

## Organic Coherence in *Monolog for Bassoon*

Isang Yun's *Monolog for Bassoon* for unaccompanied bassoon is a challenging piece for aspiring performers. Technically the performer must navigate wide leaps, extreme registers and register changes, constant dynamic changes, and awkward finger combinations. Additionally, the content of the composition is difficult to interpret. The structural elements of the piece are not obvious, and relationships between sections are sometimes hidden.

In his book *Free Composition*, Heinrich Schenker states the importance of understanding the structure of a musical work:

The performance of a musical work of art can be based only upon a perception of that work's organic coherence. Interpretation cannot be acquired through gymnastics or dancing; one can transcend 'motive', 'theme', 'phrase', and 'bar line' and achieve true musical punctuation only by comprehending the background, middleground, and foreground. As punctuation in speech transcends syllables and words, so true punctuation in music strives toward more distant goals... Consequently, the concept of background, middleground, and foreground is of decisive and practical importance for performance.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will focus on three elements of the *Monolog for Bassoon* that are part of the organic coherence of the piece. All three elements can be found in the opening phrases, and then grow throughout the rest of the work. The first element is the set class 3-3, or (0,1,4). The second element is the presence of ascending chromatic or step wise lines of the beginning notes of each phrase. The third element is the importance of the ascending and descending dyads of an augmented unison, or enharmonic equivalents, in different octaves.

The score of the *Monolog* leaves little to the imagination. Every note has a specified articulation, and every measure has dynamic indications. Some may say, as John Butt said of

<sup>1</sup> . Heinrich Schenker, *Free Composition (Der freie Satz)*, ed. and trans. Ernst Oster (New York: Longman, 1979), 8.

Bach, that “the performance is already there in the notation itself.”<sup>2</sup> Yet it is still important to understand the structural elements. In his book on pianoforte playing, Adolph Christiani contends that “intelligent perception should precede and direct mechanical execution.”<sup>3</sup> An understanding of the structural elements and organic coherence of this piece is part of that intelligent perception.

The set 3-3 is an important part of the piece, and frequently is at the opening or closing of sections. The opening motive of the piece is a low e, held for ten beats, followed by a c sharp grace note to the c above it. This outlines the first occurrence of 3-3. The second phrase is the same with the addition of the pitch class g. The third phrase also includes 3-3, although it is slightly different. It is not present in the beginning of the phrase, but rather at the end. The held f natural, followed by a grace note f sharp to a held a natural, is the opening motive in retrograde. Even though the voicing is more closed, the relationship between the close of this phrase and the opening phrase is clear.

The set 3-3 occurs in a few more places, but is less structurally significant. However in measure 65 it occupies a prominent structural place again. Prior to this measure the music has largely consisted of a few grace notes leading to long held notes. But at measure 65 the music becomes more involved melodically, as well as rhythmically. Here again, the set 3-3 opens the new section. The set consists of the b natural, its half step trill c, and the high d sharp. It is repeated five times with some other pitches added in for variation.

<sup>2</sup> . Bernard Sherman, *Inside Early Music: Conversations with Performers*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 184.

<sup>3</sup> . Adolph Christiani, *The Principles of Expression in Pianoforte Playing*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1885), 237.

The final structural occurrences of the set 3-3 take place at the end of the work. The last section of the piece begins in measure 81. The f sharp in the 32<sup>nd</sup> notes obscures the presence of 3-3, but it is still present in the a flat, g, and e. 3-3 also is hidden in measures 84, 87, and 89. But in measure 90 it occurs frequently as e, f, and a flat. This figure occurs four times in measures 90 and 91. The final motive before the last note and trill of the piece is e, e flat, and c. This also is the set 3-3, and closes this section, as well as the whole piece.

To review, the set 3-3 occurs at the beginning and end of main sections of the piece. Sometimes it is obscured by inversion, or retrograde, nevertheless it is a major structural element of this piece. The structural use of the set 3-3 is one instance of organic coherence.

Another feature of this piece is found by analyzing the starting pitches of each phrase. There is often an ascending line that moves chromatically, or by step. The first instance of this is the opening section. The low e in measure one and three moves chromatically to f at measure five. The f is restated in measure six raised an octave, and then moves to f sharp in measure nine. The f sharp again is restated before moving to g in measure eleven. In measure thirteen the g moves to a b flat and stops the chromatic progression. So, over the course of thirteen measures the beginning note of each phrase has traveled mostly chromatically in an ascending manner.

This idea returns for a short while beginning in measure twenty two on the f sharps. In a similar motive to the first chromatic shift of these low notes, the f sharp moves to g in measure twenty three, and from g to a flat in twenty four. Although brief, these shifts tie in the opening motive to this middle section of the piece.

In another section a similar situation arises. The section beginning at measure thirty four starts on a d above the staff. After a couple measures this rises to an e flat, which rises to f before

dropping down to f sharp below the staff. Then a few measures later at forty four there is a progression starting on f sharp that moves to a and b flat to close the section.

The next section continues with a rising progression. It starts on high b flat and after four measures rises to b natural. This b almost rises to c with the quarter tone pitch bending then moves to c sharp. The c sharp moves to e flat, where it stays for several measures. Then after some intermediary material the line restarts in measure fifty eight on c. The c stays for two measures before it rises to c sharp, and the c sharp again rises to d sharp to finish the section.

Something interesting happens in the closing of the piece. Measure eighty and eighty one are the climax of the piece. After this the progression reverses and descends until the end. Measure eighty one starts with an a natural which quickly falls to e. This motive is repeated, and the a is restated in three octaves. Then in measure eighty seven the a drops to an f sharp. The f sharp descends to f after two measures. For three measures f is the prominent note, then steps down to e, although it frequently returns to f. In measure ninety two there is a clear chromatic shift from f sharp, belonging to the trill, to f, to e, to eflat, and then falls to c to finish the piece.

These ascending lines are hidden in the music, often with several measures of busy material between each step, yet are an important structural element of the piece. An awareness of these relations can help performers shape their own musical interpretations.

A third common feature of this piece is the motive of the ascending or descending augmented unison. Again, this can be seen in the opening measures. In measure two the c sharp jumps up to a c natural. Two measures later the same skip appears, although there is an intermediary c sharp at the same octave of the c natural. Measure six has this dyad inverted, stating first the high f sharp, then jumping down to f natural.

In measure twenty one the last two beats allude to this dyadic motive. In each beat there is a g sharp in the middle, but the c jumping to the c sharp is still discernible. Also, in measure twenty three the d drops down to c sharp in the same fashion. Then, at the end of measure twenty five, there is a high g that drops to an a flat. This measure is particularly interesting as it combines the ascending chromatic motive discussed earlier with this leaping dyad.

As the piece progresses, the dyad becomes less prominent, but still appears in almost every section of the piece. In measure thirty two the dyad appears after every trilled dotted eighth note; first it is ascending from f sharp to g, then falling from e flat down to e, then falling from d to e.

The next prominent occurrence of the rising and falling dyad is in measure thirty nine when the high f drops to f sharp. This repetition is reminiscent of the falling f to f sharp in measure six. Then a few measures later in forty two the tremolo of f to e flat as well as the fall of the high g sharp to a natural bring back the dyadic motive. At the close of the section in forty four the second and third triplets are the dyad expanded to two octaves with an intermediary note.

In the next section, in measures 53 to 55, there are three more occurrences of this dyad. In both measure 53 and 54 the last grace note before the high e flat is an f natural. Then in measure 55 it returns with the grace note g sharp to the high a natural. After this the dyad is more obscure, such as the f to e natural grace notes in measure 89, and disappears entirely in some sections. As with the other two features discussed, an awareness of this motive and structural component can aid the interpretation of this piece.

Returning to Adolph Christiani's words on performance, he discusses whether or not elements such as these are important for the performance of a work. "Whether the composer intended such hidden melodies, or not, should never deter the performer from following his own interpretation, provided that it is based on sound reasoning.... Far from being a liberty taken with the composition, hardly enough of importance can be attached to the discovery and the bringing out of hidden melodic strains."<sup>4</sup> Even though the *Monolog* is very particulate in its notation, these hidden melodies and structural elements exist, and a knowledge of them will contribute to performance. Charles Burkhart stated in an article that an awareness of structural elements will "inevitably if ever so subtly influence the way the performer shapes the large dimensions of the composition."<sup>5</sup>

Quoted in the introduction to this paper, Schenker wrote of the importance of understanding the organic coherence of a musical work of art. He continued later that "the player who is aware of the coherence of a work will find interpretive means which allow the coherence to be heard."<sup>6</sup> Elements such as the set 3-3, the ascending lines of beginnings of phrases, and the augmented unison dyad are such elements of the organic coherence of Isang Yun's *Monolog for Bassoon*, and can shape the interpretation and performance of the work.

4 . Ibid., 238.

5 . Charles Burkhart, "Schenker's Theory of Levels and Musical Performance," in *Aspects of Schenkerian Theory*, ed. David Beach (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 104.

6 . Schenker, *Free*, 8.

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