-fertilization of “popular” and “cultivated” genres, frequently refer to the world of the circus, more or less explicitly (Starobinski 2004). The Prater, where Mahler wandered around during his directorship of the Vienna court opera (1897-1907), had been hosting circuses from the beginning of the 19th century. Circus Carré, Circus Renz, Hagenbeck’s reptile collection, circus Schumann, circus Busch all passed through Vienna while Mahler was living there. Moreover, the ‘Greatest Show on Earth’, the American circus Barnum & Bailey, on tour in Europe since 1898, arrived in Vienna in November 1900, coming to Austria for the first time ².

The excessive and overtly theatrical features of Mahler’s music evoke the world of the circus, both musically and aesthetically; and more specifically, as will be discussed below, I suggest to associate these features with the physicality of clowning acts.

1.3. *Musical clowning and physical humor*

I propose to explore the idea that the type of physical humor at play in Mahler reflects a new aesthetical paradigm emerging at the turn of the 20th century, and, thus, that this type of humor will be found elsewhere in modern music. Based on the hypothesis that clowning practices can inform modern instrumental music, this project investigates musical practices in European clowning to better understand this type of physical humor at play in 20th-century Western classical music. In turn, rethinking musical humor will provide a framework for reevaluating the role played by music and sound in clowning, highlighting the interactions between gesture and sound.

² *Neue Freie Presse*, 25 November 1900. The Barnum & Bailey circus stayed in Vienna from 25 November to 24 February 1901, performing in the Rotunda, built for the Universal Exposition of 1873.

2. MUSIC IN CLOWNING

While the field of circus studies has expanded in the last decades of the 20th century, musical practices in clowning remain largely unexplored. The first part of this project traces a history of music in clowning based on archival sources (iconography, films, recordings, musical scores, texts), focusing on three case studies. Originating in 16th-century England, the term ‘clown’ is a generic concept that includes a wide range of comic figures defined in terms of theories of laughter, practices and social role (Davison 2013). My investigation concentrates on non-verbal types of clowning at the circus, theatre, music hall and cinema. In parallel to this historical axis, I am engaged in an ethnographical observation of contemporary practices of clowning, in pedagogical and artistic contexts.

2.1. *Historical axis*

The historical axis is articulated around three key figures of 20th-century clowning, whose performances have been recorded on film: the clowns Grock and Dimitri, who both made an extensive use of music in their performances, and the cineast Jacques Tati, a mime artist who developed a unique film style relying on sound effects.

Known as the ‘king of clowns’, Grock, born Charles Adrien Wettach (1880-1959), was a virtuoso musician who played more than twenty instruments. Grock’s *Entrée* with violinist Max van Embden is centered on music playing. Here, the clown performs as well as the musician, defying the laws of nature with his tiny violin. The interactions of the clown with his partner, and with the orchestra in the pit, emphasize the tensions between ‘serious’ and ‘clownesque’ music making, which reflect a crucial feature of modern music, exposing interactions between ‘cultivated’ and ‘popular’ idioms.

Like Grock, Dimitri (1935-2016) was a musical clown who constantly used music and sound effects in theatre performances. The influence of Grock can be detected in his recurrent use of instruments ‘families’, from the smallest to the largest guitar (alluding to Grock’s tiny violin and his vocal imitation of its ‘grand-mother’, the double bass). Dimitri has also been involved in musical practices in different settings, recording Ticinese popular songs with Roberto Maggini in the 1980s, and frequently collaborating with international orchestras and music

festivals³.

From *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (1953) to *Parade* (1974), Jacques Tatischeff, dit 'Tati' (1907-1982), established a style of clowning based on cinematic image and sound, influenced by circus clowning, early silent films and animated features. In all of Tati's films, and even more in *Mon Oncle* (1958) and in *Playtime* (1967), the soundtrack is worked out as a musical score, playing with a subtle counterpoint of sound effects added during the post-production phase (De Valck 2005, 226-228). Comedy arises from the sophisticated interaction between image and soundtrack, and between music and sound.

My description and analysis of the characteristics of musical practices in clowning concentrate on the interactions between gesture and sound, or, more broadly, between visual and sonic aspects; as well as on questions of timing and rhythm; on the tension between music and sound; and on sonic mediums (musical instruments, objects, voices).

2.2. *Ethnographical axis*

This historical perspective is complemented by an exploration of contemporary practices, which allows me to observe the integration of music and sound in the creative process of clowning. The fieldwork takes place on two fronts: first, observing the pedagogical techniques relevant to my project at the *Accademia Teatro Dimitri* (scene mute, pallina, *Entrées clownesques*, pantomime, slapstick, rhythm) and at the *École de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq* in Paris (mime, circus and theater clowns, comics). Second, the artistic front involves observing contemporary clowns in performance (including Jos Houben, Nina Dimitri and Silvana Gargulio) and interviewing them on their use of sound and music, as well as on their creative process.

2.3. *Musical clowning: Grock and Max van Embden (1931)*

The tension between 'serious' and 'clownesque' music making lies at the heart of the tradition of musical clowning. Charlie Chaplin and Buster

³ Dimitri played the devil in Igor Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat*, Frosch in Johannes Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*; staged several operas and performed for the Orchesterfest in Berlin.

Keaton in *Limelight*, the Rastellis, the Rudi Llata circus, or Pierre Etaix and Annie Fratellini all play on this tension, as both the clown and the musician (reflecting the Whiteface–Auguste pair in circus clowning) alternate moments of ‘serious’ and ‘clownesque’ music performance. Transitions between these two registers are signalled by physical actions, a change of atmosphere, lighting, body language and facial expressions. Grock, whom Jacques Tati described as a «very good musician dressed as a clown»⁴, provides us with a striking example of such transitions in his *Entrée* recorded with Max van Embden in 1931⁵.

Alone on stage, the clown takes the concertina and begins playing a nostalgic melody, leading us to believe that a moment of ‘serious’ music is about to take place. The musical performance is interrupted by a physical gesture: he steps on the chair and falls through it (*Fig. 1*).



*Figure 1. – Grock in his circus, Biemme, 1953. Photo Christian Staub.
Source: Archives Raymond Naef, Zurich.*

⁴ Jacques Tati in conversation with Macha Makeieff, Revue “Cinematographe”, 1960.

⁵ See the film *Grock, La Vie d’un grand artiste*, by C. Boese, 1931 (Universum Film AG).



Figure 2. – Grock in his circus, Biemme, 1953. Photo Christian Staub.
Source: Archives Raymond Naef, Zurich.

The first comical interruption in a context of ‘serious’ music playing enacts a fundamental pattern, to which I return below: an attempt to move upwards (stepping on the chair) resulting in a brutal fall down to earth (*Fig. 2*).

Following a spectacular re-ascent on the back of the chair, Grock prepares one more time for a moment of ‘serious’ playing, sweeping a strand of fictitious hair. The lighting darkens around the clown, now illuminated only by a spotlight, as to prepare the audience for a concert performance (*Fig. 3*).

He looks around him, surprised of the sudden seriousness of the atmosphere, and begins playing the first part of the Prelude from Giuseppe Verdi’s *La Traviata* (1853), a slow theme associated with the sickness and death of Violetta. Standing once again on the chair, this time without falling, still and dignified in his ill-fitted concert outfit, the clown reminds us, through his playing of music foreshadowing a tragic ending, that the idea of death is omnipresent in the background of laughter and comedy.



Figure 3. – *Grock in his circus, Biemme, 1953. Photo Christian Staub. Archives Raymond Naef, Zurich.*

A circular gesture with the concertina announces another change of register, this time generated by the music: on an orchestral accompaniment typical of Italian *bel canto* (here a four-beat waltz, so to speak) rises a melody associated with love in *Traviata*. Grock embroiders a variation on the main theme played by a solo violin, which, as we progressively realize along with the clown on stage, does not come from the orchestral pit but from backstage. The harmony pauses on a deceptive cadence, leading to a dark oscillation between two notes (forming a semitone), which seems to announce a new arrival. Indeed, Max enters on stage, accompanied by a change of lighting. He begins a cadential phrase on his violin, and the look on Grock's face signals a return to the comical register: instead of listening to the music played by his partner, he watches the bow going up and down, as if he were suddenly aware of new potentialities hidden behind this object. A bow can be used to play music, but it is also an object that can be diverted and transformed into something else. Grock gives a flick on Max's bow to make it fall; thus, once again, the return to the physicality of clowning is marked by

a falling gesture.

At this point begins an extraordinary moment of musical ‘conversation’: Grock tries to reconcile with a sulky Max, ‘talking’ to him with his concertina, imitating the inflexions of the human voice according to different moods – high pitches when trying to seduce Max, low and raw sounds when expressing frustration. Sounds also resonate with gestures, as when Grock sticks out his tongue while playing a low sound that seems to function as a sonic equivalent to physical movement. This moment thus presents both music as language – when music replaces words to express meaning and emotions – and music as gesture, when physical and musical movements match with each other. The *Traviata* section ends with the musician and the clown playing together, Max the principal love theme and Grock a variation on it, a hopping counterpoint that reflects well the frequent posture of musical clowning, commenting and parodying the traditional repertoire.

To summarize: a moving performance of a musical theme associated in Verdi’s opera with the idea of death is frequently interrupted by comical interludes showing the diverse functions music can fulfill: music as music, music as sound, music as language or music as gesture. The transitions between these moments are signaled by physical movement and visible changes in the scenic setting (lighting). In fact, physical actions marking a change of register often take the form of falling gestures – as when Grock falls through the chair or gives a flick to Max’s bow – themselves resulting from an attempt to rise (stepping on a chair). Alterations in facial expressions and body language contribute to shift our mode of perception from the audible to the visible dimension (Grock looking at Max’s bow instead of listening to the music produced by it).

3. ‘CLOWNESQUE’ IN MUSIC

The second part of this project, directly informed by my study of music in clowning, revisits the notion of musical humor in Western ‘classical’ music by focusing on instrumental music, in the same way that I restrict my enquiry to silent clowning. Particular attention is devoted to 20th-century European and Russian compositions, which make explicit references to the world of clowns and the circus, as, for example, Darius Milhaud’s ballet-pantomime *Le Boeuf sur le Toit* (1920), including the ‘Tango des Fratellinis’; Igor Stravinsky’s *Circus Polka for a Young Ele-*

phant (1942), composed for the circus Barnum & Bailey; or Luciano Berio's *Sequenza* for trombone in homage to Grock (1966). Expanding definitions of musical humor by introducing the category of 'clownesque' encourages a more physical experience of music making and listening.

3.1. 'Clownesque' in Mahler's Seventh Symphony

As an example of 'clownesque' musical humor I return to where I began, to Mahler's Seventh Symphony. While this work does not make any explicit reference to circus or clown, its excessive and highly theatrical features can be associated with the physicality of clowning acts.

In terms of musical gestures, the last movement of the Seventh displays common points with a fundamental comical pattern, which could be described as follows: first, a theatrical announcement, which plays a crucial role at the circus. The importance of the arrival on the ring is highlighted in the term 'Entrée clownesque', traditionally used for clown acts. Second, according to several theories on humor and laughter, comedy relies on a movement initiated that is then brutally interrupted. Henri Bergson relates this pattern to the tension between the mind and the body: it is the movement that brutally brings us back to our materiality that is fundamentally comical (1900/2013, 90-91)⁶. Such interruptions occur repeatedly until provoking a fall, central comical device in clown acts an in-slapstick comedy in general. Philippe Goudard described clowns as "champions du désastre" and "virtuoses du ratage", which conveys the idea of an aspiration to move forward, or upwards, that is deceived and interrupted by a return down to earth (Goudard 2013). Grock, as we have seen, brings us back to the comical register by attempting to rise higher before falling down.

Let us see how Mahler's music responds to this pattern. The Seventh Symphony is invaded by theatrical announcement such as the one introducing the Finale ⁷. These announcements with trumpets and drums keep interrupting the musical flow, in the same way that clowns interfere with other numbers at the circus, always erupting at the 'wrong' moment. A movement is then initiated, a march or a dance, until it is inter-

⁶ See also the "Présentation" by Daniel Grojnowski and Henri Scepti (Bergson 1900/2013, 19).

⁷ Mahler: Symphony no 7, Claudio Abbado, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, 1984. The excerpt is available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/18F0WjPyuxp6fV-eoa15-X-26GWEkFvCQk/view>.

rupted by a strong rhetorical gesture. As can be heard in this ‘Grazioso’ minuet theme from the last movement, this pattern of an interrupted movement occurs repeatedly, until it leads to the collapse of the musical structure⁸. Like interruptions, collapses function as fundamental structural markers in Mahler’s music. If the Sixth Symphony can be heard as a monumental movement towards death – a large-scale falling gesture – the Seventh offers different visions of the collapse. In each movement, a dynamic gesture is initiated, full of promises, but inevitably falls down; and the fall is either tragic, catastrophic, graceful or comical. The multiple facets of the fall constitute a crucial aspect of the circus: clowns fall down to make the audience laugh, but a falling acrobat can die. Grock collapses through the chair for our greatest pleasure, but his gesture also foreshadows the final downfall of Violetta in *La Traviata*, musically evoked a few seconds later, thus revealing the double nature of comedy, and clowning in particular – humorous and tragic at the same time.

To conclude, Grock’s clowning act and Mahler’s music follow a similar pattern: both enact, the first physically and the second musically, an ‘aesthetic of the fall’; that is, a desire to rise, an ascension attempt that is then interrupted and compromised by a brutal return down to earth. These parallels between music and clowning throw light on the physicality of musical gestures, allowing the listener to experience this music in a more immediate way, and emphasize the importance of the interactions between gesture and sound in communicating meaning.

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