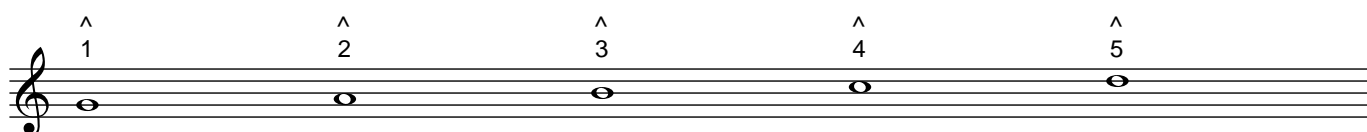


Recomposing Bartok's Mikrokosmos no. 20

Objective: application of trichords as a sort of germ motive

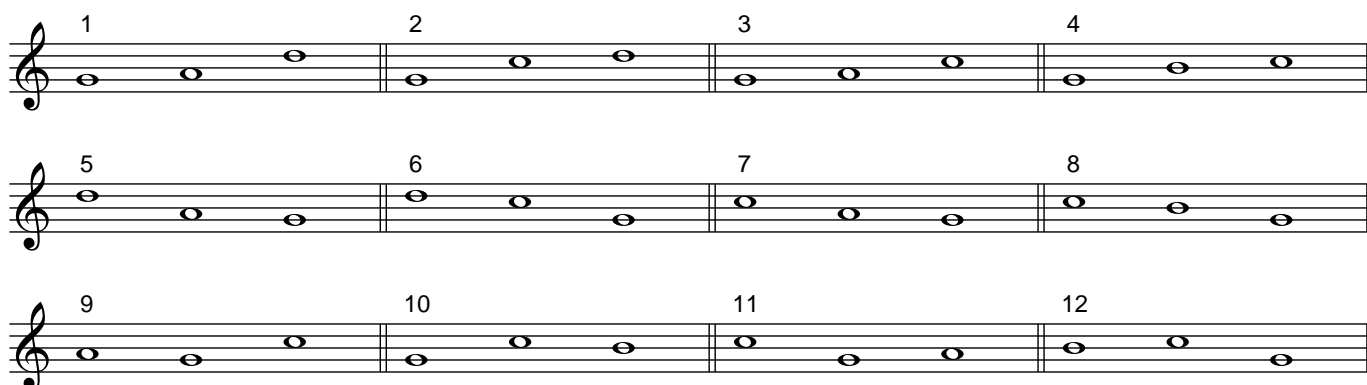
A germ motive, or 'germinal motif,' as it is sometimes called, is a motive that is the base of the melodic organization of a composition. Here I will show you the application of some well-defined trichords, i.e. some precisely specified three-note pitch structures. In six steps I will try to uncover some aspects of the creative process of Bartok's Mikrokosmos no. 20.

Step 1: point of departure an easy and universal melodic frame based on tone G.



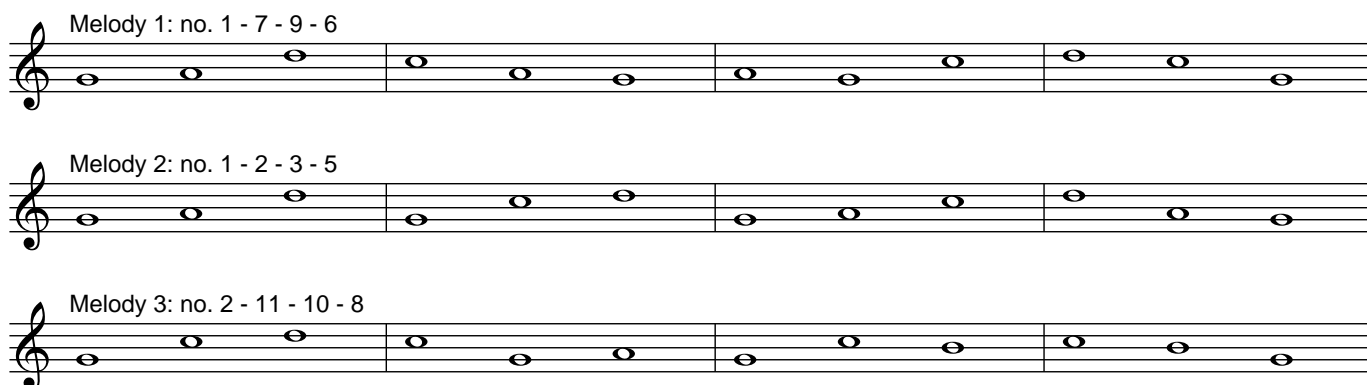
Step 2: compose all trichords,

- based on the first and the fourth or fifth tone
- based on the interval second (1)
- maximum interval: fourth



Comment: permutation no 5 - 8 are retrograde versions of no. 1 - 4. No. 9 is a permutation of no. 3 and no. 10 of no. 4. Permutation no. 11 is a retrograde version of no. 9 and no. 12 of no. 10.

Step 3: melody based on a selection of trichords; three versions



Step 4: melody based on a selection of trichords: Bartók's melody

Melody Bartók: no. 1 - 6 - 1 - 7



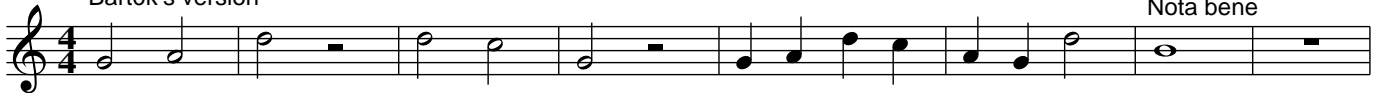
Step 5: step 4 extended to section A of a binary form (A - B) with open ending, 8 + 8 bars, meter 4/4

Possible theoretical version



Incomplete trichord 5

Bartók's version



Nota bene

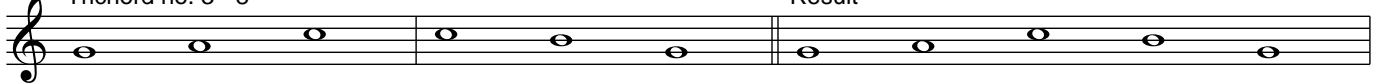
Comment: Bartók's version is great: tone B is unexpected; it's drive, however, is less compelling than tone A.

Before composing section B of the binary form, I make two notes on manipulation of trichords.

1. Note on combining trichords.

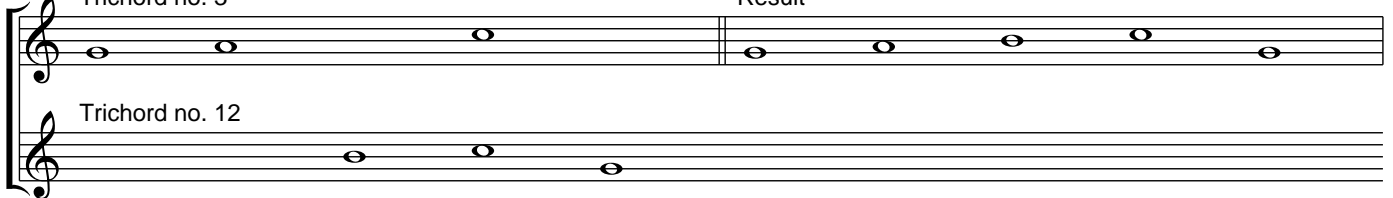
Step 3 and 4 show the construction of a melody as a succession of complete trichords. A second way of using trichords is overlapping, where the repetition of a common tone is left out. Example:

Trichord no. 3 - 8



Result

Trichord no. 3



Trichord no. 12

Result

Trichord no. 6

Trichord no. 8

Result

The image shows two staves of music. The top staff is labeled 'Trichord no. 6' and contains three notes: G4, B4, and D5. The bottom staff is labeled 'Trichord no. 8' and contains three notes: G4, B4, and D5. A double bar line separates these from the 'Result' section, which shows a sequence of notes: G4, B4, D5, G4, B4, D5, G4, B4, D5.

2. Note on diminishing trichords.

A trichord or a succession of trichords can be diminished by neighbour and passing tones. Needless to say that the melodic characteristics of a trichord can disappear. Example:

Trichord no. 3 - 7

Result

The image shows a single staff of music. The first part is labeled 'Trichord no. 3 - 7' and contains three notes: G4, B4, and D5. The second part is labeled 'Result' and contains a sequence of notes: G4, B4, D5, G4, B4, D5, G4, B4, D5.

Step 6: section B of the binary form

It will be clear that many successions and manipulations of trichord are possible. I present now Bartók's (presupposed) trichords.

Bartók's succession of trichords

The image shows a single staff of music with six measures. Each measure contains a trichord (three notes) that changes from one measure to the next. The notes are: G4, B4, D5; G4, B4, D5; G4, B4, D5; G4, B4, D5; G4, B4, D5; G4, B4, D5.

Trichords combined and diminished

The image shows a single staff of music with four measures. Each measure contains a trichord (three notes) that changes from one measure to the next. The notes are: G4, B4, D5; G4, B4, D5; G4, B4, D5; G4, B4, D5.

Within a 4/4 meter

x

The image shows a single staff of music in 4/4 time. The notes are: G4, B4, D5, G4, B4, D5, G4, B4, D5, G4, B4, D5, G4, B4, D5, G4, B4, D5. A note marked with 'x' is the G4 in the 10th measure.

Comment: the marked note can only be justified (2) by pitch related considerations, such as to avoid too many repetitions of G. It is the same reason why Bartók avoid tone d'' in section B: this tone was prominent in section A!

Now Bartók's two-part version (parallel organum) including tempo indication and phrasing will follow.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system begins with a tempo marking of a quarter note equal to 100. The notation is in 4/4 time and consists of two staves, treble and bass clef. The first system contains 12 measures. The second system contains 12 measures and ends with a double bar line. The music features a mix of eighth and quarter notes, often beamed together, and rests. Phrasing slurs are used to group notes across measures.

Footnotes

(1) This means that the triad is excluded. Interesting are results of current investigation of the multi-part folk music in southwest Bulgaria (I don't have result of current investigations in Hongaria): "The basic melodic interval in the building up of the upper (melodic) voice is the second. Another widely used intervals are the third and the fourth. Rarely one would meet cases of quint, sixth, seventh, octave or even ninth." (<http://www.mdw.ac.at/ive/emm/bulgaria.htm>)

(2) Of course one could argue that the conditions of step 2 are too strict. First, I made such conditions for didactical reasons. Second, my personal opinion is that composing is not a mathematical game (although serialism looks very much like it): the ear is always the criterion in making musical decisions. So for me it is no problem at all that my didactical model does not describe the musical reality of Bartók's Mikrokosmos no. 20 completely.

About the author:

Reinier Maliepaard, psychologist, software engineer, organist and teacher at the ArtEZ Conservatorium Netherlands (music theory and music history). Maliepaard maintains several internetsites as www.bestmusicteacher.com en www.artezmusictools.nl.

His freeware music notation programm MC Musiceditor (Windows) can be downloaded at www.mcmusiceditor.com. This article has been typeset with MC Musiceditor 6.0.6 (www.mcmusiceditor.com – www.bestmusicteacher.com)
