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Chord Superimposition in Two Late Orchestral Works by Ferruccio Busoni

ABSTRACT

Background

Felix Salzer's notion of superimposed tertian chords, which he referred to as polychords, as not simply coloristic but potentially 'integral parts of the voice-leading' raises questions about their possible functions within a musical structure and the possible voice-leading patterns that take shape in a series of chord superimpositions (1952, 195). In this presentation, modified Schenkerian notation, or linear analysis, is employed to illustrate how superimposed tertian chords are manifest at the surface level, the voice-leading involved in a series of chord superimpositions, and the role chord superimpositions play in shaping large-scale structure in two of Ferruccio Busoni's orchestral elegies: *Berceuse élégiaque* (Elegie no. 1, 1909) and *Gesang vom Reigen der Geister* (Elegie no. 4, 1915). These works are representative of Busoni's mature style (ca. 1907–1924), which, as Jim Samson has observed, forms 'a link between the incipient atonality of the later works of Liszt and the new tonal languages of Debussy, Bartók and Stravinsky' (1977, 19). As such, they anticipate techniques further developed by some contemporary and later twentieth-century composers.

The musical language of Busoni's mature style offers an interesting challenge for the music analyst. While harmony in his mature works is primarily tertian, the surface level of the music is often complicated by multiple voices that unfold independently of one another, the migration of chromatic lines among voices, misalignments of thematic and motivic ideas with the underlying harmonic progression(s), chord misalignments, and the occasional harmonic overlap or superimposition of tertian chords. Linear analysis helps to unravel the complexity of the surface level and reveals deeper-level connections between the underlying structural pillars. Rooted in Schenkerian analysis, linear analysis focusses on linear processes, voice-leading, and large-scale structure in both triadic and non-triadic, extended-tonal and post-tonal music illustrated through Schenkerian notational apparatus such as graphs, beams, slurs, etc. Since the mid-twentieth-century, a variety of linear approaches have been demonstrated in analyses by Felix Salzer (1952), Roy Travis (1970), Robert Morgan (1976), William Rothstein (1980), Craig Ayrey (1982), Paul Wilson (1984), Allen Forte (1988), James Baker (1993), and Olli Väisälä (1999), among many others. More recently, this type of analytical approach has been further clarified in the post-tonal analyses of Edward Laufer (2004, see also Slottow 2016 for more on Laufer's approach) and Timothy L. Jackson (1989/90; 1992; 1997; 2004; 2008; and forthcoming). More specifically, Salzer (1952) and, more recently, Peter Kaminsky (2004) have employed modified Schenkerian notation in their analyses of superimposed tertian

chords. The analytical approach in this study incorporates aspects of the above-mentioned more recent linear analyses. The analytical apparatus includes multi-system voice-leading sketches and is particularly suited to Busoni's above-described musical language and shaped by a desire to clarify as much as possible the voice-leading involving superimposed chords and an interpretation of the underlying structure and the various harmonic and linear processes that shape that structure (for more on the analytical approach incorporated in this study, see Davis 2015).

Much of the literature surrounding chord superimposition or polychords, in coordination with polytonality, touches upon four interrelated issues: aural perceptibility, interpretation of polychords versus extended-tertian sonorities or split-member chords, superimposed materials as rooted in a single collection of pitches (i.e., octatonic) versus multiple collections, and finally, structural hierarchy or priority among superimposed materials involving, in the case of chord superimposition, the degree to which a secondary chord maintains independence from or is assimilated by a primary chord. These ideas have been addressed by various authors and composers including Darius Milhaud (1923), Felix Salzer (1952), Vincent Persichetti (1961), Ludmila Uhlela (1966), Krumhansl and Schmuckler (1986), and more recently by Dmitri Tymoczko (2002), Peter Kaminsky (2004) and José Oliveira Martins (2015). These authors have informed this study regarding chord superimpositions and all of these issues are touched upon to some extent in this study.

In the case of *Berceuse élégiaque*, structurally significant harmonies that are marked in the work by changes in the direction of parallel progressions or other musical parameters are related to a referential sonority through chromatic inflection (for more on the term 'referential sonority', see Laufer 2004, 89, and Jackson 1989/90, 47, and forthcoming). These chromatic inflections contribute to the constant sense of rocking back and forth in this piece indicative of a lullaby, which is evoked by the subtitle of the work 'Des Mannes Wiegenlied am Sarge seiner Mutter'. In the explanation of large-scale form, the referential sonority is prolonged over the course of the work through stepwise, primarily chromatic motion connecting iterations of this chord, or chromatic inflections, in correspondence with other design features. These chromatic inflections are often horizontalized in the melodic material and also projected through chord superimpositions, which are manifest in different ways throughout the work. In the context of this work, chord superimpositions and the voice-leading involving superimposed chords can be understood as a kind of connective tissue, or a way of filling in the space between structural harmonies through primarily chromatic linear motion.

In the case of *Gesang vom Reigen der Geister*, various motivic and thematic ideas coalesce to convey polytonal

passages and chord superimpositions in which the main theme, derived from the Pawnee melody ‘Song of the Spirit-Dance’, plays a significant role. Busoni’s treatment of this theme reflects an aesthetic concept referred to in his writings as ‘absolute melody’ (1975, 228–29). He specifically mentioned Native American melodies when he described ‘absolute melody’ as containing inherent qualities, including a latent harmony, which need not rely on accompaniment or text for its expression. A modern approach to polyphony is a means of breaking apart the unity of melody and harmony characteristic of previous eras and, by extension, asserting an absolute melody as an independent element within a musical setting. Such is the case in this piece, where the main theme and the underlying harmony often develop independently of one another. One way this disunity between theme and harmony occurs at a deeper structural level is through chord superimposition. Like in *Berceuse élégiaque*, these chord superimpositions participate in connecting structural harmonies, but in such a way that the independence of the theme is asserted at a deeper structural level.

Aims and repertoire studied

The aim of this study is to illustrate how superimposed tertian chords are manifest at the surface level, the voice-leading involved in a series of chord superimpositions, and the role of superimposed chords in shaping large-scale structure in Busoni’s *Berceuse élégiaque* and *Gesang vom Reigen der Geister*.

Methods

Linear analysis involving multi-system voice-leading sketches.

Implications

Chord superimpositions, depending on the context and presentation, and particularly those that are part of multiple chord progressions occurring simultaneously, can form linear streams that connect structurally significant harmonies at deeper structural levels through primarily chromatic voice leading. While the nature of chord superimpositions in *Berceuse élégiaque* and *Gesang vom Reigen der Geister* is perhaps unique to these pieces, the proposed view of chord superimpositions from a linear perspective and the analytical approach incorporated here could be useful in explicating similar passages in other pitch-centric or extended-tonal works.

Keywords

Chord superimposition, Busoni, *Berceuse élégiaque*, *Gesang vom Reigen der Geister*, linear analysis.

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