

Theory of Music – Jonathan Dimond

Introduction to late-Romantic Chromaticism

(version September 2010)

INTRODUCTION

Early Chromaticism

The application of chromaticism as an important element in the tension-release bipolarity of musical language long predates the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.

Listen and Read: F. Chopin “Prelude Op.28” No.4 (1834)

Listen and Read: J.S. Bach “The Goldberg Variations” No.25 (1742)

Task: Identify examples from Monteverdi or Palestrina?

The Chromatic Tradition

Nevertheless, over the ages it was generally true that dissonance in one musical period became considered consonance in the next.

Developments in the area of harmony, however, were not always paralleled by similar developments in the other musical parameters. Musical developments tended to occur in fits and starts. This is complicated by the fact that composers and audiences demands, listening habits, aural experience and expectations all effected what musics were embraced or rejected in any particular period or decade. In Schoenberg's words:

“The rapid development of harmony since the beginning of the 19th century has been the great obstacle to the acceptance of every new composer from Schubert on. Frequent deviation from the tonic region into more or less foreign regions seemed to obstruct unity and intelligibility. However, the most advanced mind is still subject to human limitations. Thus composers of this style, instinctively feeling the danger of incoherence, counteracted the tension in one plane (the complex harmony) by simplification in another plane (the motival and rhythmic construction). This perhaps also explains the unvaried repetitions and frequent sequences of Wagner, Bruckner, Debussy, Cesar Franck, Tchaikovsky, Sibelius and many others.

To the contemporaries of Gustav Mahler, Max Reger, Richard Strauss, Maurice Ravel, etc., far-reaching harmony no longer seriously endangered comprehensibility, and today even popular composers make a living from it!” (Schoenberg 1967, p.31).

Indeed, there exists a traceable tradition of chromaticism from Wagner, Brahms and Mahler, through the so-called Second Viennese School (Schoenberg, Berg, Webern), the Europeans (Boulez, Stockhausen, Nono, Dallapiccola, Ligeti) and American composers (Stravinsky, Babbitt, Carter). (Rahn, p.2)

Categories of Chromaticism

Chromaticism in the music of our time tends to fall into three categories:

1) Momentary chromaticism.

A chromatic note is considered a “non harmonic” tension and is quickly resolved (usually by step) to a consonance (usually a note in the chord).

2) Delayed resolution.

A chromatic note is “elongated” or prolonged in time before eventual resolution. This increases the importance of the “wrong” note.

3) Pan-tonal chromaticism.

A chromatic note may not resolve at all. Tonal ambiguities in the harmony are manifested by complex polyphony. Tension is a relative term and notes tend to speak with almost equal importance. Tone colour, rhythm and orchestration come to the fore as important elements of “harmony” and organization of musical space.

Approaches to Applying Chromaticism

1) Momentary chromaticism.

The simplest approach to applying chromaticism is as an element of “spice” or surprise in an otherwise tonally-predictable passage of music. The chromatic note can be justified as a non-harmonic tension or passing note, which points towards – and places importance upon – the note to which it resolves. In-so-doing, momentum or forward motion is created. The “inside-outside-inside” paradigm, where composers and improvisers weave in and out of a tonal progression, is a common application. Such musicians know the rules (i.e. conventional chord-scales, cadences, etc) and how to break them.

Task: Identify examples of this approach to chromaticism.

2) Delayed resolution.

Opposition of chromaticism against tonality as opposing forces takes the role of dissonance to the next level. Though chromaticism is enjoyed somewhat for its own sound, it still relies on the relativity of consonance. Non-functional harmony is still anchored in tonality. Such chromatic passages are elongated beyond normal expectation so that the resolution of tensions is delayed.

In this kind of musical language, oppositions of dynamics, registration, and tone colour are often also found as key elements in composition and orchestration. These oppositions rely too upon their nemesis to function in their musical context, and “chromatic” composers have built up a wealth of techniques and syntactical rules in order to achieve expressive power in their particular language.

Task: Identify examples of this approach to chromaticism.

Pedal points with chromatically moving chords and/or lines show simply this kind of chromaticism that is firmly rooted to the idea of key.

3) Pan-tonal chromaticism.

When two or more disparate strata force themselves upon each other and coexist without requiring their counterparts to provide resolution, true atonality (or as Schoenberg, and the likes of George Russell prefers – “pan-tonality”) can be born. Such a language combines sophisticated polyphony, polyrhythm, and a type of development of musical ideas that flows from moment to moment usually without any perceivable classical structure.

Chromatic melodic lines of this kind are very often angular and can pass through different instruments before a single statement or motive is complete. Expectations of resolution are continuously denied, and phrases vary enormously in length and their placement in the bar.

At its pinnacle, this kind of freely expressionist chromaticism morphed into the systematic process of “twelve-tone serialism”, whereby notes became “pitch classes” and were ordered in a manner that aimed to destroy (or at least limit) the hierarchy of importance that was established in tonal harmony over prior millennia. The pioneer of this process was Arnold Schoenberg, who in his own words described it as a “*Method of Composing with Twelve Tones Which are Related Only with One Another*” (Schoenberg 1975, p.218).

WAGNER: TRISTAN UND ISOLDE (1859)

Background

Richard Wagner (1813-1883) left a legacy to the genre of German Romantic opera which is matched perhaps only by Verdi and his contribution to Italian opera. Wagner invented the “music drama”, which in his later works was the platform for the dissolution of Classic tonality. (Grout & Palisca, p.745)

Wagner wrote the libretto to *Tristan* as he did all his operas, and completed the opera in 1859, after having spent 10 years in Switzerland avoiding political troubles, being enticed back to Germany by King Ludwig II. Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“total artwork”) philosophy applies to *Tristan* as it does his other music dramas, where poetry, scenic design, staging, action and music are all equally important elements in a total artistic expression. Furthermore, the music is continuous throughout each act – not structurally segmented into conventional operatic forms such as recitatives, arias, etc. (Grout & Palisca, p.747-8)

Read: LP Liner Notes for Wagner “Tristan Und Isolde”

“*It may be considered...* (LP Liner notes by Klaas A. Posthuma)

OHP: composer’s manuscript of 1st page

Listen and Read: Wagner “Tristan Und Isolde” Prelude to Act 1.

Structural Elements

Wagner achieves structural unity in his gargantuan productions via the usage of *leitmotif*, sequences, and periods.

Periods are structural divisions of acts often with AAB (bar form) or ABA (arch form – or *bogen*). However, these forms are not aurally obvious and are camouflaged by transitions, codas, introductions, etc.

Sequences or semi-sequences abound in Wagner’s operas, whereby motives recur (possibly with slight alterations), transposed to other degrees. Schoenberg called this formal approach “developing variation” and it assists the listener in making the themes memorable. (Schoenberg, 1975, p.129).

Listen and Read: Wagner English Horn Solo from Act III scene 1.

DVD Disc 2 chapter 20 from 4:40

Score p.466

CD recording disc 3 track 5 from 5:24

Task: Students to transcribe the English Horn solo from bar 5, Wagner score p. 466 and analyse it. (Number the bars from 1-42.) Take note of:

- Motifs and their development (extension, fragmentation, diminution);
- Important intervals;
- Keys/scales referenced; and
- Use of sequence.

A *leitmotif* is a musical theme associated with a specific person, thing, or idea in the drama. (Grout & Palisca, p.748) From the outset, a *leitmotif* is a musical label, but as the drama unfolds, the *leitmotif* itself can develop, taking on accumulated significance as it transforms with the development of the plot.

A *leitmotif* is typically a short, concentrated motive, used constantly with the action. In-so-doing, his operas tend so sound like an endless unfolding of melodies. (Grout & Palisca, p.749, 752)

Let us now examine the famous “Tristan Chord”, marked ‘T’ (bar 2).

Task: Students to transcribe the opening 3 bars (Wagner, p.7) in concert pitch, compressed score (with instruments identified), and analyse the chords/key.

VC. Ob.
 E.H. T

Cl.1&2, Bsn1&2.

Being the first chord heard in the opera, and being a held dissonance, was a daring move for Wagner. The tempo marking translates to “slow and languishing”, and conductors certainly “milk” this moment in the music whenever it reappears (such as in measures 6, 10, and 12, several times later in the work and at the end of the last act.) The hairpin dynamic contour tends to only reinforce the importance of the dissonance, and make its resolution an afterthought. This lingering moment enforces my earlier point about this kind of chromaticism existing for its own sound more than the chord’s function. As such, the “Tristan chord” somewhat evades traditional functional analysis.

Key: A minor. The flat 6th (F) resolves downward by step to the P.5th.

Bar 2: The “Tristan Chord”. Intervals: TT, M3, P.4 (ascending).

Is this a secondary dominant? (V/V i.e. B7 b5)

Is this a II function (i.e. B) as a French Sixth chord? (rearranged from F A B D#)

Bar 3: E7#11

The simplest analysis of the “Tristan Chord” is as a result of natural voice-leading through two appoggiaturas¹ – one descending from F to E and one from D# to D. (This considers the chord progression as i to V7.)

¹ From the Italian word *appoggiare*, “to lean upon”. The long appoggiatura is important melodically and often suspends the principal note by taking away the time-value of the appoggiatura prefixed to it. Appoggiaturas are also usually on a strong beat and are approached by a leap and leave by a step.

Suspensions are prolongations of a melody note at a chord change, which then resolve by step (usually downward, e.g. 7-6 or 4-3 in reference to the 2nd chord.) The suspended note is usually tied, and functions as a chord tone in the 1st chord.

Wagner was delighted with an analysis by the Czech professor K. Mayrberger (1878), who “considers the attraction between the E and the real bass F to be paramount, and calls the Tristan chord a *Zwitterakkord* (a bisexual or androgynous chord), whose F is controlled by the key of A minor, and D# by the key of E minor.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tristan_chord)

Task: Students to transcribe the 5th and 4th last bars (Wagner, score p.655) in concert pitch, compressed score (with instruments identified), and analyse the chords/key.

What is different about the resolution to the “Tristan Chord” this time?

(Answer: the #9 i.e. G naturals in trombone and viola.)

Let us now examine briefly three basic motives from the Prelude to Act 1:

The image shows two musical staves. The first staff contains Motives A and B. Motive A is a descending line of four notes (G4, F4, E4, D4) starting with a leap from C4 to G4. It is marked *pp* and has a circled 'T' below it. Motive B is an ascending line of four notes (D4, E4, F4, G4) starting with a long note on D4. Motive C is a rising appoggiatura (F#4) over a dominant 7th chord (D4, E4, F4, G4), marked *piu f* and *ff*. The staves are numbered 1 and 16.

{Source: Roger North <http://www.roger.north.btinternet.co.uk/Specpp.html#anchor331994> }

Motives A and B are found in the opening 3 bars (plus anacrusis) (Wagner, p.7)

Motive C is found in bars 16-17 (Wagner, p.8)

It can be seen that motives A and B overlap, and this convergence of motives fuels the music exclusively (via sequences) until motive C – itself a modification of motive B – provides a climax point and the closure of the opening paragraph.

A summary of the motives' character:

Motive A – 3 descending steps; long stress on last note (Tristan chord); starts with a leap; first long note soft; last long note loud.

Motive B – 4 ascending steps; first long note loud; last two notes an ascending appoggiatura, drawing attention to the relatively short penultimate note; being a rising appoggiatura over a dominant 7th chord, this motive creates a questioning character.

This effect is concentrated in the Third Scene of Act 2, where Tristan betrays King Marke's loyalty and friendship by a secret rendezvous with Isolde in Marke's castle. The king's question "Tatest du's wirklich?" translates to "Did you really do it?", and the music supports this question which is on everyone's lips.)

Listen and Read: Wagner DVD Disc 1 chapter 18 (Wagner, p.433)

Motive A and B are further entwined by the rhythmic overlap which is a retrograde (bars 1 and 2).

Motive C encircles its resolution point – the A. As mentioned, it takes motive B and thrusts the third note in the upward sequence higher – above the resolving note, requiring a subsequent falling resolution (appoggiatura) instead of motive B's rising resolution.



{Source: Roger North <http://www.roger.north.btinternet.co.uk/Specpp.html#anchor331994> }

Study of Leitmotifs from Act 1 Scene 5 and Prelude to Act 1.

Task: Students to refer to Grout p.749 & 750 and study examples 18.1a, b, c and d. View their appearance in the score, and identify their source in terms of the previous motifs (A, B and C).

RESOURCES ON RESERVE IN THE LIBRARY:

Tristan and Isolde [videorecording] Mehta, Zubin. VC 782.1 TRI

Tristan and Isolde [CD] Wagner, Richard. CD 782.1 WAG

Tristan und Isolde [complete orchestral score] MU 782.1 WAG

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Cogan, Robert. *New Images of Musical Sound*. PCI, 1998.
- Grout, Donald Jay & Palisca, Claude V. *A History of Western Music*, 4th edition. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1988.
- Liebman, David. *A Chromatic Approach to Jazz Harmony and Melody*. Advance Music, 1991.
- Rahn, John. *Basic Atonal Theory*. New York: Schirmer, 1980.
- Schoenberg, Arnold. *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*. Edited by Leonard Stein and Gerald Strang. London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1967.
- Schoenberg, Arnold. *Style and Idea*. Edited by Leonard Stein with translations by Leo Black. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975.
- Wagner, Richard. *Tristan und Isolde - complete orchestral score*. Editions by Fleix Mottl. New York: Dover, 1973.
- Burkhart, Charles. *Anthology for musical analysis: postmodern update*. 6th ed. Thomson Schirmer, 2008.