

# Write-up on *Stagnant Motion*

(Composition technique: Secundal harmony)

## Introduction

The title of *Stagnant Motion* is an oxymoron, making a reference to the juxtaposition of the independent motion brought about by voice leading and the slow, seemingly dormant harmonic progression. It also refers to the contrast between the less active outer sections and the more active middle section. Despite the tempo being constant throughout, this juxtaposition is brought out through metric modulations as well as varying rhythmic frequencies.

### 1. Harmonic language and chord voicing

The two main building blocks of the harmonic language used in *Stagnant Motion* are minor 2nds and major 2nds. Minor 2nds, being more dissonant than major 2nds, are used to convey tension and instability while major 2nds are points of stability and serve as the resolution to the tension minor 2nds bring about.

Chord voicings are also used to vary how tight or open the harmony sounds, with 2nds yielding a tighter texture and 7ths (inversion of 2nds) yielding a sparser, more open texture and chord quality.

The opening layered entry of voices outlines a chord containing of 2 pairs of major 2nds separated by an intervallic gap as shown (shifted into the same octave):



This is a voicing and a chord form that is used at later parts of the piece.

The following table outlines the harmonic content of the piece.

Bars	Harmonic characteristics
1-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Predominantly major 2nds/compound major 2nds</li><li>- Occasional passing major 7th/minor 9th due to voice leading tendencies (e.g. cello: bar 4<sup>4</sup>; violin and viola: bar 7)</li><li>- Set context for harmonic stability in terms of major 2nds</li></ul>
9-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Predominantly major 2nds/compound major 2nds</li><li>- Some voicings in minor 7ths (e.g. flute and oboe, violin and viola; bar 9)</li><li>- Generally harmonically stable</li></ul>
13-22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Increased use of minor 2nds/compound minor 2nds compared to previous section</li><li>- Tighter voicings between viola and cello, but wider voicings in the upper register</li><li>- Some chords containing both major and minor 2nds</li><li>- Gradual build up of harmonic instability to lead to the harmonic climax</li></ul>

23-26 <sup>1</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong use of minor 2nds, major 7ths, and minor 9ths</li> <li>- Harmonic climax: most dissonant and harmonically unstable passage in the work</li> </ul>
26 <sup>2</sup> -30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Major 2nds/compound major 2nds</li> <li>- Staggered stepwise resolution of dissonant climax</li> <li>- Point the harmonic direction back to consonance</li> </ul>
31-40	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Predominantly major 2nds/compound major 2nds</li> <li>- Occasional minor 9ths (e.g. viola and cello: bar 33 and 38) and major 7ths (e.g. cello: bar 34)</li> <li>- Ends with a series of major 2nd triads: the resolution to harmonic stability</li> </ul>

## 2. Themes and motifs

The themes and motifs of *Stagnant Motion* are as follows:

Theme A	
Theme B	

The construction of the themes also includes 2nds, but in the melodic parameter instead of the harmonic parameter (see Figures 1 and 2).

|\_\_\_\_series of 2nds\_\_\_\_| |\_\_\_\_2nds\_\_\_\_|

Figure 1: Melodic 2nds incorporated through stepwise motion

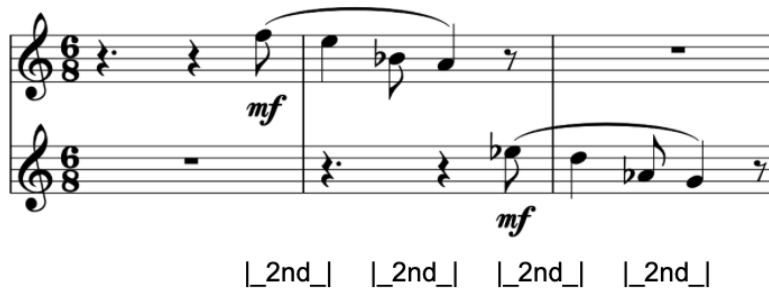


Figure 2: Pairs of 2nds separated by an intervallic gap

It is also worth noting that while theme A contains both major and minor 2nds, theme B is constructed purely out of minor 2nds, adding to the heightened tension in section B (see Section 3).

### 3. Structure

The structure of *Stagnant Motion* is as follows:

Section	Bars	Musical characteristics
A	1-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Layered entry of voices</li> <li>- Fragmented foreshadowing of theme B in flute and oboe (bars 2-3)</li> <li>- Theme A in flute (bars 4-6)</li> <li>- Slow, staggered movement of string voices: evolving harmonic colours</li> <li>- Oboe countermelody in bar 8 resembles fragment of theme A</li> <li>- Bars 11-12: gradually introducing triplet rhythmic gear to transition to section B</li> </ul>
B	13-30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 3:2 metric modulation - rhythmic gear now in groups of 3 quavers per beat instead of 2</li> <li>- Perceived increase in tempo and energy level due to more active rhythm</li> <li>- Offbeat inversion of theme B (cello, bars 18-20)</li> <li>- More complex rhythmic counterpoint (bars 19-22) with metrical displacement (e.g. cello, bars 20-22)</li> <li>- Bars 23-26<sup>1</sup>: climax featuring dramatic rhythmic punctuations and harsh accents</li> <li>- Bars 26<sup>2</sup>-30: layered entry of voices similar to opening - lower the energy level to transition to the final section</li> <li>- Rhythmic frequency decreases to prepare for change in rhythmic gear</li> </ul>
A'/Coda	31-40	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 2:3 metric modulation - rhythmic gear now in groups of 2 quavers per beat instead of 3</li> <li>- Rhythmically more stagnant than previous section</li> <li>- Return of fragments of theme A (oboe, bars 32 and 37)</li> <li>- Rhythmic augmentation and fragmentation of theme B (flute, bar 37)</li> </ul>

		- Texture thins out in the final 2 bars to end quietly
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