Insulting Music

A Lexicon of Insult in Music

Lily E. Hirsch

palgrave
macmillan

Insulting Music

Lily E. Hirsch

Insulting Music

A Lexicon of Insult in Music

palgrave
macmillan

Lily E. Hirsch
Bakersfield, CA, USA

ISBN 978-3-031-16465-1 ISBN 978-3-031-16466-8 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16466-8

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Acknowledgments

For participating in an online insult-song-brainstorm session, I am happy to acknowledge many of my friends and family: James Roelofs, Cyndi Roelofs, Alec Grossman, Seth Grossman, Lynne Grossman, Dustin Stewart, Melissa Stewart, Dylan Bartley, Vanessa Ottum, Caroline Mallonee, Monica Ambala, Carol Landau Mendoza, Suzanne Meschter McDowell, Lynn Tramonte, Heather Ramsey-Kristine, Ysabel Sarte, Cori Hall, Carl Schimmel, Nolan Jahn, and Wesley Sims. You guys sure know your insults. Should I be concerned?

A special thanks to Bryan Gilliam as well. He has been a link for me between my graduate experience in music and research experiments since. I so appreciate his continued support. I would also like to express my appreciation for those who engaged in helpful conversations and correspondences along the way: Stephen Phillips, Daniel Goldmark, James Loeffler, Josh Kuhn, Robert Elias, Zev Feldman, Evan Rapport, Josh Ottum, Christina Gier, Christine Wilkie Bohlman, Neda Erfanian, Sarah Hebeler, and Margaret Jephson. I want to highlight Robert Elias in particular for encouraging an early version of the last chapter, which was originally written in response to a symposium he organized under the auspices of the OREL Foundation. And, in that respect, I want to mention Michael Tan, who helped me develop ideas related to Chap. 9—ideas that mushroomed into a larger project about the toxic labeling of women in music, published with Rowman & Littlefield.

I am further indebted to Robert Fink, who was especially helpful in his insightful response to an early draft of this book, and to Robin James, an editor and scholar who has an intuitive and expansive grasp of the "weird"

in music, including projects with their own very unique vibe. I am so happy I got a chance to work with her and the whole team at Palgrave Macmillan.

Finally, I am always most grateful for my sparring partner in life, Austin Roelofs—a man who appreciates the fine art of insult. With him, I have found a way to have it all. And that "all" of course includes my children, Elliana and Grant. I am thankful Elliana and Grant, still small, have not yet learned many of the offensive words and strategies outlined in this book. Hopefully, I will now have a certain sympathy when they do.

Author's Note

This book has been the hardest of all my projects to complete. Part of the issue is the sheer vastness of the topic: music and insult. What makes the cut, what doesn't, when this topic is clearly underexplored and yet huge, buried in the past while ever-expanding in the present? Obviously, any book on the topic must then be necessarily incomplete, a starting point and first exploration of an area of music both new and ridiculously old.

Another difficulty lies in the insults themselves. Insults can be funny, but they can also of course be cruel and even harmful. They are designed to give offense. This book cites many examples of insult that I of course didn't author, create, or condone, but in citing them I do in some ways give these insults a platform. I give them breath in order to discuss and understand how they work. I hope that my analysis of the operation of any insult does not come across as dismissive or unfeeling. If that is the case, I am sincerely sorry. Please know that this exploration and analysis of insult is in no way an endorsement of the insults themselves but instead a wake-up call. Maybe even a call to action.

Throughout my career, I have been concerned about categories in music—how music can be used to define and then join or separate people. That focus no doubt relates to my own feelings of separation, as someone in between worlds—a Jew who is not practicing, a full-time professor who decided to leave, and a mother who still wants to matter professionally. I cannot speak with authority about the effects of all of the insults recorded in this book, given my own limited perspective. But I do try to provide

enough analysis that we can begin to see how various kinds of insults function in this way—uniting and dividing—and how important it is for us to have many more conversations about this topic. I sincerely hope that this book will be the start of such conversations—among different people with very different perspectives and approaches.

Contents

About the Author

Lily E. Hirsch is a musicologist, book reviews editor for the *Journal of Musicological Research*, and visiting scholar at California State University, Bakersfield. She studied music history as an undergraduate at the University of the Pacific and holds a PhD in musicology from Duke University. She then taught as Assistant Professor of Music at Cleveland State University.

She is the author of the books *A Jewish Orchestra in Nazi Germany: Musical Politics and the Berlin Jewish Culture League* (2010), *Music in American Crime Prevention and Punishment* (2012), *Anneliese Landau's Life in Music: Nazi Germany to Émigré California* (2019), *Weird Al: Seriously* (2020, expanded edition in 2022), *Can't Stop the Grrrls: Confronting Sexist Labels in Music from Ariana Grande to Yoko Ono* (2023), and, as co-editor, *Dislocated Memories: Jews, Music, and Postwar German Culture* (2014), winner of the American Musicological Society's Ruth A. Solie Award. In addition to chapters in books like *You Shook Me All Campaign Long* and the *Cambridge Companion to Jewish Music*, she has also published articles in musicological journals as well as newspapers and online sites, including the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, and *A Women's Thing*.

CHAPTER 1

Defining the Lexicon

In a 1907 review of the composer Richard Strauss' opera *Salomé*, H. E. Krehbiel reacted with horror to "the moral stench with which Richard Strauss fills the nostrils of humanity and makes us retch." The composer, conductor, and music critic Nicolas Slonimsky cites this critical assault as one of his favorites. And he had many from which to choose, all recorded for posterity in an unusual book, his 1953 encyclopedia of musical insults, entitled *Lexicon of Musical Invective: Critical Assaults on Composers Since Beethoven's Time*.[1] One of the special features of the work is an index of invectives, ordered alphabetically. Some of these arranged insults are flagrantly racist and sexist. Coupled together, I had a visceral reaction of revulsion to our musical past. But I was also amused in some ways by Slonimsky and the very idea of organizing in this way the harsh, insulting language used to discuss and criticize musicians and their music. And it got me thinking: what is the relationship between music and insult? And just how pervasive is the tie?

Insulting Music assembles its own kind of lexicon, this time of insult in and around music, to demonstrate just how real, wide-ranging, and impactful the overlap between music and insult really is. Indeed, I will suggest that insult is fundamental to our engagement with music in every context of Western musical contact. There is insult in the music we hear, how we express our musical preferences, as well as our reactions to settings and sites of music and music making. Anytime I talk about this book, people offer up additional examples of musical insult or insulting musical

L. E. Hirsch, *Insulting Music*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16466-8_1

events. "You have to include X song; it's the ultimate insult," or "Remember when singer X did Y; that has to be one of the most offensive acts in music's history." These "must-include" examples are never the same. They are rarely even in the same orbit: garbage truck jingles to lip-sync fails, bitter German *Lieder* to Bob Dylan going electric. With new instances of the connection between music and insult arising every day, where and how do I even draw the line, yet alone some defining lines?

At first blush, there does seem one limit: insulting experiences in and around music often involve interactions with other people, how we talk with others about music or how we read someone else's writing about music, and how we respond to certain musical environments and occasions with groups of people. But there can also be insult in more personal moments of music. Listening alone, someone might think, I love this music, and I am so much cooler than so-and-so who probably doesn't even know who this singer is. Even here, though, there is social contact, at least in one person's thinking about music.

As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and other music scholars have shown, we position ourselves and establish categories for others through music, whether in direct interaction with other people or in our own reflections concerning the world around us. That sorting system can be positive—we like music, we like others who like our music, we enjoy the catharsis and calm of listening and singing, we like music in certain settings, and so on. But just as often, it's negative—we don't like music, we don't like others who don't like our music, etc.

Insult is similarly a social, positioning move. Insult is an assertion (often audible but not always) of dominance at the expense of another, one that puts the insulter above the insulted in various ways and to various effects. As author Thomas Conley writes, in the book *Toward a Rhetoric of Insult*, insult is "an expression of a severely negative opinion of a person or group in order to subvert their positive self-regard and esteem."[2] In short, the purpose of insult "is to assert or assume dominance."[3] In its Latin origins, the dominance of insult or *insultare* is physical—a violent attack—as in "to assail, to make a sudden leap upon" (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). And that corporeal significance remains in certain uses of the term, especially medical contexts: an insult is a bodily injury.[4]

Insult then is a noun and a verb that marks a positioning move—a person, place, or thing above and at the expense of another—with shame, threat, and accusation overlapping sets. And it is defined as such based on intention or perception, the act or the effect. As a signal of insult, that

effect is surprisingly slippery, a lot like music. For one, it involves more than just the insulter and the insulted. Indeed, insult can impact witnesses as well, contributing to one-on-one assault but also mass violence, and on a rather wide scale. Insult can, at the same time, have positive effects, as a part of social bonding, for instance. In all of these ways, insult can clearly be so much more than a simple communication of disdain. It can also be quite evocative. Shakespeare, for one, seemed to know that. In *Coriolanus*, Menenius Agrippa pronounces: "The tartness of his face sours ripe grapes." It's a rich insult packing a descriptive and creative punch. As psychologist Timothy Jay argues, insult is often "emotionally arousing," adding a certain "spice" to linguistic expression.[5] But even insult at its worst has value. As Elliot Turiel writes, in *Conflict, Contradiction, and the Contrarian Element in Moral Development and Education*, opposition, resistance, and subversion are integral to our social and moral development.[6] Conflict, in insult and elsewhere, can be opportunities for personal and group growth, a chance to assess the negative and grow beyond it. These various roles of insult can converge, with humor and harm potentially working simultaneously. As Luvell Anderson writes, in *The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language*, "We identify a wide range of events and actions as insulting." And here the adjective "insulting" labels the effect or varied effects of insult.

Still, insult is rarely the subject of in-depth examination. As Conley explains, "insult or insulting behavior remains one of the most overlooked (although not unnoticed) and under examined features of everyday social interaction." That remains true today, despite a marked uptick in highly visible (often Twitter-fueled and political) exchanges of such abuse. And that neglect extends to the musical realm. While Conley, in his exploration of insult, mentions street ditties, Paul Perron, in an edited volume on invective, omits music entirely, despite a wide-ranging listing of sites of aggressive language, including "myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, comedy, mime, painting, stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news items and conversation."[7] While some music books implicitly deal with insult (e.g., when they cover the offensive histories of Blackface or discrimination leveled at female composers), the focus is not explicit, despite the centrality of insult in these contexts and in music more generally.

In *Insulting Music*, I make clear the ubiquity of music and insult's remarkable bond. But I also ask several open-ended questions: How far does this connection go? How many experiences in and around music

entail insult? Are they mostly social encounters? Is insult a primary element in the social aspect of music more generally? Destructive contexts of musical punishment seem obvious potential sites of musical insult. But do musical experiences that appear completely positive include insult too, like concerts devoted to music recovered from the Nazi era or the work of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, a bridge between Israelis and Palestinians, founded by conductor and pianist Daniel Barenboim and public intellectual Edward Said? Even in such seemingly noble contexts, there can be the privileging of a national repertoire at the expense of other music and other people, the resurrection of insulting Third Reich labels like "degenerate," or an offensive exploitation of trauma in concert funding and framing. With that, this book goes even further, asking what experiences in and around music do not somehow intertwine insult? Could insult be central to our experience of music?

To explore these questions, this book is divided into three parts. Part I is concerned with insults in music, often songs with insult, and then their effect and repercussions. Part II, focusing on how we insult music, follows a similar arc, bringing to light various examples of insult directed at music and musicians, and then the fallout. The final section, Part III, explores insults that involve musical terms and how we insult various people and places through the language of music, at times using the term music itself. Each chapter unfolds with examples of musical insult and then an exploration of the consequences.

Throughout, there are many different types of insults involving music as well as varied means of their delivery, sometimes in a single insult. A brief taxonomy is then useful. In *delivery* or packaging, insults with music may be verbal or nonverbal, in lyrics or the musical notes themselves. They may also be a form of action or inaction, perhaps the omission of an expected act deemed polite or necessary. As Jerome Neu explains, in *Sticks and Stones: The Philosophy of Insults*, an insult is a violation or "disruption of expectations," especially around accepted behavior.

Insults in music may further be divided by interpretation and ease of identification. Some insults are easily *marked* as such by certain words, images, sounds, or actions widely accepted as insulting, such as racial slurs, gendered put-downs, obscenities, or language and behavior considered blasphemous.[8] Other insults are less obvious, *unmarked*, meaning dependent entirely on perception, intention, and contextual consideration. Insult and music together may also have a second layer of such interpretation, which I term *layered* insults. This subcategory of insult may be

further divided into humorous insult, revolutionary insult, threatening insult, and shaming insult. All four types depend on a complicated negotiation between several agents—those who might intend or perceive something as both insulting and funny, insulting and revolutionary (often in protest), insulting and threatening, or insulting and shaming. This combination of aims and effects in insult point toward a system of qualitative ordering in insulting music—from desirable to undesirable, constructive to deconstructive, with many insults in music falling somewhere in between. But these aims and effects fall on the same continuum, with humor always steps away from aggressive abuse and, vice versa, all subject to change based on time and place.

Chapter 2 is the book's basic setup, establishing the existence of insult in music and providing some sense of this wide-ranging field of play and punishment. The many categories of musical insult and areas of musical repertoire with insult include but are not limited to the dozens, diss songs, rap battles, villain songs, breakup songs, protest songs, trickster songs, bully songs, and operatic depictions of the disabled and poor, sometimes appearing in video game music, musical duels, satire, shreds, and parody. Race factors into many of these categories, raising the following questions: Is race (and more specifically racism) fundamental to insult in music? And is difference more generally a core concern in musical insult?

Chapter 3 begins to treat motivations: why insult in music? By spotlighting a basketball chant, "cupcake," I first explore the hallmarks of an insult—signs an unmarked insult is in fact an insult—before identifying certain reasons for an insulting chant: play, humor, identity formation, encouragement, incitement, and shaming. Do these various motivations cancel each other out? Can an insult have more than one impact? And can that impact change?

Whatever the intention, the role of context plays a significant role in the effect of an insult. In Chap. 4, I ask: What happens to an insult when the target flips an attack, embracing it as a positive? And why are certain insults adopted by the insulted? To answer these questions, I highlight a court case, Metal v. Tam, while outlining the significance of self-insult in music: in musical terms, certain genres of music, certain songs, and band names. The reasons for such self-insult in music range from humor, attention-seeking, self-protection, defense, the forging of connection, to, in the case of Simon Tam and his band The Slants, self-empowerment. Like the many examples in Chap. 2, race plays a significant role in this type of insult, further supporting a link between music, insult, and race.

Chapter 5 is a more extreme look at the aims and repercussions of insult in music—from protest to bullying. Protest involving musical insult, like self-insult, may involve a power switch, turning a negative situation into something positive, and race is again a factor. As police target music with insult—the insult perceived both insulting and threatening—this chapter raises several concerns: Can insult in music go so far as to warrant censorship? Ultimately, the complications of music and insult undermine legal prosecution of musical insult. However, when musical bullies (yes, there are many) work to bully and oppress through musical insult, there is still room for moral condemnation.

In Chap. 6, musical insult is one man's merry-go-round—the oppressed and the oppressor and around again—as I tie together the previous chapters. That man, musician Frank Zappa, looks to insult in every aspect of his musical work. He is the oppressor, but, at the same time, he is not. He's the oppressed too, a victim of censorship and various other means of public censure. This chapter underscores the range of musical insult in a single example, the life and work of Zappa, and, in so doing, it brings up new questions: When we take a moral stand against insult, as in the previous chapter, will that stand hold? How quickly does the insulter become the insulted and vice versa?

While I examine insult predominantly as a noun in Part I, insult moves in Part II, as a verb aimed elsewhere as well—at music and musicians. It's easy to think of everyday insults directed toward music: "That song is garbage." But there is also insult aimed at music hidden in plain sight, as Chap. 7 shows. And this insult, at the Grammys, is set on its own loop: the winners and the losers, the winners that should have been losers, the winners treated as losers with cutoff music mid-acceptance speech, and those omitted, with some people speaking for the excluded through insult. For everyone, there's the threat of a formidable insult: booing. Is there a way to hail music and musicians without attracting some sort of opposition, including the online contrarian who insists the honoree was undeserving?

The need to make these sorts of value claims, hurling insult at music and musicians in the process, is the subject of Chap. 8. There are many musicians much maligned, but this chapter focuses on a perennial target, Nickelback. By exploring the hate and abuse this band experiences, this chapter identifies several motivations, again related to self-positioning and identity, and again involving race. But gender is a particular divide here as well, another core tenet of insult. How has femininity become an insult aimed at the music of men (man defined here as anyone who identifies as

such)? And if femininity is such an issue, is insult a greater threat for female musicians (again, defined be self-identification) or musicians of any identification who do not conform to the stereotypical masculine norm?

In Chap. 9, singer Taylor Swift is the test case, a celebrity who has endured more than her fair share of insult. While that insult is often gendered, using insults that are female-specific, Swift's own insults in song seem to be part of the insulter's aim. Once more, there is a loop of abuse—the victim, the victimizer, and back again. But when that pendulum swings toward Swift, the insult is especially harsh, in ways that make it hard to deny the role of gender in insult directed at music.

Swift has weathered her many storms thus far, but others don't or can't. In Chap. 10, that storm is another site of insult directed at musicians, one that, like awards ceremonies, is a bit hidden from overt view: musician jokes. These jokes are often insulting, but they can also be fun, a means of social play among musicians. By comparing accordion and banjo jokes with jokes directed at the soprano, the distinct role of gender again emerges in insult targeting musicians. And this chapter asks: Can an especially insulting joke have negative consequences? What kind of messages do jokes based in gender or common gendered insults for that matter send to women in music, women more generally, or anyone who doesn't identify as heteronormative and male?

The question of consequence bleeds into Chap. 11. But this time the subject is the related insult directed at music fans. People hate certain music and may hate the music's fans as well. That grouping of people based on musical taste can be funny, as insult often is, but it can also be dangerous. In this chapter, an extreme example, I explore the FBI's targeting of Juggalo fans, fans labeled a gang and treated as such in the criminal justice system.

When people insult in music or at music, as in Part I and Part II, they may not be aware of the real work at hand. They think they are taking a stand against an Other when they are really taking a stand for themselves. In Part III, which deals with insult involving musical terms or music itself, the common formulation "X is an insult to music" takes the subterfuge of insult to the next level. When people talk about insults *to* music, they intentionally or unintentionally disguise their selfish motivations, insulting someone or something while pretending to protect music. As Chap. 12 explores, once again, it's all about the insulter but, this time, music as well, kind of.

In Chap. 13, I look at music in restaurants, often a place of apparent insult to music. Music and food have much in common—potentially nourishing us in different ways—but music with food has also been deemed a problem. Why? The motivations behind this negative charge are self-serving, as is the case in other examples throughout this book, but they also serve ongoing hierarchies of music. When food is allowed into a symphony hall, it's often with movie music or video game music, music still seen by some as less worthy than "high art." If someone takes aim, labeling something or someone an insult to music, it then backs up the ranking and categorizing we'll see in previous chapters—our positioning of self but also those around us.

Chapter 14 spotlights another perceived insult to music: torture. When music was used to torture prisoners during the so-called war on terror, musicians and music scholars responded, this time insisting the offense was so great that music could no longer be music in such a context. On August 24, 2007, musicologist Jonathan Bellman wrote on the blog "Dial 'M' For Musicology": "That isn't music; it is sonic torture, or just torture." In both of these chapters (Chaps. 13 and 14), music actually has much in common with the main topics: food and pain. But the self-protection and the defense of music in this particular insult obscure the true victims who are in need of real attention: those tortured.

Taken as a whole, this book may have special relevance these days, given recent concern about the range and rate of insult in the political realm. *Insulting Music* in many ways puts such concern in context—revealing a wider culture of insult, the many potential insults in music, insults directed at music, and insults *to* music, as well as the related dangers, both real and imagined. But even this book, any talk about music (as I discuss in the last chapter), could conceivably be insulting. During the writing of this book, I found in conversation that many people were skeptical if not downright insulted by the idea that insult might be bound into the very essence of our experience of music. In many ways Romantic notions of music still dominate our thinking today. One of the points I hope to make here is that music does not only act toward positive ends just as insult does not always work toward the negative. When music and insult overlap, individuals can both promote social justice or undermine it, and foster connection or break it apart. The effects of insult in music can be funny, inspiring, and upsetting—sometimes simultaneously.

But my primary concern is the many insults in and around music that engage the social nature of music and what that engagement accomplishes. People often refer to music's common capacity to bring people together, but, when people come together through music, insult seems just as common, if not more so. And these insults do a lot, in surprising ways: entertain, threaten, protest, and bully. More than that, they do a lot for our sense of self and view of other people, underlining and even constructing difference, often in terms of race and gender. In this way, insult involving music supports, consolidates, and creates power in Western culture, specifically the power conscripted in difference, related to categorization. In his article "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups," Pierre Bourdieu insists that power is constructed through classification, the naming of things, which takes place in praise as well as insult: "[T]his work of categorization … is performed incessantly, at every moment of ordinary existence, in the struggles in which agents clash over the meaning of the social world and of their position within it, the meaning of their social identity, through all the forms of benediction or malediction, eulogy, praise, congratulations, compliments, or insults, reproaches, criticisms, accusations, slanders, etc."[9] Given the positioning move in both music and insult, the combination of the two can then play a particularly potent role in this determination of power. And the stakes could not be higher.

Classification affects how people view the world and their position within it. Insult is part of that labeling, asserting a general dominance but also communicating certain conceptions of individuals and groups. As Bourdieu writes, with insult "an individual tries to impose his point of view while taking the risk of reciprocity."[10] Music similarly transmits groupings of people, defined around genres or types of music, as well as associated values. Music and insult also both affect whose view gets accepted as the standard. There is a conferred authority in insult, who gets to insult and see their insults stick. There is a comparable authority in music, who gets to hear certain music and whose music is heard. That authority can translate to the legitimization of a particular worldview—in Bourdieu's words, "the power to conserve or transform the social world by conserving or transforming the categories through which it is perceived."[11]

With this relationship between power and classification in mind, this book shows that insult connected to music matters deeply, shaming insults

in particular but even an insulting joke, helping to establish societal norms as well as accepted patterns of behavior. In a historical moment hosting the reconsideration of established hierarchies—be it around race, gender, or another category entirely—it seems especially significant that we understand the role of music and insult in the construction of these norms as well as the ways music and insult support their beneficiaries, in turn perpetuating a specific set of related hierarchies. We can ignore the work of music and insult, but music and insult swirl around us, with no end in sight or sound, blasted and broadcast seemingly everywhere people go. And that work is not ignoring us, instead affecting relationships between individuals and groups of people, building up and pulling down the social world, for better and definitely for worse.

Notes

1. Nicolas Slonimsky, *Lexicon of Musical Invective: Critical Assaults on Composers Since Beethoven's Time* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2000).
2. Thomas Conley, *Toward a Rhetoric of Insult* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 2–3. Insulting, then, is a break with certain norms of behavior—in philosophy professor Luvell Anderson's words, "the undermining of reasonable expectations concerning respect." See also Luvell Anderson, "Philosophical Investigations of the Taboo of Insult," in *The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language,* ed. Keith Allan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 240.
3. Jerome Neu, *Sticks and Stones: The Philosophy of Insults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), vii.
4. That physical movement is related to another earlier definition, "to triumph over in an arrogant way," as well as the Latin *saltare*, "to dance," leaping of a different kind. See etymonline.com; Nicholas Bagnall, "Words: Insult," *The Independent*, February 6, 2000: 26.
5. See Timothy B. Jay, "The Psychology of Expressing and Interpreting Linguistic Taboos," in *The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language,* ed. Keith Allan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 77.
6. See Elliot Turiel, "Resistance and Subversion in Everyday Life," in *Conflict, Contradiction, and Contrarian Elements in Moral Development and Education*, ed. Larry Nucci (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005), 3–20.