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Strange Music

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The Uncanny in Music and Staging

Introduction

Throughout the various ballad traditions we have examined, each one presents a unique way of interpretation of the text, distinct musical styles, and different ways of conveying the uncanny. Whether it be from the text or conventional chord progressions our ears have been trained to expect, we all have a preconceived notion of what we are expecting to happen next in a story, song, or opera. The music we have examined does the exact opposite and subverts what the audience is expecting, constantly keeping them on edge and changing the interpretation of the ballad.

Olympia and the Uncanny

An example of the uncanny can be seen in Olympia and the two different versions of the performances we viewed in class. In the Munich Staatsoper performance, we see Olympia sitting down while doing her very robotic movements and singing her extremely challenging vocal parts with ease while her face, particularly her eyebrows, stay completely still. In addition to this, we also have the audience in the background with animal masks and a small stage/backdrop. These various stage elements add an eerie fever dream-like feeling to the performance and when combined with the music, gives us a feeling of the uncanny. Relating this to Freud, he mentions:

“Dolls happen to be rather closely connected with infantile life. We remember that in their early games children do not distinguish at all sharply between living and lifeless objects, and that they are especially fond of treating their dolls like live people (Freud 1919: 217-56).”

Olympia’s character as a doll elicits a familiar childhood/child-like feeling from the viewer, yet her coming to life along with the audience in animal masks blurs the lines between animate and inanimate objects, humans, animals, and machines, and draws the viewer into a world where the familiar is distorted. In doing so, the impact of the performance is enhanced through a visceral engagement with themes of alienation and strangeness. Olympia’s doll-like figure questions the essence of being and construct of identity whereas the audiences’ masks could represent the various elements in the story that remain veiled. For example, Nathanael’s obsession with Olympia reflects veiled emotions and desires. His love for her represents a longing for an idealized, unattainable love that is complicated by the demands of real human relationships.

In the Powell & Pressburger performance, it is much more evident that we are looking at the doll through the lenses of the spyglass with the very bright and saturated colors. The exaggerated visual style along with the emphasis and inclusion of the spyglass prop in the scene symbolizes the distortion of reality through Nathaniel’s personal desire and obsession. For example, there is a much more noticeable focus on the character’s facial expressions and an objectification of their gaze ([Video Example @ 42:28](#)). We see that as soon as the spy glasses are put on, Olympia begins giving several gazes towards Nathaniel and they begin to engage in a silent dialogue between each other. This interaction creates the illusion of intimacy that is both compelling yet unsettling and has the viewer almost rooting for the romance between Nathaniel and Olympia, but also unnerved by the fact that she is an automaton adding to the uncanny feeling. Similar to the Munich Staatsoper performance, the audience also plays a large role in creating an eerie and strange atmosphere with their heavy use of makeup and also seemingly

doll-like figures. It is particularly interesting that Olympia has a human appearance, yet she is a doll whereas the audience, who you'd expect to be human, have more of a doll-like appearance than Olympia herself. ([Video Example @ 41:04](#))

The story of Olympia also goes against traditional ballad forms in several ways. Traditional ballads often follow a linear narrative structure, are easily accessible and relatable, and have themes rooted in human experiences. Performances of Olympia on the other hand, have a complex narrative involving obsession, illusion, deception, and the uncanny, explore deeper psychological themes, feature intricate staging and visual elements, and use the uncanny to evoke a deeper level of reflection from the viewers and unsettle their expectations.

The Role of Music in our interpretation of the Uncanny

“Freud writes to support his thesis that ‘the uncanny [*unheimlich*] is something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich/heimisch*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it”
(Gibbs 1995: 129)

Freud's definition of the uncanny is extremely evident in Olympia's mechanical aria with its heavy use of repetition. In the aria, there are many repetitions of repetitions that each serve a different purpose. It is interesting to note however, the progression of repetitions with a difference. Initially, we have a very stark and obvious repetition in which there are no changes:



Figure 1a. Measures 15–22 of Olympia's Mechanical Aria

Immediately after this four measure phrase repeats, we see our first repetition with a difference:

Figure 1b. Measures 23–28 of Olympia's Mechanical Aria

The two measures are repeated, yet the function of the harmony changes (we see E[♮] change to E[♭] and A[♮] change to A[♭]) and Olympia's part also follows these changes while still doing the same run as the previous two measures only elongated (another difference). Eventually, we see repetitions of repetitions start to occur. For example:

The image shows a musical score for Olympia's Mechanical Aria, measures 38-41. The score is divided into two sections by a large green bracket. The first section, labeled 'K (mf)' and '1st', contains measures 38-40. The second section, labeled 'echo (p)', contains measures 41-43. The score features multiple staves with various musical notations, including dynamics (mf, p, f), articulation (arco), and a vocal line with lyrics 'pi - a. Ah!'. A green box on the right side of the score contains the handwritten text: 'Parts no longer here. Thinner texture.'

Figure 2a. Measures 38–41 of Olympia's Mechanical Aria

Here, we see two measures being repeated with the exact same notes, but there is also some thinning of texture and quieter dynamic markings to *simulate* echoes. The echoes are mechanically written into the music instead of letting the reverb and natural acoustics of concert

spaces occur. The role of these artificial echos could be to try and draw the audience into the magical and surreal world of the opera while making Olympia seem more expressive and more human-like. Simultaneously, these echos could also serve the opposite purpose, disenchanting the audience and making them more aware of Olympia's artificiality. Another instance of this can be seen here:

The image shows a musical score for measures 42-45 of Olympia's Mechanical Aria. The score is written for voice and piano. The voice part is in the upper staves, and the piano accompaniment is in the lower staves. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The time signature is 4/4. The score includes dynamic markings such as *f* (forte) and *p* (piano), and performance instructions like *suivez.* (follow), *rall.* (ritardando), and *rit.* (ritardando). Handwritten annotations in purple ink are present: "echo" is written above the first measure, and "elongation" is written above the second measure. A large purple bracket spans across measures 42 and 43. A yellow highlight is placed under the first measure. The score is numbered 150 at the top left and 40 at the bottom left.

Figure 2b. Measures 42–45 of Olympia’s Mechanical Aria

There are also instances where we have repetition occurring with slight differences of notes or some measures cut out changing the length of the phrase, yet keeping some of the same motifs or intervals only transposing the previous phrase. For example:

Handwritten blue annotations on the score include:

- E D# D# Gb* (circled in blue)
- Gb introduced* (with an arrow pointing to the Contrabasso staff)

The score shows various instruments and voices. Measures 50-56 are marked with red 'X's, indicating they are cut out. The lyrics are: "la la chanson gen til le, La chanson d'Olym pi a, d'Olym pi C'est la chan son d'O - lym - pi - a, La chan son d'O - lym - pi C'est la chan son d'O - lym - pi - a, La chan son d'O - lym - pi".

Figure 3a. Measures 50–56 of Olympia’s Mechanical Aria

Here, we have a four bar phrase that is then repeated with the second measure cut out, transposed a half step lower for part of it, and we see the introduction of a Gb in the contrabass (also a half step lower than the previous part) creating a destabilizing, unfamiliar sound. However, Olympia’s lyrics and rhythm are the exact same and give the audience something familiar to

anchor to, yet her part is *also* adhering to this unfamiliar sound in being transposed a half step lower for a portion of this repetition.

A general overview of these repetitions can be seen in the figure below:

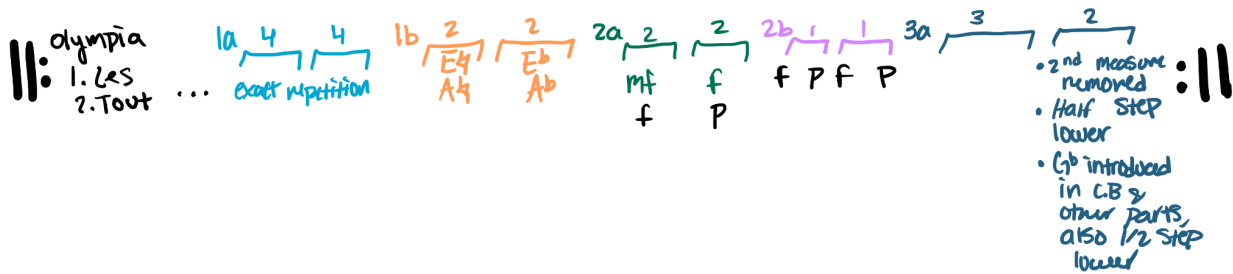


Figure 4. General Overview of Repetitions in Olympia's Mechanical Aria in the Context of These Examples

Overall, the repetitions in the aria begin conservative in changes made starting off with very obvious repetitive phrases. In doing so, the listener is expecting the aria to be a series of stark repetitions, however as the aria progresses, small yet important changes begin to occur in the music creating a sense of unease and unfamiliarity. As these small changes are made, other components remain the same which lend themselves to the stark repetitions that the listener is expecting, creating a sense of familiarity and grounding. It is this very idea of repetition creating familiarity and the familiarity repeating itself only to become unfamiliar that Freud defines as uncanny. In other words, the music itself is uncanny and thus Olympia as a character is uncanny for the reasons mentioned above, but also in her singing and musical characteristics alone.

In conclusion, the exploration of the uncanny in music and staging, particularly through the lens of the Olympia performances, illuminates the profound capacity of the arts to engage with complex themes and evoke deep emotional responses. The juxtaposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar, as Freud defines the uncanny, is manifested in both the music and visual elements

of these performances. Through the unsettling, yet fascinating character of Olympia, the audience is drawn into the narrative, finding themselves conflicted on how to feel and challenging the perceptions of identity, reality, and emotion going against the audience's expectations.

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