

My philosophy of music¹

Stephen Whale

Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara has described his compositional outlook as a synthesis of tonal harmony and melody with twelve tone technique. My approach to interpretation is to seek a union of structure and character. Each composition on the program suggests concrete images and/or more veiled emotional identities, but this is only the starting point for getting to the meaning of the piece. The deeper meaning of the work is found in the composing out of these images or identities through musical structure into a narrative, often with philosophical or psychological dimensions.

In developing this kind of interpretation I have found that three fundamental geometric shapes express this narrative, in a general way. These shapes are: the wave, the circle and the line. The basic meter or rhythmic patterns of the piece express a kind of circular motion, with the alternation or up, down and after beats (think of the conductor's pattern). Harmonic progressions also express a cyclical motion, with tonic at the center moving up a perfect 5th to the dominant, often via harmonies based on the subdominant scale degree – that is, a 5th below the tonic. I will elaborate on this later in this introduction.

The spectrum of consonance and dissonance is integral to my understanding of the psychological evolution of character in the works on this program. I visualize this spectrum as a wave of undulating tension and resolution. These waves operate on a basic level – the successions of verticalities alternating between perfect consonances, imperfect ones and dissonance according to various principles that prevent excess perfect consonance (creating stasis) or dissonance (creating chaos). They also operate on a more global level, that of tonal dissonance, whereby chromatic tones operate as a dissonance against the tones of the diatonic scale.²

Tension and resolution is not the only paradigm for understanding consonance and dissonance; another one is creation and destruction. I was introduced to this perspective by Stockhausen, who wrote that well-composed, highly dissonant music had the effect of destroying stale, unnecessary thoughts and emotions in the soul of the auditor.³ I have also come to understand dissonance as often having a cleansing effect of removing or burning impurities in the soul, but in a tonal context where the destructive energies resolve to creative ones (consonance).

¹ This article originally appeared as introduction to program notes for my second doctoral recital.

² Even within the diatonic scale there is a moderate amount of melodic-tonal dissonance created through the tendency or 'leading' tones.

³ Quoted in Jocelyn Godwin, *Music, Mysticism and Magic: A Sourcebook*, Arkana (1988).

While consonance vs. dissonance relates to creation vs. destruction, the wider realm of harmony expresses the body-mind duality. The transformation of body into mind (or spirit) and mind into body are expressed in modulations up and down by perfect 5th. When modulating in the ascending, sharp-wise direction the body transforms into more subtle, mental energy, closer to light – as Wordsworth put it, 'We fall asleep in body and become living soul'. Modulation in the flat direction suggests the descent of spirit into bodily form: the *Logos* (Word) becoming flesh. Harmonies containing chromatic tones are an extension of this, for the sharp alterations are related to the dominant side while the flat alterations to the subdominant. The dualism between diatonic and chromatic harmony often corresponds to that between the material or everyday world and the magical or supernatural.

Finally, these harmonic cycles of body-mind metamorphoses and undulating waves of consonance and dissonance need an agent of cohesion: the line. The distinctive shapes of the many melodies on this program find their continuity through conformity to an underlying voice-leading structure. The destructive, fiery power of dissonance requires linear resolution in the voice leading for the listener to understand it. Motion from one structural harmony to another, particularly diatonic to chromatic requires the fluidity of voice leading to keep the interpreter and listener fully attentive to the transformations that are unfolding. Linearity thus helps attain balance between the transformations between body/earth and mind/light, between the forces of creation and destruction and between the natural and supernatural realms. It is through this balance and synthesis that spirituality truly emerges.