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Alfred Schnittke's String Quartet No. 3 and the Uses of Quotation

ABSTRACT

Background

Alfred Schnittke's String Quartet No. 3 (1983) is considered a hallmark polystylistic work. It opens with three quotations attributed directly in the score to Lasso, Beethoven, and Shostakovich. As Schick (2002) has shown, the quotations are followed by pitch-cipher monograms, using German pitch nomenclature, for Lasso (orlAnDo Di lASSo = A–D–D–A–S–As) and Beethoven (luDwiG vAn BEetHoven = D–G–A–B–E–H), adhering to principles of monogram construction followed in several of Schnittke's works (Segall 2013). Prior interpretations of the quartet have traced a historical narrative derived from the sources of the three musical quotations (Schick 2002; Kramer 2011, 232–40). These interpretations thus take a *poietic* approach, based on information provided by the composer (Nattiez 1990).

Bicknell (2001), however, has problematized the referability of the quotations, arguing that they are not recognizable through listening alone. The Lasso quotation sounds like a generic pair of stylized sixteenth-century cadences, and the Beethoven and Shostakovich quotations are distorted. Without the attributions in the score, listeners might not determine the provenance of the quotations. This raises the question of why it is deemed important that they be recognized at all.

Prior work on quotation has focused on semantic associations and the interactions among juxtaposed quotations (Hatten 1985, Burkholder 1995, Losada 2004). Schnittke's quartet suggests another use of quotation: the quotations 'justify', as it were, the monograms that follow. These monograms, I argue, constitute the work's primary musical materials.

Aims and repertoire studied

This study offers an *esthesic*, or listener-centered, approach to analyzing quotation-based composition. This contrasts with prior poietic approaches that study the meanings of or relationships among quotations, on the assumption that they provide the key to unlocking interpretation — a reasonable stance that has produced insightful and engaging analyses. An esthesic approach focuses on elements of a work not necessarily influenced by the quotations, and thereby reveals interpretive aspects that the poietic approach may miss.

Schnittke's String Quartet No. 3 provides an ideal case study, because apart from a brief opening collage, its quotations are used in a merely decorative fashion, sounding at moments of harmonic and textural stasis. The quotations thus do not correspond to previously established categories of musical borrowing. Rather, the monograms derived from them furnish the work with its primary musical materials: referential set-class (0167), based on Lasso's monogram, and a twelve-tone row, based on Beethoven's.

This paper challenges the prevailing view of the quartet as polystylistic. Both Schnittke's longstanding association with polystylism and the quartet's conspicuous use of quotations render such a view inevitable. This paper argues that because the Beethoven and Shostakovich quotations are not stylized, the quartet does not engage in polystylism. One goal of this study is to clarify the distinction between quotation, or reference to a work not necessarily in its original stylistic context, and stylization, reference to a style not necessarily in the context of a specific work.

Methods

To construct a new interpretation of the work, this study proposes an esthesic analysis that focuses on the use of quotations, monograms, and other features salient to the listening experience. The analysis demonstrates that the quotations play a prominent role only at the beginning of the work, with the monograms providing the primary material of the remainder.

The opening eight measures are a collage introducing the three quotations. This passage employs techniques also found in avant-garde collage works of the 1960s, as identified by Losada (2004): the quotations are manipulated to reveal hidden connections, and they are juxtaposed to gradually fill in a contiguous segment of pitch space. The work thus demonstrates awareness of 1960s collage procedure before abandoning it abruptly in favor of monogram material.

The monogram material is developed more extensively throughout the quartet. Set-class (0167), of which the Lasso monogram is a member, is heard at prominent locations in all three movements, in some cases substituting for a consonant triad at a phrase ending and thus representing an 'atonalizing' force, opposed to the tonal-sounding triads of the Lasso quotation.

The six-note Beethoven monogram forms the first hexachord of a twelve-tone row; the second hexachord is a near-transposition of the first. The row is not transformed by the traditional (Schoenbergian) R/I operations. Rather, the second movement features a variety of additional twelve-tone rows, each of which is stated only once but shares family resemblances with the Beethoven-derived row. The single appearances of rows reflect a broader Soviet approach to using twelve-tone rows (Kholopov 2009). Family resemblances have been previously noted among the twelve-tone rows within other Schnittke works (Héarún-Javakhishvili 2002, Sullivan 2010).

Additional features of the quartet have been obscured by the previous focus on the quotations. The repeat signs enclosing the first 40 % of the second movement suggest a sonata-form structure, inviting astute listeners to notice, through their contrasting characters, an agitated primary theme and chorale-style secondary theme (based on the first and second hexachords, respectively, of the Beethoven-monogram twelve-tone row). The ensuing 'development' section derives

from a pastoral theme in the *first* movement, made nearly unrecognizable with *sul ponticello* overlapping tritones, arranged to form chords of set-class (0167). These features of the work emerge from an esthesic analysis, as they do not depend on the quotations that have dominated the work's discourse.

Implications

Whereas prior studies of quotation-based composition have used the quotations themselves as a starting point for analysis, the present study offers a model for circumventing the focus on quotations. By pointing to a previously unacknowledged use of quotations — their potential to suggest or generate a work's primary materials — the model accounts for the quotations' existence while at the same time highlighting other salient musical characteristics.

Previous poietic approaches to Schnittke's String Quartet No. 3 have interpreted the work through the lens of historical narrative, starting with the quotation labels in the score. The esthesic approach advanced in this paper complements the existing interpretations through an alternative analysis based on a referential sonority and twelve-tone row, readily perceived throughout the work. This study argues that the quotations are less important to the work's structure than the materials they generate.

This paper seeks to clarify an ambiguous aspect of the concept of polystylism. According to Schnittke's initial formulation, written around 1971, polystylism involves techniques of 'quotation' and 'allusion' (Schnittke 2002, 87–90). 'Quotation', however, refers to the borrowing not of musical excerpts, but of musical styles; this differs from the more common use of the term 'quotation', including as found in this paper. A more useful distinction can be made between quotation (as commonly understood) and stylization. Stylization, associated with polystylism, involves references to earlier styles. Quotation, associated with collage, involves excerpts from earlier works. Strikingly, although Schnittke distanced himself from collage, the quartet's opening demonstrates his fluency with collage techniques of the 1960s. But as the String Quartet No. 3 largely forgoes stylization, it cannot be considered polystylistic.

Keywords

Alfred Schnittke, monogram, polystylism, collage, quotation, twelve-tone technique, poiesis, esthesis.

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