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MT503 Graduate **Post Tonal** Theory Review

January 31, 2016

Listening Journal

During my MT501 Graduate Post Tonal Theory course I listened to and analyzed a variety of works from Wagner to Berg to Debussy to Schoenberg to Ives to Shostakovich. A lot of this music sounded like “huh” to me (as in I don’t know what the heck is going on, and it sounds like the composer doesn’t either!), but a good portion of it was highly expressive and developed to me. Here is the rundown of some works that I listened to and analyzed.

Richard Wagner – “Tristan und Isolde,” Prelude

This work of music to me is very expressive and has thoughtful texture in the different instruments used. I wish that it did not come from someone who had such messed up Nazi and hateful ideas. The instrumentation greatly enhances the texture of each note. In the beginning the strings and woodwinds are at the forefront; as soon as the percussion section makes its entrance with what sounds like the tympani roll, the brass is heard, and then pizzicato bass follows. Before we get to this build up, there is a lot of tension with the call and response of the strings and woodwind sections. For a work that is post tonal there is a lot of gravitation toward tonality in this piece. I like it like that myself since to my ears this gives the music structure and form as well as reason for the pitches to travel if that makes sense. This piece starts with sparse texture, builds up to very dense texture and dynamics, and then ends with sparse

texture and soft dynamics again. The same theme from the beginning is brought back to the end in the melody and chords.

Alban Berg – Piano Sonata, Op. 1

At first I found this one a little challenging to listen to because it really sounded like random notes on the piano and exaggerated dynamics. I even made sure to listen to multiple renditions of it played by different pianists. But after a while I think I “sort of” got the gist of this sonata. I think it is meant to sound dissonant, tense, and loud. The only thing that still makes it hard for me to listen to is that most of it is forgettable except for the first few measures which I find memorable. After that I get lost and sometimes even lose interest in listening because there are not enough memorable patterns for my brain to latch on to.

Claude Debussy – “La fille aux cheveux de lin”

When first listening to this piece I don't think of it as post tonal, but upon careful listening there are some brief moments that tonality is dismissed. The key signature is Gb major, and the piece starts and ends in Gb major, but there are some strays to other keys. For example in measure 6 it modulates to Eb major, and in measure 8 it sounds like the Gb and Ab dominant 7th third inversion chords are going to resolve to Db, but instead in measure 10 the Gb major original key once again returns. In measure 17 I hear a strong pull to the key of Cb major. In measure 20 it is resolved again to Eb major. The piece is very short but manages to move through even more keys. Most of it is in Gb major and sometimes deceptively resolves to Eb minor which is the relative major. There definitely is a mixture of tonality and shifts away from tonality in this work.

Arnold Schoenberg – Op. 11. No. 1 “Drei Klavierstücke”

I feel that at first this piece starts off as expressive, but as soon as we get to the 12th measure it sounds like a cat running across the piano. I don't know...maybe I am imagining things, but even if some calculated formula was used to write the passage at that measure it does not sound like something as thoughtful as I would prefer to hear. But perhaps that is OK; I don't have to completely understand everything I listen to, and not everything is meant to be appreciated in the same way. Measure 32 has some tension in the chord, but it is followed by octaves in the left hand which to me somehow resolves it. It is hard to tell what key this piece is in; perhaps it is “key-less” and totally atonal. For me if a piece such as this one is atonal, then I use the last chord to determine the key. In this case I think this piece ends in E minor since that is the last scale that is used at the end, and the left hand plays the E as the second to last notes in an octave. What makes this even more challenging though is that the final chord has Eb in the bass.

Charles Ives – “Tom Sails Away”

When listening to this one I think of how hard it must be to sing, but actually when looking at the score I can see that a lot of the melodic motion is by step. The hardest parts I would think is when the voice has to leap such as in measure 8 when the voice has to sing from F# to C; some people might find this hard to sing because it is a tritone interval. If someone has to sing by hear perhaps he or she could use the top voice on the piano (it's a B) in the preceding chord and then sing the C thinking of it as a half step higher. Later on in the piece there is a minor 9th interval from C# to D that must be sung; this one is also considered a difficult interval to sing. I feel that the

inclusion of vocals and lyrics brings this work to life by giving more meaning to the notes; it is especially evident near the end during the lyric “over” which is repeated three times with a descending major 6. It really helps to give more meaning to that word “over” since a major 6th is a large interval that makes sense to be used for this particular word.

Dmitri Shostakovich – Fugue No. 19 in Eb Major

When I listen to this one it at first sounds very mechanical, possibly due to the repetition of the dotted quarter note and the right hand imitating the left hand. It keeps this same motif in almost the entire piece, which to me gives me “something to latch on to.” It is not as bad as I had thought. There are some interesting running passages in both the right and left hands, and they are mostly eighth notes. The use of dynamics particularly toward the very end when it gets softer and finally ending at pp gives it more expression. I don’t hear this piece as Eb major at first due to the use of Fb in the melody. But at the very end it is very clear when it ends in an Eb major triad. To me it seems that Eb is the “anchor” of the piece. Not necessarily Eb major, but just the Eb note itself represents “home.” From measure 57 toward the end for me is when the harmonies produced by the left and right has sound interesting and tasteful to me.