

Thesis of DLA Dissertation

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Harmony and Tonality in Stravinsky's Works

Composed between 1913 and 1920

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## **Antecedents of the research**

There have never been published any analytic works of the size of this paper in Hungarian which would discuss the harmony and tonality in Stravinsky's music. In this field, the English language literature is the most important nowadays. Stravinsky's music has been enigmatic to the analytical approach for a long time; even now, there is not a generally accepted method. The simultaneous use of different diatonic scales is one of the most significant features of the Russian and neoclassical periods of Stravinsky's music. The concept of polytonality was being used for describing it for long – for example, by Eric Walter White in his book on Stravinsky,<sup>1</sup> with the composer's consent – but most scholars challenge it now.

Arthur Berger's study written in 1963,<sup>2</sup> in which he draws attention to the importance of the octatonic scale in Stravinsky's oeuvre, is considered a milestone.

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Walter White: *Stravinsky. A zeneszerző és művei*. Ford. Révész Dorrit. (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Berger: „Problems of Pitch Organization in Stravinsky”. *Perspectives of New Music* II/1 (1963. Fall-Winter): 11-42.

Pieter C. van den Toorn, who in his monograph<sup>3</sup> aiming at entirety summarized the music of Stravinsky, takes Berger's ideas further. He assigns central importance to the octatonic scale, and maps the ways in which it interacts with other systems, mainly with the diatonic scale. He explains the conflicts of different diatonic scales mostly with octatonic-diatonic interaction. However, it is a serious criticism against his book that he only picks parts out of the works.

Richard Taruskin shares Berger's and van den Toorn's views in his analytical approach. Taruskin provides historical evidence of the importance of the octatonic scale in Stravinsky's art. In the course of his research, he discovered that Stravinsky had acquired the possibilities inherent in the octatonic scale from his teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov, and up to *Petrushka*, he had been following in his master's tracks when using the octatonic scale.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Pieter C. van den Toorn: *The Music of Igor Stravinsky*. (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Taruskin: „Chernomor to Kashchei: Harmonic Sorcery; or, Stravinsky's »Angle«”. *Journal of the American Musicological Society* XXXVIII/1 (1985. Tavasz): 72-142. Uő.: Richard Taruskin:

Some consider the polytonal approach relevant even now. In our days, Dmitri Tymoczko is the main advocate of it,<sup>5</sup> but he does not offer a comprehensive conception. Taruskin does not reject polytonality either, but his attitude is ambivalent.

Finally, the name of Allen Forte should be mentioned, who analyses the *Le sacre du printemps* with the method of pitch-class set analysis.<sup>6</sup> Although this method is applicable principally to atonal music, Forte's approach occasionally proves to be useful for finding significant connections.

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*Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions. A Biography of the Works through Mavra.* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> The main publications are the follows: Tymoczko: „Stravinsky and the Octatonic: A Reconsideration”. *Music Theory Spectrum* XXIV/1 (2002. Spring): 68-102; van den Toorn, Tymoczko: „Colloqui: Stravinsky and the Octatonic. The Sounds of Stravinsky”. *Music Theory Spectrum* XXV/1 (2003. Spring): 167-202; Tymoczko: „Round Three”. *Music Theory Spectrum* XXXIII/2 (2011. Fall): 211-215.

<sup>6</sup> Allen Forte: *The Harmonic Organization of The Rite of Spring.* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1978).

## **Sources**

As far as the works are concerned, I was only able to have an access to the primary sources indirectly. I used the books that are linked with Stravinsky's name. These are the follows: the *Chronicle of my Life*, the *Poetics of Music*, as well as the dialogue-books written by Stravinsky and Robert Craft. Although Stravinsky was tight-lipped about analytical questions concerning his music, these utterances provide precious guidelines. We know from him that he composed tonally and that his music was always organised around certain poles of attraction. It is also important what he left unsaid: he never mentioned the octatonic scale as a part of his compositional toolbar, but according to his own words, in the Second Act of *Petrushka* he employed polytonality.

## **Method**

I listed the most important books and studies in the first paragraph. In my dissertation, I took their methods as my starting point, but I looked at their results critically, and I mixed them with my own observations. I did not deal with all the works of the period; I rather tried to

demonstrate the significant phenomena in a representative corpus. I always preferred interpretation supported by hearing – the result may be more subjective this way, but I firmly believe that it might be closer to the truth than some stilted analytical methods that only want to seize the objective elements.

## **Results**

In the works of the period examined in the paper, the significance of the octatonic scale is undisputable, but Stravinsky employs it rather freely. We can find very few pure octatonic sections. In some cases, the music only evolves from an octatonic cell – for example, from the 3-3 set –, but the whole facture does not fit into a single octatonic system.

Although the octatonic scale and the octatonic-diatonic interaction are factors that cannot be eluded when analysing works from Stravinsky's first two creative periods, we cannot explain every case this way when more than one diatonic scale are present at the same time. The concept of polytonality is necessary. There are examples where it means the starting point of

the compositional process, for example, in the case of *The Nightingale*, where Stravinsky experimented opposing the white and black keys of the piano. Nevertheless, we cannot speak of polytonality in the strict sense of the word, because we can never find the presence of two coequal tonalities. Therefore, it is more proper to refer to the clash of different diatonic scales as polytonal phenomena.

Modality plays an important role; the significance of the tone centre is smaller but in many cases, the diatonic material is organized around a certain pole. There are cases when we find several poles of this kind, and their relations can be hierarchic. Another important factor is polimodal chromaticism.

It is frequent that the upper layer of the sounding is diatonic, and the whole facture becomes chromatic by the help of the lower layers.

Some elements of a functional way of thinking appear in certain movements of *The Soldier's Tale*; therefore, this work can be regarded as a turning point on the way towards neoclassicism.

## **V. Documentation of the Activity Concerning the Domain of the Argument**

As an organist I have not played any works written by Stravinsky at my concerts, since he composed hardly anything for that instrument. Beside the organ concerts I sing regularly at choir concerts as a member of the New Liszt Ferenc Chamber Choir. As an assistant professor, I lecture on the theory of Stravinsky's music.