

neo-Riemannian Structures and Musical Affect in Scriabin's Poème Languide

Dr. David Mott, University of Southampton

Poème Languide Op. 52 No 2 (1905)

Structure and Affect

bar	Affect	Musical characteristics	Loving encounter
0-2	Whole-tone harmony, ambiguous, undulating , lightly-scented	Tonal ambiguity with common tones over a tritone link and delaying the chord root, with semitone motif rising out of a #4 gives a feeling of undulation, and whole-tone harmony provides a subtle scented atmosphere, outlined with bell-like melodic leaps. A final rising melody note raises an alert of anticipation.	caressing
2-3	Intensely-sharp chord leaning upwards...	The foundational harmony drops, exposing upper voices as an intense, super-sharp 3 rd both consonant and dissonant with the root harmony, that creates a feeling of arousal.	firm caressing, becoming serious
3-4	...resolving to: Functional harmony, bright cadences coming to rest on F# major	Tension in the intensely-sharp 3 rd is released into a progression of romantic cadences, formed by two dominant transforms linked by a tritone, over which the melody expands into a suspension that hovers in the air whilst a lower voice suspension comes to rest, ending the section with a restful, peaceful sigh. The piece is now in F# major, the dominant of the key signature.	anticipation, small climax, rest, sigh
4-6	Whole-tone harmony, ambiguous, undulating, lightly-scented, extending, rising intensity	The undulating scented whole-tone harmony returns in a different collection, with increased movement and energy, driving towards an unsettling rhythmic combination of 4 against 3, with a sense of agitation or excitement, disturbing the feeling of peace.	serious, urgent
6-8		The whole-tone phrase repeats with insistence, higher and more urgently, gathering further momentum and excitement from the rhythm of 4 against 3.	greater urgency
8-9	Intensely-sharp chord leaning upwards...	The intensely-sharp 3 rd calls out, full of energy and tension as it promises to rise upwards, over a foundational arpeggio containing a tense suspension that is prematurely eased into the next chord.	intense passion
9-10	...resolving to: Functional harmony, extended wave-like cadence onto B major ending in radiance and peace	The tension is released as the melody rises as promised into a sustained high note over a foundational arpeggio that releases further the tension in the suspension.	strong climax
10-11		Wave-like, the intensity recedes into a sequence of romantic cadences, formed by two dominant transforms linked by a tritone, over which the melody rises again to a higher but more relaxed sustained note over an F#7 chord, the dominant of the key signature.	afterglow, reflection
11-12		The melody falls gently back by semitone then leaps once more into a final radiant perfect cadence, finally descending in a restful and peaceful arpeggio over B major.	radiance, rest, sigh

Affect on the Tonnetz

nRT neo-Riemannian theory¹ has been developed to provide alternative principles for unconventional harmonies, based upon the smooth movement of chords sharing common tones. A Tonnetz is often used to plot pathways of harmonic progressions

Undulating ambiguity

- Common foundational notes, can't be sure harmony changed until bass F# => **static, ambiguous**
- Inner melody F# to G# disturbs the static => **undulating, rocking**
- All notes (except passing note G) in same whole-tone collection => **mysterious ('lightly scented')**

Transforms

Distinctive symmetric pattern of transforms, with similar sub-patterns in the two parts. Non-functional harmony is "framed" by functional cadences.

Harmony moves between two whole-tone collections, first part in WT₀, second part in WT₁. Each part visits the opposite collection during "zigzag" bli double cadence.

Each part moves from languidity to bright restful cadence, through an 'alert' (intensely-sharp 3rd).

Radiant cadences

- Functional 'zigzag' of dominant transforms joined by tritone
 - two attempts at resolution
 - includes "Neapolitan" V/bII - bli - V - I
 - tritone puts harmony on two different functional axes
 - voice-leading emphasises the shape
- => **two waves of tension and release, coming to rest in radiance**

Intensely sharp 3rd

- D# sounds like an intensely sharp major 3rd
- Interpreting chord as D7 requires a -9 for the D# which doesn't fit to listening experience
- Interpreting upper stave as F#7 resolving to B major => **brightness, alert, takes the music out of stasis**
- Foundation performs PL (F# -> D) so there are **two pathways on Tonnetz**
- Orthography of bar 1 (A#) suggests previous separation of upper and lower?

Rising Intensity

- Sounds like repeating sequence one tone higher, but:
 - outer and inner voices are **out of sync** by a tone
- Caused by TTL replacing a PL:
 - In 1st statement, PL, PL moves harmony up two tones (C# -> F)
 - Starting from F, **middle voices** repeat PL, PL **two tones up** (from C#)
 - Starting from F, **outer voices** follow TTL, PL **one tone up** (from C#)
- Replacing PL by TTL drops harmony relatively by **one tone** (B7 instead of C#7)
- Did Scriabin wish to maintain the movement of the rising semitones in middle voices?
- Sequence feels insistent but strange**

Augmenting the Tonnetz

- Altered dominant structures extending the triad
- Chord extensions (circles with scale degrees, thick circles are common tones)
- Voice leading (wavy lines)
- Multiple pathways
- Whole-tone and octatonic axes (blue and green)

Makes Visible:

- Extensive use of altered dominants
- Many common tones from extensions and transforms, allowing smoother voice-leading
- Strong connection to whole-tone collections
- Pitch retention loops (e.g. # in part 1)
- Intensely sharp chords as alternative pathways
- Voice-leading by tone drives harmonic change

Applying Dervova's system

Dervova: Major Enharmonic Sequence

Functional: cadence, with "Neapolitan" bli

nRT: sequence of PL

Dervova: Major Enharmonic Sequence

Functional: cadence, with "Neapolitan" bli

Some transforms are Dervovian, but not all

- I-beam is altered dominant (with #4)
- Purple is tritone link between dominants
- Blue is whole-tone, green is octatonic
- Ripple is voice-leading during tritone link
- Circles show scale degrees, thick circles show common tones across transforms and transform colours on perimeter

- nRT can describe transforms used in the Poème but could be extended:
 - by adding the tritone link as a transform
 - by representing concurrent pathways of related triads
- Scriabin's tritone links, extended chords and PL transforms increase use of common tones
- Augmented Tonnetz can show Scriabin's harmonic patterns in the Poème
 - non-triadic chords, tritone links, whole-tone collections, parallel triad movements
- Dervova's system applicable to some but not all the patterns
 - nRT might benefit from exploring her patterns as 'compositional strategies' (Cohn¹)
- Musical affect can be linked to Scriabin's unusual harmonies and voice-leading
 - some links can be seen on the Tonnetz
 - supports narrative of a "Creative Act", from languidity to radiance

[1] Cohn, R. (2012) *Audacious Euphony: Chromatic Harmony and the Triad's Second Nature*. Oxford University Press.
 [2] Guenther, R. (1979) *Varvara Dervova's "Garmoniia Scriabina": A Translation and Critical Commentary*. PhD, The Catholic University of America.
 [3] 'Languide is the prelude to a creative act' - Simon Nicholls