

Love in disguise: Incongruity between text and music in song

Hui-Chieh Hsu & Lily I-wen Su
National Taiwan University

The study of the relations between language and music in song has been prevalent throughout the history of Western music: Some argued for the dominance of music, and others spoke for the critical role of language (Burkholder et al 2010). In the last century, several theoretical frameworks for the analysis of song (Langer 1953; Kramer 1984; Agawu 1992; Cook 1998) have been proposed, but none is able to provide a satisfactory account of the identity of song. A more integrated account, via the incorporation of conceptual blending theory (Fauconnier and Turner 2002), is advanced by Zbikowski (2002, 2009) to explain how language and music can be put together to create artistic works with rich emergent structure. Nevertheless, Zbikowski's model is not without problems. It not only undermines the critical roles of cross-space vital relations and frame (Fillmore 1985) essential to our appreciation of song, but deals only with songs with congruous text and music, leaving songs with text-music incongruity unaccounted for.

In view of such insufficiency in Zbikowski's (2002, 2009) model, we in the present research demonstrate a modified version of his model and apply it to songs with incongruous text and music. Two songs are chosen to illustrate our point: a duet by W. A. Mozart and a song composed by Robert Schumann. In the Mozart duet, a peasant girl expresses in words her ambivalence about a nobleman's pursuit, but sings her hesitation to the exact tune the man uses to court her. The Schumann song portrays a lovelorn man who sings his inner struggles to a melody normally construed as "positive". Via our analysis, new interpretations can be emergent from the blending of the incongruous text and music in both songs. Such emergent structure, though triggered by incongruity, is in fact iconic to the effect "intended" by the composers.

By comparing incongruity in song to that in language (in terms of the pairing of form and meaning), we discover that in song it is the multimodal nature that brings about its rich possibilities, since a mode can serve as the anchor or relay (Barthes 1988; Forceville 1998) of the other and make manifest the incongruity. In the case of single modality, say language, proper anchor or relay is available only by taking contextual factors into consideration. Much like mismatches between form and meaning often found in language, incongruity between text and music in song makes explicit the cognitive ability essential to our understanding and appreciation of song.

Keywords: conceptual blending, incongruity, multimodality, anchor and relay, iconicity, song

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