
Manifestations of Stylistic Dichotomy in the Harmony of 20th Century Music: General Tendencies and Several Case Studies

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Abstract: This paper aims to provide an analytical insight into two interrelated topics, each of which is interesting in its own right. The first of them is dichotomy in music, namely, the various manifestations of binarity – that is, the juxtaposition of two different spheres of expression, either simultaneously, in counterpoint, or in succession. The second aspect targeted will be the presentation of the main trends, important concepts or compositional techniques used in the creation of such dichotomies, based on some relevant musical examples studied.

Keywords: stylistic dichotomy, composition techniques, 20th century, case studies, Latvian music.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to provide an analytical insight into two interrelated topics, each of which is interesting in its own right. The first of them is dichotomy in music, namely, the various manifestations of binarity – that is, the juxtaposition of two different spheres of expression, either simultaneously, in counterpoint, or in succession. Both types of dichotomies were already well represented before the 20th century, especially in Baroque music. An example can be the basso ostinato variations, in which the often rhythmically monotonous bass theme with its constant return is perceived as something fatal, mystical, eternal, and objective, and the opposite of that are the other voices of the texture with their freedom of rhythm, fantasy-like development and melodic individualization – they reflect a more personal, intimate expression, subjective feelings.

Another dichotomy of Baroque origin is prelude and fugue, which often also includes a juxtaposition of spontaneity, quasi-improvisation, and rationality, objectification. Of course, there are also many dichotomies in the music history from other times, such as, for example, the succession of two dances – a slow solemn opening dance and the fast-fierce second dance, which we see both in the *pavan-galliard* pair in the Renaissance and Baroque, and in many of the Hungarian rhapsodies by Franz Liszt. A binary conception born right at the

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beginning of Romanticism and also typical of the Romantic paradigm is a two-movement cycle with an anxiously restless first movement and a quietly resigned, meditative second movement – such an interpretation of the cycle can already be found in the *Piano Sonata No. 32* by Ludwig van Beethoven, where the *Allegro con brio* in *C minor* is followed by an Arietta, *Adagio molto* in *C major*, however, the most famous example here is the *Unfinished Symphony* by Franz Schubert¹. Other possible dichotomies are, for example, *Florestan* and *Eusebius* from the *Carnaval* by Schumann, a juxtaposition between the crowd and the individual in the finale movement of the *Fourth Symphony* by Pyotr Tchaikovsky (this hidden program follows from his comments in the letter to Nadezhda von Meck) (Tchaikovsky Research n.d.), a.o. – the list of interesting dichotomies could be continued.

2. Purpose of the study

In this paper, they will be discussed only in one specific aspect, namely, focusing on stylistic dichotomies that are especially characteristic of the 20th century as the era of multiculturalism and collages. In the creation of this type of dichotomy, all possible musical parameters are usually involved, such as melodics, rhythm, harmony, instrumentation, a.o. However, the role of harmony should be especially highlighted because exactly this parameter has experienced the most radical changes during the 20th century and therefore most vividly reveals the specifics of this age. Are there any main trends, important concepts, or composition techniques in the creation of such dichotomies? This is the research question that I will seek to answer in my paper.

3. Argumentation of the theme

The first type of dichotomy that will be analysed is based on the paradigm of a parallel world, which is characteristic of the art of the 20th century and manifests itself in many literary works of science fiction, where the story is developed in different time dimensions, as well as in theatre and music, where representatives of various eras and cultures that previously seemed almost incompatible are juxtaposed. Their combination creates a surreal effect in the broad sense of this term. To better understand this type of dichotomy, the term 'parallel dramaturgy' can be helpful. Musicologist Valentina Holopova has used this in an analogy to the 20th-century theatrical and literary works, for example, Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* (1940), in which the story is told in two timelines: the first one being during the Jerusalem of Pontius Pilate, and the second one – the 1930s in the Soviet Union. The events within these two timelines have no direct and unambiguous interaction whatsoever and they stand

¹ The similarity in the concept of both is recognized, for example, by the researcher of the *Unfinished Symphony*, the musicologist Maynard Solomon (1997, p. 128).

on their own (Holopova, 1999, p. 455), even though the reader, of course, creates mental links between the two. From the perspective of the conclusion, it is important to note that both timelines present different cultural traditions and stylistic spheres, retaining their autonomy to the end.

It is precisely the contrast of the tonality and atonality that often acquires a special meaning in this context.

An early example could be the *Unanswered Question*, a composition by Charles Ives for a chamber ensemble (1908). In this work, a cantilena as a symbol of the Silences of the Druids is related to the stylistics of tonal music (*G major*), meanwhile, the flutes that, according to the composer, are a symbol of human beings (Ives, 1953), and the trumpet with its eternal (unanswered) question tends towards free atonality as a musical sign of a different age. Musicologists H. Wiley Hitchcock and Noel Zahler note that in the final version of this work, the atonality is especially emphasized in the trumpet part: “In the 1930s, Ives apparently preferred the strikingly more chromatic (even atonal) “corrected” phrase, with its last note different from its initial *B-flat* and changing by a semitone with each recurrence, to the comparatively diatonic original phrase, with its beginning and ending *B-flats* implying more or less an *E-flat* tonality” (Hitchcock & Zahler, 1988, p. 441).

Meanwhile, an example representing the second half of the 20th century is the Sarabande from the *Collage on BACH* for strings, oboe, harpsichord and piano by the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt (1964). In this case, the atonal material encourages a transformation of the tonal material, the main aesthetic idea is a contemporary modification of the classic values of the past. Mark Eric John Vuorinen, researching the music by Pärt and discussing this work, quotes Paul Hillier, the author of the monograph *Arvo Pärt* who writes: Bach’s Sarabande was “chosen, we may guess, for the lyrical and somewhat disguised use it makes of the BACH motif” (Hillier, 1997, p. 51). As Vuorinen concludes, “indeed, the uppermost voice (in Pärt’s scoring, the oboe) starts with an embellished and ornamented BACH motive transposed to begin on F-natural (F, E, G, F#)” (Vuorinen, 2014, p. 37).

In the use of this motif, there is a certain resemblance with the conception of the famous novel *The Picture of Dorian Grey* by Oscar Wilde (1891): the same face in different time periods gains surprisingly different traits, and the present that is symbolized by the atonal episodes could be perceived as a parody of the past or of tonal music. The composition is based on the Sarabande from the *Sixth English Suite* by Johann Sebastian Bach and consists of two kinds of sections; firstly, the material from the *Sarabande* by Bach in the instrumentation by Pärt that is sustained in the Baroque style; secondly, a harmonically altered repetition of the same material, as a kind of Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors, namely, the classical harmonies by Bach are replaced with atonal clusters, and the sound is strange, surreal. However, Pärt has left the last word or the conclusion of

Sarabande to Bach and thus he indirectly reveals his view on the permanent and the changeable in the confrontation of past and present.

Such concepts could be denoted with a special term '**alienation**' because they are aimed at showing the great mutual distance between different cultures, even emphasizing their certain incompatibility. Diverse interpretations of the concept of alienation are often found in the music of Pēteris Plakidis (1947–2017). He is the first Latvian composer who made collage an important part of his style. Even the titles of several of his works are notable here – trios *Romantic Music* (1980), *Dedication to Haydn* (1982), *Dedication to Brahms* (1999) etc.

In the works of Plakidis, two main manifestations of stylistic dichotomy, based on the concept of alienation, can be distinguished. The first one is in a certain sense similar to the aforementioned idea by Arvo Pärt, which I metaphorically compare with a reflection in a crooked mirror – namely, the musical material that represents the stylistics of the past is “modernized” (first of all in terms of harmony), acquiring unexpectedly strange characteristics. An example is the *Pusaizmirsta sentimentāla melodija* (“Half-Forgotten Sentimental Melody”) for violin, bassoon, violoncello and piano (1977). However, unlike Pärt, Plakidis “modernizēs” not a melody of another composer from the past, but rather his own tune – a cello cantilena, which is presented at the beginning of the piece in F major and acquires a dimension of romantic ambiguity because it is exposed against the background of a dominant organ point (see Fig. 1).

Tranquillo
espr. poco rubato, improvisato

Vc. *mp* pizz. *pp*

Fig. 1 Pēteris Plakidis, *Pusaizmirsta sentimentāla melodija*
 (“Half-Forgotten Sentimental Melody”) – the beginning

Very soon, the violin and piano transform one of the motifs of this melody by adding sharp accents and, above all, a sudden chromaticization that brings unexpected strange sounds to the initial F major diatonic (see Fig. 2). Taking into account that this strange motif is nevertheless derived from the previous cantilena, it acquires a self-ironic character, as if the composer himself was making fun of his sentiment, which can be felt at the beginning of the miniature and is not suitable for the contemporary world.

Fig. 2 Pēteris Plakidis, *Pusaizmirsta sentimentāla melodija*
 (“Half-Forgotten Sentimental Melody”), mm. 15-19

The second manifestation of the stylistic dichotomy, also characteristic of Plakidis, is based on an opposing treatment of melodic lines, on one hand, and harmony on the other hand. Here, a favoured genre by Plakidis – songs for voice and piano – should be mentioned. He has been writing them all his life and also performed them as a pianist in an ensemble with his wife, the excellent Latvian singer Maija Krīģena. Many of these songs with their intimate, sincere expression follow the German *Lied* traditions and, in his native Latvia, have been frequently described as neo-romantic, although parallels with postmodernism, which was relevant in Western art music of this time, can also be seen. The significance of these art movements for the Latvian composers who entered the music life during the 1970s is highlighted by the researcher Jānis Kudiņš: “[...] beginning in the 1970s, after the modernistic *harsh style* of the previous decade, Latvian composers more often began to turn to a cultivation of a postmodern neoromanticism stylistic” (Kudiņš, 2021, p. 119).

A dialogue between the past and now is an essential topic for postmodern art, and it is also richly presented in the works by Plakidis. An example is the song *Upei pāri* (“Across the River”) from *Trīs Ojāra Vācieša dzejoļi* (“Three Poems of Ojārs Vācietis”)². In the poem by Vācietis, a young girl is described, who lives in her own fantasy world and “swam across the silver river, holding on to the tern’s fin” (*Sudraba upei peldēju pāri, raudiņas spurā turēdamās*); neither the neighbour couple nor the parents understood her, but only he alone, who “looked at me and was silent”.

² See also: Youtube.com (2015). *Three Poems by Ojars Vacietis: I. Across the River*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSSI_udrfzw (accessed on 19 January 2024).

The poem inspired Plakidis to create a song which includes an opposition of two textural layers:

- a romantic, diatonic and thoughtful cantilena is presented in the vocal part, suitable for the chest voice and supported by the piano's left-hand accompaniment (classical triads and seventh chords, mostly tonic and subdominant). The main key is *D flat major*, however, several derivations to the related *B flat minor* are also felt;

- a completely different musical material appears in the piano's right-hand part – its thematic core is a fast sixteenth-note passage in the high register, which ends with a broad rising intervallic leap (a ninth). Initially, this musical material is played in the interludes, but later it is also exposed simultaneously with the vocal cantilena.

Despite the contrast of several musical parameters, we can describe both musical materials as different only in character and not stylistically. The second, playful material in the piano's right-hand part is also diatonic, with its own tonal centre (initially, *G*), but it is precisely the polytonal combination of both of these materials that creates a strange impression. Thus, both the romantic sincerity of the poem (the vocal cantilena) and the surreal dimension (the already mentioned poetic text about swimming across the silver river, holding on to the fin of a tern) are revealed at the same time (see Fig. 3).

The image displays a musical score for the song "Upei pāri" by Pēteris Plakidis. The score is written in D-flat major (three flats) and 4/4 time. It consists of two systems. The first system shows the vocal line with lyrics "Sud - ra - ba u - pei__ pel - dē - ju pā - ri, rau - di - ņas spu - rā__" and the piano accompaniment. The piano part features a fast sixteenth-note passage in the right hand and a simple harmonic accompaniment in the left hand. The second system shows the vocal line with lyrics "tu - rē - da - mās." and the piano accompaniment, which continues the sixteenth-note passage in the right hand and the harmonic accompaniment in the left hand.

Fig. 3 Pēteris Plakidis, *Upei pāri* ("Across the River") – an excerpt

The composer also achieves a similar, gentle and ethereal effect in the last movement of *Trīs Ojāra Vācieša dzejoļi (Siltā lietū / “Come into the Warm Rain”*³), where the vocal cantilena in the *C sharp Dorian* scale combines with a softened (*pp*) but harmonically completely incompatible fourth (*D–G*) in a high piano register (see Fig. 4).

Molto tranquillo, rubato

pp

Molto tranquillo, rubato

pp

Sempre Ped.

1. Sil - tā lie - tū, kas iz - maz - gā
2. Ze - mes bries - to - šā sil - tu - ma

sir - di, ru - dzu bal - ta - ja sa - no - ņā
mā - cīts, viņš te gai - da jau nez ku - rais

Fig. 4 Pēteris Plakidis, *Siltā lietū / “Come into the Warm Rain”* – an excerpt

Such soundings are individualized and very characteristic of Plakidis.

Another manifestation of a stylistic dichotomy is related to the concept of **revelation**. It marks a universal idea close to that represented by, for example, Beethoven's last *Piano Sonata (No. 32)* or Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*. It could be described as a contrast between life's pain (never-ending struggle) and the clarity and harmony of another world. In the music of the 20th century, the implementation of this idea is frequently enriched with a stylistic contrast of two opposite unities. One of the well-known examples is *Violin Concerto (1935)* by Alban Berg, dedicated “to the memory of an angel”, or the eighteen-year-old deceased Manon Gropius. In this work, both dramatic and contemplative episodes alternate, however, the drama and atonally dissonant tension reach their greatest height [the record “*Höhepunkt (des “Allegros”)*”⁴ in the score] in the

³ See also Youtube.com (2021). Pēteris Plakidis "Siltā lietū" (*Vizma Zvaigzne, Justine Eckhaut*). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUiflEm3Pw4>

⁴ Culmination (of the *Allegro*).

second movement, shortly before the softened conclusion. The latter contains two quotations that can be perceived as voices from a completely different world. The first of them is the Lutheran chorale⁵ *Es ist genug* used by Johann Sebastian Bach at the ending of his cantata *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort*, and the second example is a quotation from the Carinthian folk song – a muted and dance-like diatonic melody. This theme which appears near the conclusion of both movements and quickly fades out is perceived as a symbol of memories of a girl whose life is over. Both quotes seem to draw parallels with a revelation about the true values, which many come to only when the struggles of life and the constant pursuit of the unattainable have already ended. However, the very way in which both the chorale and the Carinthian folk song are presented also reflects a stylistic dichotomy – in both cases, the ancient melody contrasts with the polyharmonic context of the other voices. Andrew Thomson, basing on the research conducted by other musicologists, admits that “the appearances of a Carinthian folk song in Gb and the Bach chorale *Es ist genug!* are skilfully integrated into the technical context of 12-note serialism” (Thomson, 2014, p. 55).

There are quite a lot examples of such stylistic dichotomy in Latvian music of the Soviet period, 1970s and 1980s. I will discuss the piano cycle *Varšavas triptihs* (“Warsaw Triptych”, 1973) by Imants Zemzaris in more detail.

This cycle was created after the composer's trip to the festival *Warsaw Autumn*. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was a special event for many Latvian enthusiasts of contemporary music, because there was almost no chance to go to concerts or festivals in Western Europe or America due to the Iron Curtain, but *Warsaw Autumn* presented various interesting styles, including avant-garde. Imants Zemzaris has reflected the polystylistic impressions of his visit to the Polish metropole in the above-mentioned cycle. The stylistic panorama of this work includes, for example, elements of rock music (the cycle has the subtitle *Three rock pieces*), a quote from Bach's fugue (*Well-Tempered Piano*, Part 1, *Fugue in F sharp minor*), and also atonal pointillism. The finale of the cycle (movement 3) is characterized by a particularly intense alternation of different materials based on the principle of collage. However, in its final phase, one of Chopin's most expressive, poignant melodies appears as an unexpected revelation. It is the theme of his slow etude in *E flat minor*, which is also provided with a rhythmic augmentation. This quote is longer than any of the previous themes of the movement – as if symbolizing something permanent in contrast to the rapidly changing modern world. And yet, there is something fragile, ethereal, because the final tonic of the period, although prepared, does not come in – with an elliptical turn, the composer returns to the elements of rock music and thrilled syncopated pulsation (see Fig. 5), which also was used at the beginning of the triptych.

⁵ Text by Franz Joachim Burmeister, and melody by Johann Rudolph Ahle.

The musical score is divided into six systems:

- System 1:** Piano introduction with chords in both hands. Dynamics: *ff*. Includes a vocal line with a fermata and an 8va ornament.
- System 2:** Piano part with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Dynamics: *p*. Ends with an asterisk.
- System 3:** Piano part with a 3/4 time signature change and a melodic line. Dynamics: *p*.
- System 4:** Piano part with a melodic line in the right hand and a rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand.
- System 5:** Piano part with a melodic line in the right hand and a rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand.
- System 6:** Piano part with a melodic line in the right hand and a rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. Dynamics: *f*. Includes an 8vb... 1 ornament and a Ped. instruction.

Fig. 5 Imants Zemzaris, *Varšavas triptihs*, movement 3 – the conclusion

Similar to the previously reviewed Berg's Violin Concerto, such an ending is stylistically ambiguous and leaves an open question – is the past symbolized by the theme of revelation (in this case, melody by Chopin) viable in the modern world, or is it just a nostalgic reminder?

3. Conclusions

From a structural point of view, two interpretations of dichotomies should be distinguished. The composer can emphasize the ambiguous coexistence of two stylistic spheres by concluding the composition with their counterpoint, like in most of the discussed works. However, it is also possible to assign a preference – the final word – to one of the styles, like we see in the *Sarabande* from Pärt's *Collage sur B-A-C-H*. As I have mentioned earlier, this work ends with a quotation from Bach's music rather than with the sonoristically deformed version of this material.

If we compare the dichotomies in the music of the 20th century with those typical of earlier centuries, then we can also see a certain continuity – for example, the similarity of the revelation to the concept of the *Unfinished Symphony* by Schubert. However, it must be recognized that the use of new harmonic possibilities sharpens the contrast between two sides of the dichotomy and the juxtaposition not only of different characters but also different cultures is expressed much more strongly than ever before.

The ideas manifested in this paper could be further developed in interdisciplinary research aimed at comparing the role of stylistic dichotomies employed in other arts in a similar conceptual context. It will undoubtedly deepen our understanding of the general processes of contemporary culture.

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