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Skryabin's Late Acceleration through Hexatonic and Octatonic Space

ABSTRACT

Skryabin's last sonata is segregated into areas of major third chord-relationships (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 diverse ways in recent times. Kallis (2015) describes the interaction of the acoustic, octatonic and hyper-hexatonic scales in the tenth sonata, while Callendar has explored the application of neo-Riemannian transformations (1999), all building on the most sustained critique which was James Baker's book (1986) — a synthesis of Schenkerian and Fortean technology. To my mind, however, none have fully grasped the way that the segregation of different spaces coheres within a broader framework. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate, using Skryabin's Sonata No. 10, that a broadly-defined diatonic thread weaves together octatonic (OCT) and hexatonic (HEX) spaces, taking account of the charges and 'discharges' (Harrison 1994) of tense sonorities that push through the space in which they are defined.

1. OCTATONIC SONATA FORM

Skryabin is famed for his extended chords, each with six or seven tones in them. But he is also noted the strict way in which he transposes or alternates these around a T^3, T^6 or T^9 cycle. This creates a general octatonic cycle with four root chords. Of course, some notes in the piece are alien to these, but such passages are nonetheless fundamentally octatonic in so far as their basic chords and voice-leading fit within a single octatonic (8–28) collection. This happens in countless pieces and creates a static environment, because the leading-notes of the four chords are the four missing pitches from any given 8–28 collection. Thus, while these chords interchange quite freely within vast swathes of the music, there is no real resolution (or 'discharge') between chords; in this way, an octatonic collection can behave *as if* it was a single *function*, by which I mean tonic, subdominant or dominant in the *Funktionstheorie* tradition. This claim obviously requires development and qualification. In 2011, I proposed that Skryabin has a very strong tendency to rotate octatonic cycles at formal levels, further articulating a kind of functional resonance (Smith 2011). Thus, I showed that Sonata No. 6 rotates the three octatonic functions as shown in Figure 1. This displays a standard sonata form, with primary and secondary themes in the exposition as normal. Note that there is a rotation of three octatonic-functions (T–S–D–T), rather than a more normalized dialectic of T–D–T. Note also, the Schubertian type of recapitulation in which the movement to the Tonic is delayed because of the whole-sale transposition of the exposition as the recapitulation. The same pattern happens in the 8th Sonata.[1] This type of rotation works fluidly because there are releases of tension from one set of octatonic chords *into* the next along a D–T axis. So, for example, the chords of D^7, F^7, $A\flat^7$, B^7 of the primary-themes create a store of energy, which is then released into G^7, $B\flat^7$, $D\flat^7$, E^7 of the secondary-themes, resolving tension like a V–I cadence. The same then happens into the DEV, with C^7, $E\flat^7$, $G\flat^7$, A^7, and again in the recapitulation. This leads me now to my first premise, which is that *octatonics store functional energy*; they need to move into the other two scales if they want to release their energy. Moving from T–S momentarily releases a kind of pressure-valve; so does moving from S–D and D–T.

EXPO		DEV	RECAP	
P	S		P	S
T ($OCT_{1,2}$) D^7 F^7 $A\flat^7$ B^7	S ($OCT_{0,2}$) G^7 $B\flat^7$ $D\flat^7$ E^7	D ($OCT_{0,1}$) C^7 $E\flat^7$ $G\flat^7$ A^7		T ($OCT_{1,2}$) D^7 F^7 $A\flat^7$ B^7

Fig. 1. Skryabin, Sonata No. 6, Formal Structure.

2. HEXATONIC INJECTION

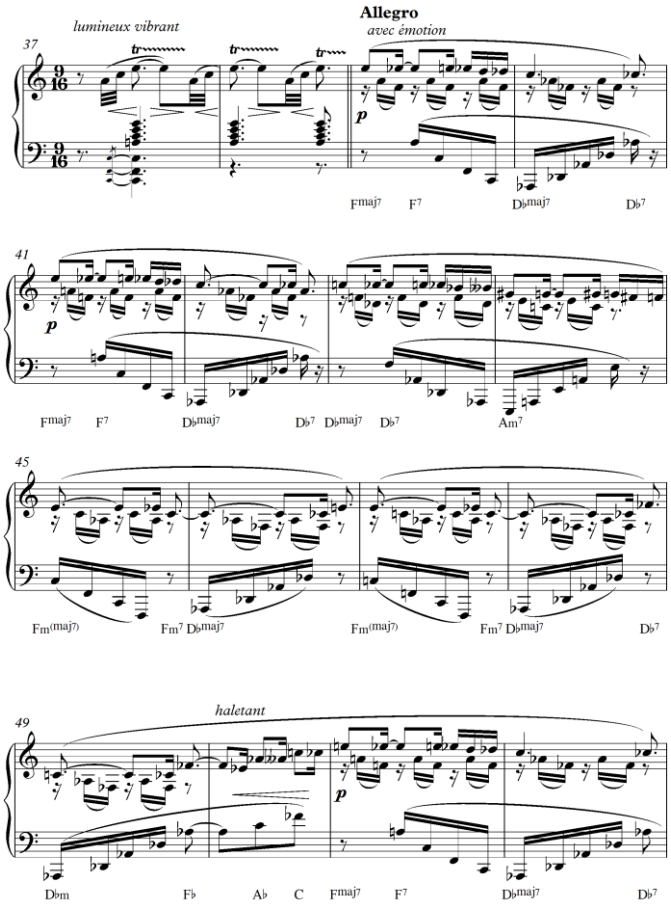
In Skryabin's very late style, things change. James Baker suggests that the set 6–20 (the hexatonic scale) is injected into Skryabin's last sonata, the 10th. Vasilis Kallis provides an excellent analysis of this piece (2015), taking us through the various interacting scale types that are used in the acoustic-octatonic one, the hyper-hexatonic one and so on. Simplifying things, I come to a slightly different conclusion by focusing on short sections of the piece that are broadly hexatonic, in that chords relate adjacently by T^4, and T^8 — major thirds — hexatonics.

Hexatonics, unlike octatonics can, I argue, release tension, because, for example, in $HEX_{0,11}$ the leading notes for available triad (C major, C minor, A♭ major, A♭ minor, E major, E minor) are found in the others, so there is a ♭ pitch in the chords of E major, E minor and A♭ minor, that can release leading-note tension into the chord of C. So, in a passage running F→D♭→A, for example, the hexatonic scale can change function (such as S→D→T). If an octatonic context is established, one plausible hearing of a hexatonic passage, then, is that it is transitional, passing through the three different octatonic functional areas. I would claim therefore that, *whereas octatonics store functional energy, hexatonics release it*.

Turning to the tenth sonata, I take the first (and main) passage of hexatonic motion (b. 37) to be a transition section of the

[1] As Ross Edwards analyses (forthcoming).

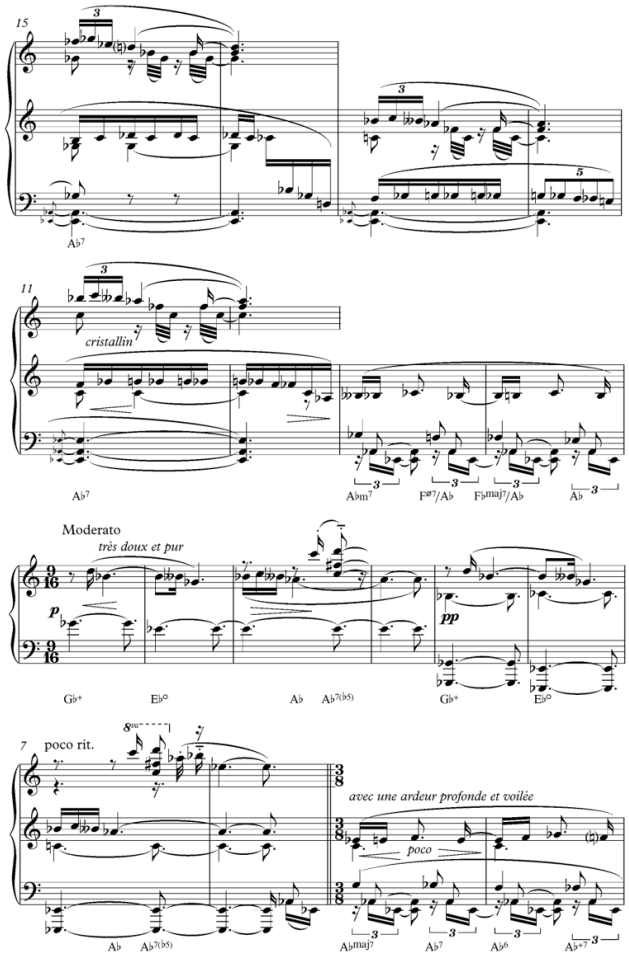
exposition (Example 1). Note that the tendency is to categorise this hexatonic section as the primary theme (Kallis 2015), whereas I regard it as the transition. This is in part because the music is so mobile and active, pushing through hexatonic cycles, whereas the more 'stable' tendency of other thematic groups is to remain within an octatonic collection. This section moves from the T to the S and to the D to coincide with the secondary theme. Between bars 40–60 we push between F, D♭ and then A and F. This hexatonic inhalation-exhalation becomes accelerative in the miniature interjection by the cycle F♭, A♭ and C which moves backwards around a new hexatonic cycle in a breathless attempt to catch-up the speed — the French instruction being *haletant*: 'breathless'; 'panting'. To finish this hexatonic interjection, the C resolves to F as V–I.



Ex. 1. Skryabin, Sonata No. 10, bb. 37–52.

3. FORMAL STRUCTURE

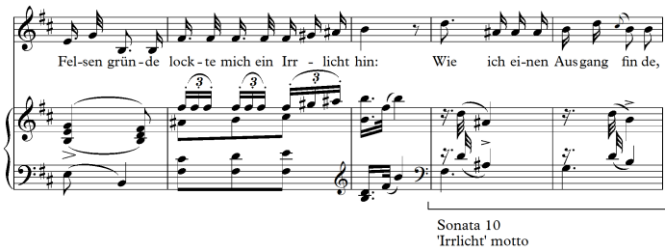
This thematic-harmonic account works well with my view of the Tenth Sonata's formal structure (Figure 2), which shows a rotation T–S–D–T, albeit a more unusual one than hitherto displayed in Skryabin's other sonatas. My formal model shows a marked shift in Skryabin's tonal balance in this sonata; it is now front-loaded so that the D function is already resolved into the T early in the Development; this shifts the tonal weight of the sonata, allowing Skryabin space for the subcutaneous formal rotations to break through to the surface. Remember, that my view of the hexatonic section just described, is that it fulfills the role of transition. This leads us from the T-OCT$_{0,2}$ function through the S-OCT$_{1,2}$ function, ready for the secondary-zone to begin in the D-OCT$_{1,2}$. However, in Sonata No.10, only the exposition and developmental 'pre-core' are functionally mobile; the development and recapitulation emphasize the T function again. It is worth remembering that my view of the form departs from those in current circulation, mainly by Baker and Kallis, and I make a brief digression here to explicate this, before returning to this model. Let us therefore consider the beginning of the piece, shown in Example 2.



Ex. 2. Skryabin, Sonata No. 10, bb. 1–14.

The opening 'cuckoo' motto, for me, has a direct origin in Schubert's *Winterreise*; it is the *Irrlicht* — the willow-the-wisp, that guides the wanderer through the forest to a *rendezvous* with his fate. Schubert's song (see Example 3) prefigures Skryabin's sonata directly. Skryabin described the sonata as 'expressing the impression of a forest', which builds on the mysterious light (the *Irrlicht*) which beckons him through the forests (Bowers 1996, 90). Skryabin seemingly lifted 'Irrlicht''s motto quite candidly, and the entire sonata becomes a new variation on this motto. The tendency is to consider this opening to be parageneric: an introduction. The reason I hear the initial gesture as being so crucial to the form as to label it the primary theme, not as parageneric space, is partly its role of beginning a series of formal rotations as the deep level of the sonata; it constantly returns, and the rotational substructure is predicated upon it (see the deepest level of Figure 2). The opening mystery chord — the willow the wisp — has hexatonic-compatible pitch content (an augmented chord), moving to an octatonic-compatible diminished chord rather than Schubert's triad, which means that it serves as a microcosm of the whole sonata

the opening pitches, become chord relationships, connecting particularly strongly with the unstable transition sections. But note how this settles down to an exploration of the $OCT_{1,2}$ French-sixth chords, and so begins a polarization of D and A♭, leading to the Transitions' springboard of F^7, before it digresses through hexatonics. The *Irrlicht* (the little light) in the sonata quickly becomes lost in the dense octatonic forest. Thus, to my mind, these hexatonic sections are transitional; they are functionally mobile, transporting us to new octatonic realms as part of a rotational structure.



Ex. 3. Schubert's 'Irrlicht' from *Winterreise*, bb. 6-10.

EXPOSITION							DEVELOPMENT					
$P^1 \rightarrow P^2$		$P^1 \rightarrow$	Tr	S^1	S^2	S^1	$P^1 \rightarrow P^2$		$P^1 \rightarrow P^2$		Tr	
1–8	9–28	29–38	37–72	73–83	84–99	100–115	116–123	124–131	132–139	140–157	158–183	
Tonic			S→D	D				D → T	T			
R1		R2					R3 →		R4 → climax 1			

RECAPITULATION									
$P^1 \rightarrow$	$P^2 \rightarrow$	(S^1)	Tr	S^1	S^2	P^2	S^1	NT	P^1
184–191	192–212	213–221	222–259	260–270	271–293	294–305	306–307	308–359	360
R5 → climax 2						R6 R5 → climax 3: new dance			R7

Fig. 2. Formal Structure of Sonata No. 10.

4. CONCLUSION

This all means that, despite the piece's octatonic and hexatonic roots, a general rotation of function (T–S–D–T) cuts indiscriminately through the different harmonic spaces. But the kind of tension-releases that occur in the mobile section are not fundamentally hexatonically driven. We are talking about *diatonic* drive, pushing through hexatonics, and perhaps even trying to push through octatonics, but at different speeds. The rotation of function described above, based on charges and discharges of leading-tones, 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. And in this case, there are formal implications. My conclusion then is that *diatonicism* — at least a type of *Funktion* that derives from diatonic roots — *runs its course through Hexatonic and Octatonic spaces with different intensities*. Octatonics, remember, store energy, while hexatonics, to my hearing at least, release it.

KEYWORDS

Neo-Riemannian Theory, Early 20th-Century Music, Diatonicism, Harmony and Voice-Leading, Skryabin.

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