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## Tonality and Prolongation in Roger Sessions' Second Symphony

### ABSTRACT

#### Background

Roger Sessions began to compose his Second Symphony in 1944 and completed it in 1947. The work along with the Second Piano Sonata and his opera *Montezuma* are often grouped together as constituting a transitional phase between his more unambiguously tonal works of the 20s and 30s and his later adoption of the twelve-tone technique. Though each movement bears a key signature and though the work ends definitely in D Major, the symphony's rich chromaticism and dissonance problematize its tonal foundation. In his notes for the work's performance in San Francisco in 1947, Sessions wrote: '[The symphony] with reasonable accuracy may be considered as in the key of D minor—the movements being in D minor, F minor, B-flat minor and D Major respectively. The subject of tonality is complex and even problematical these days, and if I use terms [i.e. key designations] which I myself find inadequate to the facts of contemporary music, it is because they possess certain essentials more satisfactorily than any I know'. Through using techniques used to study the music of Stravinsky developed by Joseph Straus and Heinrich Schenker and techniques proposed by Rudolph Reti designed for studying pantonal musical works, the tonal foundations of Sessions' symphony can be clarified and the work's relationship with conventional tonal music strengthened.

#### Aims and repertoire studied

The first movement of Roger Sessions' Second Symphony poses significant theoretical problems: what is its underlying tonal structure and how is this structure unfolded throughout the movement? While clearly in the Stravinskian neo-classical tradition, the work is riddled with manifold dissonant lines and few vertical sonorities clearly derived from major and minor triads. The aim of this study is to elucidate Sessions' relationship with tonality as evinced by Stravinsky in his neo-classical works and to develop a method of analysing music which is simultaneously the product of tonal and motivic (or contextual) thinking. This study also seeks to rehabilitate Reti's ideas about pantonality and techniques by which early 20<sup>th</sup>-century composers imply tonics without resorting to common-practice tonality.

#### Methods

Three principal analytical techniques influence my methodology: the analysis of tonal process in Stravinsky's music by way of Joseph Straus and Heinrich Schenker, set-class theory, and Rudolph Reti's theory of pantonality. In the last decade, Joseph Straus has published several analyses of Stravinsky's music from various periods of his output. He identifies tonal axes and motion in the music and attempts to

reconstruct the conventional voice-leading of a given passage. He compares this recomposition to Stravinsky's actual voice-leading in order to demonstrate how the complex and modernistic musical surface is a distortion of conventional, common-practice voice-leading techniques. Set-class theory offers the ability to trace the development of motives determined solely by interval content. Finally, Reti's theory of pantonality describes means by which composers imply tonal motions to a variety of tonics simultaneously and without the need for tonal confirmation. While impressionistic, Reti's work allows for sensitive hearings of complex music which lacks systematic pre-composition (i.e. twelve-tone and serial music). Together, these three analytical strands lay the groundwork for an analytical method which registers both what is tonal and contextual in Sessions' music.

I begin by comparing features of Session's symphony to Straus's analyses of Stravinsky's music. Like Stravinsky, Sessions uses ostinatos which establish local tonics. Neighbour tones prolong tonic triad members and in some cases imply tonics which are never explicitly stated. Against these ostinatos are freer musical lines. In Sessions, these lines are significantly more chromatic but phrase boundaries still support the tonics proposed by the underlying accompanimental ostinatos.

The symphony's opening chord is interpreted in several ways. It gives way to two trichords (013) and (027) which form the movement's principal motifs. These trichords are worked into more complex contrapuntal lines which often operate independently of underlying tonal structures. At the beginnings and endings of large-scale thematic units and small-scale phrases, these motifs, however, support the units' harmonic pillars. Thus (013) is associated first with a tonicization of A minor and (027) with a prolongation of II in D minor. The transition arrives on a chord related intervallically to the opening sonority. The second subject's harmony is derived from these two motives and progresses as a palindrome.

Reti posits that tonics can be suggested by voice-leading in subtle ways. The opening chord is shown to be a D minor triad with added pitches which resolve eventually as neighbour tones. This chord is prolonged by a cascading violin line which emphasises D minor chord tones through repetition and through extremes of contour. I present voice-leading reductions of the first subject which reveal a conventional underlying bassline supporting a triadic harmonic progression. The transition's arrival harmony also has a clear harmonic function: it is the dominant of D minor which liquidates. It eventually reduces to the (013) motif suggesting a resolution to the tonic D minor. The second subject is viewed tonally from two points of view: the motivic construction of the melody suggests motion towards scale-degrees in B-flat minor, I, IV and V. The accompanying harmony which was previously shown as motivically derived, is shown also to function as a move from a diatonic B-flat minor pitch-space to a diatonic E-minor pitch-space, thus ending as far

as possible from the theme's tonic (Bb). This harmonic motion is viewed analogically as similar to motion from a tonic to dominant in an antecedent phrase.

### Implications

The resulting analysis suggests that tonal functions in chromatic 20<sup>th</sup>-century music can exist alongside music derived purely from motivic elaboration. While these features of a work's structure are subtle, they offer new entry points into atonal pieces by other composers from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, especially those written in the wake of late romantic tonal practice. This analysis also calls for a rehabilitation of Reti's theoretical ideas regarding the presence of implied tonics in music which is not normally described as being conventionally tonal. This paper, thus not only attempts to clarify the development of Sessions' style and its connection to common-practice and neo-classical tonality, but to proffer possible analytical methods for analysing a wide range of music which has resisted convincing harmonic and tonal analysis.

### Keywords

Roger Sessions, Tonality, Rudolph Reti, Neo-Classicism, Pantonality

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