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Francois Couperin's *La Flore* (5th Ordre): Motivic Replication, Approach to III, and Analytic Methodology

ABSTRACT

Background

François Couperin's keyboard miniature *La Flore* is beautiful, restrained, and austere. Channan Willner (2006) has suggested that, small as it is, its influence can be observed in later works by Haydn, Beethoven, and Brahms. This paper comments on the following aspects of *La Flore*: 1) a persistent motive and its interaction with the piece's structure; 2) how the opening measures both set up the motive and relate to the closing measures; 3) the route to the mediant; 4) the final section of the piece and whether or not it is a coda; and 5) the potential awkwardness of integrating the motive, which moves from scale degrees 5 up to 8 and back again, within an Urlinie structure which descends to 1. This abstract does not address 3) and 4). Regarding 5), I look at a reading by Charles Burkhart which incorporates David Neumeyer's ideas of the ascending Urlinie (1987a) and three-voice Ursatz (1987b).

Upon repeated playings of *La Flore* one becomes aware of a curious sense of monotony, perhaps of *déjà vu*. This sense derives from a persistently repeated motive, replicated on multiple levels: E–F♯–G–(F♯–G♯)–A–G–F–E. The motive inhabits the upper tetrachord of the A minor scale. It appears in different harmonic contexts, but is pitch-specific, always in the 4-octave register. It occurs in mm. 3–5, and on a somewhat larger level in 3–8, 8–11, 19–22, and 23–26. In addition, a case can be made for an over-arching version of the motive that embraces the individual instances and covers almost the entire piece. Here the expansion is one-sided — the ascent from E to A (mm. 3–25) is greatly enlarged, but the descent to E is not (mm. 25–26). From E, retained all the way from the initial E Kopfton in m. 3, I read a quick Urlinie descent in mm. 26–27. I read the bass arpeggiation as I–III–V–I. To do so, however, I somewhat devalue the I⁶ chords in mm. 21 and 25, seeing them more as the result of a 5–6 motion from III in m. 19. It is also possible to read the Urlinie descent in the coda (mm. 27–35) — which would then not be a coda. In that alternative reading, the large bass/harmonic structure would be I–(III)–I–V–I, because I is so strongly stated in m. 27 and 31.

The motive is prepared in the first three measures by a series of unfoldings in the right hand which open up a gap of a fourth between A₄ and E₄. This gap is then neatly filled in by the motive, which moves up and down between E₄ and A₅. So a space is created for the motive, which is then plugged in to it.

A key issue in the analysis of *La Flore* is the interaction of structure (in the Schenkerian sense) and the motive, which is so insistent that it really can't be ignored. Because the motive moves between E and the A above, but the Urlinie (if read from 5) descends from E to the A below, the two inhabit different regions of the A minor scale. In a sense, it could be said

that the Urlinie is authentic and the motive is plagal. A corollary of this is that the Kopfton from 5 isn't very involved in the motive aside from its first and last notes, but tends to hover statically until the end of the piece. Reading the piece from 3 doesn't alleviate that situation; it just makes it worse. Charles Burkhart's reading of *La Flore* addresses this problem by totally integrating the Urlinie with the motive. It does this by replacing Schenker's descending Urlinie forms with an ascending Urlinie $\hat{5}-\hat{6}-\hat{7}-\hat{8}$, introduced by David Neumeyer (1987a). He also adopts Neumeyer's idea of adding a structural middle voice to Schenker's two-voice Ursatz model (1987b).

Burkhart's Urlinie E–F♯–G–G♯–A consists of the rising part of the motive above bass A–C–E–A (I–III–V–I). Burkhart reads mm. 19–27 as dominant prolongation with the leading tone G♯ retained throughout, only reaching the final Urlinie note A in m. 27. The previous arrivals from G♯ to A in mm. 20–21 and 24–25 he reads as dissonant neighbor 6/4 chords over a retained dominant pedal. In contrast, I hear the passage basically as tonic prolongation, with the G♯ resolving to A in m. 21 and again in m. 25. That is, I hear A as a goal and a resolution of G♯, not as an accented neighbor supported by a neighbor 6/4. But it is crucial to Burkhart's reading to hear this passage as dominant prolongation; otherwise, what is to prevent the Urlinie from reaching the goal A prematurely (before the main cadence) in mm. 21 or 25? The difference between Burkhart's and my readings accentuates the question: how important is it to align motivic replication with large-scale structure?

Aims and Repertoire Studied

François Couperin's *La Flore* (5th ordre).

Methods

Schenkerian analysis.

Implications

Multi-level motivic replication and saturation is a key feature of *La Flore*, leading to two questions and avenues of future research: 1) how widespread is motivic replication/saturation in other Couperin *clavecin* works? and 2) how important is it to align motivic replication with large-scale structure?

Keywords

François Couperin, Schenkerian Analysis, French Baroque, Motive, Music Analysis, Heinrich Schenker, Charles Burkhart.

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