

The Transformation from Texture to Pitch:

A look into Bartók's String Quartet No. 5, *Adagio Molto* and *Andante*

The gesture I am most fascinated to trace in Bartók's string quartets is the deeper meaning behind his use of ornaments and extended techniques: specifically trills, glissandi, and tremolos. Often he will introduce these gestures and then "fill out" the extended technique through various scalar patterns and chromatic cells, expanding phrase lengths and intervals from this kernel. We are left questioning our sense of meaning in recognizable harmonic lines, notes and gestures—ultimately blurring the lines between written out melodic ideas and a chromatic blur/textural wash of sound. We question our perspective of musical linearity and harmonic tonality, realizing its existence is completely dependent on its context of space and time. We watch gestures shape-shift into different musical interpretations and perspectives of reality. We are left with the questions: where is the point where texture and pitch merge together? When this happens, do they take on new meanings? Bartók allows us to hear and watch these transformations happen.

In looking specifically at the second movement "*Adagio Molto*" of Bartók's String Quartet No. 5, the movement opens with a series of trills—a gesture that morphs, develops and expands throughout the movement. The opening trill from F# to E# is followed two beats later by a filled in third from C# to E in the cello—filled in by three grace notes. This similarly happens with the C# to B# trill in the second violin followed two beats later by the filled in third (with three grace notes) from D# to F#. The expansion of the trill gesture has already begun, although minute, it previews what's to come.*¹

¹ See Image 1 for reference

The trill then morphs in measure 3 and onwards into a chromatic cell with an outcropping of seconds, 4ths and specifically tritones, expanding intervallically. Each of the two note gestures at measure 5 through 10 relate to the trill as a different perspective of the same idea, perhaps as the trill slowed down, stretched out, or seen up close—like the different perspective of splatters of paint on a Monet painting right in front of your nose, verses from a distance. It appears that C# F# D# and G# are the important notes throughout this vaporous section, semitones clinging to each other with the possibility for growth. From the sequence of vaporous two note gestures emerges a cello line, coalescing into a solid state at measure 10 as we land on the D chord and enter the beautiful and haunted world of the following choral-like section.

The choral section starting at letter A has a strong focus on the notes of G C D F, detuned a half step from the important notes in the initial semitone gesture/trill expansion sequence. It appears that this material is related to the opening of the movement harmonically but the stronger pulling notes here have shifted slightly downwards, into a detuned reality amidst the sustained slow moving chords. This reminds one of the semitone fluctuation, vibrato like character of a trill.

The choral-like chords begin at measure 10 on a D chord, then C major, Gmin. Gmin7 with the voice-leading to F. At measure 15, we have Amin7, F, Fmaj7, Cmaj.7, Dmaj 7 with a 9/8 suspension, then C7 and D with what feels like a 4/3 suspension. This slowly moving chordal bed envelops and wraps around the scalar chromatic cell that moves on top in 2nds and semitones. The trill has expanded now into a chromatic cell of a 4 note line moving into the tritone interval. The cell at measure 11 in the first violin starts on a Dflat (enharmonically C#)

and ends on a C, and in the following line at measure 13 in the first violin begins on an E and ends on an Eflat, stressing significance between half steps and detuned intervallic relationships.²

The scalar wispy chromatic line in the first violin beginning at A, is particularly haunting as the line moves on top of the tonal bed of chords we can recognize. The line at 15 climbs upwards to a tritone, then moves down to a second in its next iteration at measure 17. Then at 20 the chromatic line extends slightly and moves to a 6th, eventually culminating in the fully expanded line at measure 22 in the first violin climbing downwards to measure 25 and passing the line off to the viola which ends at B. This feels to me like the culmination of the first journey of the initial trill sequence. This line at measure 22 is moving upwards and downwards in motion, rising and falling, between 3rds, 2nds and 5th leaps, almost like wave form or written out vibrato. The line has elongated and slows down into quarter notes, in the middle of measure 25 in the viola—like a vibration getting wider and wider, slower and slower, less and less distinguishable.

At B, Tempo 1, the G pedal tremelo in the violin 2 reminds us of the choral-like section that came before by fitting into the progression of triads. Each part in the following section adds to the development of the material already introduced in different ways. The tremelo in the violin is another perspective of the shaking, quivering, trill-like vibration but very condensed. The semitone pizz. in the viola that is then passed to the cello and violin in the following five measures almost acts as a rhythmic beat or signpost, adding stability by playing always on the 1st and 3rd beats of the measure. We are reminded here of the two note chromatic cells from the beginning. The scalar figure in the violin 1 moves in seconds and semitones climbing upwards

² See Image 2 for reference

and falling downwards, between intervals of different kinds of 4ths. Gesturally it feels related to the opening trill but exploring new dimensions with the written-out chromatic and scalar motion, exploring a quickly vibrating trill-like gesture.³

The scurrying 2nds and semitone figures with pizz. and tremelo at letter B express Bartók's use of night music. The trill has morphed into different dimensions here, as tremelo, as the 64th note scalar line—even as the isolated pizz. gestures moving in fragmented two note semitone motion. This scurrying motion is accompanied by a three note melody of 4ths and 2nds, moving between the viola, cello, violin 1 and elongated at measure 31. This is the development of the opening cello phrase at measure 5 which lead into the choral-like moment. This section feels textural initially but the expanding melody flows on top with an ethereal legato quality. Growing in phrase length, the melody seamlessly shape-shifts into extended scalar motion at letter C.

At letter C, starting on a G# in the violins and viola, there is an outcropping of canonic movement between 4ths, tritones and 2nds. The scurrying chromatic fragment in the cello also starts on a G# and shivers against the angular music in the scurrying motion of G# to C# also only moving a 4th. Here Bartok is filling in the motion between the interval leaps he is exploring in the canon, creating a texture of different dimensions of the same material. In measure 35 in the second violin you can see that the circle of fifths going downwards points out the seconds from the G#.⁴ The first violin plays a B at measure 37, and continues the scurrying motion now also in the first violin as a written out 4th between B and E. The next sequence of this material at the pick up to measure 39 starts on the F— again dropping to a 4th and then up a 2nd in canonic

³ See Image 3 for reference

⁴ See image 4 for reference

motion. This leads to measure 40, starting this motion on a D, the following measure on A, then leading to the scurrying motion climbing further up 4ths and landing in a note cluster on measure 43, of Eflat E C# F# landing on a Dmajor chord at letter D. The pitch constellation I've found in this section starting at letter C until letter D moves from G#-B-F-D-A-D, related by thirds.

At letter D, the linear line is coming from the harmony. Here the chordal bed is reminiscent of the sustained harmonies in the choral-like moment at letter A. Both are pianissimo, sustained and related by thirds, although in this case the harmonies move from C major to e min, to a kind of G#maj7 with a detuned octave of G natural in the violin 2 with violin 1 moving between b flat and A flat, which could be interpreted either as a detuned octave or just a relation between 2nds. Both relate to the initial trill section, via the fluctuation between different kinds of seconds, and interval relationships detuned. Then we move to Bmin and then a chromatic cluster at measure 49, resulting back to the two note gesture from the beginning, but in this case on G# working its way towards the ending in trills, like the initial trill gesture in the opening. It appears to me that the strongest pitches in this ending section are G# C# C natural, G natural, and then D, F and Aflat, ending the movement on a D. The harmonic network of the strongest pitch relationships fluctuate in each section but have interesting connections in that often the pitch networks between sections will be different in various ways but will often be moved a semitone in one direction from the strong pitches in another section, resulting in an overall fluctuation of the detuning effect as a character throughout the movement.

It appears that there is a constellation of interval relationships expanding throughout the movement. In the first section the strongest intervalic relationships are between seconds, (with a few 4ths, 3rds and tritones giving a glimpse of whats to come). At letter A, the strongest

intervallic relationships brought to the table are pitches related by thirds moving in triadic motion. This leads us to letter B where relationships between 4ths become a bit more prominent, interspersed with tremolo and 2nds in pizz. This leads us next to letter C where the canonic motion is centered around 4ths in an even more explicit way. Letter D brings us back to a focus on triadic relationships in the chords, and at measure 50 we are back to focusing on 2nds in the two note gesture. From there until the end we are slowly morphing back into our original shape: the trill and grace-notes, ending the movement in a written-out trill line going the movement of a semi tone from Eflat to D an octave down. Therefore, through this lens the intervallic constellation is focused as follows: trill->2nds-> 3rds->4ths-> 3rds->2nds->trill, in a full circle. It is as if the trill itself is expanding, widening its vibrato and slowing down, looked at through a magnified glass and then the magnification taken away, returning to itself as it is—a mere trill. A tiny gesture that could have a million meanings.

In the fourth movement *Andante*, certain atmospheric ideas introduced in the second movement take flight and actualize. Bartok has an interesting use of glissando as an opening gesture in the beginning of *Andante*. Again, looking through the lens of the extended technique turning into actual pitch point from a blur of sound, we see the glissando in measure 6 from C# sliding up to a G, where we instantly land on the G pedal in the viola. From there the G slides to different 4th and 5th relationships as the pedal stays steady. In measure 11 the cello glisses up to a B which then leads to the chromatic noodling from A to B in the violins.

Later on in measure 17, the cello glisses downwards from C to F# leading into the chromatic noodling of E to F# in the violins. In these examples the textural blur of the glisses become solid

itches, and we are shown that transformation as it happens. From textural uncertainty comes certainty.

The *Andante* movement develops further the idea of the written-out trill. Near the beginning of the movement leading into measure 10 is the first appearance of chromatic noodling, sounding very much like a slightly slowed down trill, fluctuating back and forth between seconds.⁵ this goes on through measure 12 leading into a chromatic-like melody with more leaps but still coming out of the chromatic noodling gesture from before. We can see the written out trill gesture expands over time. At measure 40 this gesture has expanded into twelve 32 notes, and from there ebbs and flows but continues to elongate leading into letter B.⁶ As this chromatic noodle develops, it continues to move in seconds but moves in more scalar motion at letter B in the second violin. Flitting in and out against the chromatic melody in the first violin which although has more upwards and downwards motion, is mostly using seconds with a few 4th leaps. At measure 54, the chromatic motion between seconds in the cello, violin 2, and viola, again feel like an expansion of the trill idea, although now the phrase is longer with more motion and longer phrase lengths. On top, the violin 1 has slower moving chromatic scalar motion leading into the tremolo gesture at measure 60. As this figure takes on more life, it turns into an ostinato at C— fast moving motion between seconds, like a blur of chromatic sound, a quick flutter of breath, with a scalar type melody floating above. The trill gesture has actualized into a fully fleshed idea in this movement—becoming something more than itself, a fully developed melodic gesture with more depth and characteristics to notice.

⁵ See Image 5 for reference

⁶ See Image 6 for reference

The tremolo is another interesting use of extended technique to notice in this movement. At letter A the tremolo reads to me as another exploration of vibration between close intervals—another form of trill, albeit tighter, a vibration just staying itself on the same note. At letter A this tremolo almost seems to trigger a fragmented melody line in the cello that emerges in a call and response type relationship—slowly climbing in upwards motion to be interrupted by the tremolo double stops. The tremolo then triggers the extended (written out) trill/chromatic gesture at measure 39 into 40. This feels like a deep exploration of very close intervals, and the small fluctuations between them.

Another salient feature of this movement, that is reminiscent of the *Adagio Molto*, is the beautiful triadic chords at letter D, with harmonies that remind us of the choral-like moment in the second movement. At measure 87 we have the chords Dmajor, Fmaj. Cmaj. Gmaj., just like in the second movement. The chromatic trill-like gesture oodles in and sputters on top, like a cooing bird. Here is another moment where we have a grasp on tonal stability—before it is quickly blurred again by tremolos and slides.

There is an interesting narrative at play between the B and the Bflat in this movement. The movement begins and ends on a B and seems to be exploring this relationship throughout. After the opening B pizz. in the first violin, at measure 10 the written-out trill fluctuates between a Bflat and an Aflat, and then in the following measure between an A and a B natural in the violins, with the cello landing on a B natural, leading us to the next measure (measure 12) where there are more Bflats in the cello and violins. The exploration of this detuned octave has begun. Bflats seem to return fairly frequently after that—soon after at measure 21 in the violin 1, and measure 27 and 29 in the tremolo. It plays an important role in the melody that starts to take shape at

letter B in the first violin, through measure 55, and we also see a B natural emerge in the second violin at 56 starting the chromatic climb. Bflat is also important in the violin 2 melody at letter C at Theme 2. I think the high point for this detuned relationship is at measure 67, where the first violin plays high Bflat while the viola and cello play fast moving chromatic ostinato starting on B natural.⁷ Then at measure 73 we have a different detuned octave of E to Eflat in a similar relationship, down a 5th from B. As we near the end of the movement we return to the interest in detuned B's at measure 78, and through this whole section—with the Bflat in the first violin melody at measure 80, leading into B natural at Letter D. Measure 85 is another nice detuned B with Bflat relationship. In measure 95, the high B is held in the first violin, until the end (though it jumps down in register).

This detuned octave is the statement we are left with—that and the return of the tremolo slide, sliding up to the Bflat— shaking the very ground that the B stands on, shaking it's significance into a mere vibration of motion between closely hugging intervals. How close do intervals need to be to dissolve into incoherence or texture? As composers, how far can we push for them to disappear?

Harmonic intervals, melodies, and chromatic gestures can blur together (as the result from a notated extended technique) into a texture and become meaningless, or take on a new meaning. Perhaps we are left with the thought that anything can happen from a single, simple vibration between two semitones. Here I've tried to map out how Bartók seems to be taking this idea as a kernel by which to expand outwards, transforming into recognizable musical meanings and gestures, only to return to the textural blur from which it was born.

⁷ See image 7 for reference

I think what I love so much about Bartók's music is the digging—looking deeply into his vocabulary, his personal language, this profoundly deep inner world and finding connections. It is fascinating to find them, and I'm left deeply in awe, but my intuition makes me feel a bit sad and guilty to even try to really make any claims on this music. The beauty for me is the ephemerality, the changeability, the shape-shifting, spontaneity and surprise. The melodic phrases, the growth, decay, character and passion that broods and breaths in every measure. It is a world that is full of questions that I don't feel can be answered, and that is, in my opinion the most beautiful part of all. A sea of sounds pointing to eternal questioning—and feeling deeply, in spite of it all.