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Meaning Construction through Conceptual Blending - A Hermeneutical Analysis of ‘Samuel Goldenberg und Schmuÿle’ from Modest Musorgsky's ‘Pictures at an Exhibition’

ABSTRACT

Background

Conceptual blending (Fauconnier & Turner 2002) is a cognitive theory proposing the combination of diverse -but structurally related- conceptual spaces for the creation of novel blended spaces. The theory has been applied to the study of music cognition, focusing on the role of cross-domain mapping to meaning construction (Cook 2001, Zbikowski 2002). Musical conceptual blending can be intra-musical, pertaining to the combination of diverse structural elements for the creation of new melodies, harmonies or textures, or extra-musical, involving the integration of musical and non-musical (linguistic, pictorial or emotional) spaces for the creation of novel analogies or metaphors (Spitzer 2003, Zbikowski 2008, Tsougras & Stefanou 2015).

Aims and repertoire studied

In this context, the present paper puts forward a structural and hermeneutical analysis of ‘Samuel Goldenberg und Schmuÿle’ from Modest Mussorgsky's ‘Pictures from an exhibition’ in an attempt to disclose both the intra-musical (combination of modal or tonal harmonic spaces, types of musical texture, rhythmic patterns, cadence formulae) and the extra-musical (musical symbolism and programmatic aspects) conceptual blending that the work incorporates. The analysis aims at revealing how musical structure promotes meaning construction through cross-domain mapping. A fundamental assumption for this investigation is the idea of a scored composition as an emergent structure, which can yield novel structural concepts even when studied retrospectively. The ensuing analysis is therefore intended to outline possible ways of conceptualizing the piece structurally and in terms of symbolic characterisation, to explore how this process generates meaning that is neither purely musical nor exclusively pictorial or verbal, and ultimately, to argue that the elements that are central to this blended understanding of the work, are themselves a result of structural blending.

Methods

The analytical methods applied for the intra-musical aspects are reductional/schenkerian graphs combined with harmonic analysis symbols and structural/morphological diagrams. For the extra-musical aspects they are Conceptual Integration Networks (CINs) describing pictorial, psychological and affective states and ontologies.

Results and implications

The analysis reveals that the piece comprises three distinct parts (A, B, A+B) based on contrasting modal/tonal spaces, textures and rhythmic patterns that, despite their differences on the musical surface level, share key structural elements enabling them to converge in the piece's closure. The piece's ternary form corresponds not only to the presentation and juxtaposition of contrasting musical material, but also to a cyclic evolution of the musical texture (monophonic – homophonic/heterophonic – polyphonic – homophonic – monophonic) and to the evolution and closure of a coherent harmonic structure that prolongs a dominant harmony through integration with the minor mediant and closes with an idiomatic III⁶ aug-i cadence.

The reductional/prolongational analysis provides input for the creation of two distinct Conceptual Integration Networks (CINs), the first describing the intra-musical blending of harmonic and rhythmic concepts and the second proposing the extra-musical blending of the musical and pictorial input spaces into a blended hermeneutical space that projects the work's narrative/programmatic/emotional potential. CIN 1 proposes that the piece's evolutionary musical form is a result of the linear arrangement of two contrasting musical spaces and the intra-musical blending of their compositional concepts, integrated and unified by an evolving and uninterrupted harmonic structure that functions at the background. The Generic Space for CIN 2, to which both input spaces relate, involves *Contrasting Characterisations*. Input Space 1 is the *Pictorial/Psychological Space*, Input Space 2 is the *Musical Space*, and the Blended Space is ‘*Samuel Goldenberg und Schmuÿle*’ as a perceived meaningful programmatic piece. The contrasting parameters of the Musical Space are: texture (monophonic-polyphonic), rhythm (clearly articulated-tremolo), tonality (Bb minor-Db minor), harmony (modal-tonal), and dynamics (forte-piano). The corresponding contrasting parameters of the Pictorial Space are posture, physical condition, social status, speech and personality, as ‘Samuel’ stands with confidence, looks robust, is rich, speaks with assertive tone and possesses powerful personality, while Schmuÿle seems hopeless, looks miserable, is poor, speaks with trembling voice and has weak ego. The produced Blended Space is a musical work amalgamating contrasting psychological, emotional and physical states. This multiple-scope CIN 2 proposes meaning construction and suggests that the contrasting properties embedded in the musical structure and the corresponding contrasting personalities in the pictorial/psychological space evoke cross-domain integration and the creation of a new, amalgamated projected personality, sensed as a novel meaningful

experience by the listener. So, the blended space of CIN 2 appears to suggest that the two contrasting musical characterisations actually correspond to two sides of the same person, a complex, multi-faceted personality, incorporating and balancing multiple cultural, social and psychological states. This conclusion corroborates Taruskin's claim (Taruskin 2009) that Musorgsky in fact intended to portray not two but *one* Polish Jew, an amalgam of *Yevrey* and *Zhid*.

The proposed analysis shows how the three operations of conceptual blending (composition, completion, elaboration) can be employed in combination with structural analysis to propose/explain musical meaning. This research suggests that conceptual blending can be creatively used as an analytical tool contributing to a deeper comprehension of the musical experience.

Keywords

Music hermeneutics, musical signification, structure, conceptual blending, Musorgsky.

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