

Observations on Bartok's "Song of the Harvest"

"Song of the Harvest" for two violins, is a 5 part 'Rondo' Form, *ABABA*, in which the *A* Sections (slow, soft, legato) present 3 statements (varied in different ways) of the same freely imitative material while the *B* sections (fast, loud, heavily accented) present a strict canon (first at a half note, second at a quarter note interval of imitation). The *B* section's energetic rhythm contrasts strongly with the *A* section's lyric character. Nevertheless the *A* and *B* materials share a number of common melodic features and the first four sections (*ABAB*) also share the identical range constraints (the diminished 8ve) and the octatonic, "bi-tonal" harmonic construction. The Final section, restates the *A* material but within a diatonic "perspective" (i.e. Ab dorian) thereby eliminating the predominance vertically of the tritone interval which permeates the first 4 octatonic sections.

The duo was composed with the intent of making both violin parts equally important. This accounts for Bartok's use of imitative textures and for the fact that, in the second *AB* section (Bars 16-29) he exchanges the violinists' roles - the "leader" becomes the "follower" and the "follower" becomes the "leader". This equality also extends to the melodic and harmonic construction itself. The melodic material is derived from two simultaneously performed (and mutually exclusive) tetrachords (each constructed symmetrically: *ws, hs, ws = abcd*). These two tetrachords (until the final "recap" of Bar 30-34 - as mentioned above) are connected contiguously by a half step (for example: the *D#e#f#g#-Abcd* collection of Bar 1-5). The resulting Octatonic collection allows Bartok to form 2 brief 4 note melodies, each of which prolongs a tonal center located a tritone distant from the other. These simultaneously competing tonal centers are an extension of the nature of the octatonic scale (the "diminished" scale) and can be heard as a form of bi-tonality – a true kind of musical equality since, in effect, each performer has his/her own tonal center!

Observing the violin lines individually, one notices that, in the *A* of Bar 1-5, the First Violin plays a melody drawn from the tetrachord collection Abcd and, in the *B* of Bar 6-15, plays a melody drawn from the tetrachord collection Defg. Together these two tetrachords form the D Dorian mode: defgabcd. This means that when a performer practices the First Violin part, the music will yield a diatonic impression - completely devoid of the tritone tensions formed vertically by the presence of the Second Violin part. Similarly the Second Violin plays the G# Dorian mode (this accounts for the F# Major Key Signatures) and similarly will find the line completely diatonic. Bartok's "trick" is that, by combining the tetrachords of these 2 modal scales, he creates an Octatonic Collection vertically – i.e. by superimposing these 2 diatonic units, he creates a more harmonically "tense" pitch collection. When he wishes to remove the tritones generated by that collection, he simply reconnects the two tetrachords by a whole step and the vertical dimension returns to normal (i.e. in the final *A* section).

Parts:	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>
	1st Tetrachord	2nd Tetrachord
Leader:	D Dorian: d c b <u>A</u>	g f e D
Follower:	G# Dorian: g# f# e# <u>D#</u> ,	c# b a# G#

The sequence of tetrachordal centers as selected by Bartok for the 5 sections is:

	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>		<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>		<i>A</i>
Leader-Soprano:	A	D	Switch to Bass:	E	A	Switch back to Sop:	E \flat
Follower-Bass:	D \sharp	G \sharp	Switch to Soprano:	B \flat	E \flat	Switch back to Bass:	A \flat
Octatonic Collection	T0	T5		I7	T6(T0)		A \flat Dorian



These centers are manifested by the following Pitch Collections:

Pitch Collections Used in "Song of the Harvest"

Collections are presented in register used by Bartok. Whole notes indicate tetrachord's Pitch Center

T0 Octatonic Ms. 1-5, Form: Part A (1)

T5 Octatonic Ms. 6-15, Form: Part B (2)

I7 Octatonic Ms. 16-20, Form: Part A (3)

T6 Octatonic Ms. 21-29, Form: Part B (4)

A \flat Dorian** Ms. 30-34, Form: Part A (5)

*T6 (Transposition by tritone) Repeats tetrachord division of T0, but now in reversed order.

**Bartok lowers first Tetrachord of preceding T6 by 1/2 step to form Dorian collection on A \flat , lowering intervallic tension.

The Pitch Collection (I7) used in the 3rd Part is a "surprise". Had Bartok wanted a straight forward transposition (T7) of Bars 1-15 to serve for Bars 16-29, (i.e. without an exchange of roles between the two violinists), he would have written the following using the Octatonic collection for the *A* part: A \sharp B \sharp C \sharp D \sharp E F \sharp G A and the Octatonic Collection D \sharp E \sharp F \sharp G \sharp A C D E for the *B* part:

A
B

Leader: A Dorian a g f# E, d c b A
 Follower: D# Dorian d# c# b# A#, g# f# e# D#

Bartok, instead, introduces several changes to this model. He reverses the Leader-Follower relationship placing the Leader in Violin II from bar 21 through 29 and presents the *A* material in its Inverted form. This gives a fresh perspective on the *A* material - yet preserves the Cadence point of E/Bb. In the *B, Piu' Mosso* section, he continues the role exchange, but he leaves the musical material in its original (i.e. non-inverted) form. He lowers the Leader's line an 8ve (to low A) so that the Leader's line is now also the bass line. The Cadence Tritone for this second *B* section is, consequently, A/Eb (not D#/A) which prepares resolution of the final *A* section to the Fifth, Ab/Eb. He "tightens" the Canon so that the Follower enters after a quarter-note pause only. (Bartok also makes adjustments in the timing between parts by cutting out a beat of pause following the cadences in Bar 20 and 29.)

A
B

Follower: f g ab Bb, ab gb f Eb, .
 Leader: b c# d E, d c b A,

As the earlier outlines demonstrated, the second *B* section uses the same Tritone Cadence (D#/A and A/Eb) and the same 2 tetrachords as the opening *A* section – a symmetry which helps promote a sense of return and completion and certainly was of fundamental importance to Bartok's

structural decisions. Interestingly enough, had he NOT dropped the Leader an 8ve at Bar 21, he would have easily had access to a verbatim recapitulation of the original material of Bar 1-5 with only the Leader/Follower roles exchanged:

Piu' Mosso

Follower:

Leader

Lento

B A

Follower: ab gb f Eb, ab gb f Eb .

Leader: d c b A, d c b a

Instead he opts for a conclusion which, similarly, maintains the common tones (ab gb f Eb in Violin 1), but switches the Leader and Follower Roles back to the original placement with Violin I as Leader and assigns the Follower the task of relaxing the tension by moving its tetrachord from the Octatonic collection to the Ab Dorian collection.

Follower

Leader

Voices Return to original position

Leader

Follower

Bartok allows the lower tetrachord of the Ab Dorian mode to vanish in the last bars leaving the final word to the upper tetrachord and its Eb center. The final victor in this war of centers? It connects quite nicely back to the first A section's D# Center.