

Matthew Boyle*¹

*Indiana University, Bloomington, United States of America

¹mlboyle@indiana.edu

Harmonic Materialities: Syntactic and Statistical

ABSTRACT

Background

Discussions of primo *ottocento* opera, especially those by Gioachino Rossini, have understated its harmonic qualities. Even recent attempts to rehabilitate Italianate harmony, such as Rothstein 2008 and 2012, have only normalized it within a German-centric tradition. In this paper I argue two things: 1) that the musical interest of Italianate harmony is fundamentally different from Austro-German harmony, and 2) that this attitude in scholarly discourse is the residue of a historical realignment of the meanings of harmony occurring around 1800. Here, harmony shed its early usage as a descriptor of texture and instrumentation while keeping its current sense as the sum of the abstract rules governing chordal objects (and those very objects). These antiquated meanings of harmony are preserved in the writings of J. G. Sulzer, Charles Burney, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Stendhal (Henri Beyle), François-Joseph Fétis, and the Italian pedagogical tradition. They are also applied to Italianate music deep into the nineteenth century, well after these meanings would have been avoided for music north of the Alps. Harmony, in short, once was used to describe musical syntaxes and musical textures, usually in one of four ways: 1) as instrumental (i.e., as opposed to vocal); 2) as a measure of contrapuntal density; 3) as relating to timbre; and 4) as a measure of euphony.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

I argue that harmonic interest in the stylistically conservative operas of Rossini largely rests on its pre-shifted meaning. This seismic change was facilitated by Rameau's theories. Before discarding its textural meanings, harmony did not stand solely as a prime exemplar of what Leonard Meyer has called syntactic parameters in music. It instead encompassed both syntactic and statistical parameters more or less equally. Moreover, this shift, viewed from another light, can be interpreted as an instance of the separation of the spiritual (conceptual, syntactic) from the material (spatial, statistical), a historical process that Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht reads as a central project of modernity. I explore the analytical potential of a broader conception of harmony in two passages by Rossini: the introduction to *Cenerentola* and Elena's rondò finale to *Donna del Lago*. I propose that re-expanding the semantic scope of harmony to its pre-Ramellian borders is essential for understanding the conservative tradition of nineteenth-century Italian opera. Instead of emphasizing metaphysical chromaticism, Italian operas place aesthetic attention of the material qualities of harmony. It should then come as no surprise that Bonifazio Asioli 1836 dedicates its final 200 pages to orchestral textures and their relationships to various affects.

Methods

I use Leonard Meyer's conception of primary and secondary parameters to redefine harmony. I also use Gumbrecht's model of aesthetic engagement where one's attention oscillates between meaning and presence effects as well as the reception history of Rossini's operas to sketch two provisional frameworks designed to examine the relationship between harmony's textural material dimension and its well-explored syntactic realm. The first, based on an analysis by Fétis of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, finds violations of syntactic rules as a compositional strategy for highlighting the presence effects of secondary parameters. The second views presence effects as important elements in conventionalized (and syntactic) musical 'constructions' (Gjerdingen and Bourne 2015), which in *ottocento* opera have a prominent textural/timbral component. I will briefly discuss one such textural construction with an emphasis on pizzicato strings.

Implications

Such an attitude towards harmony may suggest further paths of dialogue between the traditional methodologies of Anglophone

Music theory and recent trends in operatic criticism that prize the material, bodily, and drastic components of musical experiences over the compositional, technical, and increasingly the hermeneutic.

Keywords

Ludwig van Beethoven, Construction Grammar, Harmony, History of Music Theory, Instrumentation, *Messa di voce*, Orchestration, Opera, Pizzicato, Plenitude, Presence, Gioachino Rossini, Schema Theory, Texture, Timbre, Giuseppe Verdi, Vocal Music.

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