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Transcendence in Pop-Rock Music

ABSTRACT

Background

Richard Cohn (2012a) identifies chromatic, major-third root movement as a special class of triadic progression. The contrary motion of half steps, described in neo-Riemannian terms as PL or LP voice leading, produces a perceptual paradox that simultaneously destroys any sense of background diatonic collection and forces irreconcilable interpretations of consonance and dissonance. Cohn explains the perceptual paradox, taking motion from E major to C major as an example: “the new root, C, is heard as approached from its leading tone, B; the new fifth, G, is heard as approached from its , A \flat . The minor third of the first chord is revealed as an augmented second, undermining the first chord’s status qua triad.” (Cohn 2012b, 51) Such paradoxes arise in any tonal position, with both PL and LP motions, in both major and minor contexts. In music from composers as diverse as Carlo Gesualdo, Franz Schubert, Sergei Prokofiev, and Arnold Schoenberg, Cohn identifies strategic use of these progressions to describe uncanny circumstances such as magic, visions, and resurrection. Richard Taruskin (2010, 87) describes similar harmonic motion in 19th-century music, specifically motion from a major tonic to its flat-major submediant, as a “quintessentially romantic” convention for describing transcendence from one psychological plane to another. Matthew Bribitzer-Stull (2012) demonstrates how leading film-music composers, especially in the sci-fi/fantasy genre, employ such motion in the minor mode to signal mystery, magic, deceit, and darkly supernatural conditions.

Aims and repertoire studied

This paper expands the social implications of the technique by exploring the association in contemporary pop music. These progressions occur with just enough frequency in pop-rock harmonic syntax to allow for a specialized study of their employment for dramatic effect (Trevor Declercq and David Temperley 2011). The study identifies over 50 songs from 1958-2016 that exhibit a direct correlation between PL/LP motion and lyrics describing transcendent or uncanny scenarios.

Methods

This study identifies six generic types of transcendence associated with PL/LP progressions: visions, overcoming mental barriers, supernatural phenomena, psychological conditions, nonsense poetry, and descriptions of dystopia. While some songs fit neatly into one category or the other, several examples engage more than one category. Some songs reference drugs such as marijuana, heroin, and LSD as the vehicles for transcendence while others refer to social conditions such as war, politics, and personal relationships. Sometimes the progressions occur directly between adjacent chords, other times the progressions are composed out over a span of several chords. While some songs use the PL/LP progressions

ubiquitously, creating an overall sense of disorientation, in many examples the harmonic transformations occur at conspicuous moments where a word-for-word connection to the lyrics makes the voice-leading paradox particularly effective. While motions between tonic, mediant, and submediant harmonies are common, this paper examines the use of these transformations in a variety of tonal positions including modulations and tonally ambiguous situations. With each type of transcendence, this paper examines one example in detail and lists others in a table. Taking those analyses as models, the paper also provides hermeneutic readings of songs where the association between lyrics and harmony is less obvious.

While not every PL/LP transformation involves transcendence, such as the Aeolian cadence \flat VI- \flat VII-I (Biamonte 2010) or Walter Everett’s Type 5 system (Everett 2004), when the transformations are used conspicuously between adjacent or framing harmonies, the pervasive associations with transcendence, across sub-genre and generational lines, are hard to ignore.

The Beatles’ 1967 hit “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” provides an illustrative example. The opening lyrics invite the listener to transcend reality and enter a fantasy world full of surreal imagery, “picture yourself on a boat on a river, with tangerine trees and marmalade skies.” The harmonic progression of this phrase is governed by PL motion from A major to F major. The tonal disorientation of contrary, half-step motion between consonant triads approximates the dream-like intangibility suggested by the lyrics.

Implications

Recognizing the associations between uncanny lyrics and PL and LP voice leading offers a few interesting points about the history of modern pop music. For one, the widespread use of the technique since 1967 contributes to the already long list of evidence claiming the Beatles’ output of that year, and specifically the *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* album, as singularly influential on the genre. Also, while a wide variety of songwriters employ the technique, the music of some groups and subgenres is so saturated with these progressions that they can become a defining aspect of their sound. For example, PL and LP progressions permeate virtually all of the most successful and iconic songs of the early-1990s, Seattle-based genre known as “grunge.”

Furthermore by finding associations between transcendence and PL/LP transformations in a style removed from the classical-romantic canon, this paper engages a much broader group of musicians and audiences in terms of race, gender, and socio-economic opportunity, giving greater weight to Cohn’s perceptual argument. As with any examination of human perception, the more diverse the survey pool, the more convincing the argument. Where Cohn’s and Bribitzer-Stull’s work has widened the survey pool chronologically, this paper begins to deepen the pool socially.

Keywords

chromaticism, harmony, music hermeneutics, popular music, musical signification

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