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Memory in Music Analysis: Referential Appeals to Proustian Memory in Dutilleux's *Ainsi la Nuit*

ABSTRACT

Background

In conversation with Roger Nichols, Henri Dutilleux described the method of composition that produced his lone string quartet, *Ainsi la Nuit*: “There are small cells which develop bit by bit. This may perhaps show the influence of literature, of Proust and his notions about memory” (Nichols 1994, 89). The composer further explains his compositional process by invoking the term *croissance progressive*, or “progressive growth.” In his own words, this is a specific technique of variation, wherein repetition and relatedness are not always immediately apparent. It is through appeals to memory—in particular to Proustian memory—that Dutilleux sought to establish a network of such related elements spanning the string quartet.

While Delcambre-Monpoel (2001), Hesketh (2010), Chendler (2013), and others have devoted substantial analytical time to the piece, they have focused on the more traditional thematic and motivic details of primarily the quartet’s main movements. No analysis to date has sufficiently examined the compositional fallout of the influence of Proustian memory on the piece. Yet, Dutilleux leaves behind some clues in his commentary: “[Memory is] a notion applicable to most of my other music. I [am] alluding to prefigurations, variations, everything to do with this idea. You can sense it very clearly in the sections called ‘Parenthèses’” (Glayman 2003, 77). The organizational layout of *Ainsi la Nuit* comprises several main thematic sections (titles *Nocturne*, *Miroir d’Espace*, etc.) as well as brief “parenthetical” passages that bridge the main sections. It is my contention that the *Parenthèses* serve to frame the main thematic sections, acting as connective insertions that help to imbue the music with networks of reference. By interacting with musical memory, the compositional structure attempts to clarify the piece’s form and create a rich and coherent musical landscape.

Methods

My account of *Ainsi la Nuit* will employ both structural pitch-class set and transformational analysis and an interpretive framework for the technical implications of that apparatus. The latter of these methods will pursue a possible manifestation *in the music* of the compositional influence of Proustian memory that Dutilleux himself indicated. In his novel, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust expresses his thoughts on memory in the form of a dichotomy between active and passive recollection. *Voluntary memory* involves willful attention to certain details, while other aspects are expunged from recollection. For our purposes, the most important feature of voluntary memory is the conscious attentiveness of the subject. On the other hand, Proust’s *involuntary memory* is a process by which flashes of memory burst from unconscious associations formed often through the senses. At its core, invol-

untary memory is unconscious, intuitive, and evocative. Beckett argues that Proust understand the latter to be central to a true understanding of the lived-in world.

How might this Proustian inspiration directly play into our analysis of the *Parenthèses* in *Ainsi la Nuit*? In order to accommodate this memory binary, musical elements that function as references in time will be examined for their ability to appeal to either form of memory. A schematic of the approach taken here is given as Table 1:

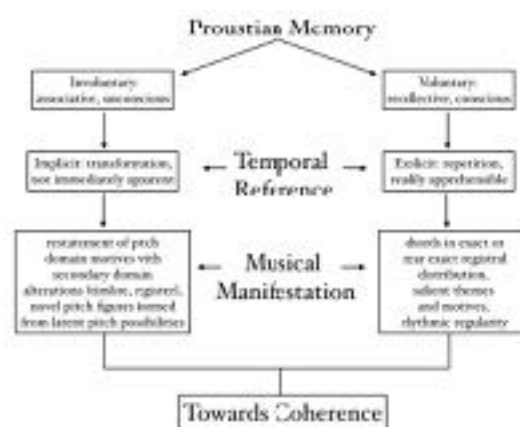


Table 1: A schematic approach to an analysis of *Ainsi la Nuit* that incorporates the influence of Proustian memory.

As Dutilleux himself emphasizes, the goal of an internally coherent quartet is presumed to be pursued by appeals to Proustian memory. In this analysis, the two broad memory processes exist as motivating factors in the distribution of allusions within the piece, in turn imposing a classification of technical musical references that call upon either form of memory. These references, generally conceived in terms of a temporal experience, will be deemed either *explicit* or *implicit*.

Explicit references are recognizably repeated and require a certain threshold of apprehension such that they may appeal to consciousness, to voluntary memory. They present as musical manifestations of exact or readily identifiable repetitions that establish referential chords, motives, regularities of rhythm, and other features that the listener can immediately access at first impression. Implicit references evoke a sense of relatedness without direct apprehension, making diverse aspects of a piece remain part of one unified sound by appealing to the unconscious, to involuntary memory. They occur in the music in two forms: first, as the restatement of pitch domain motives that are altered in secondary domains such as timbre, register, or rhythm; and second, as the manipulation of certain latent possibilities within some pitch domain element in order to generate novel pitch motives. In both cases, the role of references that appeal to Proustian memory is to create an aurally and internally coherent musical structure.

Implications

As a means of bridging the gap between large swaths of music, the connective role of the *Parenthèses* is primarily a referential one. By manipulating motives and thematic cells from the Introduction and earlier main sections, the *Parenthèses* at once provide trinkets immediately recognizable material while simultaneously drawing together the piece as a whole with a subtle, sub-surface nexus of referentiality. The various references I will articulate, which will here be interpreted as appeals to Proustian memory, provide links between otherwise thematically diverse main sections—binding what originally were conceived of as distinct pieces of music into a single, coherent work. In this interpretation, the references espoused by musical cells in the *Parenthèses* are dependent upon a model of memory that allows for the *recognition* of explicit repetition as well as the *intuition* of coherent connectedness in *Ainsi la Nuit*.

In the realm of music analysis, diverse accounts of the scope of analytical inquiry can be espoused. I hope to project a broad and inclusive approach to the study of a single piece, incorporating literature, perception, and technical analysis in an argument for the immanent structure of *Ainsi la Nuit*. While this is by no means a catch-all theoretical method, I intend to offer a reading of several important musical cells in the string quartet that simultaneously engages with compositional history, the writings of an important literary figure, and the twentieth-century music-philosophical turn toward the listener.

Keywords

Post-Tonal Music, Music Hermeneutics, Contemporary Music, Analytical Theory, Musical Perception

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