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Counterpoint in Salvatore Sciarrino's *L'Opera Per Flauto*

Within the Baroque era, counterpoint is the relationship between multiple concurrent musical strands which are harmonically interdependent. Even though the explicit usage of Baroque counterpoint techniques was abandoned, the concept, extricated from harmonic rhetoric, was explored extensively during the 20th century. Composers, such as Salvatore Sciarrino, began to explore the possibilities of character, timbral, formal, and even physical polyphony in pieces for solo flute. This compositional idiom is not without precedence. Bach is revered for his incorporation of polyphonic writing into pieces for melodic instruments. While it is impossible to draw literal parallels between Bach's *Partita in A Minor* for solo flute and Sciarrino's *L'Opera Per Flauto*; some of the concepts which construct both pieces are similar. The *Partita* is a collection of dance movements in various styles drawn together by harmonic and formal expectations created by the opening movement. *L'Opera* documents new comprehensive contrapuntal techniques solely available to the flute and is structured by the expectations and transmutation of timbres presented in "All'aure in una Lontanaza." In Bach, changes in tonal centrality and thematic material delineate form. In *L'Opera*, the changes in timbre (and occasionally pitch centrality) create the form.

For the sake of clarity an effort should be made to discern what constitutes these new manifestations of counterpoint. Timbral counterpoint exists where two or more discernibly different sonorities are developing concurrently. One could argue this has been present in flute literature for centuries; where shifts in registral, dynamic and tone color are discerned as contrasting sonorities. I would argue this is closer to character polyphony because traditional flute playing is produced solely through one means of tone production. Character counterpoint exists when a passage has more than one dynamic, expressive indication, or articulation implicating a contrasting musical pathos. While this can incorporate timbral counterpoint, it can be employed without any differences in the method of sound production. For a contextual example, Ferneyhough's "Sisyphus Redux" for alto flute is rife with instances where two dynamically and interpretively (for example, one line is indicated as *con forza* and the other is *fragile*) opposite musical strands are rhythmically superimposed on each other. Body counterpoint, also known as "decoupling", is where different physical procedures which are usually reliant on each-other are engaged independently. In the Sciarrino, this concept is featured in the "Canzona Di Ringraziamento" where both hands are tasked to do completely different types of motion. For the bottom staff, the left hand is playing chromatic material between G4-C#5 (sliding the thumb for the Bb4) and the right hand is constantly doing double trills on either the F and F# keys or the C and D trill keys.

Before even delving into any specific part of the piece it is worth noting that the program notes and visual presentation of *L'Opera Per Flauto* documents the importance of counterpoint in the work. "L'Orizzonte Luminoso Di Aton" heeds the performer to take note of the "intimate relationship between the methods of tone production..." "Hermes" indicates "Opening indications, such as *senza tempo* or *Vivo*, do not pertain to speed or movement. They aim rather at more intense articulations of the tempo, suggesting an essentially emotive psychic dimension." The "Canzona Di Ringraziamento," "L'Orizzonte Luminoso Di Aton," and "Venere Che Le Grazie la Fioriscono" are divided into two staves (three on pg. 24 to incorporate key clicks) to visually reinforce the relationship between the different timbral voices.

The various timbres in the Sciarrino can be divided into five categories: sounds derived from the harmonic series, percussive timbres, pitched air sounds, "fluttering" gestures, and artificial multiphonics. The first category includes harmonic trills (Movements 1,2,4,6) natural multiphonic clusters (2,3,6,7), non-multiphonic harmonics (2,4) and closed lip plate harmonics (1,5), harmonic glisses (1) and whistle tones (7). The second includes tongue rams (2,3,5,6), key clicks (5,7), jet whistles (3,5), glottal stops (6), and multiphonic clusters (Page 13, movement 3). The third includes pitched closed lip air sounds (1,2,5), jet whistles (1,2,3,5), closed lip plate flutter tongue (1,7) and pitched inhalation/exhalation (6). "Fluttering" timbres are events in which a single pitch (occasionally entire tracts) is altered or reiterated through extremely fast mechanical or bodily alternations. These include harmonic bisbiliandos (1,2,4,6), chromatic double trills (3,4,6), double trills on G5 (3,4), closed lip plate flutter tongues (1,7), and alternate fingering chromatic glisses (3,4). Artificial multiphonics are only present in the 6th and 7th movements. Sciarrino delineates the difference between "multiple artificial tones" and "soft, homogeneous diads."

Many of these timbral events overlap categorically. Throughout the *Opera* they appear in wildly different contexts. For example, the jet whistle in "All'ure In Una Lontananza" initiates the other closed lip air sounds that exist as the movement's B material. Inversely, in "Venere Che Le Grazie La Fioriscono" the jet whistles are an outgrowth of the closed

lip air sounds that pervade the beginning of the movement. As well, they have been transmuted into an explosive percussive timbre. Thus, there is a structural tension between the sounds in themselves which will be sussed out in an analysis of the following two movements.

“All'ure In Una Lontananza,” like many of the movements, is structured around the collision and transmutation of timbral planes A into B and the eventual integration as a section of (AB). The A material is all the events derived from the harmonic series. This includes the harmonic bisbilandos and pseudo-glisses. The B material is the jet whistles and pseudo-chromatic air sounds. (AB) is the integration of both of these sonorities, both texturally and physically. The structure of the first two pages is visually apparent. The first page is primarily harmonic bisbiliandos. The second is primarily air sounds, with the occasional harmonic trill. Interestingly, the second and final pages contain a technique which is a procedural mixture of the A and B material. These closed lip plate harmonics are produced by covering a small portion of the hole with your tongue (or upper lip) and blowing gently as if you were going to softly produce the B material. This technique is employed extensively on the third page and functions as a third contrapuntal timbre. The first jet whistle is harbinger of immediate change in the formal structure in “All'ure in Una Lontananza.” This event initiates the prominence of the air sounds as well as the expansion of the harmonic aggregate. As the piece continues the addition of C natural, D natural, F natural and finally Eb hints at a “modulation.” The piece moves from being entirely based around the overtones which are lower on C natural's spectrum to a mixture of C's and C#'s. This becomes extremely apparent on the third page (line 4, Eb6, Dolcissimo) This a recap of the opening material which appears with the integration of the different harmonic languages outlined by the tritone between A and Eb. More so, Sciarrino subtly foreshadows this harmonic transition in the fourth sound event in the entire piece. The lip gloss between E and Eb has an obvious teleological importance here.

One might contend that the interrelationship between the pitch material and the harmonic series is simply incidental. This is a superficial reading of the piece. *L'Opera* employs so many different versions of the scalar portion of the overtone series (whistle tones that are centered around the fundamentals C, C# and D, natural multiphonics clusters) the relationship between the harmonic content and the harmonic series seems inextricable. To further this point, the “Canzona Di Ringraziamento” is almost harmonically identical to “All'ure In Una Lontananza.” The piece begins with the usage of overtones derived from C natural (the tones appear in a similar order as well: E, A, F#, C vs A, E, F#, C). The only Eb bisbilando in the movement (page 19, first event) is foreshadowed by the increased prominence of B and F natural (as well as the lip glisses from C to B natural). As in the first movement, the the increased prominence of the C# harmonic material also delineates an important change in musical texture. In the first movement it functions, at some rhetorical level, as a recapitulation (synthesis of both “keys”) of the opening, and in the “Canzona” the Eb bisbiliando directly precedes the fluttering texture being transposed up an octave as well as the first unadorned natural harmonics of the movement. Much like the opening lip gliss (E to Eb) in “All'ure In Una Lontananza” the final lip gliss in the *Canzona* (F to E natural) is an important foreshadowing of the ending of “L'Orizzonte Luminoso di Aton.” This movement culminates with a return to the E and A bisbiliandos (pg30) which begin the piece; seemingly giving a cyclical sense to the piece. As well, final gesture is an inhalation on a C natural. Each of the lip glisses seem to have a structural importance and seem to function as the heralds of the harmonic modulation a within the piece.

Sciarrino's usage of overtone modulation to delineate structural change is extremely similar to traditional uses of harmony. In Bach, the increased prominence of nonchord tones and leading tones of closely related keys obviously indicates that there will be a change of harmonic centricity. As well, this harmonic destabilization will always lead back to stability. Harmonic stability is most prominent at the beginning of a new formal section, before any episodic material. Thus in both pieces, settling in a “key” indicates a change in musical rhetoric or texture.

After establishing that some of the guiding principles behind both works are indeed similar, I will posit that Sciarrino's manipulation of the counterpoint and development of the timbral planes in “Venere Che Le Grazie La Fioriscono”'s can be better understood through a hermeneutics analysis of the first movement of Bach's solo partita. Within “Venere,” there are countless instances of micropolyphony and macropolyphony. The former is the timbral material that exists concurrently in a single melodic gesture. The latter is the two timbral planes (lyrical tones derived from air vs percussive timbres) which are superimposed on top of each other and the dissonance which ensues almost entirely obliterates the opening material. This structure is visually apparent upon opening the score. The first key click on page 23 initiates the formal splintering. The next page features an increased amount of percussive interruptions until they completely dominate the texture. Beyond functioning as a formal dialectic, it is not as obvious how both sections form a cohesive whole. The timbral planes are interrelated through continuation and cultivation of the air sounds. From the second page onwards, until the end the piece, always exists visually on three (at times, illusory) staves. The top staff is harmonics, the second is air sounds and the third is all the other percussive timbres. Each contrapuntal strand is always represented consistently, regardless of the changes of texture. Thus, it is to be assumed that every event on a given line either remains static or is interrelated through a process of transmutation. The latter is distinctly the case with the air sounds. Despite being

transmuted into a percussive timbre, they are produced through identical means. More interestingly, the long section establishing the jet whistles functions as an integration of the air and harmonic sounds of the opening. The air sounds on the beginning page 25 lack any prominent overtone content. As they crescendo they begin to glide through multiple partials. Thus final page of the piece, subtly, features all of the previous timbral material.

After establishing the formal structure of this piece, this begs the question: what does this have to do with Bach? In analyzing the Allemande, one realizes there is a similar process of splintering that occurs in the harmonic language which moves the piece from the exposition into the development. In order to compare it to the Sciarrino, one must determine some disruptive element within the first tonal area. Within "Venere," this element is obviously highlighted by the abruptness of the gestures and the obvious timbral differences. Within the partita, determining the initiator of structural dissonance is more difficult. Bach's harmonic transitions are extremely smooth and nothing stands out as a disruption. But in order to begin comparing these works I would argue, at least in this movement, that the leading tone of the second tonal area functions as this disruptive element. In common practice harmony, the tritone is the most volatile portion of a dominant 7th chord which implicates the motion to a new tonal area. Thus, It seems apt that the tritone of the first tonal is to be chosen as the destabilizing element.

The first four measures of the piece are distinctly in A minor. The continuous presence of the leading tone (G#) constantly reaffirms the tonic. This section, while episodic, remains in closely related keys to A minor and lacks intense chromaticism. More so, the first 13 measures are entirely void of D#. In measure 13, it appears as the third of V7/V. In 15, it subverts the previous harmonic language by initiating the first intensely chromatic sequence in the piece and causes the harmonic language to spiral out until it truly resolves in measure 21. While its compositional application may be different it bears rhetorical similarity to the splintering in the Sciarrino. Once it truly established itself, the structural dissonance of the D#, within this paradigm, cannot be ignored. The percussive timbres are similar. These interruptions, while obvious, do not establish themselves as structurally fundamental until they've subsumed the texture. While it might be incidental it is worth noting that the first key click in "Venere Che Le Grazie La Fioriscono" is a tritone (G and C#). Bach's harmonic language is constrained by standard counterpoint rules. The tritone, within the context of a V7, has implications of modulation within a tonal schema. Thus, it is entirely unremarkable that a tritone would be used as a destabilizing element. Sciarrino, inversely, is not constrained by any compositional practices. His music constantly gives deference to older forms and styles of music. Each of these pieces intentionally avoids the obfuscated formal structure of most high modernist compositions. His manipulation of compositional materials is akin to that of Beethoven. He is fascinated by the fixation and extrapolation on one or two motives per piece. Is it possible that this single key click pays homage to the way harmony unfolds in Bach's solo flute writing? While this reflection upon the tritone in relationship to structural movement might be entirely fleshed out, it may have precedence in intercontextualizing Sciarrino's compositional methods and rhetoric in multiple movements of *L'Opera Per Flauto* to common practice music.