

Dr. Sunny Knable
108-02 72nd ave, apt 3C
Forest Hills, NY 11375
Email: sunnyknable@gmail.com
Cell: 347.742.5153

John Harbison's Philosophy as seen through his *Piano Sonata No. 2*

Introduction

When invited to give a series of lectures at the Berkshire Music Center (now Tanglewood) in the summer of 1984, composer John Harbison began by recounting the music which shaped his musical tastes as a youth: composers Mozart and Bach; Stravinsky and Bartók; Kern and Gershwin; and the jazz pianists Oscar Peterson and Horace Silver. After illuminating the attendees (who included a budding composer, Steven Mackey, among others) about the progression of his personal development as it related to those diverse musical heroes, he then drew a distinction between various classical composers who he claimed embody a state of "Personality" such as Handel and those who embody "The Philosophic Mode" such as J.S. Bach.

The philosophic composers tend to come to 'sound like themselves' only gradually, and to place little priority on when or how they arrive... I want to be a composer of the philosophic mode, which I think requires a sophisticated harmonic language, an ability to reimagine melody as a guiding force, an inventive formal sense, a willingness to be misunderstood, and much patience.¹

This statement represents well the elements which make up Harbison's process of composition as seen some two decades later in his *Piano Sonata No. 2* (2001). In this 22-minute, four-movement work commissioned by pianist Robert Levin, Harbison uses a sophisticated harmonic language based primarily on post-tonal constructs which serve to guide harmonic and linear structures. It includes traditional elements of the sonata form and the theme-in-variations, but

¹ Harbison, *Six Tanglewood Talks*, 12-15.

often operates as if it were a free improvisation, as this paper will illuminate through an analysis of the first movement, *Intrada*. As Harbison intimated to the Berkshire audience, what all composers fundamentally want is to be understood.² Like other composers of the philosophic tradition, his willingness to be *misunderstood* is seen in his compositional style in the *Piano Sonata No. 2*, which fuses together such disparate elements an improvisatory nature reminiscent of those jazz figures he named, traditional forms, and the materials of a post-tonal composer.

Form

Large structure form

The opening movement of *Sonata No. 2, Intrada* is demarcated into eleven sections, each with its own tempo and character indications. Every section serves a purpose, whether to introduce new material, provide a variation, transition, or return to existing material. Its large-scale form can be described as reminiscent of the sonata form: ABA₁ with coda. Example 1 shows the large-scale formal structure, the 11 sections, their corresponding measures, tempo markings and this author's description of those functions.

Ex. 1 – the form of *Sonata No. 2, Intrada*

	mm.	form – tempo (translation) – function/description
A	1-9	a - <i>Tempo giusto</i> (rightful/true), <i>maestoso</i> - opening tableau
	10-15	b - <i>Con bravura</i> (great skill/energy) - linear variation on same materials
	16-23	c - <i>Declamando</i> (bombastic) – Romantic-sounding variation
	24-26	b ₁ - <i>Con bravura</i> – transition, exact repetition of three measures
B	27-40	d - <i>Cantabile</i> (singing) - new material, 6-vox texture with open spacing
	41-50	e - <i>Chiaro, misterioso</i> (clear, mysterious) – dense 6-vox texture
A ₁	51-78	f - <i>Lucido</i> (shining, bright, clear) – opening material, overlapping 16 th 's
	79-94	g - <i>Campane lontane</i> (distant bells) – opening material, juxtaposed bass
	90-94	c ₁ - <i>Declamando</i> - near exact repetition, shortened
	95-105	b ₂ - <i>Con bravura</i> - near-exact repetition, longer phrase than B ₁
Coda	106-115	h(f ₁) - <i>Limpido</i> (clear) - coda - like F section but elongated

² Harbison, *Six Tanglewood Talks*, 19.

Textures

Other than the tempo and character indications, the principal way in which Harbison delineates form is by the use of varying textures. The opening tableau (mm. 1-9) presents material with hands in mostly homophonic rhythm, playing 3-6 notes at a time. What follows are a streamlined variation (mm. 10-15) which is primarily a two-voice texture operating in homophonic rhythm with bass-note interjections; and the second variation (mm. 16-23) which provides a fuller-voiced perspective on that same material, harmonized with a wide-reaching left hand. While the material is related to the A_1 section, the change in texture to fuller right-hand chords marks the start of a large-form B section. Within this section is an *aba* structure out of which, the *b* phrase is marked "*lantano*" – distant. The idea of distance as an extra-musical concept is at the literal center of the piece, a concept which is referenced at the end of the movement as well. After closing that section with a returning *a* phrase, the music abruptly changes to a denser six-voice texture in this next section, beginning at m. 41.

The first phrase of the A_1 section is the longest section of the piece (mm. 51-78), which could be described as an obscured return to the opening material. This first phrase consists of overlapping trichords in a stretto-like texture. What follows is a second phrase which starts similarly and then builds to the largest climax of the piece at m. 61. There begins a diffusion from this peak starting at m. 66 with a rhythmic augmentation of the material, from a 16th-note to 8th-note based texture. Broadly spaced fragments of opening-based material are heard in the last phrase of the section, transitioning through the use of expansion and contraction in terms of the spacing within each hand. "Distant bells" describes well the aural picture that the listener experiences in the following section when hearing the right-hand material juxtaposed with clashing bass notes starting in m. 79. The conclusion of this large form A_1 section is defined by the return of the *Lucido* texture, a coda which pulls apart its 16th-note texture of overlapping chords disappearing into the distance.

Transitions by range and dynamic

Short sections are facilitated through the use of short transitions which often function by the variability of range and dynamic. The use of range can be seen, for example, in the use of the extreme high range in mm. 14–15 as a way of transitioning to the *Declamando* section, as well as in m. 23 to transition to *Con bravura*. In terms of dynamics, it should be noted that the lack of transition is noticeable between the large-scale A and B sections, punctuated by the change in dynamic from *fortissimo* to *piano*. Further delineating form with the use of dynamic, nearly the entire B section is marked at *piano* or *pianissimo*. Similarly, the *sforzandi* of mm. 85–89 serve to transition into a more exact return to first-phrase materials, starting with the *Declamando* section of mm. 90–94, then the *Con bravura* section of mm. 95–105.

Musical Materials

Principal trichords

As Harbison describes in his program notes, this piece contains “immediate, rhetorical, explicit music with more reticent, conflicted music, and its character is derived from the tension between them.”³ Within the explicit music of the opening tableau are two bell-like chords of the piece which contain the derivation of nearly every note which follows: trichords [015] and [025]. Figure 1 shows these trichords as written and then in their prime form.

[insert image 1]

Additionally, between the first three trichords, one can find a [027] relation between the transposition of those trichords. The relationship to the [025] trichord is further solidified in mm. 2–3 where one can find a [025] in inversion as shown in figure 2.

[insert image 2]

³ Harbison, program notes.

Different uses of trichords

Trichord by transposition

These two trichords are so abundantly used throughout the piece that there is little point in naming all of the occurrences. What is worth noting is how else Harbison derives material from the principal trichords. For example, the *Declamando* section starting at m. 16 offers a treble line consisting almost completely of major second relations, while the bass is abundant with major thirds. It is simple to find the inspiration for the intervallic relationships of that are offered within the [015] and [025] trichords. Further, the bass notes (Bb-Eb-Db) on the downbeats of mm. 16-18, have an [025] relationship, showing that the foundational trichords can serve to organize material extending to the phrase and form level of the piece as well as the melody and harmony. This same trichordal relation can be found in a pronounced alto voice of the right hand (with the notes E-C#-B), in mm. 22-24.⁴

Fragmentation

Another use of the principal trichords is how they are used in an overlapping fashion or by fragmentation. One can find overlapping [015] chords in the *Lucido* section, which are separated by their rhythm and transposition (usually by the space of a M2). These overlapping trichords can be seen descending down the whole-tone scale in M2's before being fragmented into occurrences of the P4. The M3's of the right hand in mm. 55-56 can also be seen as referring to the 1 and 5 in the [015] trichord. It is likely not coincidence that the first three whole-note bass notes of mm. 79-81 form an [015] trichord, just as the following three bass notes form an [025].

Other trichords and tetrachords

In the first phrase (mm. 41-43) of the *Chiaro, misterioso* section, the five-note chords of the right hand display an intricate relation of new trichordal relationships, the melody (Bb-B-C#) an

⁴ As Harbison admitted in a 2004 interview in *The Vocal Point* magazine, his attraction to the inner melodies comes from his time as a violist.

[013] trichord, while the top three voices of this phrase are either [013] as well or [024]. The second phrase (mm. 45-48) is thinned to four-notes in the right hand, with a melody also based on the [013] trichord. Furthermore, the soprano notes of m. 55 presents a [0135] tetrachord (Eb-Db-Cb-Bb), related to the [015] trichord, and which shall return shortly. While the first phrase creates a dreamy overlapping texture, the second phrase makes an exciting ascension, crawling up the whole tone scale in mm. 57-59, and operating with the inversion of the [0135] tetrachord previously heard (A-B-C#-D). The peak of this phrase is achieved through transpositions outlining [013] trichords, otherwise known as the diminished scale. Expansion and contraction of intervals is the process that slowly takes shape as the guiding idea of the fourth large phrase in mm. 69-78. The ebb and flow of these movements is usually opposite in hands – when one is contracting, the other is expanding and vice versa. The concept of expansion and contraction of intervals is also seen in mm. 84-88.

The *Declamando* at m. 90 and the *Con bravura* of m. 95 offer strong references to their counterparts in the opening sections, borrowing mainly from the right-hand material, and recasting it with new harmonic material. The most notable change in m. 95 is so small it looks at first to be a typographical error, but the F-natural in the soprano as opposed to the F# in m. 10 is confirmed by the repeat of that same F at m. 103. One needs only look so far as the bass line to see that Harbison is playing again with the intervallic relationships between the repeated figures and the new bass line material of this altered section. The harmonic motion of mm. 100-101 (just as in m. 20) outlines the [0135] tetrachord, soon to be referenced in the Coda. After the near-exact repeat of mm. 24-26 at mm. 103-105, the *Limpido* section closes the piece with a Coda, bringing back the overlapping [015] figures of the *Lucido* section. These figures feature the P4, a component of the trichord, which are sequenced down by an [0135] transposition in mm. 109-110.

Rhythmic materials

Just as he assigns specific trichords (leitmotifs) to characters in his opera *The Great Gatsby* written in 1999, so too does he assign intervallic relationships to correspond with rhythmic figures.⁵ For example, in the first *Con bravura* section starting at m. 10, when utilizing tied off-beat triplets, there are also primarily intervals of a perfect fifth (P5). He departs from this modus operandi in m. 14, where the intervals expand to prepare the arrival of the P5 punctuation on beat three. The transition in mm. 14-15 also contains this P5 material. At m. 103, the only change from m. 95 is the Bb, again, so seemingly insignificant, that it could look like a mistake, but the change from a tritone on beat 2 in m. 95 to a P5 in m. 103, seems supported by the structural importance given to the interval of a P5, and the process of expansion from the middle sections. The low ringing bass notes (Eb-Ab-Db) from m. 106 to 111, are significant in their fifth relation as well.

Jazz-related materials

While the analysis above points to a composer who is of the post-tonal tradition, the general audience member would hear that the music has elements of the jazz tradition. As soon as m. 3 in the piece, one hears the first overt reference to jazz harmony – a chord of the Lydian mode (G Major 9#11) with open spacing, common to the pianists of the modern Jazz era. It could be seen an [015] trichord with a G in the bass and a tenth above. The second phrase of this opening tableau (mm. 4-6) is similar in rhythm and shape, but it is transposed up a M2. The third three-measure phrase is transitional, using the full-voiced figuration of trichords in the right-hand and a left hand containing the root, fifth and ninth and/or tenth above. This thinking of a stable left hand outlining the triad and a right hand filled with extensions of the harmony is typical of jazz-piano voicings, and upon further investigation, the trichords of each hand as well as the transpositions of those trichords, are positively post-tonal.

⁵ Silberman 2013, 166

Though short lived, the *Con bravura* repeat at mm. 24–26 (corresponding with mm. 10–12) is an effective transition of its own. Due to its melody-accompaniment-bass formulation, tertian harmony reminiscent of jazz voicings, and dissonant melodic notes which are derived from the blues scale, this section sounds nearly Gershwin-esque. This same material of m. 20 is referenced in mm. 100–101 as well. Upon further analysis, this material is still related to the opening tableau. The start of this large form B section features a different approach to working with interval types. The first *a* phrase of this section is a primarily six-voiced texture, separating the hands into three parts of two voices each. The bass intervals make up what jazz pianists would call “shell-voicings”, consisting mainly of $m7$'s; the mid-range intervals are primarily $M2$'s (though this role is condensed to one voice in mm. 29–30); and the highest intervals oscillate between $m3$ 'rd's and $M3$ 'rd's. The added eighth-note motion in the soprano in addition to the shell voicings in the bass, makes for an overtly jazz-flavored section. However, the intervallic make-up of these three layers can still be tied to the $[025]$ trichord, which is comprised of a $M2$ and a $m3$.

Harbison continues with many phrases that can be heard as influenced by jazz but defended with set theory. For example, the jazzy cadence of m. 40; the use of whole-tone and diminished scales in mm. 57–59 which play an important role in jazz harmony and melody, though here, the relations are all used in the function of phrase and form, as well as in the name of post-tonal theory. Further, the third phrase at m. 66 augments the rhythm with expanding interval sets from soprano to bass, building a jazz-like $VI^9-V^{b9}-i^9$ cadence in E-minor in mm. 67–68. The final phrase of the piece is a rhythmic expansion, providing space to let the $[015]$ trichords come to rest. The two chords heard in repetition are the two $[015]$ trichords which started the piece—(G-F#-D) and (F-E-C)—each of which are accompanied by a contrasting low bass note in the left hand. If one were to think of these as jazz chords with the root in the soprano

(G major-7 and F major-7), then it would follow that the note we are missing from the chord is the M3, which, so happens, is what we find juxtaposed against the last chords: an A octave at m. 112 and a B octave at m. 114. This completes a consist treatment of post-tonal thinking in a jazz context. This is achieved by the use of two primary trichords which govern the piece in terms of harmony, melody, phrase and form, all the while used in ways which suggest jazz harmony, voicings, scales, and motives.

Timbral effects

Other notable characteristics of the piece involve the overall timbral effects achieved. One primary aspect is the use of pedal throughout the work, which helps to create the sense of ringing, especially effective for bell-like figures and the faint vibrations of “distant” sounds. In m. 79, the idea of *Campane lontane* (“distance bells”) is achieved through an exact but quieter repetition of the opening material juxtaposed with contrasting bass notes. The registral changes are often used to transition sections or to delineate a juxtaposition of materials. The thinning and thickening of textures aids in the delineation of form, whether by the sudden change in number of voices, or the gradual effect made by an additive or subtractive process. Lastly, the use of open versus closed voicings between the hands has a large effect on the overall musical references made to sounds (bells, distance), styles (Bill Evans, Gershwin), and process (expanding, contracting).

Conclusion

Later in his career, Harbison summarized his artistic credo as an attempt “to make each piece different from the others, to find clear, fresh, large designs, to reinvent traditions.”⁶ These elements are evident in his *Sonata No. 2*. As an opening movement, *Intrada* has the overall effect of a dreamy, wandering prelude. Though the material is tightly organized, and the form clearly

⁶ George “John Harbison” Oxford Music Online.

demarcated, the changes in style and process make for an improvisatory piece, like a modern-jazz pianist improvising multiple sections based on three-note motives. The term “improvisatory” has been used in the past as a criticism of Harbison’s music,⁷ but the composer himself confirmed this intention in his program notes to this piece which stated that he wanted the “fanciest details to sound quasi-improvised, so that [Robert Levin’s] cliff-hanging, risk-friendly performance style could flourish.”⁸

The son of a piano-playing Mother and a banjo-playing Father, Harbison grew up teaching himself to play piano in his own jazz band, improvising before he could read notes.⁹ As the composer put it, Harbison’s process as a youth was “never to learn music, but to absorb it instead.” This led to an interest in jazz and popular music in addition to the classical music he was raised on. Even after Walter Piston, his Professor at Harvard, told him that he had “no future in real music”, Harbison set out on a journey towards this unique compositional style.¹⁰ As he wrote in his second talk at the Berkshire Music Center on the subject of popular music, “The only popular music we can honestly and viably incorporate into our compositional style is that of our own adolescence,” and that being jazz for Harbison.¹¹ In this way, as David George points out, Harbison arrived at an approach which is the synthesis of the two overarching models 20th Century: the serial tradition of Schoenberg and the various neo-stylings of Stravinsky.¹² After all, Stravinsky himself was writing music influenced by the jazz tradition in one phase of his output.

⁷ Seabrook 1996, 10.

⁸ Harbison, program notes.

⁹ George “John Harbison” Oxford Music Online.

¹⁰ Seabrook 1996, 7.

¹¹ Harbison, *Six Tanglewood Talks*, 19-20.

Harbison goes on in his third talk to ruminate on the hurtful but necessary role of criticism for the composer, being that their ego and their ephemeral art form is fragile.

¹² George, “John Harbison”, Oxford Music Online.

What Harbison described as the philosophic tradition, I believe he has achieved in *Sonata No. 2*. In it, he presents a sophisticated harmonic language based on a tonal and post-tonal concepts; an ability to reimagine the melody as a guiding force, one in which the melody guides the harmony and phrases; and an inventive form, one that is based on old constructions but conceived of in new ways. When asked about composers and what makes them successful, Harbison says:

Composers are perceiving at a tremendous level of detail and intent... but unless we translate some of that into what I call the working of the outer ear, an ear that is not working at that level of specificity, we won't be able to communicate with people who are not spending their lives at it... The composers worth returning to are the ones who achieve a balance between the two.¹³

Judging by this first movement to his second piano sonata alone, one can hear that he is a composer who has struck that balance between the complex the communicative. By this and many measures of his prolific work, I believe John Harbison is a composer worth returning to.

¹³ MIT Video, "John Harbison on Composing at MIT and the Celebration Concert"

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