

Chapter 1

I. Introduction: Why is a new theory of tonality necessary?

The present study seeks to explore the nature of chromaticism in modal and tonal music from the sixteenth century to the opening of the twentieth. Over the course of the past decade, with the help of several outstanding students and colleagues at the Aaron Copland School of Music, CUNY, Henry Burnett has evolved a comprehensive theory of chromaticism and its role in all aspects of tonal and modal organization.¹

Chromaticism, and in particular, the completion of the chromatic aggregate, is endemic in all but the simplest of tonal pieces. In fact, the introduction of all twelve tones of the chromatic scale can hardly be avoided in any piece admitting to functional triadic tonality whose length is

¹Previous publications exploring this topic, used selectively in this book, are: H. Burnett and Shaugh O'Donnell, "Linear Ordering of the Chromatic Aggregate in Classical Symphonic Music," *Theory Spectrum* 18/1 (1996):22-50; H. Burnett, "Levels of Chromatic Ordering in the First Movements of Haydn's London Symphonies: a New Hypothesis," *International Journal of Musicology* 7 (1998):113-165; H. Burnett, "A New Theory of Hexachord Modulation in the Late 16th and Early 17th Centuries," *International Journal of Musicology* 8 (1999). In addition to these must be added the work of Roy Nitzberg, the co-author of the present study. His was the first Ph.D. dissertation to combine traditional Schenkerian analyses with the chromatic theories of Burnett. See *Voice-Leading and Chromatic Techniques in Expositions of Selected Symphonies by Joseph Haydn, Introducing a New Theory of Chromatic Analysis* (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1999). Nitzberg also presented the new chromatic theory in a paper titled "The Hidden Thirds Behind the Quinten's Fifths: Symmetrical Properties and Formal Organization in Haydn's String Quartet in D minor, Op. 76 no. 2", at the Music Theory Society of New York State's annual meeting at New York University, April 8, 2000.

of any consequence. The simple harmonic movement of applied dominants will introduce most of the five chromatic tones, the ones absent usually found as a result of a motion in the opposite direction, in fourths. Since most tonal pieces move in exactly this manner, one is bound to hit all five chromatic tones at some point or other. The question is not if the total aggregate will be completed — that is a given — but, rather, how the aggregate is partitioned as a future source of developmental material.

On the other hand, chromaticism applied against a diatonic background needs to be qualified and contained if the composer wishes to maintain the integrity of the key. Since a key is defined by certain harmonic progressions and voice-leading motions, a haphazard use of chromatic tones could easily disrupt one's understanding of the underlying tonal structure, and, as a result, negate any meaningful gesture or argument the composer is trying to make working within those compositional parameters. The situation is comparable to painting. The painter deliberately chooses certain colors with which to depict a scene or an emotion. If the prevailing color scheme is pastel in the manner of Renoir, the painter's "key" in this instance, the insertion of dark opaque colors, indiscriminately applied, would draw one's attention away from the main focus of the painting and, indeed, would interfere with one's understanding of the painter's visual deployment, development, if you will, of the painting's primary color scheme.

In tonal music, no less than in art, the composer's choice of chromatic tones at any given moment must be carefully weighed. After all, these tones are perceived against a diatonic scale that is supported by a series of diatonic chords arranged in an asymmetrical hierarchy. If the key that is produced by this arrangement of scale tones and chords is to be understood at all, assuming that is the composer's intent, then certain steps must be taken by the composer to establish that key within the mind of the listener.

For reasons of tonal clarity, again assuming the composer's intent (not all composers seek tonal clarity in their works), most key-centered pieces will begin with relatively few harmonically significant chromatic tones in their opening phrase, or if chromaticism is introduced, care is taken to relegate it to the foreground level as embellishing or passing. Once the all-important tonic/dominant relationship that defines the key takes place, and is understood by the listener, the composer has a certain amount of liberty in increasing the chromatic spectrum. This may take place after only a few bars of music, so long as the key is established as a frame of reference. The situation is not unlike the Baroque concerto practice of beginning an allegro with the *Vordersatz*, a motive that clearly defines the key through the use of tonic and dominant chords in root position.

Naturally, there are mature classical pieces that deliberately attempt tonal ambiguity at the beginning of a piece, such as Haydn's quartet Op.33, no. 1, in D, but sooner or later, the key must be evident, or else large-scale prolongation, not to mention the formal design inherent in the sonata form, would be impossible to achieve and, as a result, the recapitulation and final resolution of dissonant issues would be rendered meaningless.

Chromaticism, by its very nature, increases tension, depending on how unstable it renders the prevailing tonality. It is no wonder then that composers would tend to increase the density of chromatic material as a piece progresses, thus also heightening the effect of the formal restoration of the tonic, which may or may not occur at the moment of recapitulation. Considering the unstable nature of chromatic pitch classes projected against a diatonic background, it would seem natural that composers would choose their chromatic tones with great care, either as embellishments within the melody or motive, or as chord structures.

So why is a new analytical theory of tonality, form, and style necessary? Simply because

traditional musicological/analytical methodologies have been unable to satisfactorily answer so many complex compositional questions, especially those regarding seemingly unexplainable chromatic digressions or substitutions, within the diatonic framework of a modal or tonal composition. One plausible reason for this is that previously musicology, as a scholarly discipline, has been historically transmitted as a compilation of disparate ideologies (for example, philosophy – including “feminism,” “queer” musicology, and lately, “disability studies”² – archival musicology, theory and analysis, and factual history) that has long resisted any urge to impose a “unified field theory” to interpret the steady metamorphosis of Western art music from its earliest roots in late Medieval modality all the way through twenty-first century atonality. Consequently, the validity of any transformational model or idea concerning the natural evolution of styles is questioned and even frowned upon nowadays as epitomizing some kind of grotesque teleological bigotry. Going against current thought, we believe that the teleological approach aimed at the observation of stylistic change is still valid when considered from the purely compositional perspective.

²See Joseph N. Straus, “Normalizing the Abnormal: Disability in Music and Music Theory,” *JAMS*, Spring 2006, 59/1: 113-184.