7.6: General Post-Tonal Resources - Analyzing a Post-Tonal Piece from Scratch

What makes post-tonal music so interesting is the uniqueness of each piece. As György Ligeti points out, many post-tonal works make use of “one-of-a-kind forms” (“On Form in New Music,” 1966). In the best cases, these one-of-a-kind forms can make listening to this music very engaging. (In the worst cases, it can be quite disorienting and frustrating.) In most cases, though, this constant uniqueness makes analysis difficult, as there is not one process or one set of tools that can help musicians figure out the structure and meaning of a piece.

However, there are some general principles that can guide our engagement with post-tonal works. Keeping these principles — really, questions — in mind early in the analytical process can help us relate what we are hearing to what we already know, and can help us figure out what tools and procedures to use as we dig deeper into the piece.

Starting out

When engaging a post-tonal work for the first time, the following three questions can offer great help in knowing how to conduct an analysis of the work:

**What is the form of the work?** Even if we cannot get a clear answer like ABA’ right away, certain moments in the music will jump out of the texture as we listen — climaxes, points of arrival, moments when things change. When we hear these moments, we can note them for further analysis: What made that moment sound like a high point or an arrival? What specifically changed at that moment? If our ears latched onto it the first time, there’s a good chance that it is important, and some composers purposefully use those clearly audible moments to help listeners make sense of their one-of-a-kind musical structures.

**What does the title mean?** A title like String Quartet No. 1 may not help, but a title like “The Sunken Cathedral” can be
both evocative and guide us to understand the roles that specific elements in the piece are playing in the larger structure. Again, this can help us narrow down which musical elements are most in need of our analytical attention.

**What is the historical context of the work?** Was it written by Schoenberg, Berg, or Webern? Then maybe set theory or twelve-tone theory would provide the most insightful tools. Was it written before the 1920s? Don’t bother applying mature twelve-tone theory. Was it composed by Debussy or Bartók? Then an analysis of how different pitch-class collections relate to the form might be the best place to start. Was it written by a European after WWII? Then a hunt for serial structures might be in order. Is the piece a ballet by Stravinsky? Look at the rhythm and compare it with a video of the original choreography (if you can find one). Knowing what techniques are associated with what composers/countries/time periods can help narrow things down a lot and direct our attention to musical elements that are more likely to be structurally important than others.

None of these questions will give a fool-proof answer. However, if we ask all three and they all point in the same direction, that’s a good sign that we should begin our analysis there.

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**Get your hands dirty**

Once these preliminary questions point us in one or two directions, we can start trying some things out and seeing what works. Whether you are looking for rhythmic motives, pitch-class collections, twelve-tone rows, or trichord/tetrachord cells, keep the following questions in mind as you work:

- What analyses are offering an explanation of your experience of the piece?
- What analyses are answering questions you already had about the piece?
- What analyses are opening up new, more interesting questions?
- And perhaps most importantly: *What analyses are helping you tie seemingly disparate things together with a sense of unity?*

A good musical analysis is a good theory: an explanation of your observations and experience. And since many post-tonal composers try to use a few fundamental principles to generate a diversity of musical effects, the best musical analysis is often the one that can explain the most things with the smallest number of basic principles. (This is not always the case, but if you can find a small set of basic, unifying principles, you’ve almost certainly got a good analysis.) This is what mathematicians call *elegance*, and it can go a long way in analyzing art, as well.

You may find that your initial hunch did not work out. That may be because of an analytical mistake, so check your work. However, it also may be because the composer is purposefully working against the more obvious expectations that (s)he expects listeners to bring to their work. So keep and open mind and try a few different things early on to see what looks the most promising.

Always keep in mind your experience of the piece: what stood out to you the most when you heard it the first time, the second time, the twentieth time… Grounding your analysis in your own experience will help motivate you to keep searching. But it will also take advantage of those structures that your brain already knows, but so far can only make sense of unconsciously. Tying your musical instincts to explicit concepts is easier than starting completely from scratch, and it will usually lead to a more personally satisfying result.
This resource written by Kris Shaffer.