

Thematic Resonance in Franz Anton Hoffmeister's D Major Viola Concerto

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Thematic resonance is a term used by writers to refer to literary techniques, such as repetition, symbolism, and motifs, that support the theme in some meaningful way. Some musicologists have used the term in a different way, referring to melodies that resonate in our minds because they remind us of melodies we have heard elsewhere. In Hoffmeister's day, composers were well aware of this phenomenon and frequently quoted popular melodies of other composers. Such "imitation" was not then considered plagiarism, but rather "the sincerest [form] of flattery," to quote Charles Caleb Colton, an eccentric English cleric fond of partridge-shooting, who was born during Hoffmeister's lifetime.

One particularly striking example of Hoffmeister's capitalizing on thematic resonance is found in the second theme of the first movement of his Concerto in D Major for Viola and Orchestra. Here is the theme, as Hoffmeister wrote it:



And here is the source melody, from the aria "Devo implorarti, per favore, non più rigatoni!" ("I must implore you, please, no more rigatoni!"), the highlight of Francesco Antonio Spumoni's outrageously popular half-act (and according to some critics, half-assed) opera, *Che cosa è per dessert? (What's for dessert?)*:

A musical score for a single staff in D major (two sharps). The melody begins with a quarter note G4, followed by a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The next measure contains a triplet of eighth notes: C5, D5, and E5. This is followed by a quarter note D5, a quarter note C5, and a quarter note B4. The final measure contains a quarter note A4, a quarter note G4, and a quarter note F#4.

De-vo im-plo - rar-ti, per fa-vo-re, non più ri-ga - to - ni! Man-gia-mo i dol-ci, i dol-ci, a - des - so!

Hoffmeister has quoted Spumoni's melody note for note, and while not word for word, many listeners of his day would likely have sung, or at least been able to sing, both words and melody along with the viola soloist as he or she played this beloved aria. Who could fail to fall in love with an aria that goes on to demand, "Let's eat sweets, sweets, right now!"?

The widespread popularity of this aria would have been reason enough (or resonance enough) for Hoffmeister to have chosen to quote it. Another reason might have been that the aria was in the same key as his concerto's second theme would need to be, thus relieving him of the burdensome task of transposing it from another key (easy to do on a computer, not so easy using a quill pen and a biological brain). He could also have felt relieved of any fear of offending someone who might have perfect pitch and object to hearing the melody in the wrong key. Historical records have shown audiences erupting in near riot upon hearing a familiar aria performed in any key other than the original, although they have seemed relatively unaffected by hearing it sung out of tune, as both singers and opera fanatics have always (perhaps wisely?) focused more on expression than on mere accuracy!

There has been some speculation with regard to other factors that could have influenced Hoffmeister's choice. It is difficult to overlook the fact that Franz Anton Hoffmeister and Francesco Antonio Spumoni had the same first and middle names in their respective languages. Surely this coincidence would not have been lost on well-informed audiences. Furthermore, as Spumoni's reputation as an opera composer far outshone Hoffmeister's lowly stature as a composer of something as trivial as a viola concerto, quoting the great *maestro compositore italiano* would (and surely did) enhance Hoffmeister's renown, even giving his concerto a chance at being regarded worthy of performance by anyone other than students not yet sufficiently advanced to perform any of the truly great viola concertos that had not yet been composed.

Nor can Spumoni's last name itself be overlooked as having attracted Hoffmeister to this most famous example of the "dessert aria" genre. Spumoni is the name of a molded gelato (a lower-fat Italian form of ice cream) reported to have been very popular in Vienna during the time Hoffmeister lived and worked there (and it remains popular to this day, according to our extensive research on this delicious topic). This dessert's historical connection to Vienna is reflected (though not authenticated) in the names of such establishments as the VIENNA gelateria, located in remote Neviano, Italy, and although some sources suggest that true Italian gelato did not find its way to Vienna until 1885, it could have been known earlier by different names in the inscrutable Viennese dialect, and the origin of its recipe a closely guarded secret.

Did Hoffmeister and Spumoni (the composer) actually know each other? We know that Hoffmeister, both a composer and a music publisher, was friends with, and published works of, many of the important composers of his time, among them Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Clementi, and Wanhal. Although Spumoni's name does not appear in Hoffmeister's catalog (and it cannot be considered relevant that traces of spumoni ice cream have been detected on some of Hoffmeister's manuscripts), there is circumstantial evidence that the two composers could have met. Spumoni visited Vienna on several occasions, including his attendance at the Viennese premiere of his celebrated *Che cosa è per dessert?* in May of 1792. (The opera's tremendous success was eclipsed only partially by the shocking news that Kentucky had separated from Virginia to become the fifteenth state in the United States of America.) Spumoni, in his diary, writes at length of having enjoyed frequent visits to the Café Demel (K. und K. Demel Hofzuckerbäckerei), a coffee house that opened in 1786 on Vienna's Michaelerplatz and is still in business there today. Unfortunately Spumoni writes only about the coffee and the many delicious sweets, not about anyone with whom he might have shared these delights (and he does not mention Kentucky at all). We know also that Hoffmeister was a regular at Demel's, but then, who wasn't, provided they were able to afford such luxuries?

Regardless of any personal connection between the two composers, or lack thereof, Signor Spumoni surely deserves credit for having penned music that must have played a significant role in elevating Herr Hoffmeister to the rank of a major composer of his time and certainly inspired him in the course of composing a viola concerto that is today, over two hundred years later, in the repertoire not only of students but of a greater number of artist performers than Hoffmeister could ever have imagined. Hoffmeister, for his part, is to be appreciated for having preserved a lovely melody from an opera that is, perhaps but not necessarily unfortunately, totally forgotten and no longer performed.