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Understanding Ornamentation in Atonal Music

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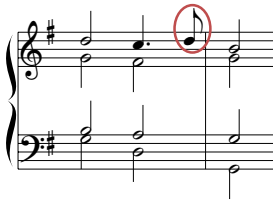
ABSTRACT

In 1987, Joseph Straus convincingly argued that prolongational claims were unsupportable in post-tonal music. He also, intentionally or not, set the stage for a slippery slope argument whereby any small morsel of prolongationally conceived structure (passing tones, neighbor tones, suspensions, and the like) would seem just as problematic as longer-range harmonic or melodic enlargements. Prolongational structures are hierarchical, after all. This paper argues that large-scale prolongations are inherently different from small-scale ones in atonal (and possibly also tonal) music. It also suggests that we learn to trust our analytical instincts and perceptions with atonal music as much as we do with tonal music and that we not require every interpretive impulse to be grounded by strongly methodological constraints.

I. INTRODUCTION AND EXAMPLES

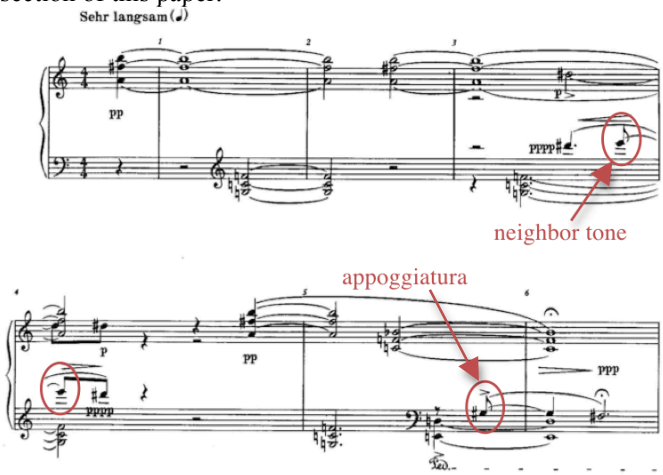
On the face of it, this paper makes a very simple and modest claim: that ornamentation (such as neighbor tones, passing tones, and suspensions) can be heard in atonal, as well as tonal, music. I am far from the first person to make this assertion. To varying extents, I follow in the footsteps of Salzer (1952), Travis (1959, 1966), Morrison (1991), Lerdahl (1989, 2001), Vaïsälä (1999, 2002), and Silberman (2008, 2011), among others. My aims, however, are considerably more limited than those of the aforementioned scholars: I neither couch my analyses of melodic ornamentation within any larger prolongational theory nor do I maintain that ornamentation is necessarily hierarchical.

We will begin with several examples of ornamentation, ranging from clear and intersubjective examples to readings that seem more interpretive. Before discussing my analyses, however, a brief terminological note is in order: it is commonplace in English-language pedagogy to refer to ornamental tones as "non-harmonic tones." Though generally considered synonymous with "ornamentation" or "embellishment," this paper eschews the term "non-harmonic tone" both because what is and is not harmonic in atonal music can be tough to discern and, more importantly, because searching for what is and is not harmonic in common-practice *tonal* music can amount to something of a red herring. Consider Example 1, in which an escape tone (or échappée or incomplete neighbor) embellishes the soprano note at the end of the first measure. The circled D5 is clearly ornamental because C5—the chordal seventh—syntactically must resolve down to B4, but D5 is also the root of the very chord that it embellishes. Because most every music theorist would agree that this D5 is ornamental and because it is also clearly "harmonic," we shall avoid that misleading expression.



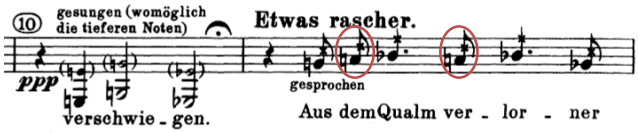
Example 1. An escape tone that is *not* "non-harmonic."

Example 2 excerpts an oft-contemplated piece: Schoenberg's op. 19, no. 6. In mm. 3-4, E6, the highest note of this short movement, neighbors D♯6. This neighboring motion is the first new gesture that we hear following repetitions of the iconic first two chords. Two bars later, we can hear an appoggiatura as the unprepared G♯ enters and resolves down to F♯. The D♯-E-D♯ neighbor tone was also shown in a reductive analysis in Lerdahl (2001, 354), but Lerdahl apparently disagrees with my appoggiatura designation, instead equating both G♯ and F♯ as members of "departure" sonorities. Small details aside, Lerdahl (2001) focuses primarily on harmonic entities and prolongation, whereas I am engaging only local ornamental events, not their surrounding harmonic sonorities. We will return to this example and to the issue of reading ornamentation outside of a larger prolongational and methodological context in the next section of this paper.



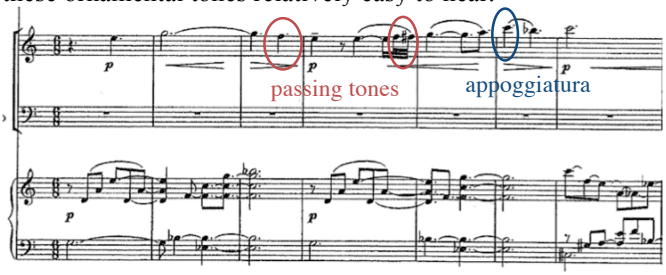
Example 2. Schoenberg, Six Small Piano Pieces, op. 19, no. 6, mm. 1-6.

Example 3 is drawn from another theory class chestnut. Whenever I ask my students to locate instances of the <+3,-4> interval motive in "Nacht" from *Pierrot Lunaire*, almost everyone identifies the famous sung "Verschwiegen" (E3-G3-E♭3) in m. 10 and at least a few students also identify the vocal part just after that in m. 11 (setting the text "Aus dem Qualm verlorner"). I do not discuss passing and neighboring tones in my undergraduate twentieth-century analysis class, but my students clearly must harbor the notion that such things can exist in this repertoire or they could not spot m. 11 as a composed-out instance of the central motive.



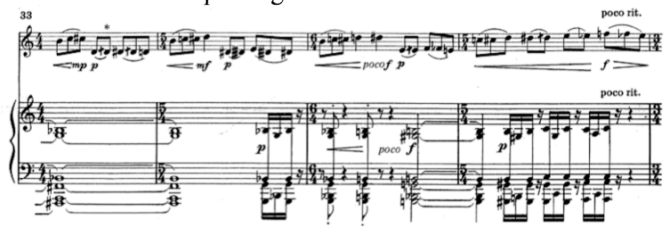
Example 3. Schoenberg, *Pierrot Lunaire*, "Nacht," mm. 10-11 (voice part only; in treble clef). A is first passing, then neighboring.

Paul Moravec's *Tempest Fantasy*, which received the 2004 Pulitzer Prize, features a wealth of ornamentation, especially in the lyrical sections. Example 4 shows the opening of the gorgeous fourth movement, titled "Sweet airs," which features very clear passing motions (circled in red) between E5 and G5 and in the violin's overall stepwise ascent from E5 to C6, the first high C—circled in blue in m. 6—acts as an appoggiatura. I maintain this reading despite the fact that the first C6 enjoys more consonant support than does the second one. The first C6 is harmonized by a quintal harmony in the piano, with E♭ and G as boundary tones. By contrast, what I believe to be the violin's true arrival on C6 is supported by a more dissonant chord built upon a C♯ bass tone. Despite the non-tertian harmonies in the fourth movement of Moravec's piece, the substantially diatonic melody and clear phrase structure make these ornamental tones relatively easy to hear.



Example 4. Moravec, *Tempest Fantasy*, mvt. 4, "Sweet Airs," mm. 1-7 (violin, 'cello, and piano).

Near the beginning of Lutoslawski's *Partita* for violin and piano, the violin's initial entrance features a bevy of three-note chromatic passing gestures. This use of chromatic passing gestures persists into the first movement's second section, and the passing function of these middle tones is arguably even more apparent in the third section where quarter tones are used (a sample of this third section is included in Example 5). Indeed, all the quarter-tones in this passage are clearly passing within a backgrounded 12-note chromatic space. And, echoing the beginning, some of the semitones are also passing.

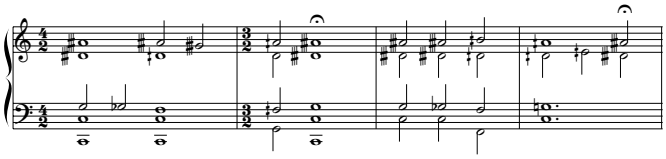


Example 5. Lutoslawski, *Partita*, mvt. 1, mm. 33-36. All quarter tones are passing tones.

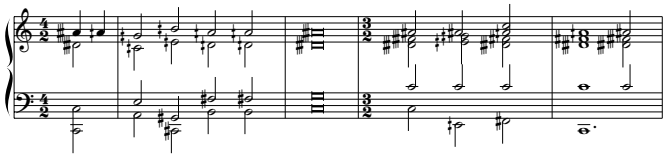
By claiming that all of the quarter tones are passing in Lutoslawski's *Partita*, I am essentially saying that we needn't expand into any sort of 24-tone equal-tempered pitch-class space in order to analyze this passage effectively. In that sense, this passage is substantially different from a work like Charles Ives's *Three Quarter-Tone Pieces* for two pianos, in which quarter tones are often passing or neighboring, but they also serve more essential structural roles. Ives's published score uses traditional musical notation (which does not directly distinguish quarter tones) and simply instructs the performers to tune Piano 1 a quarter step higher than Piano 2. To facilitate analysis, I have used modern notational conventions for quarter tones in Example 6, transcribing both pianos' parts onto one system. Example 7 isolates the soprano line from the Example 6 excerpts and employs pseudo-Schenkerian notation to highlight the neighboring (in red) and passing (in blue) motions.

The third movement of Ives's work is a chorale that begins with two two-bar neighboring progressions in which the first chord, with C2 in the bass and A¾♯4 in the soprano, book-ends each phrase (Examples 6a and 7a). Variations on these neighboring progressions form something of a refrain that returns often during this movement. Examples 6b and 7b show the fourth and fifth iterations of the initial phrase. The chord prolonged through double-neighbor motion in mm. 27-29 is very nearly the same as at the beginning. The prominent upper A¾♯4 can be heard as genuinely progressing down a quarter step to A♯4 as we move to the second phrase on this example. Starting at m. 30, we can hear A♯ similarly prolonged by the red double neighbors C and A¼♯. The salient motion from the prolonged A¾♯ in the first phrase to the prolonged A♯ in the second phrase marks a true quarter-stepwise progression that is not merely ornamental. This quarter-stepwise motion is bracketed on Example 7b.

a) mm. 1 – 4:

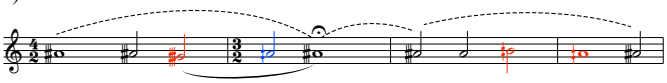


b) mm. 27 (beat 4) – 31:

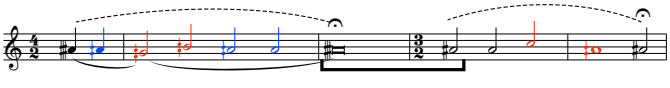


Example 6. Ives, *Three Quarter-Tone Pieces* for two pianos, mvt. 3 (renotated), (a) mm. 1-4 and (b) mm. 27.4-31.

a) mm. 1 – 4:



b) mm. 27 (beat 4) – 31:



Example 7. Ives, *Three Quarter-Tone Pieces* for two pianos, mvt. 3 (soprano line only), with analytical notation. Neighbor tones in red; passing tones (passing from the neighbors) in blue. Solid slurs clarify the passing motion; broken slurs show prolongation of a single tone.

II. INTERPRETATION

To this point, we have seen a variety of examples of ornamentation in atonal music while, with the possible exception of Example 7, hewing to no obvious methodological framework. Methodological neutrality has been a central goal of these analyses, but one might well claim that at least some of the foregoing observations are *ungrounded* (to use a rather pejorative term). Especially in my observations about Schoenberg's op. 19, no. 6 (Example 2), I merely declared a neighbor tone and an appoggiatura to be present without detailing why I hear those tones as ornamental. I will now briefly defend those claims.

I understand E6 (again in Example 2) to be neighboring because there is a sustained D♯ an octave below the D♯-E-D♯ motion (notice that the lower one is in the right-hand part and vice versa). Also, the intervallic profile seems right for a neighbor tone—that is to say that it goes up a step and then falls back down by step. Because we are employing overlearned gestalts that originate in tonal (and modal) music, we should regard stepwise motion as equally important to claims of neighborliness or to passing or suspension gestures in atonal music as it is in tonal music. The rhythmic and metrical profile of this example also supports the categorization of mm. 3-4 as containing a neighbor tone.

It is tougher to defend my reading of the G♯ in mm. 5-6 of Example 2 as an appoggiatura to F♯. I do not believe that my analysis has much to do with the intervallic content of the chord. For one thing, were I inclined to hear functionally tonal or tertian sonorities even in atonal contexts then I would surely prefer hearing the incomplete E dominant-seventh chord in the second half of m. 5 with G♯—the consonant third of the chord—moving by step to F♯ as a sort of escape tone that cannot quite escape before the phrase ends. But at least a limited and informal survey of students and colleagues suggests that my appoggiatura interpretation is broadly shared (i.e., intersubjective). Schoenberg has done nothing to foster any tertian structural expectations; more importantly, the rhythmic and possibly metrical profile of this figure, suggests that the last note is the tone of resolution, though it is resolving to a [0,2,4]-type sonority.

I could stack up all the evidence for why this G♯ is or is not an appoggiatura, but I selected this example simply because, for as long as I can remember, I have heard it as an appoggiatura, even when using this as a teaching piece to demonstrate an analytical methodology (Fortean set-complex theory and taxonomy) whose practitioners generally frown upon such ideas borrowed from the tonal and prolongational lexicon. So, while we might well circle that whole group of four notes in the left hand part and show it to be a member of whole-tone set class [0,2,4,6], it does not seem to follow that all members attain equal stability.

We have arrived at one of the two central problems associated with reading ornamentation in atonal music. Just how much evidence does one need to support ornamental claims absent tonal syntax or at least the priority of consonance over dissonance? Can one reasonably make any such claims off the cuff and without a mountain (or maybe even a molehill) of supporting evidence?

It might well be that some readers are wondering why anyone would want to get around providing evidence for analytical claims. Is this lazy scholarship? Why not be up-front about the analytical criteria that we use for making such decisions? There are many examples of people detailing their analytical criteria in the act of making analytical claims (or often as a prelude to those claims). The segmentation literature is filled with this kind of thing: most famously, Tenney (1964), Tenney and Polansky (1980), Hasty (1981), Lefkowitz and Taavola (2000), and most recently and least algorithmically Hanninen (2001, 2004) have given us various ways of citing the compositional features that inform our associational decisions. Perhaps most relevant to this project, Silberman (2008) offers a carefully laid out and very helpful set of conditions for understanding passing and neighboring gestures in non-traditionally tonal works from the last century. While I greatly admire the work done by each of these scholars, I will briefly defend my seemingly seat-of-the-pants arguments, not in order to devalue their work but rather to carve a place for work that is interpretive without being quite as (obviously) formal.

The problem with citing musical evidence and expressly theorizing every time one wants to make an interpretive claim is that the this matter of crossing T's and dotting I's can get unwieldy, negatively affecting both how much you can say about a piece and how cumbersome your analytical rhetoric (or analytical figures or graphs) might be. That does not mean that I am opposed to analytical methodology or to rigor; it just means that I do not always want to and, honestly, I am not always able to say precisely why I hear some notes as more or less important.

If that sounds a bit too *ad hoc*, I would just point out that this is *exactly* how analytical discussions often unfold in the field of *tonal* music analysis. At his 2010 Society for Music Theory talk, L. Poundie Burstein provided examples from classical common-practice literature that could be considered either half cadences or elided imperfect authentic cadences. Many top scholars in the field found themselves at odds over what seems like a very simple—indeed a fundamental—categorical distinction: between half and authentic cadences. If esteemed scholars such as William Rothstein, William Caplin, and Janet Schmalfeldt can engage in a tripartite dispute over what kind of a cadence they hear in Mozart's piano sonata, K. 310, mvt. 1, mm. 8-9 (and Burstein highlighted exactly that dispute), then why should we insist on taxonomical clarity in atonal music? Indeed, Burstein's larger point was that the disagreement was informative; that our categorical boundaries might not be as crisp as we imagine them to be (and as we portray them in our tonal treatises and pedagogies). Far from trying to bully others into "hearing" things my way or to cognitively understanding the passage as I do, I hope that by making unapologetically subjective analytical claims, we can sow the seeds for analytical engagement, argument, discussion, and perhaps even empirical evaluation.

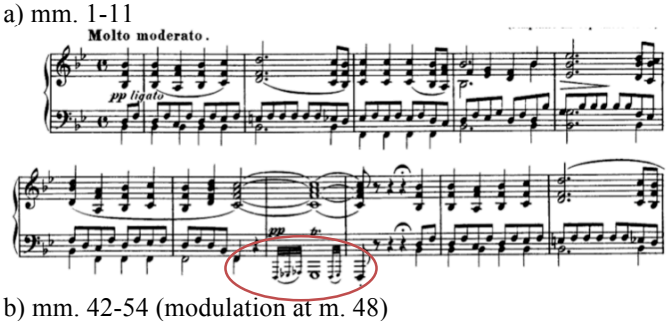
That summarizes the first problem: the issue of accountability. The other central problem in reading ornamentation in atonal music is the *slippery slope argument*. Most music theorists are well-acquainted with Joseph Straus's persuasive and oft-cited 1987 article, "The Problem of Prolongation in Post-Tonal Music" and many of us have been swayed by his arguments that we cannot truly claim that prolongation operates in music that is not tonally syntactical. I am inclined to agree with Straus insofar as prolonging

pitch-class set classes seems to be a difficult proposition. (Indeed, Kuusi (2003) empirically demonstrated how difficult it is for people to differentiate even identical set classes within a rather limited repertoire of chords; prolongation makes far greater cognitive demands than merely identifying whether two chords are categorically the same or different.) Like Straus, I am skeptical of long-range prolongational claims in atonal music (including those by Lerdahl, Salzer, Travis, and others). However, I have come to believe that simple surface-level prolongations (e.g., passing and neighboring tones) are categorically different from long-range ones. I am not prepared to make any prolongational claims that require longer-range hearing than what I proposed in the Charles Ives phrases in Examples 6 and 7.

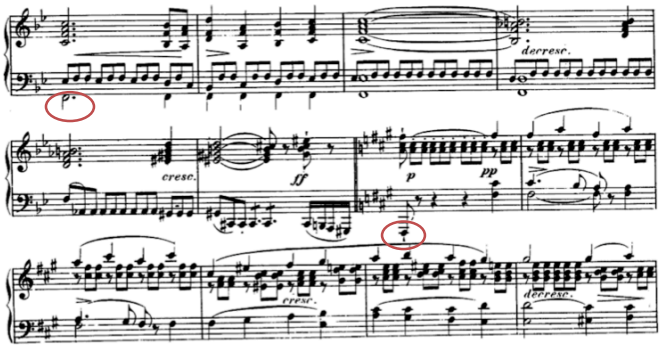
The slippery slope argument suggests that if we allow moment-to-moment claims such as the ones I have made, then who is to say that we cannot also allow similar readings across longer passages of music. If we can have neighboring tones, then we can have neighboring chords, then we can have neighboring progressions, then we can have neighboring sections, and so on. Exactly how far is too far and who will stop us from crossing the prolongational Rubicon? This is a very persuasive argument, and it is bit harder to debate. I found the process of contemplating why I am only confident reading short-range ornaments in atonal music led me to re-evaluate my feelings about short- and long-range ornaments in *tonal* music.

As a result, although I both teach and practice Schenkerian analysis, I confess that I am no longer secure in my belief that long-range and surface-level neighbors (or passing tones or what have you) are both manifestations of the same *kind* of thing. When we discuss Schubert's late B♭ piano sonata (D. 960), it makes for a great analytical story to acknowledge a relationship between the famous trilled G♭ to F in mm. 8-9 (circled in Example 8a) and the apparent modulation to F♯-minor midway through the exposition and its subsequent return to the tonicized dominant of B♭ twenty-two bars later. To be clear: motivically, associationally, prolongationally, even intentionally, I do not doubt that relationships exist between these small- and large-scale events. My only question is whether the expansive neighboring tonality is truly the same *kind* of thing as a plain old neighbor tone. Is there genuinely a hierarchical relationship between them or is "neighbor" simply a convenient metaphorical term that seems to apply well to both events? This is a different and less expansive critique than the one offered by Larson (1997) in his response to Straus (1987): "When different principles guide the organization of different levels, we usually give the objects on those different levels different names (e.g., atoms vs. organs, or appoggiaturas vs. codas). When the objects bear the same names on different levels, we are probably dealing with a hierarchy in which all levels follow the same rules." (Larson, 117.) Unlike Larson, I am not questioning the nature of prolongation so much as the recursive relationship of simple ornamentation to larger prolongational spans.

a) mm. 1-11



b) mm. 42-54 (modulation at m. 48)



Example 8. Schubert, Piano Sonata, D. 960, mvt. 1, a) mm. 1-11 (salient G♭ neighbor to F is circled); b) mm. 42-54 (prolonged F in bass moves to prolonged F♯; the return to F is not included on this example).

III. CONCLUSIONS

I have made three central arguments:

1) That simple readings of ornamentation should not incite philosophical crises about the nature of prolongation in atonal music. Even slightly longer-range ornaments need not challenge Straus's central ideas about whether we can or cannot prolong set classes and such.

2) That exhaustively (or at least obsessively or defensively) supporting our prolongational claims can distract us from the business of actually *making* analytical claims and tying them together into larger-scale analyses.

3) That trusting ourselves to make these sorts of simple reductive claims will enhance our potential to perform analyses and to critique others' analyses in a way that is commensurate with the ways in which we critique tonal—especially Schenkerian—analyses. This is a central point I was trying to make in an earlier (2010) paper: that neither pretty charts and graphs nor mere methodological obedience are sufficient in constructing effective musical analyses. One should also have something to say about the music. If we are to regard the analysis of atonal music as an interpretive activity, we owe it to ourselves to stick our necks out a bit and talk (and argue) about our personal readings.

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