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Skryabin’s Late Acceleration through Hexatonic and Octatonic Space

ABSTRACT

Background

Skryabin’s last sonata is segregated into areas of major third chord-relations (hexatonic progression) and minor-third relations (octatonic progression). The way that Skryabin traverses these spaces calls for a reassessment of his voice-leading procedures. Skryabin’s late music has been assessed in several different ways in recent times. Kallis (2015) describes the interaction of the acoustic, octatonic and hyper-hexatonic scales in the tenth sonata, while others have explored the application of neo-Riemannian transformations (Callender, 1999), all building on the most sustained critique which was Baker’s (1986) synthesis of Schenkerian and Fortean technologies. To my mind, however, none have fully grasped the way that the segregation of different spaces coheres within a broader framework.

Aims and repertoire studied

The aim is to demonstrate, using Skryabin’s Sonata No. 10 as an example, that a broadly-defined diatonic thread weaves together octatonic (OCT) and hexatonic (HEX) spaces, taking account of the charges and discharges of tense sonorities that push through the space in which they are defined. The opening motif (a borrowing from Schubert’s ‘Irrlicht’) contains the seeds of the hexatonic (augmented triad) and octatonic (diminished triad) spaces that will be traversed, projected into chordal, and then formal significance as the work unfolds:



Methods

The analytical methods employed are broadly neo-Riemannian, but synthesise Lendvai’s (1971) axis system with a more specific *Funktionstheorie*. Based on a model in which function is assigned to a single collection of minor-third-related chords (say, a Dominant axis might be represented by G, B@, C#, E chords), I show that a general rotation of function (*T-S-D-T*) cuts indiscriminately through the different harmonic spaces. I briefly reflection on Skryabin’s esoteric philosophical worldview, which proposes a fundamental acceleration through space and time. This chimes with more recent philosophical investigation into post-Marxian ‘accelerationism’ (Mackay, 2014).

To work through this philosophical angle, I offer a view of Skryabin’s form of the piece which, differing from previous accounts, shows a ‘rotational’ form to be at work in the sonata’s substructure. This rotational substructure takes over

the more normative form for Skryabin’s late sonatas whereby Skryabin rotates through the three octatonic cycles as if they were functionally active (See Smith 2010), spreading across the Sonata’s tripartite framework. I therefore produce a formal model that shows a marked shift in Skryabin’s tonal balance in this sonata; it is now front-loaded so that the *D* function is already resolved into the *T* early in Development; this shifts the tonal weight of the sonata, allowing Skryabin to space for the subcutaneous formal rotations to break through to the surface.

To achieve this energetic breakthrough of the rotational substructure, Sonata 10 allows the rotation of the OCT and HEX spaces at a more local level to produce two climactic points in the sonata’s development and retransition that work through the hexatonic material from the opening in different ways. This constant reworking (R¹–R⁷) produces a cybernetic form, accelerating into a radical retransformation of the S² theme, now reworked as a new dance topic just before as the piece closes.

EXPOSITION						DEVELOPMENT					
P ¹ →P ²	P ¹ →	Tr	S ¹	S ²	S ¹	P ¹ →P ²	P ¹ →P ²	Tr			
116	120	20-18	77-73	73-83	14-49	100-107	116-23	124-131	132-131	136-137	145-143
Tone						L..B		D	B..T		T
R1						R2		R4 → climax 1			

RECAPITULATION										
P ¹ →	P ¹ →	(S ¹)	Tr	S ¹	S ¹	P ²	S ¹	NT	P ¹	
116	101	102-113	113-221	122-219	246-270	278-293	294-304	316-317	308-319	140
R1 → climax 2						R1 R1 → climax 1: new dance				R7

Implications

The rotation of function described above, based on charges and discharges of leading-tones (Harrison 1994), shows a fundamentally diatonic energy that exists despite a surface of octatonic or hexatonic progression. This has clear implications for the ways in which we hear ‘alternative’ tonal spaces, possibly even the ‘atonal’. This has formal implications. Discussion could develop into potential for hearing or experiencing diatonicism within such ‘other’ spaces. My conclusion is that *octatonic motion stores tonal energy, while hexatonic motion discharges it*. And Skryabin plays with this sense of energetic flow throughout this exceptional work to create differing *speeds*.

Keywords

Neo-Riemannian theory; early 20thCentury music; Diatonicism; Harmony and voice-leading; Skryabin

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