

## Musical coherence by a variable ostinato design in Wagner's 'Der Engel'.

"One thing I really missed in my musical education was the discussion of general principles of form, independent of style."  
(Alan Belkin, in 'Musical Composition: Craft and Art', Yale University Press, 2018)

### 1. Musical coherence.

Unity is a common aesthetic goal. The question is what factors produce unity? Which factors produce musical coherence, that make music comprehensible? Generally spoken, it depends on our memory: are we able to associate several musical events to each other? In this text, I'll try to investigate unifying elements in the song 'Der Engel' from Richard Wagner's 'Wesendonck Lieder' (1857), a piece I discussed with my students recently. I discern foreground (what you can hear immediately) and background (what is more or less hidden).

#### 1a. Musical coherence in the foreground.

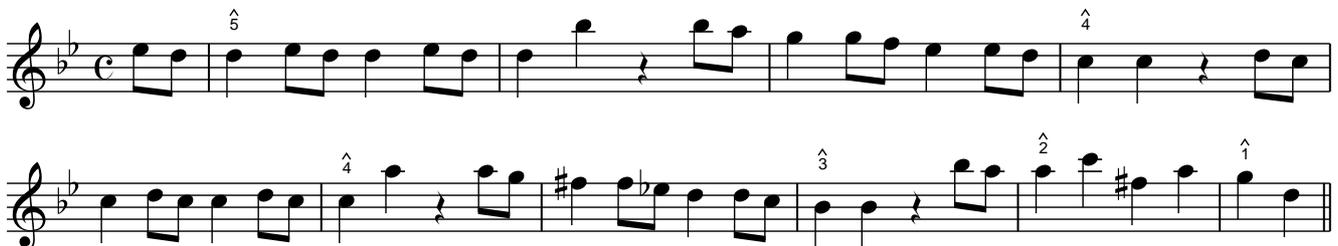
Discussing musical coherence, one will tell something about recurrent patterns: themes and motives. Think of a fugue from Bach's *Kunst der Fuge* where the repetition of a theme is essential to its nature. Or think of a Brahms' *passacaglia* in his fourth symphony, movement 4, based on an ostinato (=continuously repeated - whether or not varied). Or think of Beethoven's fifth symphony, movement 1 with its short-short-short-long motive that integrates all musical events.

In all these examples we can conclude that repetition is the key of musical understanding, logic and thus coherence.

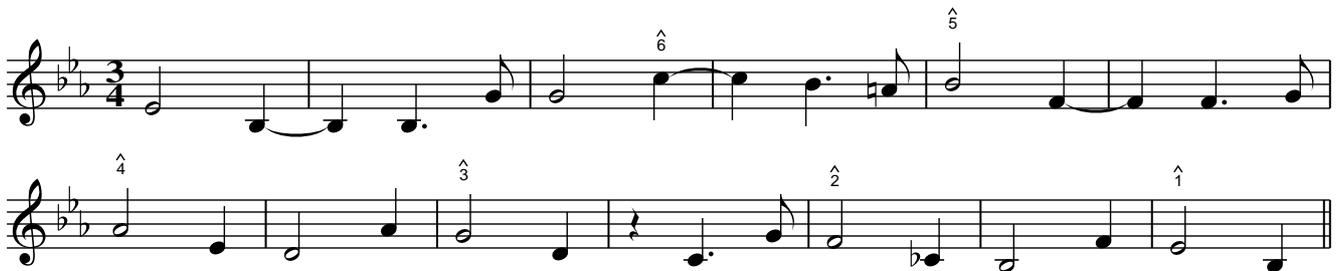
#### 1b. Musical coherence in the background.

However, a more hidden way to make a composition coherent, consistent and comprehensible is using lines. A line or linear progression is a succession of intervals of a second, that structures a melody or -in other words- defines its main tones. A few examples:

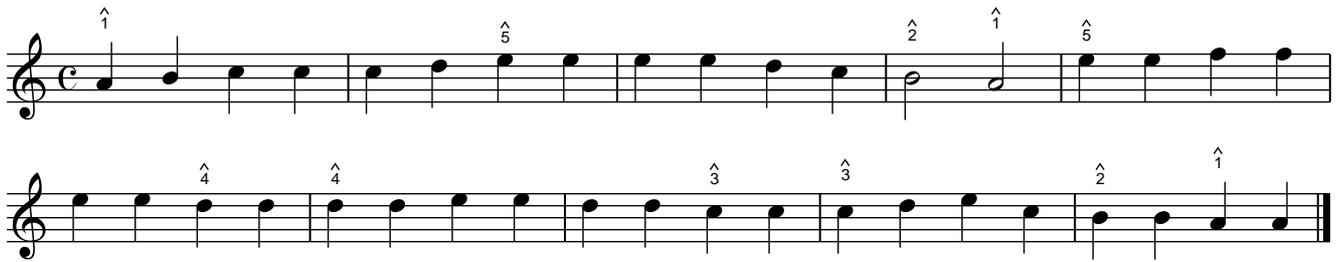
a. Mozart's G-minor symphony (KV 550) is a diminution of a descending linear fifth progression (1). The caret notation refers to the position of a tone within a key, e.g.  $\hat{5}$  is the fifth note of a key. Note the octave change at the end.



b. Schumann's third symphony, movement 1, shows an intriguing example also. Study how the motives -that could bring musical stability- are changing.

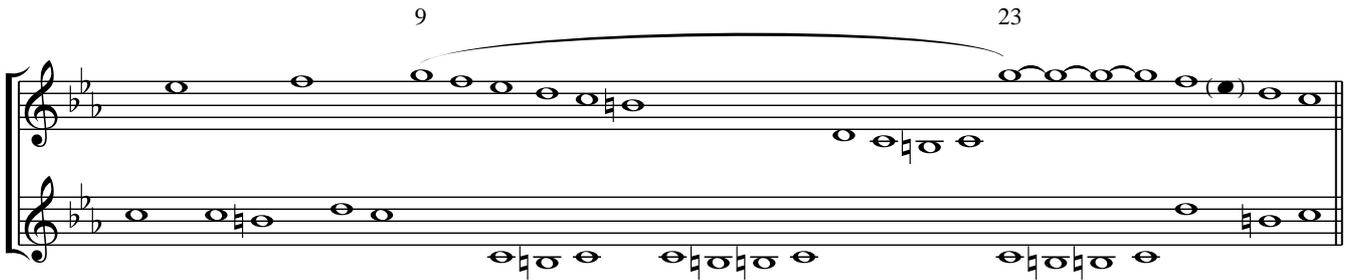


c. Many hymns do not have recurrent patterns, but are coherent by only structural lines. Pars pro toto: *Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig*, composed by Michael Franck (1652) and again a diminution of a linear fifth progression.



**1c. A hybrid example: recurrent patterns in foreground and background.**

Study the reduction of Beethoven's piano sonata op. 10, no. 1 (movement 1):



This reduction demonstrates an interplay between the leading tone cadence (C-B-C) and the descending linear fifth progression, (both excellent means in defining a key, here C minor).

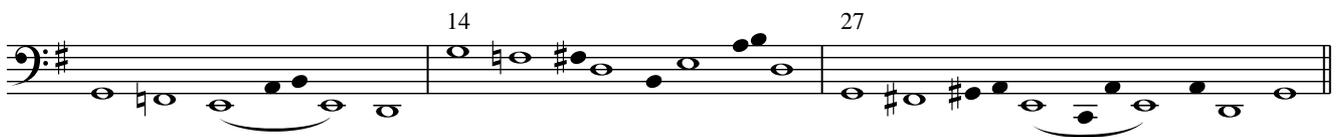
**2. Musical coherence in Wagner's 'Der Engel' I.**

The song 'Der Engel' from Richard Wagner's 'Wesendonck Lieder' (1857) is written for female voice and piano, where the vocal line seems to float above the piano accompaniment. The main key of G major is contrasted with a section in G minor. This key contrast is also translated in the art of accompaniment: a harp-like texture due to arpeggiated chords in the G major sections (giving them a clear identity) and chord repetition in the G minor section.

The piano accompaniment seems to determine the piece: a slow moving bass voice against faster moving upper voices of the piano accompaniment and the vocal melody. This means two things:

- the bass voice determines and direct the motion of the song and
- all other voices are in fact elaborations of the harmony, the bass voice is part of.

The reduction of the bass voice in terms of comprehensible progressions could be as follows:



It will be clear that the basic progression of the bass voice is G-F#(F#)-E-D(-G) or  $\hat{8} \hat{7} \hat{6} \hat{5} (\hat{1})$  in G major/minor. The way this progression is diminished, varies. One could say that  $\hat{8} \hat{7} \hat{6} \hat{5}$  is a melodic ostinato that is varied: a variable ostinato (2).

**3. Musical coherence in Wagner's 'Der Engel' II.**

A variable ostinato, a repeating melodic pattern is -at least for me- a sufficient explanation for the coherence of Wagner's 'Der Engel'. However, the bass melody is part of a voice leading pattern in the piano accompaniment and the voice. This is demonstrated in the next three reductions:

The reductions speak for themselves: the upper voice demonstrate variations on the linear third progression B-A-G or  $\hat{3} \hat{2} \hat{1}$  and its retrograde. In other words: this two-part voice leading pattern appears to be fundamental to Wagner's 'Der Engel' and indeed an unambiguous answer when it comes to the question of musical coherence (and tonal stability).

To summarize, linear progressions are a very powerful for coherence in tonal music. To understand a composition completely, try always to get some idea of pitch organization (3). If music is directed motion (Structural Hearing: Tonal Coherence in Music, 1962), then we need something to know about musical drive, i.e. about pitch relations as in Wagner's 'Der Engel': one could speak about a variable ostinato, when investigating the motion in the lower and in the upper voices.

**Footnotes**

- (1) A linear fifth progression is a line with the range or ambitus of a fifth.
- (2) Although we usually apply this term for ostinato procedures of Stravinsky. An ostinato refers to the continuous, literal repetition of a pattern (although 'literal' can have small exceptions during a piece). In a variable ostinato, changes to the ostinato pattern are implemented. You experience the idea of the ostinato but also the elaboration of it. In 'The Rite of Spring' (Le Sacre du printemps), 1913, many examples of this technique can be found. Basically it is all about extending or expanding a melodic and/or rhythmic cell. 'In mystic circle of young maidens' of 'The Rite of Spring' we find an example:

And in 'Evocation of the Ancestors':

- (3) In non tonal music, this could be complex if you re looking at structural lines or similar strategies.

**About the author:**

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