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Making Sense of Pitch in the ‘Free Atonal’ Second Viennese School Repertoire: a Teleological Approach Based on Salience Conditions

ABSTRACT

Background

How one should understand pitch in the music Schoenberg, Berg and Webern composed from 1908 to 1922 (the so-called ‘free atonal’ period) is still a matter hugely controversial. From the 1950s and 60s, strictly atonal readings based on pitch-class set-theory (Forte 1973; Rahn 1980) have become the dominant approach, while other authors still proposed tonal readings complete with Roman numerals (Leichtentritt 1951; Ogdon 1981) or adaptations from Schenkerian theory (Travis 1966; Väisälä 1999). Tonal readings have been criticized for their far-fetched assumptions and unclear results (different analyses cannot even agree on what the key of a given piece is); Schenkerian approaches, for failing to define consistent criteria for differentiating between stable and unstable tones, intervals and chords; and set-theoretical readings, for analyzing pitch in purely associational, non-hierarchical terms and for ignoring remnants from common practice tonality.

Aims and repertoire studied

In this paper, I recognize the shortcomings of such traditional approaches to the repertoire under consideration and follow Lerdahl (2001) in claiming that ‘theories of tonality and atonality should ... be linked’, as well as Newton (2014) in arguing that ‘it does not seem likely ... that functional harmony should have entirely disappeared the day Schoenberg “freed music from the shackles of tonality”’. I thus believe that a more nuanced approach to the ‘free atonal’ repertoire is required — one that while recognizing the revolutionary significance of that music still acknowledges the extent to which it contains ‘a puzzling amount of old [tonal] material in unfamiliar contexts’ (Christensen, 1987). Indeed, common features of this repertoire such as semitonal cadential motions (Ashforth, 1978; Milstein, 1992) invoke an undeniable tonal resonance, as does the sense that despite the atonal context some pitch-classes can still be more important than others (Lewis, 1981).

Methods

I thus propose an analytical method for early post-tonal music, which follows Lerdahl (2001) in arguing that in the absence of conventional tonal syntax the relative salience of (contextually emphasized) pitches becomes a major determinant of perceived pitch structure. I focus, specifically, in four salience types: registral salience (for notes appearing at extreme high or low points of the registral space in a given rhythmic grouping); rhythmic salience (for notes appearing at important

moments in a rhythmic grouping, such as beginning, climax, or cadence); metrical salience (for notes given a strong metrical position in terms of real, perceived — not necessarily notated — metre); and ‘tonal’ salience (for notes already salient in registral, rhythmic or metrical terms that further evoke a sense of leading-tone resolution).

Unlike Lerdahl, however, I state that reiterated emphasis of specific pitch-classes allows such pitch-classes to gradually become (increasingly stable, almost tonal-like) goals of motion (for Lerdahl atonal music almost by definition rules out stability conditions). I thus recover Kramer’s (1988) notion that in early atonal Second Viennese School music a teleological sense of progression and even goal-directedness remains crucial in the listener’s experience of the temporal unfolding of musical events, even though that sense is created by means different from tonality and has, compared to it, a weaker and less predictable effect.

Implications

To show how my method works, I focus in two pieces from the ‘free atonal’ repertoire: Schoenberg’s Op. 11/1 and Berg’s Op. 5/1. In the former piece, I provide a new understanding for the last chord, which according to Forte (1973) ‘has perplexed many analysts’. I argue that two gradually (and independently) revealed goals — Eb and G# — finally coalesce in that chord’s outer (and therefore most salient) voices. These pitch-classes become goals of motion by virtue of becoming increasingly salient as the piece proceeds: Eb becomes increasingly emphasized across its three prominent appearances in the bass register (bars 12-13, 47-50 and 59-64), whereas G# becomes more and more salient over the course of the exposition, either in the treble register (in the three statements of the first theme: bars 1-3, 9-11, 15-18) or in the bass register (in the two statements of the second theme: bars 4-8 and 25-33). In Berg’s piece I argue that the final cadence has a more surprising effect, since D is repeatedly emphasized from very early on in the composition, and yet the final sonority moves to an unexpected chord based on a [B-G-C-F#] complex, conspicuously avoiding D. This way, my analysis provides a rationale for understanding why an extremely brief chord suffices to finish Schoenberg’s piece (as the chord has long been prepared) whereas in Berg’s piece the final sonority is so surprising that it needs much more time to establish itself (3 entire bars — about 25% of the total duration of the piece): it only becomes stable because it lasts so much, whereas Schoenberg’s chord is immediately felt as stable. In more general terms, these results evince the possibility of defining different degrees of cadential closure through pitch

means in a traditionally understood atonal environment, an example of how ‘old material’ survives in ‘unfamiliar contexts’.

Keywords

Post-tonal music, Common practice tonality, Musical time, Salience and stability conditions.

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