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Music and Motion: Kamila Valieva's Interpretation of Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel*

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Abstract

According to a musical theory of meaning called resemblance theory, music expresses emotions by sparking a resemblance between musical features and human states of mind. The musical elements of Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel* create an atmosphere of calmness and stability. However, the choreography of Kamila Valieva's figure skating program to *Spiegel im Spiegel* features overabundant choreographic movements that glut the music's delicate simplicity. Nevertheless, Valieva's program was scored highly in international competition. Were judges better informed of the intrinsic relationship between musical features and perceived emotions in listeners, they might be better equipped to judge musical interpretation through the congruence of choreographic elements and the character of musical selections. A greater knowledge of resemblance theory within the elite figure skating circuit would promote fairer scores and a more equitable competitive environment.

Keywords: Figure Skating, Arvo Pärt, *Spiegel im Spiegel*, Resemblance Theory, Choreography

To many casual viewers, the sport of figure skating is as enigmatic as it is beautiful. Who has not wondered if its evaluations are objective when glancing at the judges' scores? Perhaps the impact of subjectivity will never be overcome in figure skating; in fact, according to skating's International Judging System (IJS), a subjective element can never be removed ("Scoring System"). But it may be possible, or so I shall argue here, to use a musical theory of meaning called resemblance theory to make at least one dimension of judging more systematic.

Resemblance theory claims that the expressive power of music depends on a resemblance between its elements and particular states of mind. Elements of music include tempo, volume, melodic range, rhythm, and articulation. Thus, resemblance theory suggests that the most appropriate way of responding to music in dance (here, figure skating) is to imitate or "resemble" the expressive elements of a piece. This suggestion is supported by the very standards of judging established by the International Skating Union (ISU), an international governing body that oversees figure skating judging. The ISU's standards for judging Performance Component Scores under the IJS system dictate that figure skaters' interpretation must represent "the personal, creative, and genuine translation of the rhythm, character, and content of music to movement on ice" ("Program Components"). One such musical work interpreted by elite figure skaters, Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel*, is characterized by restraint, calmness, and stability. When performed by the Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva, however, the expressive power of *Spiegel im Spiegel* is countered by an overabundance of rapid, extraneous choreographic movements. Valieva's choreography stands in active defiance of not only the bodily tendency to align with emotions perceived in music but also the acknowledged standards of the judges. The effect of this disjunction between choreography and music creates a flawed skating performance.

Resemblance theory can help us recognize and defend this claim.

Emotions in Music

According to a theory of musical perception called resemblance theory, listeners process music in the context of extra-musical stimuli known as “referential” meaning. Patrik Juslin describes this concept in his book *Musical Emotions Explained: Unlocking the Secrets of Musical Affect*. At first, he disproves musical “absolutists” who believe that music only refers to itself and its pattern of notes instead of any extra-musical phenomena (Juslin 65). Juslin argues that humans do not listen to music as a mere system of patterns; instead, listeners associate musical elements with emotions and real-life experiences. “Hearing music in absolute terms—as pure note patterns—would require ... no previous experience,” Juslin writes, “[or] personal associations and memories” (Juslin 68). Thus, for Juslin, “a more plausible view is that music listening is *always* referential,” that is, referring to extra-musical phenomena such as emotions (Juslin 68; emphasis added). Whether or not one accepts Juslin’s view that music is always referential, his work undoubtedly supports the basic concept of resemblance theory. Paul Boghossian solidifies this idea by defining resemblance theory as “the expressive power of a piece of music depend[ing] on a resemblance between that piece and particular states of mind” (Boghossian 4). It is obvious that music has the ability to transmit extra-musical meaning in the form of emotion, whether *resembling* or *referring to* extra-musical phenomena.

Because of the referential power of music, listeners are inclined to hear music as expressive of emotions and can label these emotions consistently. Juslin notes that “emotions are salient in most listeners’ perception of music” (Juslin 71). This statement is supported by empirical evidence: in a survey conducted by Juslin and Petri Laukka in 2004, 100 percent of

listeners responded that music expresses emotions, as did 99 percent of expert musicians polled by Erik Lindström, Juslin, Roberto Bresin, and Aaron Williamson in 2003 (Juslin 68-69). Additionally, surveyed listeners can rate emotional expression in music with consistency and accuracy: not only were ratings systematic and reliable, they could “even be predicted with reasonable accuracy based on various features of the music” (Juslin 71). Burger et al. make a similar observation, surmising from five distinct studies that “listeners are able to perceive emotional content in music” (Burger et al. 518). Likewise, Juslin and Lindström’s 2010 research “confirm[ed] empirically based predictions from previous *post hoc* analyses of music regarding the causal relationships between musical features and perceived emotions,” indicating that “judgments of emotional expression in music are quite reliable” (Juslin and Lindström 350). Thus, empirical evidence supports the claim that listeners are able to accurately perceive emotions expressed in music.

In order to maximize this perceptive ability of listeners, composers express emotions through certain musical features. This raises the problem of communication accuracy, “the extent to which listeners are able to correctly infer or recognize the emotion that the composer or performer intends to express” (Juslin 82). A 1992 study by William Thompson and Brent Robitaille is a fascinating example of testing communication accuracy. The researchers asked five musicians to compose short melodies that express joy, sorrow, excitement, dullness, anger, or peace. These melodies were subsequently played for fourteen listeners on a computer sequencer (Thompson and Robitaille 82-83). Each listener successfully recognized the intended emotion, leading Thompson and Robitaille to conclude that “composers are capable of communicating distinct and definable emotional qualities to listeners through the medium of music” (Thompson

and Robitaille 88). Another study by Juslin and Lindström corroborates this conclusion, indicating that composers' musical "features were involved in each emotional expression" (Juslin and Lindström 352). Thus, composers can use musical elements to convey emotions which are then consistently and accurately perceived.

Composers use specific musical gestures such as tempo and rhythm to shape the emotions of a piece. A different study by Alf Gabrielsson and Lindström assessed how variations in tempo, melodic range, rhythm, articulation, volume, and timbre alter perceptions of emotional expression. For instance, a slow tempo corresponds to "calmness/serenity, peace, dignity/solemnity, tenderness, and longing" (Gabrielsson). The researchers determined that tempo and volume were the most important features in emotional perception, but perceived expression "is a function of many factors which may work in additive or interactive ways" (Gabrielsson). Thus, composers can harness various musical gestures to elucidate emotions which are consistently, predictably, and correctly perceived by listeners. Having established this relationship between elements of music and emotions, we can examine the musical features of *Spiegel im Spiegel* to determine the emotions its composer seeks to express.

Pärt and *Spiegel im Spiegel*

Composer Arvo Pärt uses the aforementioned musical features to cultivate an atmosphere of calmness and restraint in his work *Spiegel im Spiegel*. Disillusioned by the pressures on Soviet bloc musicians to avoid American avant-garde compositional styles, Pärt turned to medieval and Renaissance music for inspiration. Influenced by the Russian Orthodox traditions of bell ringing and meditative prayer, he pioneered his famous tintinnabuli style in the 1970s (Heaney 367, Cizmic 47). Tintinnabuli music features harmonious, stripped-down

compositions with sequences of notes that step upwards or downwards in simple patterns before overlapping into nuanced musical conversations. As the Arvo Pärt Centre writes, tintinnabuli music includes “simple rhythm and often gradually progressing melodies and triadic, so-called tintinnabuli voices [which] are integrated into the complicated art of polyphony, expressing the composer’s special relationship to silence” (“Biography – Arvo Pärt Centre”). *Spiegel im Spiegel*, composed in 1978, is one of Pärt’s best known tintinnabuli works (“Arvo Pärt Centre, ‘Spiegel Im Spiegel’”).

Both Pärt and his critics recognize the restrained, comforting qualities of *Spiegel im Spiegel*’s melody. In reference to the title of the piece, which translates as *Mirror (or Mirrors) in the Mirror*, each ascending melodic line is followed by a “mirrored” descending phrase. Every subsequent phrase adds an additional note to the melody, generating an endless continuum (“Arvo Pärt Centre, ‘Spiegel Im Spiegel’”). Maeve Heaney describes the piece’s opening as creating “‘a static state of being’ underlining the experience of time and endurance” (Heaney 367). Maria Cizmic also recognizes the stable qualities of *Spiegel im Spiegel*, writing that “the systematic, predictable changes brought about in each cycle of *Spiegel im Spiegel* constitute a perpetual change so regularized that it sounds like stasis” (Cizmic 71). Cizmic lists the qualities of tintinnabuli compositions that create a peaceful, comfortable musical atmosphere: repetition, change, and a high musical range (Cizmic 75).

If tempo and loudness are chief among the emotion-producing factors of music, as Gabrielsson and Lindström postulate, then the key emotions engendered by *Spiegel im Spiegel* should be “calmness/serenity, peace, dignity/solemnity, tenderness, [and] longing” (Gabrielsson). *Spiegel im Spiegel* features a narrow melodic range, a smooth rhythm, and *legato*

articulation. According to Gabrielsson and Lindström, a narrow melodic range corresponds to a sad, dignified, tranquil, and delicate atmosphere. A regular smooth rhythm indicates “dignity, majesty, and peacefulness” (Gabrielsson). *Legato* articulation corresponds to tenderness, solemnity, and longing. Pärt himself commented on the restrained form of *Spiegel im Spiegel*, noting that the piece must be performed with the utmost clarity and strictness: “everything redundant must be left aside. Just like the composer has to reduce his ego when writing the music, the musician too must put his ego aside when performing the piece” (“Arvo Pärt Centre, ‘Spiegel Im Spiegel’”). The effect of these stylistic choices is confirmed by Pärt’s work. Kaire Maimets-Volt’s reflection on tintinnabuli “explicitly suggests that there is a remarkable convergence between what the composer intended and its listeners perceive or experience,” much like Juslin and Lindström previously established (Heaney 372).

Kamila Valieva’s Performance

During the 2019-2020 skating season, the Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva used *Spiegel im Spiegel* for the first half of her short program music. However, her movements do not align with the emotions represented in Pärt’s work. Constructed by the Russian choreographer Daniil Gleikhengauz and coach Eteri Tutberidze, Valieva’s program makes an overabundant use of transitions and choreographic movements that glut the delicate simplicity of *Spiegel im Spiegel* with extraneous motion (“International Skating Union, ‘Kamila Valieva’”). This creates a rift between musical intention and choreographic performance that greatly diminishes the impact of her program.

In particular, Valieva’s choreography flouts the body’s natural tendency to align with emotions portrayed in music (Burger et al. 519). Birgitta Burger draws attention to the research

of Marc Leman, who “suggests that corporeal articulations [of music, i.e. dance] could be influenced by three (coexisting) components or concepts: Synchronization, Embodied Attuning, and Empathy” (Burger et al. 520). The latter two concepts, Embodied Attuning and Empathy, are particularly important for figure skating. Embodied Attuning describes how humans link their movements to musical features like melody, harmony, rhythm, tonality, and timbre—the same features identified by Gabrielsson and Lindström. Empathy is “the component that links music, or rather musical features, with expressivity and emotions ... the listener feels and identifies with the emotions expressed in the music and imitates and reflects them by using body movement” (Burger et al. 520). In this manner, a figure skater attuned to Leman’s conception of Empathy would link the expressive musical features of their skating music with appropriate and congruous bodily movements, matching music with motion.

However, the disjunction between the slow unfolding of *Spiegel im Spiegel* and Valieva’s rapid choreography demonstrates that the skater does not incorporate Leman’s concept of Empathy in her performance. According to the ISU’s scoring guidelines, skaters must perform a genuine translation of the rhythm and character of their music to earn high Interpretation scores. Additionally, programs must “express the music’s character/feeling and rhythm” (“Program Components”). However, in scarcely over a minute of minimal musical development, Valieva performs seven leg kicks, two micro-Ina Bauers, and one micro-spiral between three skating elements: a triple loop, a double axel, and a flying sit spin.¹ These elements and choreographic motions eclipse the slow tempo and softness of *Spiegel im Spiegel*, cluttering the delicate

¹ An Ina Bauer is a choreographic element where the skater skates on two parallel blades with one foot on the forward edge and one foot on a different backwards edge, typically held for dramatic effect over an extended period. The triple loop and double axel are both types of jumps.

simplicity of the music with extraneous, incongruous bodily movement. Valieva's mismatched choreography reveals that her coaching team understands neither the character nor the emotions expressed in Pärt's piece, thus failing Leman's definition of Empathy ("Program Components"; Burger et al. 519).

The failure of Valieva's program arises from the greater failure of Daniil Gleikhengauz and Eteri Tutberidze to provide a genuine translation of *Spiegel im Spiegel's* emotional content. Translation is not chief among the priorities of Valieva's coaching team, however. Because complex (and sometimes musically incongruous) transitions in and out of skating elements are rewarded with a higher Transitions mark in Performance Component Scores, Gleikhengauz and Tutberidze stuff their skaters' choreographies with an overabundance of movement to increase Transitions scores ("Program Components"). But in doing so, they sacrifice appropriate musical interpretation. If perceived emotions do lend themselves to motion, as Leman and Burger suggest, then Gleikhengauz and Tutberidze's incongruous choreographic choices are all the more inappropriate because they subvert the body's natural response to musical features.

Moreover, Valieva's program ignores the states of mind presented in *Spiegel im Spiegel* and thus fails to embrace the power of music to express emotions as seen in resemblance theory. In Valieva's frenzied program, the transcendence, solemnity, and calmness of Pärt's work are crowded out by unrelated movements. The philosopher Roger Scruton's description of dance in *Music as an Art* applies to figure skating choreography as well, highlighting the loss of quality that results from mismatched choreographic choices. He writes, "[T]here is a great difference between the dancer who understands the music to which he or she is dancing and the dancer who merely dances along with it. Understanding involves translating the music into gestures that

are like translations of its inner movement” (Scruton 65). Here, Scruton references what the International Skating Union defines as “Interpretation of the Music,” particularly the ability of a skater to capture the character of a piece of music. The solemn, peaceful “inner movement” of *Spiegel im Spiegel* is nowhere to be found in Gleikhengauz and Tutberidze’s choreography, creating negative implications for the quality of the program.

However, Valieva’s international results do not reflect her flawed skating performance. She is the current Junior Grand Prix Final and Junior World Champion and holds the junior world record for the free skate and combined total score (“Free Skating Ladies”; “Total Ladies”). During the Junior Grand Prix series, this decorated skater earned a mean “Interpretation of the Music” mark of 7.82 at the 2019 Junior Grand Prix de Courchevel, 8.00 at the 2019 Junior Grand Prix in Chelyabinsk, and 7.75 at the 2019 Junior Grand Prix Final (“JGP Grand Prix de Courchevel”; “JGP RUS”; “Grand Prix of Figure Skating Final”). At the 2020 Junior World Figure Skating Championships, Valieva was awarded a score of 8.25 in Interpretation (“World Junior Figure Skating Championships”). Her average Interpretation mark for the season was 7.955. ISU guidelines regard a performance earning from 7.00-7.75 in Interpretation as “Good” and a score from 8.00-8.75 as “Very Good” (“Program Components”). Nevertheless, such high marks in Performance Component Scores are unjustified given that Valieva’s program fails to meet basic requirements for Interpretation under the IJS system. Were international judges more aware of the intersection between resemblance theory and the way the IJS judges Performance Component Scores, perhaps they would more accurately reward better-interpreted programs in the elite figure skating circuit.

Conclusion

According to resemblance theory, music expresses emotion by sparking a resemblance between the piece and human states of mind. Composers create expressions that coordinate with the body's natural inclination to move. The example composition of Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel* creates an atmosphere of restraint, calmness, and stability. However, Kamila Valieva's program features a flurry of disjointed movements that do not align with the character of Pärt's work. Not only does she fail to provide a genuine translation of the emotions of *Spiegel im Spiegel* due to her choreographer's disregard for the peace and stability expressed in Pärt's work, but her performance obfuscates the emotional expression of the piece by muddying its interpretation with a frenzy of movement. The schism between the music and the skater and the subsequent flouting of resemblance theory diminishes the effect of Valieva's performance, rendering it an inferior program. Were international judges better informed of the intrinsic relationship between musical features and perceived emotions in listeners, they might be better equipped to judge musical interpretation through the congruence of choreographic elements and the character of musical selections. A greater knowledge of resemblance theory within the elite figure skating circuit would promote fairer scores and a more equitable competitive environment.

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