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Goehr's Piano Sonata through a Transformational Lens

ABSTRACT

Background

Alexander Goehr's interest in serialism has its root in the twelve-note compositional trend in the post-war environment and his particular family and cultural background. His Piano Sonata is his first composition to have secured a performance in an international context, one that de facto launched his professional career. Apart from being inspired by the rhythmic characteristics of Bartók and Messiaen, Goehr points out that Liszt's Piano Sonata and Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony also informed his Sonata, 'which contained [his] first experiment in the combination of twelve-note row and modal harmony' (Goehr and Wintle 1992, 168-169). The subtitle 'in memory of Serge Prokofiev' in the published scores and the melodic reference to Prokofiev's Seventh Piano Sonata also confirm Goehr's reference to the Russian composer (Rupprecht 2015, 124).

Aims and repertoire studied

Existing literatures on the Sonata mainly focus on its historical references (Hopkins 1980; Rowlands 1989; and Rupprecht 2015). Row analysis plays a dominating role in examining the Sonata but they fail to account for the overall pitch organization and the large-scale structure. For instance, as there is rarely a clear-cut note-to-note row presentation in the Sonata, both Rowlands and Rupprecht emphasize the unordered dyadic and/or tetrachordal segmentation of the row (Rowlands 1989, 20; Rupprecht 2015, 122). Segmentation of the row into unordered chordal sets may solve discovering the ambiguous row presentation but the ordered intervallic succession of the paradigmatic row no longer receives due attention in this context. Hence, it challenges the appropriateness of row analysis and poses analytical difficulty in this piece.

Furthermore, albeit with the recognition of the historical influence of Prokofiev to Goehr's Sonata, scholars have not yet examined how exactly the influence is reflected in the work. This paper thus takes another analytical approach – the transformational analysis – to scrutinize the thematic and structural framework of the Sonata.

Methods

Due to the historical context and strong family background that Goehr shares with Schoenberg, in this analysis I contend that the Schoenbergian technique of developing variation may have also served the thematic expansion process well. Instead of invariance, isomorphic partition and combinatoriality, which are the key techniques residing in the literature of Schoenberg's synthesis between twelve-note technique and developing variation (Haimo 1990 and 1997; Kurth 1996; and Boss 2014), I shall suggest that the transformational networks constitute as a useful agent to depict the expanding thematic process in Goehr's Sonata.

With reference to the influence of Prokofiev, I argue that the basic unit for developing variation in Goehr's Sonata stems from an abstract intervallic motive – the (013) trichord – from Prokofiev's work. John Covach observes the opening of a piece provides the most significant materials for subsequent developing variation (Covach, 2000, 313). Following Covach, I shall show that the introductory theme functions as a seed that grows to become other themes. Furthermore, the opening of

the introductory theme also acts as a germ that 'contains a latent set of relationships that the themes unfold', which is depicted by some isographic transformational networks.

On the other hand, the endings of each section of the Sonata feature different tetrachordal presentations. Specifically, the (013) trichord is embedded in all of these structural tetrachords, which further asserts the importance of this abstract intervallic motive at the structural level. The application of the Klumpenhouwer networks relates these structural harmonies by means of isographic networks, which binds the chronological structural closures into a complex of relationships and hence reveals the 'deep structure' of the Sonata.

Implications

The application of transformational analysis, along with that of Klumpenhouwer net, on Goehr's Sonata, a novel approach conducted here for the first time, reveals an intricate array of functional relationships among different themes and structural entities, which reside at a variety of levels in the composition. The transformational analytical approach thus sheds new light on the form and structure of Goehr's Sonata and the possible synthesis between twelve-note technique and developing variation.

Keywords

Alexander Goehr, transformational theory and analysis, Klumpenhouwer network, dodecaphony and serialism, developing variation, form and structure.

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