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Short Assignment #2A

Graduate Theory Post-Tonal Review

Listening to Alban Berg's Piano Sonata

Despite this piece being considered atonal there are distinct patterns that make it recognizable to me. One of the most obvious examples to me is the quartal motif that appears in the beginning pickup measure; even if I hear just G, C, and F# played in that order I think of this sonata (I guess because I have heard this piece a few times during my life, but I don't think I have listened to the entire piece that carefully enough, which is why I selected this one for this assignment). Another memorable motif is the first complete measure of the piece which resurfaces in a lower pitch in the eighth measure and later on in some further measures and different keys. I also hear the distinct descending chromatic motion in the inner and lower voices in the first two measures. I tend to get "lost" when listening to this piece; I feel that I am familiar only with the first 8-16 measures or so. Later on the piece sounds less memorable despite the obvious integration and eventual development of some of the motifs that are used in the beginning.

I think that if the first measure did not make its reappearances in further measures (including in different keys), then this piece would be less memorable. Also the dynamics and rubato really help to make it more expressive than if this was played at the same volume and tempo the entire time. Since I tend to think in pitches I feel that this piece starts and ends in B minor (see how it lands on B minor in the third measure at the beginning and notice how the last four measure of the piece at the end also scream the tonality of B minor).

I played this piece for my sister during a short road trip to see what kind of reaction she would get (she is a musician too). I love the way she puts it: she says that the composer does a lot of rambling and never gets to the point and that most of the notes and patterns make no sense

and don't compel her to follow them! I agree with her to a point, but I still stand by my opinion of the first complete measure being the motif that reoccurs in different keys/pitch levels throughout the piece.

Perhaps it is the familiarity with this kind of music that makes it easier for one listener to appreciate it than another. I am still in the process of trying to appreciate music that lacks tonality...and I still feel "relieved" that this piece begins and ends in B minor! I would say that the repetition of motifs allows me to better appreciate this piece and that the lack of tonality that lasts for more than a few minutes makes it difficult to stomach. My sister also said that this piece would be perfect for a movie that involves conflict since the lack of tonality could represent disorder. I think the piece is too long in terms of the lack of tonality and the "musical blah-blah-blah" that lasts for almost 10 minutes...but perhaps it would make an interesting piece to analyze especially with the chords. If Alban Berg was still alive I would probably ask him how he goes about writing something like this and what determines the melodic and harmonic note selection. I too think that music like this that has "no point" as my sister puts it would benefit greatly by being put together with video or photos. When I watched this documentary on Berg it showed how he appreciated natural landscapes, and the movie played his music against landscape photos and videos which really went together very well like a descriptive story told by music and landscapes.