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On Metrically Weak Cadential 6/4s

ABSTRACT

Background

An intriguing and under-investigated byway of 19th century harmonic practice is the phenomenon of cadential 6/4s that appear in the 'wrong' metric setting — that is, metrically weak instead of strong. Harmony and cadential progression thus seem to be working against the metric grain. My paper explores the effects of this on the perception of meter, and investigates how composers exploit this in a variety of idiomatic techniques.

Heinrich Schenker referred to the phenomenon indirectly, in connection with the idea of a 'triumph of absolute meter' (meaning the power of meter to assert itself over conditions of harmonic stability).

Carl Schachter (1980) later explained it as the 'anticipating 6/4', a metrically weak 6/4 anticipating a metrically strong root-position V). Although theoretically sound, this begs some important questions: First, hearing it as unambiguously metrically weak downplays its propensity to express a metrical contradiction or ambiguity — as a compositional resource that composers could and did creatively exploit. Second, it is not really analogous to anticipation in the usual sense of the pre-empting of an (otherwise metrically normative) melodic or harmonic event (and thus adding to the overall time occupied by it). It instead functions as a temporal shift of the *entire V6/4–5/3 complex*, but (crucially) without adding anything to the time occupied by it as a whole. Third, it fails to distinguish the different phenomenon of real anticipatory 6/4s in the more conventional sense just described (which do in fact exist). Schachter also overstates its rarity — it is in fact frequently encountered in certain genres (especially, though by no means restricted to, waltzes).

Our conditioning to hear cadential 6/4s as metrically strong is deeply ingrained, so much so that the chord itself possesses the power to reorient our perception of meter (Rothstein 1995; Ng 2009). When the chord appears in a metrically weak context, the established metrical framework and the chord's natural metrical 'signal' appear to pull in opposite directions, producing a kind of 'metric flux'. This is well modeled by the concept of *shadow meter* (Samarotto 1999; Rothstein 1995).

Aims and Repertoire Studied

My examples are drawn from music from Mozart to Dvorák, and above all the waltzes of J. Strauss II, whose varied and inventive treatment of this phenomenon was unmatched. Analytical focus is metrical, harmonic, and phrase-structural: for example, the compositional exploitation of conflict between real and shadow meters; and the artful interplay between hypermetric levels, creating effects of hypermetrical acceleration within a symmetrical phrase-structural framework.

Methods

Analytical approach is Schenkerian, incorporating recent theories of hypermeter, and its interaction with phrase structure.

For practical purposes I define the operative meter — or shallow hypermeter — contextually in individual cases, according to the harmonic rhythm of the cadential 6/4 (and, by extension, of its 5/3 resolution). This harmonic rhythm reflects precisely the level at which the chord's accentual status (strong or weak) emerges; hence also the emergence of any resultant conflict between real and shadow meters. I posit three standard durational models, as defined by the rhythmic unit occupied by the cadential 6/4: 1-bar, 2-bar, and 4-bar models.

Two idiomatic features associated with the phenomenon are, first, its preceding by a metrically strong pre-dominant harmony (normally II^6) in a phrase-initiating role, creating a powerful harmonic impetus to the phrase structures; and second, the propensity of the shadow meter, once established, to self-replication, in repeated phrases generating a 'looping' effect.

An important compositional resource is the weak 6/4's susceptibility to reinterpretation — both metrical and harmonic. For example, the shadow meter can usurp the real meter, creating a large-scale metric reorientation, with a shift from beginning- to end-accented phrasing as a climactic shaping device (Ng 2009; Temperley 2003).

Harmonic techniques include the potential for exploiting a double harmonic meaning. One possibility here involves playing on the identity of so-called 'inverted cadential V6/4s' (Cutler 2009) with real I^6 chords. Another kind of harmonic play involves different functional categories of 6/4 chords: e.g., the reinterpretation of a weak cadential 6/4 as passing, with ramifications for phrase- and cadential type. This can work in two ways: first, the same 6/4 chord means one thing at one level, and another thing at a different level; alternatively, the 6/4 chord functions as a 'fork in the road' when the passage is repeated, taking a different direction the second time.

Implications

Why is this phenomenon so prevalent in waltzes and related repertoires?

First, regarding its rationale as a compositional technique, the 'metric flux' effect of accentual ambiguity was evidently recognized as a useful strategy for counteracting the (potentially) excessively foursquare effect of the dance's repetitive periodicity of phrase construction. Second, as the other side of the same coin, the 'triumph of absolute meter' that Schenker observed in the waltz's typical beginning-accented phrase construction provided a singularly viable context within which the metric structure is stable and predictable enough to withstand a degree of disruption from weak 6/4s. A third factor

was surely its aesthetic aptness: the metric flux as one crucial factor contributing to that heady, intoxicating effect (in the words of McKee 2011, the 'delirium') so distinctive to this dance genre.

Finally, the paper reassesses some previously unchallenged assumptions regarding an important but still under-explored aspect of 19th century harmonic practice. It demonstrates many hitherto-unremarked compositional techniques, with particular reference to a still under-theorized repertoire (the waltzes of J. Strauss II).

Keywords

Harmony, Meter, Common-Practice Tonality, Musical Perception, Rhythm, Schenkerian Analysis.

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