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Posttonalni kontekst i narativna funkcija harmonskog jezika: Šostakovič, Hindemit, Bartok / The Post-Tonal Context and Narrative Function of Harmonic

Language: Shostakovich, Hindemith, Bartók

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Atila Sabo's book *The Post-Tonal Context and Narrative Function of Harmonic Language: Shostakovich, Hindemith, Bartók*, published in 2023 by the Faculty of Music in Belgrade, constitutes a slightly modified version of its author's doctoral dissertation, which was successfully defended at the same Faculty in 2018. In this study, Atila Sabo undertook the complex and twofold task of systematising the vertical dimension of music written in the domain between tonality and atonality and exploring the narrative function of this specific type of organising harmonic language. From a historical perspective, the author locates this domain in the first half of the 20th-century music, focusing his discussion on works by Dmitri Shostakovich, Paul Hindemith, and Bela Bartók.

Sabo accomplished his double undertaking in both parts of his book, discussing in the first three extensive chapters the concept and phenomenon of tonality, its history, as well as the development of theoretical thinking about tonality, parallel with the development of that system of musical language itself, before focusing his view onto the main problem of the study, the "post-tonal context". Sabo begins by tackling the problem in theoretical and methodological terms, discussing various views of the phenomenon of post-tonality in foreign and Serbian 20th-century music theory, setting out from Arnold Schoenberg and Paul Hindemith and progressing through an array of major theorists: René Leibowitz, Vincent Persichetti, Ludmila Ulehla, Ctirad Kohoutek, Dejan Despić, Heinrich Schenker, Allen Forte, Joseph Straus, William Hussey, David Fanning... Starting from Carl Dahlhaus's classification of

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music theory as speculative, regulative, and analytical, Sabo proposes a new methodological distinction between “regulative-analytical” and “speculative-regulative” theories of the post-tonal context. This sort of theoretical systematisation of existing research enabled the author to provide, whilst invariably basing his discussion on its results, the “missing element”, which would become the methodological mainstay of his exploration. Namely, in the second chapter of his study, Sabo proposes an important hypothesis: that classical-romantic tonality may be treated, in line with theoretical precepts postulated by David Lidov and Eero Tarasti, as *musical space*. Accordingly, Sabo posits new “spatial” categories, maps out new musical “spaces”, formed after the suspension of classical tonality, and proposes classifying them as modified tonality, tonicality, multi-tonicality, and atonality. He arrives at this classification, in diachronic terms, by surveying the gradual rejection of three key aspects of tonality (according to a definition by Dejan Despić): the system of relations, gravity, and centre, providing thereby an entirely new insight into the evolution of harmonic language in 20th-century music. At the same time, he highlights the possibility of combining different musical spaces in sound, the possibility of “multilayered-combined spatiality”, thus broadening the conception of the harmonic qualities of post-tonal music. As a sort of conclusion coming out of these considerations, especially noteworthy is Sabo’s assertion that, unlike “mono-spatiality, which character-

ised music made under the auspices of the major-minor system while it lasted, conquering new harmonic ‘spaces’ also meant conquering music’s ‘poly-spatiality’”, which, in turn, “enabled composers, freed from various conventions, to make their way through highly varied musical spaces”.¹

In his third chapter, Sabo elaborates on the theoretical precepts presented in the first two chapters, using numerous examples furnished with harmonic analyses and newly introduced symbols for labelling the categories and subcategories he proposes.

The discussions of the first part of the book gave rise to one of Sabo’s key hypotheses regarding the semantic potential of new harmonic spatialities, that is, the semiotisation of new musical spaces formed in the post-tonal context, which in turn also enabled him to explore the semiotic relations forged between them. Sabo maintains that, although atonally and dodecaphonically organised music often abolishes or suppresses meaning, works whose musical language primarily moves between tonality and atonality witness a revitalisation of narrativity. Furthermore, the author notes that “the process of poly-spatialising a musical universe emerges as the sum total of two basically opposed tendencies – the progressive and the traditional, which, somewhat paradoxically, somehow complement each other”.²

¹ Atila Sabo, *Posttonalni kontekst i narativna funkcija harmonskog jezika: Šostakovič, Hindemit, Bartok*, Beograd, FMU, 2023, 71.

² *Ibid.*, 205.

In that sense, “poly-spatiality”, which generates new semiotic spaces, not only “supports the web of narrative discourse in a special way”, but also “enriches” it.³ Combining the narrative paradigm of the major-minor system with new means obtained by intentionally abolishing that system led, under the conditions of post-tonality, to the emergence of new narrative possibilities and the opening up of new musical spatialities, allowing the being of music simultaneously to manifest itself along two axes, spatial and temporal, expanding the possibilities of both. Setting out in the fifth chapter of his book from the new forms of narrative identified by Michael Klein and exhibited in a semiotic square that includes both the narrative and its negation and then, discussing the contemporary narrative and semiotic theories of Eero Tarasti, David Lidov, Michel Imberty, and Robert Hatten, in the sixth chapter Sabo posits his own methodology of narrative analysis, by applying the proposed spatial categories. Thus Tarasti’s analyses, erected on Greimas’s generative model, Michel Imberty’s explorations of the relations between musical space and time, David Lidov’s concept of mediation, and Robert Hatten’s theory of markedness are applied and at the same time modified in Sabo’s exploration of post-tonal music. Sabo thus also arrives at new conceptualisations and a new terminology that support the semiotic capacity of his newly established spatial categories: he affirms the significance of atonality as a key factor in the “radicalisation of the narrative pro-

cess”;⁴ on the basis of theoretical precepts expounded by Dejan Despić that articulated the phenomenon of the tonal curve, Sabo defines the “spatial curve and spatial transfers”;⁵ setting out from Greimas and Tarasti, he elaborates on the phenomena of “engagement” and “disengagement” in post-tonal conditions; he introduces the concepts of the “level” and “degree of engagement and disengagement” of internal musical space, with which he accurately articulates spatial processes in the newly established harmonic circumstances. In highly developed analytical discussions of narrative formations in the post-tonal context, Sabo analyses in the three sub-chapters that make up his seventh chapter the concepts of *mediation*, *isotopy*, and the *relationship of spatiality and temporality*. He begins by demonstrating the influence of spatial categories on the mediation of binary-opposed meanings, modelled after David Lidov’s theory, using the second movement of Paul Hindemith’s Seventh String Quartet and the second movement of Bela Bartók’s *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* as examples. Sabo arrives at the conclusion that in the post-tonal context, in certain situations, despite the disappearance of the “grammar” of the major-minor system, one may use opposite musical spaces to demonstrate the presence of narrative formations that are identical to those of classicism, such as those exemplified by Hindemith’s quartet, and, however, that the process of *mediation*

³ Ibid., 208.

⁴ Ibid., 218. (Sabo reconceptualises David Lidov’s idea regarding the “radicalisation of the semiotic process”.)

⁵ Ibid., 219.

may cause the narrative flow to move in the opposite direction from the one Lidov envisaged, from *abstraction* toward real *opposition*, as in Bartók's work. In the subchapter titled "Isotopy", narrative flow is viewed from the perspective of Tarasti's semiotic analysis of the musical text. Sabo uses the examples of the third movement of Paul Hindemith's Seventh String Quartet and second movement of his Sixth String Quartet to determine that the basis of narrative generation resides in the movement of *isotopy* through different musical spaces, which is always closely connected with temporal processes. Finally, using the third movement of Dmitri Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 15 as an example, Sabo considers the direct connection between musical space and musical time, which manifests itself in the processes of engagement and disengagement. He points to a certain kinship between these procedures and the phenomena of *tension* and *distension*, elaborated by Michel Imberty under the auspices of temporality.

In his conclusion, Sabo opens perspectives for further explorations and applications of his proposed theoretical and methodological precepts in the analysis of musical forms, the study of the relation between spatiality and temporality in a narrative flow, as well as concerning analytical bodies from earlier epochs of music history and contemporary music.

In scholarly thought written in Serbian, as well as internationally, Atila Sabo's study constitutes the first thoroughly and scholarly executed systematisation of the modalities of organising the vertical dimension of music in the domain be-

tween tonality and atonality. In it, relying on some key explorations from contemporary music theory, musical semiotics, and musical narratology, the author posits an original hypothesis about *tonality as space* and, by extension, about establishing *new spatialities* in music created under the conditions of the abandonment of tonality. That hypothesis gave rise to a new original hypothesis about the semantic potential of harmonic *spatialities*, therefore, the semiotisation of new musical *spaces*, which also enabled the examination of the semiotic relations established between them. Sabo shows that these relations are narratively functionalized, in other words, that in the specific context of *poly-spatiality* established in the domain between tonality and atonality and the simultaneous negation and affirmation of musical narrativity, new narrative configurations are formed, which are even richer than those inherited from the tonal epoch. Thereby, following in the footsteps of significant but partial narratological explorations of harmonic language, this is the first time that the hypothesis regarding the narrative functionalization of organising the vertical axis of music in the post-tonal context has been thoroughly deduced and explicated.

Atila Sabo's study is relevant in methodological terms as well. It provides, on the one hand, a valuable systematisation of theoretical approaches to the post-tonal context in 20th-century music theory; on the other hand, using a broad sample of symphonic and chamber works by Shostakovich, Hindemith, and Bartók,

Sabo devised an original methodology for analysing harmonic language, as well as methods for narrative analysis of a musical flow with regards to the harmonic *qua* semiotic processes that partake in it. A peculiar harmonic language that fluctuates between tonality and atonality, between systemic organisation and its absence or, rather, a new form of music-linguistic “grammar” in dodecaphony, via various modes of modifying tonality, equally different modes of “tonicity” (centralising the musical flow without a system) or “multi-tonicity” (centralisation without gravitating toward a single centre and without a system) has thereby acquired a reliable systematisation, while analysts specialising in this field of harmonic analysis have gained a reliable methodological support. For it was precisely this “interspace”, due to its peculiarities and “systemic-nonsystemic” character, that used to form a “stumbling stone” in analytical approaches, just as its systematisation eluded methodological efforts. One should emphasise, however, that Sabo’s proposed division of this field does not constitute a mere taxonomy of spaces for “accommodating” harmonic solutions developed by composers or the narrative configurations established by the relations of their semantic values, but an accurate framework for reading them creatively, including numerous possibilities for combining new harmonic spatialities, whether viewed synchronically or diachronically.

The many exhaustive analyses included in the study, as well as graphs and tables, constitute Sabo’s guidelines for a

practical application of this methodology in analysing music from the post-tonal context and, equally, provide a methodological and analytical apparatus for understanding the principles and narrative logic of the unfolding of a musical flow in the post-tonal context.

Thanks to that, opening this study to other epochs, proposed by the author in his conclusion, has already found applications in works by other scholars and will certainly keep finding them. By virtue of its scholarly range, Atila Sabo’s study is a valuable contribution to music theory and narratology, as well as, simultaneously, a reliable “textbook” in pedagogical practice. That is also due to its clear structure, precisely and gradually executed scholarly approach, clear written idiom, and engaging mode of exposition despite the complexity of the problems it tackles, and, finally, due to its extensive scholarly apparatus, bibliography comprising several languages, as well as numerous examples of notated music, graphs, and tables. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to publish this study in one of the global languages as well, not only as an outstanding individual contribution to the general academic community, but also as an affirmation of the prominence of Serbian scholarly thought on music in global terms.