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Harmony and Prolongation in Roger Sessions' Second Symphony

ABSTRACT

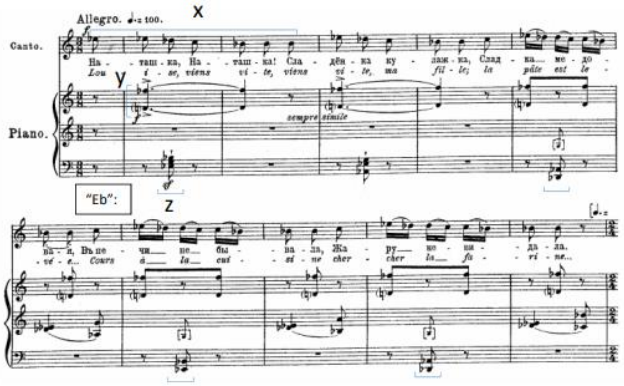
Theorists have faced significant problems in analyzing advanced tonal music from the first half of the twentieth century. While set-class theory has provided theorists with the means of tracing motivic relationships in chromatic music, its underlying harmonic structure has remained elusive. Roger Sessions' neglected music from the 1940s marks a transitional phase between his earlier, neo-classical works and his later adoption of the twelve-tone technique. His Second Symphony, in particular, marks a turning point in his harmonic vocabulary and is an ideal testing ground for theories of 20th century tonality. I analyze the work by drawing on Joseph Straus' recent work on prolongation and tonality in Stravinsky and by exploring Rudolph Reti's conception of pantonality and melodic tonality. I locate structural fifth-spans which underpin the music's harmonic and melodic dimensions. I also identify tonal motions suggested by independent melodic lines and their relationships both to other contrapuntal line and to broader arrival points in the large-scale voice leading. I reduce and recompose passages to demonstrate how underlying tonal or prolongational features are obscured through surface-level motivic manipulation. The ability to assign tonal functions to harmonies while considering their contextual motivic properties suggests possible avenues for analyzing music from other repertories whose harmonic structures are unsystematic, such as the atonal music of Arnold Schoenberg.

1. INTRODUCTION

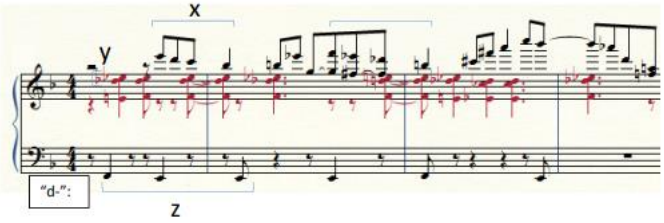
Roger Sessions began to compose his Second Symphony in 1944 and completed it in 1947. The work, along with the Second Piano Sonata and his opera *Montezuma* are often grouped together as constituting a transitional phase between his more unambiguously tonal works of the 20s and 30s and his later adoption of the twelve-tone technique. Though each movement bears a key signature and though the work ends definitively in D Major, the symphony's rich chromaticism and dissonance problematize its tonal foundation. In his notes for the work's performance in San Francisco in 1947, Sessions wrote: '[The symphony] with reasonable accuracy may be considered as in the key of D minor — the movements being in D minor, F minor, B-flat minor and D major respectively. The subject of tonality is complex and even problematical these days, and if I use terms (i.e. key designations) which I myself find inadequate to the facts of contemporary music, it is because they possess certain essentials more satisfactorily than any other I know'. Much time has passed since the work's completion, however, and new forays into prolongation and counterpoint in post-tonal music, especially that of Stravinsky, will help to shed light upon the work's tonal elements without obscuring its more contextual surface features. In particular the work of Joseph Straus on Stravinsky and a revaluation of Reti's theory of pantonality will clarify elements of the first movement's underlying pitch structure. These techniques might then be extended to composers whose work similarly stands between conventionally tonal and freer poles.

2. SESSIONS' STRAVINSKIAN INHERITANCE

Sessions' reverence for Stravinsky earlier in his career is well documented by Frederik Prausnitz who writes: 'both native and immigrant composers allied themselves with one of two hostile musical camps, identifying either with Stravinsky or with Schoenberg. In this climate of confrontation, Sessions, who according to Milton Babbitt was very much 'down on Schoenberg at the time' wrote a long and revealing article, 'Music in Crisis' in which he reserves his highest praise for a new manner of expression, a new sobriety and at its best, as in the finest pages of Stravinsky, a new inwardness' (176). It would not be unreasonable to expect that as Sessions championed Stravinsky in his writings he might also integrate Stravinskian practice into his compositions.



Ex. 1a. Stravinsky, *Pribaoutki*, II.



Ex. 1b. Sessions, *Symphony No. 2*, I.

Compare the two passages in Example 1 (a and b), the first from the second movement of Stravinsky's early *Pribaoutki* (discussed in Straus 2014) and the second from the first movement of Sessions' Second Symphony. Straus identifies two fourth/fifth spans that govern the melodic and harmonic dimensions of the Stravinsky: the E♭–B♭ in the melody is the melodic fourth span and a secondary vertical span D–A is begun in m. 1 and completed later in the piece. I have labelled the melodic span 'x' and the horizontal D–F♭ ostinato 'y'. This bass articulates another ostinato, labelled 'z', which prolongs

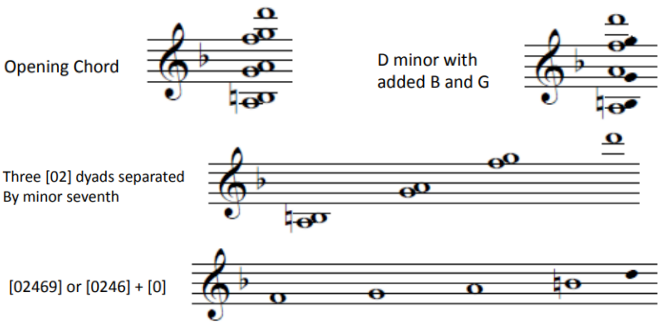
an E♭ vertical fifth, the same fourth outlined by the melody. Without question, the underlying tonic of this passage is Eb: the D–F♭ serves to decorate this tonic by embellishing it with chromatic neighbours that do not resolve. In sum the musical surface 'composes out' the underlying E♭ tonality by stating multiple dissonant contrapuntal elaborations at the same time: the D–F♭ neighbour occurs more or less simultaneously with the D♭–A♭ neighbour in the bass.

The Sessions example follows the same procedure. The flute states a — more expansive — theme that first outlines a short step-wise descent from E–B♭ outlining an augmented fourth, labelled 'x'. An ostinato in the middle register prolongs E♭ and D♭, chromatic neighbours of D, the passage's tonic. The bass presents yet another ostinato on $\hat{3}$ and $\hat{2}$ in D minor. What separates the two examples is the degree of chromaticism in the Sessions. Where Stravinsky is content to repeat his figures, Sessions instead sequences his fourth-span melody up a semitone and then develops it into a larger melody. It only returns weakly to D minor at the very end. Furthermore, while there were two fourth/fifth spans in the Stravinsky, the Sessions does not as convincingly articulate particular spans for long. But this is an innovation and should not be seen as a significant deformation of an essentially similar compositional procedure.

In his *Tonality, Atonality, Pantonality*, Rudolph Reti introduces his concept of pantonality and applies it to several brief musical examples. His concept is founded upon the impression given by much early 20th century music that a passage may be grounded in one or more tonics. Reti calls this effect, 'tonicality'. It is largely dependent upon the occurrence of fragments of diatonic scales, repetition of pitch-classes and melodic/harmonic gestures reminiscent of common-practice tonality. In my analyses that follow, I generally begin by identifying the most strongly 'tonical' segment of the music, whether it is a diatonic melody, stepwise bass line etc. I continue by relating other features of the musical surface to this local tonic, for example by reconstructing a more conventional underlying harmonic progression. In this way, a complex and chaotic-seeming musical surface can be reduced. Often more than one possible tonic can be identified in a passage. As a result, the passage can be reduced in more than one way. A listener's simultaneous hearing of a passage's differing tonal relationships is central to Reti's theory of pantonality and to much early 20th century music.

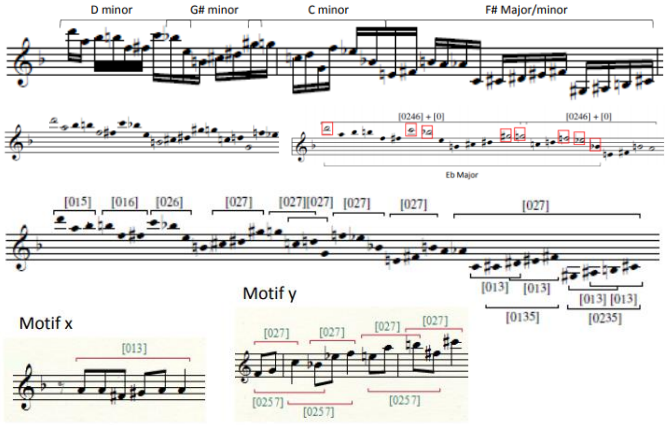
3. THE OPENING CHORD

The chord that opens the first movement of Sessions' Second Symphony, presented in Example 2, is a highly important sonority: it appears at all of the piece's formal junctures, it is prolonged through passages and it contains the seeds of the movement's thematic material. It can and has been understood in a number of ways. As noted by Michael Steinberg, it can be thought of as a D minor triad with two added pitches, G and B, which surround A by whole step (530). It can be considered to be a set of [02] dyads separated by minor sevenths with an added D. It can be represented as an unordered set class [02469] or [0246] with an added pitch-class. Or it can be thought of as a central quartal chord bookended by major thirds with D at its centre. Each of these different interpretations has direct consequences for how one might parse later passages of music: if one wishes to uncover the tonal foundations of the music, reading this chord as a D minor chord in second inversion implies that the piece begins on an unstable triad whose bass, one might expect, will resolve eventually down to D. Parsing the chord into dyads will become relevant when examining the harmony and registration of the second subject group. Reading the chord as an unordered pitch-class set allows one to relate it to sets and horizontal motives that arise later in the piece.



Ex. 2. Opening chord and its multiple meanings.

The different interpretations of this chord, for example, will greatly colour our analysis of the extended violin line that follows (Example 3). This violin line provides a powerful example of the multivalence of Sessions' harmonic language while also revealing the relationship between the opening chord and the piece's principal thematic materials. Analysing this relatively simple line will give us insight into how to parse the much more complex music that follows.



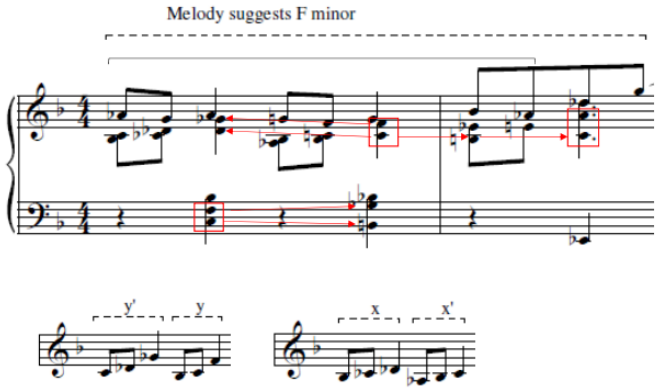
Ex. 3. The opening violin line and its multiple meanings.

The lowest points of each of the wave-like figures articulate the pitch-classes of the opening chord: D–A–F–B–G, thus it in some sense prolongs the opening chord horizontally. One might also pull out the crests of these waves which nearly complete an aggregate and attest to the line's chromatic saturation and the possible segmentation into [0246]+[0] pentachords. One might also parse the line in order to show the trichordal segmentation that grows from [015] to [027] (the quartal sonority identified in Example 1 and the introduction of smaller [013] units in the line's tail. These [013] and [027] motifs, labelled 'x' and 'y' respectively, will build the two chief 'themes' of the first subject group. The line can also be segmented according to its constituent diatonic collections. It might be segmented into D minor and G♯ minor, followed by C minor and F♯ minor. These tritonal pairings attest to the line's chromatic nature. This analysis of the violin line demonstrates

how Sessions employs tonally neutral material, such as [013] and [027] trichords, in order to prolong tonal harmonies: by placing structural pitches at the extremes of contour or at the beginnings and endings of lines. The opening chord functions as both a tonic, D minor, with added neighbours and a collection of dyads independent of tonality. Sessions will explore both features of this chord in his first and second subject groups.

4. THE FIRST SUBJECT

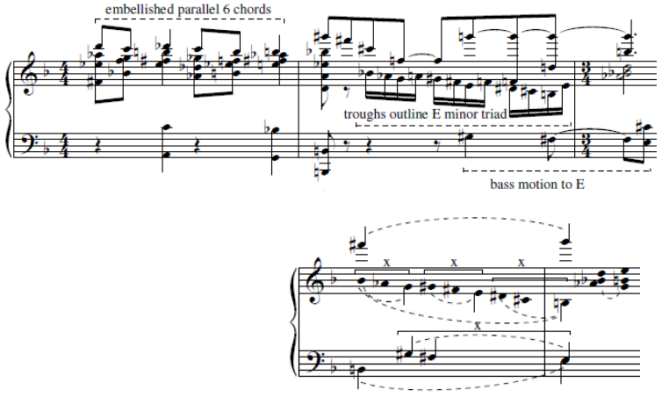
The first subject is rather complicated from both tonal and motivic points of view and so it may help to clarify its main points by first investigating its musically simpler B section. In measure 11, Sessions introduces a new theme, presented in Example 4.



Ex. 4a. The first subject, B section, mm. 11–12.

While clearly a reworking of motif x — note the [013] trichords —, this theme rather unambiguously sugests F minor. In the same way that Straus hears melodic fragments in Stravinsky as suggesting not only keys, but common tonal harmonisations, we might look to extract from Sessions' harmony the normative, tonal core. This melody outlines a fourth. This fourth F–B♭ and an additional fourth C–F can be found in the accompaniment to this melody, first in the lower strings. Thus there is a hint of the Stravinskian structural fourth span in this passage. The passage also includes pitches not diatonic to F minor. They are neighbours that do not always resolve: the B and G♭ in the bass in m. 11 clearly function as neighbours to the C and F that precede them in register and the D♭–G♭ on beat 2 function as neighbours to the C and F that follow. This simultaneity of chord-tone with non-chord-tone results in the dissonant surface. It becomes almost immediately apparent that the complex musical surface is both acting as a prolongation of F minor *and* a development and contrapuntal combination of the motives stated so far. The inner line — in the horns — refers to the whole-tone dyads of the opening chord. The first horn plays C–D♭–G♭, a variation on the [027] call of motif y whereas the lower horn plays B♭–C♭–D♭, [013].

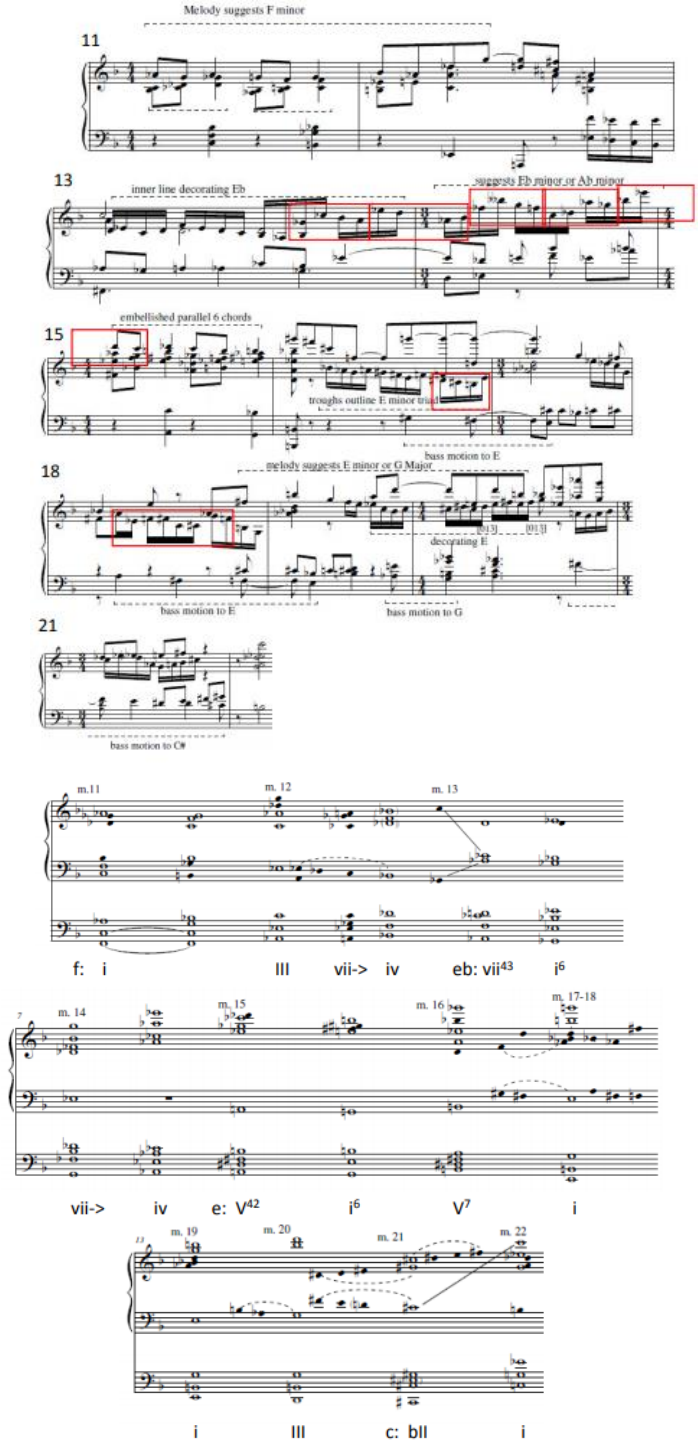
In measures 15–17, Sessions suggests V–I motion in E minor (see Example 5). This motion is similarly obscured by a dissonant inner line. This line embellishes an outline of an E minor triad with descending thirds whose constituent pitches are not always diatonic to E minor. The melody arrives on G before the bass has had to time to fully resolve. The inclusion of chromatic embellishing tones and the temporal displacement of voices are devices used to obscure the underlying harmonic progression.



Ex. 4b. The first subject, B section, mm. 15–17.

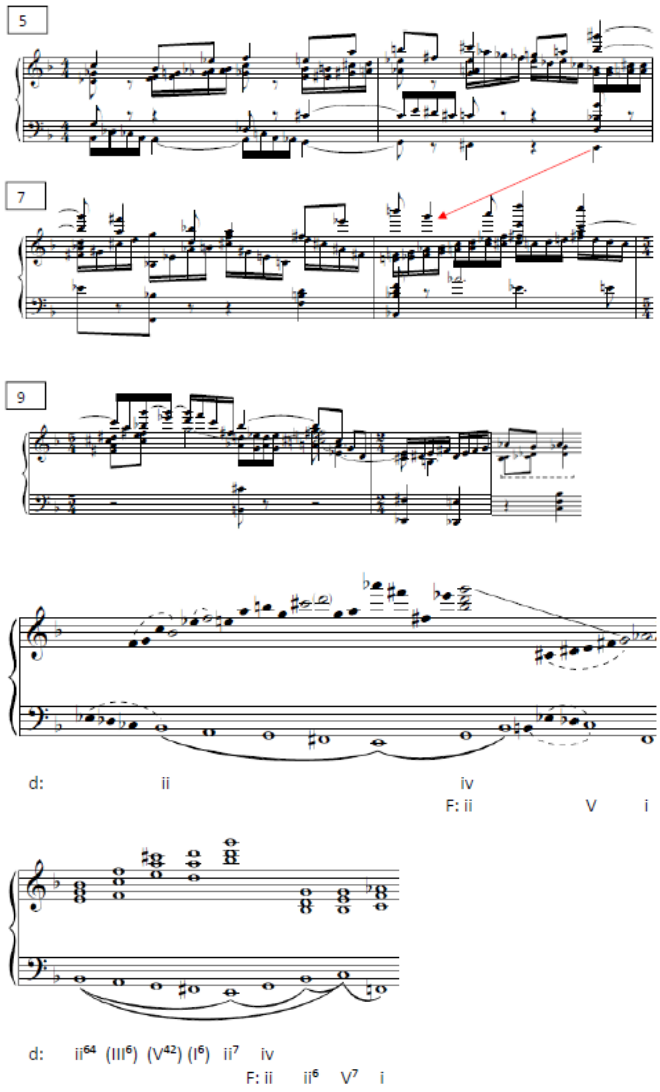
The musical surface of the entire B section is presented in Example 6 with a few rhythmic changes and omissions for ease of reading. Segments of the melodic line suggest various possible key areas. The melody in mm. 11–12 suggests F minor, its answer in mm. 13–14 suggests E♭ minor, a third statement of this theme in mm. 15–16 and a new idea added in mm. 17–18 suggest E minor. These suggestions of tonal areas then inform a possible harmonic reduction of the passage. The passage divides neatly into a progression in F minor, E-flat minor, E minor and C minor. Ultimately, we can extract a highly conventional harmonic underpinning to the often chaotic surface. The inner voice figures in sixteenth notes are frequently derived from the opening violin line — a fourth plus two steps in the opposite direction. These inner lines generally embellish the local tonic: the inner line in measure 13 decorates E♭ just as the sixteenth notes in mm. 19–20 outline an E minor triad. The final 'C minor' chord initiates the reprise of the A section and offers a slight variation on the opening D minor sonority. The tonic C, in the highest voice, is simultaneously embellished by two chromatic neighbours (B and D♭) and the added sixth A is also present.

Returning to the A section, we should begin by investigating the tonal properties of the melodic and bass material. This passage is essentially a prolongation of predominant harmony in D minor. Whereas the piece's opening bass fifth D–A had



Ex. 5. Entire B section of the first subject and its harmonic reduction.

been prolonged in the first four measures of the piece, here the fifth B♭–E is prolonged through mm. 5–8. The melody is constructed primarily out of [027] trichords, motif y. The inner voices typically move by step and ornament structural pitches, though they are chromatic and treated freely. If we temporarily omit these inner voices, we can focus upon the relationship of the bass and melody. The musical surface is dissonant largely because these two voices are often temporally displaced. The melody's B♭ in m. 5 should occur with the B♭ in the bass, but instead occurs over the bass's A. The melodic goal of the passage, G, does not arrive convincingly until m. 8 or 9, even



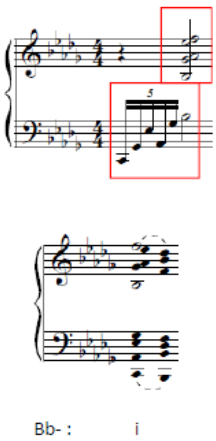
Ex. 6. A section of the first subject and its harmonic reduction.

though ii^7 is suggested by the bass as early as the last beat of m. 6. A reduction of the two voice-counterpoint normalizes the musical surface. In fact, Sessions has composed a traditional harmonic progression but has overlaid it with dissonant counterpoint.

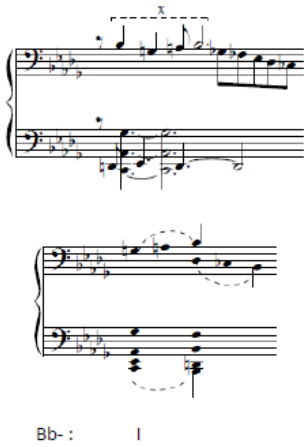
In summary, the analysis of the first subject has demonstrated how an underlying harmonic progression can be uncovered through finding fourth and fifth spans in the melody and accompaniment that suggest particular key areas and by extracting and normalising the outer voice counterpoint. Following Reti, we have traced prominent diatonic collections in the bass and melody and have shown how the musical surface, rich with dissonant detail, can be simplified in order to identify its underlying tonicality.

5. THE SECOND SUBJECT

While the confluence of the bass and melodic voices in the 1st subject group allowed for a relatively clear extraction of an underlying tonal harmonic progression, the second subject intensifies the contextual/motivic features of the earlier music



Ex. 7. Opening chord of the second subject.

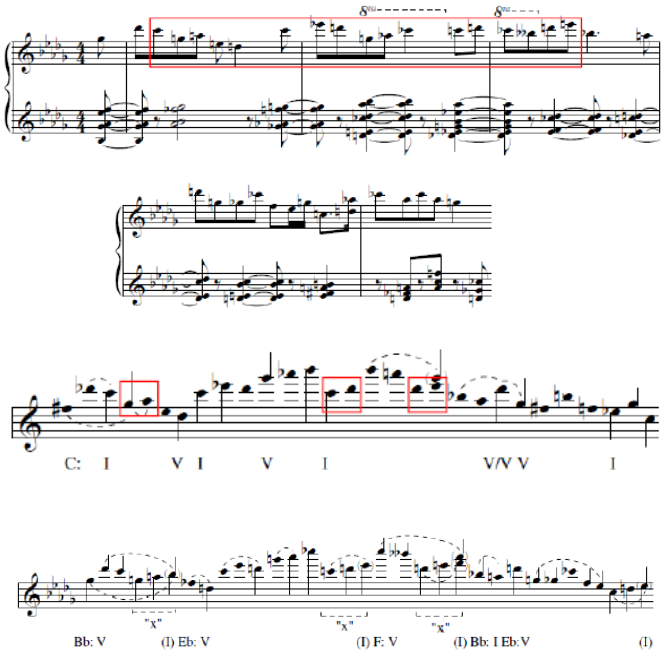


Ex. 8. Final chord of the second subject.

while slowing the tempo considerably and employing a more homophonic texture and lyrical melody — in keeping with the typical rhetoric of second subjects.

The second subject begins with a short cello figure and chord in the winds (shown in Example 7). The cello line is simply a transposition of the piece's opening chord in a new inversion with C in the bass and B♭ at the top. In previous cases where this chord or a related chord has appeared, the top voice — often in the violins — has also stated the 'tonic' — thus we might reasonably expect B♭ to be articulated as the tonic. The ensuing chord shares certain properties with the initial chord: the segmentation into whole-tone dyads, the orchestration, etc. It is a [02357] pentachord, however, and so its interval content is rather different. From a tonal standpoint, the chord appears to be an E♭ minor triad in second inversion with two additional pitches, A♭ and F, and in this way it is also very similar to the piece's opening chord.

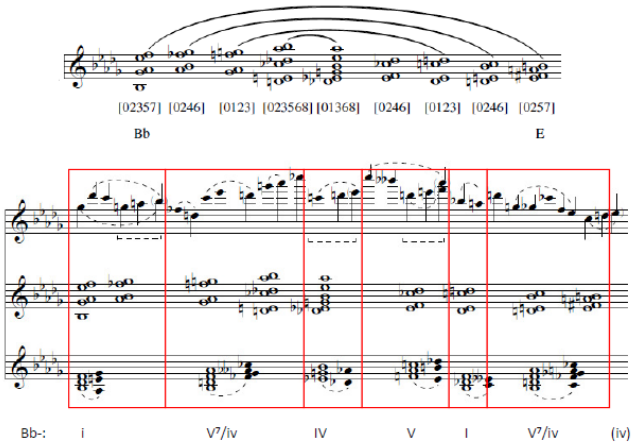
At the close of the second subject, Sessions reintroduces a variation of this chord (Example 8). Again, B♭ is stated in the highest register and might be thought of as a weak tonic. Notice the motion G–A–B♭, the same [013] trichord that makes up motif x. Here, its G and A sound like raised $\hat{6}$ $\hat{7}$ leading toward the tonic B♭. The low D has the effect of a Picardy third. We might, then, rationalize these chords as unresolved neighbours to the tonic B♭ minor. These chords suggest B♭ minor without a B♭ minor triad ever being present.



Ex. 9. The second subject's melody and its tonal interpretations.

The second subject's melodic line is composed out of smaller motivic building blocks, but their arrangement suggests no clear and consistent segmentation (Example 9). On first listening, one might be inclined to hear the melody in C Major/minor. There are numerous segments which belong to C: the first three measures, for example, are almost entirely in C Major/minor. We can map out a potential listening of this passage entirely in C as follows. There are even implied tonic-dominant progressions in this melody. But we also know that Sessions intends a B♭ minor hearing. This hearing is predicated upon motif x, the [013] trichord which typically functions as ♯$\hat{6}$ ♯$\hat{7}$ $\hat{1}$ in this piece. We can identify several [02] dyads in this melody and consider them to be incomplete occurrences of this motif. If we follow the rising [02] figures by implying 'resolutions', we are able to trace the line's allusions to B♭. This results in several "pseudo-prolongations" of conventional tonal areas: I–IV–V etc. The ability to hear this melody as prolonging multiple tonics, C and B♭, simultaneously is a key feature of its 'tonicality'. Whereas in the first

subject, our formulation of an underlying harmonic progression was guided by the relationship of melody and bass, here the accompaniment is more abstractly related to the melody. The sonic impression is of two different, unrelated musical strands developing at the same time.



Ex. 10. Melody and accompaniment in the second subject.

The chords, like the piece's opening chord, are obviously constructed out of two or more sets of whole-tone dyads, each of which moves principally by step. The resulting collections are mostly tetrachords, though additional voices are added to thicken the texture in the middle of the progression. The result is a 'fuzzy' palindrome in terms of set-classes, as shown in Example 10 — though not in terms of transformations. In his discussion of Stravinsky's *Requiem Canticles*, Straus argues that the outer chords of a passage are constructed in fifths while the central sonorities are whole-tone subsets and so less stable. Thus the Sessions can again be seen as making use of this Stravinskian technique: fifth and fourth spans establish tonic stability. The first chord contains the structural fifth B♭–F — suggesting B♭ as tonic —, while the final chord contains the structural fifth E–B. This second fifth is a tritone away from B♭ and so maximally displaced and thus represents an opposite pole of stability, perhaps analogous to a half-cadence in tonal music. We can still seek to relate the chords to the melody, however. In the same way that the piece's opening D minor triad contained within it two neighbour tones, these chords can also be reduced to triads with simultaneous neighbours. The first two chords suggest B♭ minor when the D♭ from the melody is included. The second two chords suggest V/E♭ minor. The fifth chord contains within it the resolution, E♭ Major. The sixth chord is a transposition of the second chord down by perfect fourth, suggesting F minor. The final chords again suggest V/E♭.

Overall, the analysis of the second subject reveals Sessions's most abstract employment of Stravinskian techniques. An expressive but meandering melody contains hidden motions toward conventional tonal scale-steps, while the accompanying chord progression moves from one structural fifth to another maximally far away.

6. TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

I have argued that a possible underlying tonal framework for this piece can be uncovered by tracing Sessions' employment of characteristic Stravinskian techniques which are well documented and understood theoretically and by analysing the music according to Reti's principles of pantonality. Sessions has offered us numerous clues, such as key signatures and his own analytical remarks, which have made my own analytical work somewhat easier. But I believe that similar analytical techniques might yield insights when applied to the music of other early 20th century composers, such as Schoenberg, Hindemith and Krenek. Continuing work in this vein will likely require a more systematic approach to harmonic normalisation, but in such rich and complex music a degree of subjectivity is often inescapable.

KEYWORDS

Roger Sessions, Pantonality, 20th-Century Tonality, Stravinsky.

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