

The Aesthetics of the Comic in Piano Literature

Ruxandra MIREA¹

Abstract: *The paper investigates how the aesthetics of the comic, through its fundamental elements—humor, laughter, and parody—are manifested within both universal and Romanian piano literature, with emphasis on specific musical language devices that generate expressive effects conferring a comic character to piano works. The study examines piano miniatures with suggestive titles and thematic content, tracing aesthetic trends and stylistic developments in Western art music. The analysis integrates technical parameters (rhythm, melody, harmony, dynamics), audience reception, and pedagogical perspectives in piano performance, ultimately proposing conclusions regarding the artistic and educational significance of humorous music.*

Keywords: *comic; humor; irony; parody; laughter; piano; miniature;*

Introduction

The present study investigates, through an interdisciplinary approach, the way in which humorous techniques are constructed by the composer, through musical analysis and psychological interpretation. Through the analysis of piano miniatures, both universal and Romanian, the paper aims to highlight the stylistic specificity of each creator, as well as the ways of valorizing musical language elements in relation to trends in the history of music and to the composers' personalities.

Music, in an ontological sense, is the outpouring of emotions, experiences, and affects. Music, in an epistemological sense, is emotion that is experienced and acts as a catalyst for evolution, opening new horizons of development. Through art, experiences and affects unfold, transmitting sensitivity, tension, strength, and collapse—a difficult process that builds toward spirituality, since “art has been presented with such insistence as something opposed to life; this is perhaps due, as S. Freud suspected, to the circumstance that through it some human tendencies which society suppresses and forbids can be released.”²

1. Concepts

Beauty, the primordial aesthetic norm, which encompasses under its dome the nuanced multitude of other categories, centres art within its sphere. Therefore, “we say that a thing is beautiful when it manifests such harmony of appearance that the eye that observes it or the ear that listens to it can grasp it as a whole, with ease and delight.”³

Vibrational resonances and predominantly impactful **emotions**, expressed in musical language, are the four basic emotions identified by psychologist Paul Ekman as universal and fundamental to human beings: **joy, sadness, fear, and anger**. They open up a plurality of other emotions, nuanced according to culture, personality, education, and genetics. Such a multiplicity of inner experiences is also triggered by listening to music.

The emotion of joy can be identified in musical scores through the reflection of several aesthetic categories, one of which that supports the emergence of these experiences is the comic,

¹ Faculty of Arts, Ovidius University of Constanta, ruxandra.m63@gmail.com.

² Vianu, T. 1968. *Estetica*. București: Editura pentru Literatură, pp. 611–612.

³ Vianu, T. 1968. *Aesthetics*. Bucharest: Literature Publishing House, p. 445.

as well as its forms that bring psychological nuances: **humor, joke, parody, or even irony**. “Experimental laboratory research has provided considerable support for the idea that humor is a mechanism for emotion regulation”⁴.

Drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis, we have the authoritative view of the founder of modern psychoanalysis, S. Freud, who “suggested that the comic involves delighted laughter at childish behavior in oneself or others, which he described as ‘the laughter of regained childhood’ (Freud, 1960 [1905], p. 224)”⁵.

The comic is an aesthetic category that presents itself in a dichotomic manner, as a fluctuation between form and content, between appearance and inner truth. Comic situations may also contain tendentious elements, allowing the pleasant release of libidinal energy. Therefore, the aesthetician Vasile Morar considers that “of these forms, the most important are: 1. simple amusement in the face of the comic; 2. the joke – the use of the comic as a punchline; 3. irony – highlighting one’s own superiority through an apparent lowering of the self; rejection in the form of apparent acceptance; 4. sarcasm – bitter, contemptuous, destructive rejection – in the form of exaggerated acceptance”⁶.

Humor – which, from an etymological perspective, originates from the Latin word *humor*, meaning “bodily fluid” – can be defined as a way in which reality is presented in a humorous, ironic, or satirical form, for recreational or critical purposes. In music, humor is shaped as an artistic mode of expression through which carefully chosen musical language elements can create amusement, good mood, surprise, or parody. Sigmund Freud considers humor, in his work *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), as a form of psychic discharge through which emotional tension is transformed into pleasure and relaxation.

“**Comic and humor** are closely related phenomena, but ‘they are not even formally parallel to one another,’ as Hartmann argues; while the comic pertains to the object and is a quality of it, humor, on the other hand, pertains to the one who contemplates or creates (the poet, the actor); the comic and humor would be as different as music is from musicality, or the laws of numbers from the simple craft of calculation.”⁷

Studying the psychology of humor directly, Rod Martin defines the resources of this category: “From a psychological perspective, humor is essentially a positive emotion called mirth, which is usually elicited in social contexts through a process of cognitive appraisal involving the perception of playful, non-serious incongruity and is expressed through the facial and vocal behavior of laughter”⁸.

Completing the nuanced picture of this mode of expression, humor, “sociologist Michael Mulkay (1988) suggested that humor can be viewed as a form of interpersonal communication frequently used to convey implicit messages in an indirect manner and to influence others in various ways”⁹.

Another perspective on the transformative energy of humor is also understood through the gradual development of skills and interpersonal expertise, in which genetic factors, family environment, and social context invariably participate: “Sense of humor, defined as the ability to understand and produce humor in the laboratory, is associated with social competence, cooperation, initiative, and leadership.”¹⁰

2. The Brain and Humor

⁴ Martin, A. Rod. 2007. *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. Burlington: Elsevier Academic Press, p. 306.

⁵ Martin, A. Rod. 2007. *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. Burlington: Elsevier Academic Press, p. 36.

⁶ Morar, Vasile. 2003. *Aesthetics. Interpretations and Texts*. Bucharest: University of Bucharest Press, p. 241.

⁷ Morar, Vasile. 2003. *Aesthetics. Interpretations and Texts*. Bucharest: University of Bucharest Press, p. 229.

⁸ Martin, A. Rod. 2007. *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. Burlington: Elsevier Academic Press, p. 29.

⁹ Martin, A. Rod. 2007. *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. Burlington: Elsevier Academic Press, p. 17.

¹⁰ Martin, A. Rod. 2007. *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. Burlington: Elsevier Academic Press, p. 267.

From the perspective of brain physiology, the same expert Rod Martin states "that it is clear that laughter is a complex activity involving cognition, emotion, and motor behavior, and requires the coordinated activation of a wide range of brain regions, including parts of the cerebral cortex, the limbic system, and the brainstem."¹¹

The unanimous conclusions of recent research in neuroscience (including psychologist Rod Martin) support the involvement of both hemispheres in the beneficial reactions of humor and good mood. The neurotransmitter dopamine, involved in brain biochemistry and in the multitude of emotions, is a key component of the mechanism of well-being.

3. The Psychology of Humor

"Over the years, many theorists have suggested that the ability to respond with humor in the face of stress and adversity may be an important and effective coping skill (Freud, 1928; Lefcourt, 2001; Lefcourt and Martin, 1986). Norman Dixon (1980) even suggested that humor may have developed in humans specifically for this purpose"¹².

When we laugh, the architecture of the brain and, implicitly, of the psyche changes and is harmoniously modulated, and negative emotions such as sadness, anger, anxiety, and even depression are replaced by feelings of joy. "The psychological functions of humor include the cognitive and social benefits of the positive emotion of mirth, its uses as a mode of communication and social influence, and as a means of alleviating tension, regulating emotions, and coping with stress"¹³. Therefore, researchers have confirmed the therapeutic effect of laughter, reflected in the aesthetics of the comic through humor: "Thus, humor can be seen as an important mechanism of emotional regulation that may contribute to mental health (Gross and Muñoz, 1995)"¹⁴.

The personality type most likely to trigger humor and laughter is the extroverted one, which openly and fully expresses its characteristics, a point also emphasized by Rod Martin: "The strongest factor is related to a cheerful temperament and an extroverted, sociable disposition..."¹⁵. On a predispositional basis, this develops into a true communication skill: "Thus, an ability to produce humor can be considered a type of social skill, as well as a creative ability"¹⁶.

4. The Aesthetics of the Comic Following the Trends in the History of Universal Music

All the characteristics of the comic previously presented can be identified in piano literature across the aesthetic currents of the history of art music. However, due to cognitive and emotional development, as well as social constraints, efforts toward a free expression of the comic occurred gradually, without any affront to the privileged classes of society. The comic and humor were expressed in a veiled manner, through irony and parody, suggesting hidden tensions.

During the Renaissance, because "everything is united in God,"¹⁷ the comic in music signified a playful state of mind, containing only subtle irony, touches of parody, and a relaxed atmosphere, while preserving the sacred space.

¹¹ Martin, A. Rod. 2007. *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. Burlington: Elsevier Academic Press, p. 173.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 282.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 226.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 226.

¹⁷ Vianu, T. 1968. *Aesthetics*. Bucharest: Literature Publishing House, p. 693.

Even in the Baroque period, humor was not understood as modern entertainment but as an aesthetic category related to expressivity, contrast, and especially surprise. Imitation, tension, playfulness, and surprising effects represented appropriate tools, translated into musical language. Through the Doctrine of the Affections, expressive color was given to literature, especially vocal music, and gradually to instrumental music.

The Classical period, without dramatic accents, brings through the works of its representative composers balance, serenity, a playful spirit, charm, and surprise. The aesthetics of opera buffa, an emanation of this historical period, extends with considerable imagination into keyboard music scores.

The release of emotions and inner experiences in Romanticism, along with a true spirit of freedom, encouraged the unconstrained expression of the comic. In music as well, “the Romantic perceives everywhere, in the vastness of nature, an hidden life pulsating beneath the apparent forms of nature.”¹⁸

In the musical modernist literature, social satire, the sharp critique of contemporary morals, draws attention to the shaping of an intense comic, featuring elements of irony, absurdity, parody, and intellectual play.

4.1. The Aesthetics of the Comic in the Renaissance Music. William Byrd (1543–1623) – *The Carman’s Whistle*

The history of a repertoire for keyboard instruments, succeeding the organ, begins with the Renaissance in music. The desire to explore dimensions of everyday life and the diversity of habitual behaviors shaped the original and comprehensive dimension of secular art music.

One of the composers of the period, from Elizabethan England, who chose to highlight the shy, delicate, yet clear and crystalline colors of the virginal, was William Byrd (1543–1623). His repertoire for keyboard instruments is distinguished by melodic elegance and contrapuntal refinement, revealing clear sonic layers, with rapid rhythmic alternations and meditative passages.

<<The first printed compositions for keyboard appeared in England under his successor, James I (1603–1625), bearing the following title: “Parthenia or the Maidenhead of the First Music that Ever Was Printed for the Virginalles, composed by three famous masters: William Byrd, Dr. John Bull, and Orlando Gibbons, gentlemen of His Majesty’s Chapel Royal.”>>¹⁹

The Carman’s Whistle is a work for virginal, consisting of a theme and eight variations, composed approximately around 1580 (late Renaissance). It was first copied in the collection *My Ladye Nevells Booke* (1591), and later in the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*. The work, a theme with eight variations, evolves from a simple melody to a complex polyphonic texture reaching up to six voices. We emphasize the sense of construction, the versatility of thematic variation, the rigor of unfolding, and the creative flow in each variation.

The theme, derived from folklore—imitating the whistling of a carter transporting goods—is simple and clear, remaining unchanged throughout the cycle. Its polyphonic development demonstrates the composer’s mastery of counterpoint, while original interventions concern rhythmic aspects, which are dance-like, enriched with ornaments, trills, and mordents.

The theme has an A–B structure, where A (4 measures) presents the main musical idea and ends with a half cadence (on the dominant), creating a sense of questioning. The second section, B, responds to the first part and introduces a slight melodic or rhythmic variation while maintaining the same character, concluding with a stable cadence (a firm resolution) in the main key (C major).

¹⁸ Vianu, T. 1968. *Aesthetics*. Bucharest: Literature Publishing House, pp. 693-694.

¹⁹ Wietzmann, C.F. 1893. *A History of Pianoforte-Playing and Pianoforte-Literature*. New York: G. Schirmer, p. 25.

The aesthetics of the comic, the naturalness of humor, and the smile it evokes are abundantly present in the theme and in each variation. By choosing a playful, lively theme in C major, the composer highlights situational humor.

Likewise, through the almost vocal melodic quality of the same theme, the composer recreates the natural and rhythmic whistling specific to the movement and effort of carters. This is another form of the comic—parody—through the representation and interpretation of a real street scene at the court of Queen Elizabeth I.

Structural humor is identified in the principle of progressive accumulation, demonstrated throughout the entire work, of musical language elements that enrich the piece melodically, polyphonically, and harmonically (if we refer to vertical sonorities): ornaments, diminished rhythmical values, and syncopations.

Descriptive humor, expressed through the same serene whistling of the carter, is observed in imitated motifs and rhythmic variations:



Fig. 1. W. Byrd, Variation 2, bars 9–16.

The Renaissance establishes, alongside the idea of the imitation of ancient art and of nature as appearance, as a world of forms, the idea of the imitation of nature as a creative principle. The piece, an almost pictorial image of a carter working and whistling at the same time, reveals the great fusion of two modes of thought in W. Byrd, a contrast which in itself draws attention to the aesthetics of the comic: the folk origin of the theme and the English elegance of the composer in polyphonically elaborating it. The musical language elements through which the work is inscribed in the aesthetics of Renaissance comedy are expressed in a stable and cheerful major key, C major: imitative counterpoint, ornamental counterpoint, rhythmic diminution, bold rhythmic superimpositions, and the expansion of voices from two at the beginning to six by the end of the variations.

4.2. The Aesthetics of the Comic in Baroque Music: Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764), *La Poule*

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764) composed a cycle of 15 pieces entitled *Nouvelles Suites de Pièces de Clavecin* (ca. 1726–1728), expanding the genre from one consisting exclusively of dances to a more multifaceted form through the introduction of character pieces, thus marking the stature of a renowned late French Baroque harpsichordist. Through the galant style, as a visionary of his time, J.-Ph. Rameau develops in this suite an expressive and theatrical aesthetic of dance interwoven with iridescences of elegant comic expression. Two pieces of this type are *La Poule* and *Les Sauvages*.

La Poule is a character miniature composed in a descriptive manner (French: *pièces de caractère*), representing one of the most daring and expressive examples of the aesthetics of the comic in French Baroque harpsichord music. The work illustrates how late Baroque aesthetics integrate the playful and the grotesque within a highly sophisticated artistic language,

establishing a particularly fluid boundary between the comic, the grotesque, and the pastoral-exotic. Thus, J.-Ph. Rameau, through the caricatural imitation of the clucking and behavior of a hen, constructs a musical characterization with a genuine comic function, both elegant and refined.

In a somewhat free and varied structure, AAvBAv, the composer allows himself the use of melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and even timbral procedures, musically recreating and subtly caricaturing the image of a hen: repetitive rhythmic formulas, short and fragmented motifs, agitated tempo, and sudden accents:



Fig. 2. Jean-Philippe Rameau. *Le poule*. Bars. 1- 9

In highlighting the aesthetics of the comic in the work, we emphasize rhythm as the principal and suggestive element of great effect, almost visual in nature, through which J.-Ph. Rameau musically sketches the bird's behavior: its clucking, jerky movements, and agitation. This is achieved through repetitive, rapid, and fragmented formulas inspired by the lute technique (*style brisé*), very short sixteenth- and thirty-second-note values, syncopations, and sudden accents. The melodic line is subordinated to rhythm, its importance being diminished through the use of short, repeated motifs. Although the dynamics lack flexibility, being adapted to harpsichord technique, the composer inserts several times the indication *doux* ("sweet"), a sign of the Doctrine of the Affections, of the alternation between tension and relaxation, and of the future dynamic nuances that were still limited on the instrument. Ornaments, mordents, and trills enrich the caricatural tableau, accentuating its comic character.

The work reveals, through the mirror of an expertly virtuosic harpsichord technique, the Baroque rhetoric of the affections, the French taste for ornamentation, and the playful spirit of early Rococo, through which it subtly highlights the comic and the closeness between music, theatre, and dance. The work may be regarded as a small theatrical scene with a genuine comic flavor.

4.3. The Aesthetics of Comedy in the Musical Classicism of Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) –*Piano Sonata in E-flat Major*

Joseph Haydn, an Austrian composer and conductor, is recognized as the first great Classical composer, distinguished by creations in the major genres established during his era and by their remarkable artistic value. Hallmarks of his entire oeuvre, which became reference points for future generations, are his playful spirit, formal clarity, and expressive surprise. Genuine elements of comic spirit can be found in his large-scale orchestral works, such as the Symphony No. 94 "Surprise" and the Symphony No. 45 "Farewell", as well as in chamber works like the renowned String Quartet Op. 33 No. 2 "The Joke". In his representative piano sonatas, the most appropriate attributes are playfulness, surprise effects, cheerfulness, and wit. Haydn's humor is refined, elegant, and intellectual, always shaped through spontaneous and unexpected melodic ideas.

The Piano Sonata in E-flat Major, Hob. XVI:52 was composed during the height of Haydn's stylistic maturity. It displays a balanced tripartite structure and develops a refined

expressiveness within the pianistic discourse. In the third movement, *Presto (Finale)*, Haydn creates a score imbued with a brilliant playful spirit that conveys a humorous character. The qualities perceived are vivacity, elegance, surprise, contrast, and explosive energy. All musical elements serve the composer's intention, outlining an image of continuous motion. The form is that of a Sonata-Rondo, ABACA, which allows him to alternate the main theme (A), characterized by clarity, elasticity, and playful expressiveness, with tonal variety, register changes, temporary tensions, and dynamic as well as thematic contrasts. The third movement is centered on the home key of E-flat major, with contrasting episodes in related keys (especially the dominant, B-flat major, and relative minor tonalities), while the development section (C) presents a tonal mobility characteristic of the sonata-rondo form, culminating in the reaffirmation of the tonic in the final coda, A.

The elements of Haydnesque humor are clearly recognizable in the rapid passages, whose direction is constantly altered between ascending and descending motion. The insistent repetition of melodic and rhythmic formulas produces playful tension, creates musical irony, and intensifies the mischievous character. Rhythm supports the playful and spirited atmosphere through sixteenth-note patterns, accents, and syncopations that connect the melodic motives. The alternation between basic rhythmic formulas and diminished variants generates theatricality and a subtle comic effect. Tonal clarity remains evident, while harmonic surprises, rapid modulations, and lightly tensioned transitions contribute to the dynamism of the discourse. The lively, elastic, and fluid tempo sustains this virtuosic structure.

This third movement of the Sonata in E-flat Major demonstrates the composer's ability to integrate humor and surprise within a rigorous and classical construction.



Fig. 3. Joseph Haydn – *Sonata in E-flat Major*, p. 3, Bars 1–24

4.4. The Aesthetics of Comedy in Musical Romanticism: Robert Schumann (1810–1856), *Carnaval*, Op. 9

The cycle of 21 pieces gathered under the title *Carnaval*, Op. 9, bearing the subtitle *Carnaval, Scènes mignonnes sur quatre notes*, is one through which we identify the aesthetics of Romanticism: miniature pieces that speak of hidden loves, contrasts of movement and evoked states—lyricism, grotesque, comic—and formal freedom.

The piece that most forcefully embodies the aesthetics of comedy is *Pantalon et Colombine*, No. 15, inspired by the emblematic characters of the Commedia dell'arte. In this miniature, Schumann musically condenses the eternal story of the struggle for power and age between the old, miserly, and ridiculous man and the young servant girl, clever and full of presence of mind. Comedy with theatrical accents is musically evoked by the composer through the strongly emphasized character traits, the psychology of the protagonists, and the dynamics of their interaction.

Within the free tripartite form, ABA_v, R. Schumann imaginatively presents all the elements of musical language, also identifiable through the virtuosic pianistic writing of the

score: the melodic motives are short, abrupt, and staccato, with angular trajectories, suggesting a dialogue filled with animosity; although the harmony is minimalist, giving priority to the fragmented melodic line, one may discern progressions reminiscent of seventh chords; the rhythm, dynamic and tense across all three layers, sustains the rapid and comic dialogue; sixteenth-note rhythmic formulas and off-beat unresolved chords, presented in ascending motion, intensify the agitation; the tempo is exceptionally lively, *Presto*; while the dynamics—contrasts between *p*, *sf*, and *f*—highlight the conflict of principles. The middle section, B, through its descending contour, the temporary relaxation of motion, and the presence of legato, suggests an apparent reconciliation of ideas.

The piece, being dynamic and dance-like, with both characters constantly in motion, instantly translates into music the comedy of the couple: between Pantalone, who insists upon his abusive and rigid authority, and Colombina, versatile and skillful in dismantling outdated principles:



Fig. 4. R. Scumann. *Carnaval*, op. 9. *Pantalone et Colombine*, bars 1-9

4.5. The Aesthetics of Comedy in Musical Modernism: Dmitri Kabalevsky (1904–1987)– *Children’s Suite*, Op. 27

Dmitri Kabalevsky, Russian composer, musicologist, pianist, and conductor, was a musician whose artistic expression embraced almost all the musical genres of his period. The theme of comedy can be found in the inspired and picturesque pieces from the *Children’s Suite*, Op. 27, where the musical discourse is shaped by a playful vision modeled on the years of childhood. In both pieces, Kabalevsky’s ability to transform a pedagogical exercise, as the work was originally conceived, into an authentic artistic experience full of vitality and humor becomes clearly evident.

In the first miniature, *Clowning*, of remarkable comic expressiveness, Kabalevsky transforms technical gesture into a genuine theatrical scene. Through lively rhythm, caricatural accents, and dynamic contrasts, the piece creates a vivid and accessible musical image capable of provoking positive emotional reactions. All the musical elements suggest the playful actions of an energetic clown who jumps, performs acrobatics, and exaggerates movements and gestures in ways that provoke amusement. The scene, which inspires cheerfulness and energy, follows a clear ternary lied form, ABA¹, and employs highly expressive musical devices: in pitch, the melody features an angular contour and rapid register changes; in rhythm, lively accents and an animated tempo dominate; while in dynamics, evident contrasts intensify the comic effect. The humor is almost visual, as the acrobatics and movements acquire tangible consistency through subtle technical devices such as staccato articulation, accents, and tempo variations:

14

10.
Clowning



Fig. 5. Dmitri Kabalevsky – *Children's Suite*, Op. 27, *Clowning*, bars 1–9

The second piece, *A Little Prank*—a child's small prank, No. 14—has a playful, mischievous character, oriented toward caricature and irony. The ABA¹ lied form succinctly conveys the lively reactions of a cheeky child who, with agility and spontaneity, plays an innocent joke. The musical elements that draw attention to the humor include insistent repetitions, accents, rhythmic formulas, and metrical-rhythmic features such as syncopations and dynamic contrasts. The rhythmic elements suggest an evident humorous character, while the melody, built from short motives, highlights liveliness and a declamatory quality. The harmony, without being sophisticated, follows the tonal framework but includes subtle dissonant insertions with an expressive, ironic function. The comic effect is also recognizable in the piano dynamics (piano–forte) as well as in the lively, almost rushed tempo. The energy is clearly comic in nature. *A Little Prank* is a pedagogical miniature of high artistic effectiveness.

Through its lively rhythm, surprising accents, and caricature-like musical gestures, the piece creates a comic universe that is both accessible and expressive:

20

13.
A Little Prank



Fig. 5. Dmitri Kabalevsky – *Children's Suite*, Op. 27, *A little Prank*, bars 1–7

4.6. The Aesthetics of Comedy in French Modernism: Erik Satie (1866–1925), *Sonatine bureaucratique*.

Entering the memorable twentieth century, we can discern a series of overlapping trends, as well as avant-garde musicians who engage with multiple aesthetic directions of their time or even innovate entirely new ones, thus aligning themselves with avant-garde modernism. Such is also the case of Erik Satie, who “sought to break down the barriers between the arts and to view music in a fresh way, as a vital part of the interaction between various levels of aesthetic experience; as a contribution to a larger whole, and always profoundly modern.”²⁰

²⁰ Robert Orledge, 1990, *Satie the Composer*. Cambridge: University, Press p. XIV.

To him we owe the aesthetic of *furniture music* (French: *musique d'ameublement*)—a concept developed in his late compositional period, when we witness the birth of “furniture music,” shaped by the (not unregretted) awareness of the inexorable passage of time and, implicitly, of human destiny. The only possible response in this context becomes resigned acceptance, similar to the reception of decorative music, which we are asked to ignore entirely.

The work situated within the aesthetics of comedy, through the lens of irony, is the *Sonatine bureaucratique*, composed in 1917 and dedicated to the pianist Juliette Meerovitch, with whom, “in 1916, Satie performed the first public presentation of the four-hand version of *Parade* at the legendary Salle Huyghens.”²¹

The composer writes his own scenario (ingeniously placed between the staves) by drawing on the score of Muzio Clementi’s *Sonatina Op. 36 No. 1 in C major*. The *Sonatine bureaucratique* is a parody of a standardized, impersonal, and monotonous rhythm of existence, musically reflecting a day in the life of a clerk: *Il va gaiement à son bureau* (He cheerfully goes to his office,)/ *Content il hoche la tête* (He happily nods his head,)/ *Il aime aussi son port-plume se manche en lustrine verte et sa calotte chinoise* (He also likes his pen holder, with its green lacquered handle and Chinese-style cap,)/ *Il fait des grandes enjambées* (He takes large strides,)/ *Se précipite dans l’escalier q’il monte sur son dos* (He rushes down the stairs which he seems to carry on his back,)/ *Quel coup de vent* (What a gust of wind,)/ *Assis dans son fauteuil, il est hereux et le fait voir.* (Seated in his armchair, he is happy and shows it).



Fig. 8. Erik Satie – *Sonatine bureaucratique*, Part I, bars 1–4

The aesthetics of the *Sonatine bureaucratique* are subsumed under a new compositional principle—Neoclassicism, whose promoter is Erik Satie—as well as under programmatic writing and irony through nonconformism. Distinct and highly inspired elements of musical language create clear sonic contrasts and discrepancies.

While Muzio Clementi’s *Sonatina Op. 36 No. 1 in C major* is in C major, its harmony is established within classical consonance and refinement, with precisely notated nuances and a didactic purpose, Erik Satie’s *Sonatine bureaucratique* is in A major. Its text is written between the staves, suggesting both narrative and performance approach. The intervallic writing is zigzag-like, exceeding the smooth contour of the classical model, while the harmony is abrupt and intrusive, incorporating parallel fourths and fifths—progressions considered improper within the eighteenth-century stylistic language:



Fig. 9. Erik Satie – *Sonatine bureaucratique*, Part III, bars 105–112

²¹ Ulrich Krämer. *Prefață Sonatina Burocratică*. Retrieved May 18, 2026, from <https://www.henle.de/en/Sonatine-bureaucratique/HN-1075>.

Erik Satie, through the *Sonatine bureaucratique*, asserts Neoclassicism by parodying Classical style, avoiding Classical charm and refinement, and generating emotional detachment alongside a simplicity freed from conventions. Irony, the underlying aesthetic principle, is reinforced through the mechanization of the musical discourse, as well as through the deliberate distortion of tempo in the final movement, *Vivache*:



Fig. 10. Erik Satie – *Sonatine bureaucratique*, Part III, bars 105–112

4.7. Romanian Modernism: Paul Constantinescu (1906-1963) – *Four Fables for Piano*

The piano suite *Four Fables for Piano* by Paul Constantinescu was composed in 1932 under the careful guidance of his teacher Mihail Jora, himself a skilled practitioner of humor in his musical scores. The suite consists of four miniatures—didactic compositions intended for classroom study—that take the fable as a reliable means of expressing humor. The fable is an epic, versified literary genre in which allegorical characters convey a moral message while creating comic, humorous, or ironic situations, sometimes approaching the grotesque. In his instrumental approach, Constantinescu turns to animals which, through artistic transfiguration, generate humorous situations: 1. *The Cat with Bells*; 2. *A Rooster with His Eyes Gouged Out*; 3. *The Crow and the Fox*; 4. *The Quarrel Between Cousin Jay and Cousin Fox*.

In the last miniature, which I analyze here, the very title suggests a perspective of conflict, irony, and a satirized relationship, the two characters being addressed as “cousins.” With musical perspicacity, Constantinescu creates an imaginary dialogue between a noisy jay and a sly, agile fox. Original, suggestive, and almost pictorial musical elements underline humor, wit, and irony: from the outset, the indication *sempre staccato* is specified; small and diminished intervals, part of dissonant harmonies, outline tension; the melodic line is fragmented, with priority given to the rhythmic component; there are shifts into the upper register; the alertness and commotion of the quarrel are rendered through short sixteenth-note values, organized in a *Vivo agitato* tempo; syncopations, together with both expected and unexpected accents, suggest a permanent state of uproar and dispute, as intended by the composer. To these are added dynamic elements that shape the sonic perception of conflict—*sforzando*, crescendo and decrescendo, alternations between piano and forte—as well as agogic indications such as *poco rallentando* and *stringendo molto*:

4. s-a certat cumătra gaiță,
cu cumătra bufniță



Fig. 7. Paul Constantinescu – *The Quarrel Between Cousin Fox and Cousin Jay*, bars 1–8

The analyzed work, as well as the entire miniature cycle, remains a model in Romanian piano literature for highlighting clear nuances of comedy, which can draw attention to certain human flaws, defects, and behaviors: humor, wit, irony, and satire:



Fig. 7. Paul Constantinescu – *The Quarrel Between Cousin Fox and Cousin Jay*, bars 21–24

5. Conclusions

Piano music is not only a means of lyrical or dramatic expression, but can also function as an instrument of humor and caricature, capable of conveying images, gestures, and situations with comic effect. This characteristic is visible both in universal piano literature and in Romanian piano repertoire, where folk inspiration and musical characters play an essential role, and where composers create miniatures with playful or ironic effects. The sense of humor in music remains an artistic fluctuation between predisposition and practice, developed through social experience and through the courage to overcome failure.

The present analysis has involved the identification of musical language elements that support the aesthetics of comedy in piano literature. “The comic is, in essence, the representation of what is weakest in man; it ceases where serious suffering and bitter pain begin. It also presupposes another essential condition of the comic: the weakness in question does not lead to destruction”²².

The synthetic structure has considered the sequential organization of historical musical trends. From the musical Renaissance to twentieth-century Modernism, the landmarks of comedy are continuously expanding, in accordance with the stylistic demands of each period. If in the Renaissance the breath of the Divine almost obscured the impulse toward a pure and sincere smile, in the Baroque period humor is fully expressed and theatrical; in Classicism, social conventions still restrict humor, opening a path toward irony, particularly through opera buffa; in Romanticism, the vicissitudes of life are pushed toward the grotesque; and in musical Modernism, personal states of mind shape works defined by parody, absurdity, and social satire, always marked by intellectual refinement.

In piano literature, the aesthetics of comedy—through all its tools, including humor, laughter, and parody—can be defined as an artistic mode of expression in which reality is presented in a humorous, ironic, or satirical form, for either recreational or critical purposes. The musical language elements carefully selected by composers across all eras can evoke wit, good humor, surprise, or parody, always with expressive emotional charge, such as:

- musical motifs or themes with zigzag contours;
- imitations varied through dynamics;
- very short note values (sixteenth and thirty-second notes);
- unexpected rhythmic accents;
- syncopations inserted into the melodic design;
- sudden modulations;
- fast tempos;
- tempo fluctuations.

²² Morar, Vasile. 2003. *Aesthetics. Interpretations and Texts*. Bucharest: University of Bucharest Press, p. 230.

“By reflecting us in a caricatural manner, artistic comedy helps us become aware of the ridiculous incidents of everyday life and, as far as possible, avoid them by correcting ourselves. We need this intelligence of the comic in order to reflect upon our outward, surface-level behavior in everyday interactions. There is here a necessary impulse toward recovering the youthful beauty of our face as seen by the world.”²³

6. References

• Books

- Martin, Rod. 2007. *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. Burlington: Elsevier Academic Press.
- Morar, Vasile. 2003. *Aesthetics. Interpretations and Texts*. Bucharest: University of Bucharest Press.
- Orledge, Robert. 1990. *Satie the Composer*, p. XIV, Cambridge: University Press 978-0-521-07899-3.
- Vianu, T. 1978. *Works. Studies in Aesthetics*. Bucharest: Minerva Press.
- Wietzmann, C.F. 1893. *A History of Pianoforte-Playing and Pianoforte Literature*. New York: G. Schirmer.

• Articles / Journals

- Balint, George. “The Aesthetic View (VII),” *Revista Muzica*, no. 7, 2018.

• Electronic Sources

- Ulrich Krämer, Preface to *Sonatine bureaucratique*. Retrieved may 18, 2026, from <https://www.henle.de/en/Sonatine-bureaucratique/HN-1075>.

²³ Balint, George. 2018. *Muzica Journal*, no. 7, p. 86.