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Integrating Tonal Transformations and Prolongations: A Case Study of Richard Strauss's 'September' from *Vier Letzte Lieder* (1948)

ABSTRACT

Background

Recent research on chromaticism in tonal music has opened up a wide array of analytical possibilities. In the studies of shifting interactions between diatonic and chromatic space, a variety of approaches in consideration of 'centricity' have been proposed. In these approaches, one debate continues to rage, namely the concern for explaining the tonal complexities of late-Romantic (and neo-Romantic) chromaticism by either regarding or disregarding particular tonal centers. Accordingly, a sort of analytical dichotomy arises between Schenkerian models (either orthodox or liberal), which espouse tonal centers, and non-Schenkerian models, primarily neo-Riemannian theory, which operate independently of them.

Despite the common assumption that these approaches yield opposing analytical readings, this paper intends to demonstrate that they can interact in analytical praxis.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

The analytical goal of this study is to demonstrate that a Schenkerian 'prolongational' approach and neo-Riemannian 'transformational' approach can be wedded in an attempt to place parsimonious voice-leading transformations and, more importantly, specific recursive motives modelled by neo-Riemannian operations within a functionally tonal context. In this sense, the approach demonstrates that the neo-Riemannian methodology is not entirely isolated from tonal discourse. By applying this idea analytically to Strauss's 'September' from *Vier Letzte Lieder* (1948), this paper will show how the plural integration of Schenkerian prolongations and neo-Riemannian transformations contributes to understanding the parsimonious voice leading in this piece. One of the benefits of this integration is the opportunity for the neo-Riemannian operations to highlight specific recursive motives within a functionally tonal context. Ultimately, this study will show that the decisive function of the recurring linear connections (motives) is to achieve inner coherence and continuity despite a high degree of chromaticism.

Methods

In order to model the synthesis of neo-Riemannian operations and Schenkerian prolongational readings, I will reveal networks of meaningful linear connections generated from neo-Riemannian voice-leading parsimony when a specific *Stufe* is prolonged — what I call 'linear scale-degree motives'. The term suggests my concern with combining neo-Riemannian theory with Schenkerian scale degrees, a concern that brings to the fore a sense of linearity and harmonic

movement. In the analytical praxis, the most important concern for conceiving any linear scale-degree motive generated from transformational operations is that the motives are always derived from the deep-structural tonic(s).

By creating Schenkerian sketches that also reflect neo-Riemannian operations, it is possible to find that the operations occurring on different levels construe relatively long-range harmonic relationships. Consequently, the analysis in this paper can show that the linear scale-degree motives generated by neo-Riemannian parsimonious voice-leading transformation may possibly arise not only in short-range but also in medium- or long-range tonal events. To determine the relative importance of the chords that comprise foreground or middleground levels of neo-Riemannian operations, this study identifies three necessary conditions. With these conditions, the most profound, 'structural' neo-Riemannian operations are determined in the prolongational levels.

To establish these conditions, in particular, the analyses in this paper are heavily indebted to Strauss's thought on how to treat the conditions of the post-tonal middleground with the concept of prolongation. In his article, he states that, 'prolongation is our most potent analytical tool in a certain musical environment' (Strauss 1987, 19). With this principle, he establishes four kinds of conditions for more convincing approaches to the large-scale (i.e., middleground) organization for post-tonal music. His system for manipulating the prolongational concepts to post-tonal music catalyzed my understanding of the neo-Riemannian middleground operations. Accordingly, all four conditions presented in his article provide a benchmark in terms of imposing my own conditions for neo-Riemannian middleground operations.

In this study, three conditions necessary for neo-Riemannian prolongation are identified:

- Condition 1 (the third relations condition, either chromatic or diatonic): a consistent set of relationships between harmonies by either chromatic third or diatonic third;
- Condition 2 (the meaningful linear scale-degree motive condition): a clear distinction between the vertical and horizontal dimensions;
- Condition 3 (measure length that musically sustains condition): a musically decisive piece of evidence.

Crucially, all these conditions allow us to make meaningful assertions about large-scale organization for neo-Riemannian operations, if accepting a lenient attitude toward the Schenkerian concept of prolongation.

Implications

The concept of linear scale-degree motive proposed in this paper involves careful considerations of thematic content, especially by the recurring linear motions, and strenuous

harmonic activity. Furthermore, the analytical method that addresses these considerations grapples with the observation of hierarchical relationships in the Schenkerian sketches. In this sense, recognizing certain types of linear scale-degree motives within ‘September’ will ultimately allow for several merits: 1) how linear scale-degree motives are generated from the synthesis of harmonic and linear phenomena that emerge from a Schenkerian analysis; 2) how the harmonic relationships are dependent on thematic coherence; 3) how the recurring linear scale-degree motives relate to certain types of neo-Riemannian operations to express compositional consistency and inner coherence. With these analytical results, I believe that exploring Strauss’s music may yield increased rewards if analysts are not limited to only one approach. Embracing certain aspects of different analytical methodologies can potentially allow us to better understand musical works from multiple angles.

Keywords

Chromaticism, Schenkerian Analysis, Neo-Riemannian Transformational Theory, Late Nineteenth-Century Music.

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