

Guidelines for the Analysis of Twentieth-Century Music

I. General considerations for analysis

- A. Become familiar with 20th-century styles, composers, and techniques, so that in individual pieces you will have an immediate sense of what kinds of musical processes may be at work.
- B. In any 20th-century piece, come to grips with the pitch material as soon as possible: is it tonal, atonal, diatonic, chromatic, pandiatonic, twelve-tone, modal, ... ?
- C. Always pay attention to musical *context* and *process*. With the dissolution of the tonal system, pieces in the 20th century, more than ever before, have a way of setting up their own unique musical “worlds.” Become sensitive to the kind of musical process that begins a piece, then try to follow that process through to the end.

II. Pitch material: One of the most striking aspects of 20th-century music is its expansion of pitch material. Much can be determined about a 20th-century work simply by observing how it uses pitch. The following scales are frequently used as the basis of pitch material in 20th-century works:

- A. Diatonic (*asymmetrical*)
 1. Traditional major and minor scales
 2. Modal scales
 3. Pentatonic
- B. Chromatically based scales (often *symmetrical*)
 1. Chromatic scale (symmetrical)
 2. Octatonic (diminished) (half-step — whole-step) (symmetrical)
 3. Whole-tone (symmetrical)
 4. Hexatonic Scale (half-step -- minor third) (symmetrical)
 5. #4b7 (Lydian-Mixolydian) (asymmetrical)

III. Tonality: Much 20th-century music is tonal or quasi-tonal, but there are new, as well as traditional ways of establishing or suggesting a tonal center:

- A. Traditional tonality
- B. Traditional tonality-determining functions in a new context
 1. Implication of a tonality through statement of its V or V7
 2. Leading tones, both above and below
 3. Acoustic emphasis on a tone by use of consonant tones closely related in the harmonic series (perfect fourths and fifths, major thirds (cf. Hindemith, *The Craft of Musical Composition*))
- C. Modality
- D. Tonal emphasis by *assertion*
- E. Tonal emphasis by symmetrical focus on a pitch
- F. Tonal emphasis through register, dynamics, duration, timbre

IV. Harmony and other pitch-related considerations: In the 20th century traditional functional harmony generally gives way to other means of establishing harmonic coherence. The following should be noted:

- A. Pandiatonicism — free use of notes within a diatonic scale.
- B. Extended harmonic sonorities. N.B. It is important to learn to recognize these sonorities, but also important to realize that understanding them involves seeing how they are used in a given *context*.
 - 1. Chords in thirds extended beyond the seventh: ninths, elevenths, thirteenth, with alterations
 - 2. Chords in fourths or fifths rather than thirds (Quintal/Quartal Harmony)
 - 3. “Polychords”—two traditional triads stated simultaneously
- C. Tendency in the 20th century for intervallic construction to take precedence over tonal-functional considerations: structural coherence through use of pitch-class sets: *set theory*
- D. It is often important, in many 20th-century styles, to note when the total chromatic is stated—when the twelfth chromatic pitch is heard (i.e., aggregate completion)

V. Twelve-tone music: If a piece makes use of the entire chromatic set, and if the pitch-class turnover within the chromatic set is quite rapid, the piece may use the ordering principles of twelve-tone serial music.

VI. Form

- A. Many 20th-Century pieces set up their own formal worlds and categories. Be sensitive to structural repetition, but do not expect pieces to fit into the formal norms of traditional tonal music.
- B. 20th-century composers often tend to avoid the literal restatement of material—to emphasize continual transformation and change rather than return to formal stability. Material is often radically transformed, compressed, or expanded if it reappears at all.
- C. Traditional forms do occur rather frequently, but often their articulation depends not on tonal criteria, as before, but on non-pitch-related aspects of music: tempo, rhythmic characteristics, dynamics, timbre, and articulation.

VII. Line: Despite the disjunct character of much 20th-century music, long-range, stepwise lines continue to play an important role in works of many styles. Often passages for which it is difficult to find a tonal or harmonic motivation are tied together by a clearly directional movement in scalewise lines, either in melodic voices or in the bass.

VII. Rhythm: 20th-century music is characterized by a much greater rhythmic freedom than the tonal music of the 17th through 19th centuries. The following list includes a number of common rhythmic features in 20th-century scores. These features should be considered in the context of the musical language of the works in which they appear, and not be treated simply as “labels.”

- A. Frequent changes of meter (changing meters)

- B. Asymmetrical meters (5/4, 7/4, etc.)
 - C. Polyrhythm
 - D. Polymeter
 - E. New rhythmic techniques: metric modulation, additive rhythm, rhythmic palindromes, etc.
- IX. Timbre: Timbre has assumed an increasingly important structural role in 20th-century music. It is an important factor in the articulation of tonal and harmonic events in works of the early part of the century, and in works from the 1950's on it becomes a structural element in its own right.

New ways of using timbre, e.g., *Klangfarbenmelodie*