

Analysis of the First Movement of Bartók's *Suite Opus 14*

Matt Wright, Music 301B, March 17, 2004

Tonality

The allegretto first movement of Béla Bartók's *Suite*, Opus 14 from 1916 uses many elements of the tonal common practice idiom but can hardly be considered tonal. Triads are by far the most common vertical sonorities in the piece, although they almost never match the implied key of the melody. B^b is the closest the piece has to a tonal center: it is strongly stated in triad form for the introduction, ends the piece as a single note in the lowest register, and feels like “home” in mm. 100-105 and especially on the downbeat of m.21. But B^b is never used as a tonic in a functional harmonic progression. In fact there is only one functional harmonic progression in the entire piece, from a B dominant seventh chord to E major on the downbeat of m. 31.

Rather than use triads and other chords to make subdominant-dominant-tonic progressions, Bartók in this piece is much more interested in playing games such as harmonizing melody notes as thirds of “unexpected” triads, reinterpreting major sixths as first the fifth and third of a major triad and later the third and root of a minor triad, and exploring the connection between B^b and the furthest possible triad, E major.

Form

I would divide the piece into sections as follows:

| <i>Measures</i> | <i>Section and main idea(s)</i> | <i>Basic melody</i> |
|-----------------|---|--|
| 1-4 | Introduction (short prefix: the sixth) | Just a D note |
| 5-20 | A (main motive, important triads) | Up M2, overall D down to D |
| 21-36 | A' (variation: Pseudo I/V, slower to E) | Same idea 8 ^{va} up. |
| 37- 51 | B (reinterpreting : new sixths) | Long D-E-F [#] , not G [#] |
| 52-77 | C (tritones as diminished vs. whole-tone) | G [#] -A [#] C [#] -D, mush |
| 78-97 | D (bass motive vs. main motive from A) | C up whole tone scale to G |
| 97-99 | E (short flourish from the sixth) | F-D |
| 100-106 | F1 (Climax of B ^b /E relationship) | C-D-E, G ^b -A ^b -B ^b |
| 106-109 | F2 (Climax of whole tone scale) | Same, but just as a scale |
| 110-117 | F3 (Climax of bass note/dyad relation) | No melody; just chords |

Table 1: Form of the Piece

Introduction

The piece begins with a four-bar introduction consisting of no more than a root-position B^b major triad in low register, in an eighth-note “oompah” rhythm between on-beat bass notes and right hand dyads with D in the upper voice. Obviously, this establishes a feeling of (the key of) B^b major, but Bartók will come back to this material's aspect as bass note underneath a major sixth dyad rather than as the tonic chord. The introduction also establishes the rhythmic style that will be used for the A section: chords on the eighth note off-beats, possibly with bass notes on the quarter notes.

A section: Main Motive, Phrasing, and Important Triads

The first phrase begins in m. 5 with a melody played in the right hand. This melody begins on an eighth note upbeat on D an octave above the D of the introduction. For the first beat, at least, this melody follows the key and rhythm of the introduction. But the melody is not in B^b: the D's melodic function is to resolve upward C-D-E or downward C-D-B; the fact that it "fits" as the third of a B^b major triad is more of a pun or double meaning than a tonal function. In fact the melody taken alone, is very strongly in E natural minor.¹

The overall melodic shape of the A section is from D above middle C down an octave to low D, and then the A' section begins on the next higher D and works its way back down to D above middle C, which becomes the longest-held pitch in the piece (mm. 36-40). Although this melodic motion from and to D in these sections could give D the status of a modal final, nothing about the harmony puts any kind of emphasis on D.

The "A" section of the piece can be explained fairly tidily with Rothstein's terminology of phrasing. The first phrase, mm. 5-12, consists of a fore-phrase and an after-phrase, two repetitions of the same melody except that the first resolves up to E and the second down to B. Harmonically, the B^b works as a sort of tonic, the starting point of each melodic fragment, but in place of the dominant (which should be F), Bartók uses E major. In this sense the fore-phrase ends on a sort of half-cadence (the E major in m.8) and the after phrase begins on the tonic (B^b major in m.9). Finally, at the end of the after-phrase, Bartók gives us the third chord of the piece: he contextualizes the melody note B not as the fifth of the expected E major triad, but as the minor third of an A^b minor triad, so that he spells the pitch as C^b.

The second phrase, mm. 13-20, is all about taking the melody note out of its horizontal context and making it the minor third of the "wrong" chord. For the fore-phrase, mm. 13-16, the melody is an exact transposition of mm. 5-12 by a fourth down, while the left hand is an exact transposition (minus one octave doubling) of the same bars but downwards by a major third.² Thus, the D that was the major third of B^b becomes an A that is the minor third of F[#], and the E that was the root of E major becomes B as the major seventh of C major seventh. The after-phrase, mm. 17-20, begins as a minor third downward transposition (of both melody and harmony) of the fore-phrase (bringing us to D[#], the halfway point between the F[#] and C), but then for the melody in mm. 19-20 (which is basically a transposition of m. 11-12), Bartók makes every strong note the third of a minor triad, so that the second phrase ends on the original melody note D over a B minor triad.

¹ Except for the last note, this melody stays in the lower pentachord of C Lydian, but because of the rhythmic weight of the melodic E and because the melody comes back to E, these 5 pitches function more as ^b6 through ^b3 of E natural minor. This also sounds like a whole-tone scale that doesn't quite make it to the high G[#] in the melody (though we get a low G[#] in the accompaniment to clash with the high G natural), a connotation to which the piece will return.

² The bass traverses this major third via a descending whole-tone scale: B^b, A^b, F[#].

A' Section:

The most amazing moment in the piece for me is the downbeat of m. 21, which feels so strongly like a “functional downbeat” (including motive, key, and rhythmic emphasis) in spite of there not having been a single functional harmonic progression in the entire piece. I attribute this feeling of tonal return to the amount of prior repetition of B^b (mm 1-5, 7, 9, and 11), the fact that the prior bass tritone leaps from D[#] to A were between the tritone of the B^b major scale, and the smooth stepwise bass descent in mm.19-21 back down to the lowest note of the piece: D[#], C[#], B, B^b.

Measures 21-36 are a variation of mm. 5-20. Throughout, the right hand is an octave higher than before. Bartók uses F major seventh instead of E major in measures 22 and 24 as a different alternative to the dominant of B^b (along with the right hand melody ending up on G instead of down on E). The melodic motion D-C-B that in mm. 11-12 was harmonized with B^b and A^b minor, is harmonized in m.27-28 with each note as the major third of a triad: B^b, A^b, then G. G major will appear again in m. 36 at the end of A', underneath the D that finishes the melody of the A' section, used as yet another “unexpected” triad recontextualizing the melody note, this time as the fifth.

The second phrase of A' (mm. 29-36) is a transposed variant of the first phrase, but while the phrase starting in m.13 was the melody down a fourth over the chords down a major third, this time everything is transposed down to E, which had been so prominent in the A section and which Bartók avoided (by replacing it with F major 7) in the first phrase of A'. Again the second chord (in place of a dominant) is a V major seventh, though at the end of m.30 the A[#] changes to A natural to form a genuine B dominant seventh that resolves to a root-position E major in m.31, the only functional harmonic progression in the entire piece. I believe that the distance of E from the “home key” of B^b is what makes this progression not seem jarringly tonal in the context of the piece. When B comes back in m.32, it is B minor with a major seventh, a jazzy chord that I hear as a premonition of the whole-tone material that will be developed in the C section.

Another aspect of the A and A' sections, a sort of consequence of the “recontextualize important melody notes with the wrong triad” technique is the many dissonances and cross-relations that it causes. First in m.6 (and again in m.10), the E major under the melodic E makes the high G a dissonance. In m.14 the melodic/harmonic dissonance is even stronger, with the B, major seventh of C major seventh, resolving past the root to C[#] and D. The same occurs again in m.18 transposed down a minor third, and in mm. 30 and 34 against B major seventh.

B Section: Working the Sixth Dyad, Slow Whole-Tone Climb

The B section (mm.37-51) has a very different texture: slower melodic motion over faster harmonic motion, with a strong bass note on every downbeat and almost every quarter note. The core of the melody is a slow whole-tone climb from D to F[#] but not quite G[#]. The left hand material comes from the introduction: bass notes alternating with sixth dyads.

In mm. 37-40, under a sustained D pitch, all the chords are root-position major triads (F[#], E[#], A, G, F[#], F, and E) with the fifth-third dyad above the bass note. These chords absolutely do not form a tonal progression, but the two that stand out, the G in m.38 (because of the rhythm) and the E in m.40 (because of the rest following) were important chords earlier, and fit with the D note.

The next series of chords (mm. 41-44) is still bass notes alternating with major sixth dyads (as in the introduction), but this time each major sixth is from the third to tonic of a minor triad, with the fifth in the bass. Underneath a sustained E we get C[#]m, B[#]m, F[#]m, D[#] diminished, C[#]m, and Cm. The D[#] triad is diminished because of the A (instead of A[#]) in the bass, which resolves downwards across the mm. 42-43 bar line to G[#]; underneath the E this hints at a IV to I₆ progression. The chromatic scale continues in the bass to the downbeat of m.44, a second-inversion B major triad. From here the left hand sixths are a mix of major and minor, and chords start repeating and making sense in the key of B^b major (Dm, Cm, Bb, and secondary dominant of Dm), but the strong F[#] and continued whole-tone-scale embellishments outweigh the relatively unforceful tonal progression.

C Section: Tritones Fit Diminished Chords and Whole-Tone Scales

The downward melodic motion of mm. 49-51 finally reaches its target on the downbeat of m.52: a long B below middle C. This B is the first melody note taken by the left hand in the lower staff; Bartók draws a line to it between the staves, across the mm.51-52 bar line, from the previous note, middle C.

Also in m. 52 the upward whole-tone scale finally reaches the G[#] that had first been denied in mm. 6 and 10 and just recently been avoided in m. 49. We hear it first in the octave below the melody, then one eighth-note later an octave higher, in a tritone dyad with D. This voicing of lowest note, tritone, octave for the right hand, spanning the melody of the left hand, remains throughout the section.

The tritone is unique among the intervals of the chromatic scale because you can “get to it” by climbing by half steps (as with any interval), by whole tones (as with major thirds and minor sixths and sevenths), *and* by minor thirds (as with major sixths). In other words, of all the intervals in the chromatic scale, only the tritone is part of both the whole-tone scale and the diminished chord. Throughout this section the incessant tritones relate both to diminished chords (as on the downbeats of mm.52-71) and to whole-tone scales (as in the left hand melodies in mm. 52-58 and mm. 62-68, and as in the last eighth notes of mm.58-60 and 65-70).

Volume, textural density, and ambitus rise to a temporary peak in m. 62, then again steadily all the way to m. 76. At both of these points the chord E plays a crucial role. The C section up until m.62 emphasizes the G[#], B, D diminished triad; finally in m.62 the strong E makes this into a dominant seventh chord, but without the B that had been the focal point of the melody. Next, in mm. 63-71, the E is made the third of the C[#], E, G diminished triad for a repeat of the same phrase (at least at first) up a fourth. The climax of the C section is m.76, where we get the highest chord of the piece and the section’s only non-tritone vertical sonority, an open fifth of just B and E in two octaves.

D Section: Return to Main Motive, New Cadential Bass Motive

The melody switches back the right hand on the downbeat of m.78. In the next bar the left hand introduces a new motive consisting of three eighth notes, first up a fifth then down an octave, which alludes to bass patterns traditionally found at cadences, but without the corresponding harmonic motion. Under the melodic C we get B^b and F, for a chord composed all of fifths.

In m.82 the right hand brings back the rhythmic and melodic motive from the A section, but a whole step lower, and consisting only of the first bar’s worth, repeated three

times. In m.85 this resolves up to D, but just two quarter notes, not the melody from m.6. In m.86 this motive repeats in the original key (D) and register, but again only the first bar's worth, this time resolving to two root-position E major triads in m. 87.

At m.88 Bartók finally gives us the second bar of the A section melody, complete with the cross relation between G[#] and G. Here, instead of E triads on the offbeat eighth notes, only the right hand G[#] is on the off-beats, while the downbeats have octave Bs and Es that again sound “cadential.”

Again, this turns out to be just a fragment of the A section melody, going to the pitch C in m.91 (over A^b major). The first half of the motive comes back in C in the high octave in m. 92, resolving immediately to D major on m.93. Just as the melody in mm.5-6 was harmonized by tritone bass motion, Bartók uses the same idea in mm.86-87 and mm.92-93. Measures 94-96 are like mm. 88-91 but in G instead of E. Also, the melodies in mm 88-90 and mm. 94-96 could be seen as a “thwarted” whole-tone scale, just as in m.6.

Bars 97-99 consist of just short flourishes using the F-D major sixth from the introduction; I see these three bars as a short connecting section.

F Section: Climaxes of Different Aspects of the Piece, Sudden End

In the conclusion of the piece, Bartók finally makes it clear what the piece is about, only to end suddenly.

In mm. 100-106, the two most important chords of the piece, B^b major and E major, are linked in the strongest way by the whole-tone scale. The opening motive from section A starts on a low D and resolves to an open E-B fifth on m.101. Then the melody enters an eighth note later on G[#] to complete the E major triad, but this G[#] is actually an A^b, beginning a repetition of the same motive transposed by a tritone (G^b, A^b, B^b) and resolving back to a B^b open fifth only to have the motive enter again on D. Bartók uses this whole-tone melodic motive to go back and forth three more times between E major and B^b major. This concludes three of the most important elements of the piece: the whole-tone scale, making the melody note be the third of the “wrong” triad, and the relation or at least juxtaposition between (the chords, if not the keys) B^b major and E major.

In m.106 the motion between triads finishes and we get a simple ascending statement of the whole-tone scale in octaves, from C to B^b, repeated 4 times with the right hand going up the whole time while the left hand. This is the most dramatic and forceful statement of the whole tone scale that has been so important in the piece.

After this climax, the last 8 bars of the piece consist of just chords, with major thirds (in octaves) in the right hand against “wrong” bass notes, sort of an extension of making the melody be a part of the “wrong” triad. First, in m. 110 is a low G natural, the first note in ten bars not in the C whole-tone scale. This is harmonized above by E natural and A^b, recalling the G sharp/G natural cross-relation in m. 6, 10. The other chord is a low B^b with C and E above, a nonfunctional 3rd inversion C dominant seventh chord made all from notes of the C whole-tone scale. After alternating these two chords a second time faster, Bartók ends the piece with its lowest note, a bottom-octave B^b, as if the piece had ended tonally in the key of B flat.