

Thesis of a Dissertation

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„IRRATIONALLY FUNCTIONAL
HARMONIES”.
DYNAMISM OF PITCHES AND
HARMONIES IN SELECTED WORKS BY
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I. Antecedents of the research

Thomas Adès is one of the most prominent, and most frequently researched living composers. The first book on Adès' work was published in French in 2007, which is a convincing proof of his international status. One of the milestones of the Adès research is the 2012 interview volume containing the conversations of the composer and Tom Service. In this collection, the author, who until then rarely and briefly commented on his music, gives insight not only into his creative process and compositional thinking, but also into his relationship with many other artists and works. Edward Venn's monograph on the orchestral work, *Asyla*, which is the most thorough Adès-analysis up to that point, was published in 2017. In 2021 – the year of Adès' 50th birthday – two comprehensive volumes were released on the composers' work, one of them by the Cambridge University Press and the other one by the Oxford University Press. In the same year, the renowned British contemporary music magazine, the *Tempo Journal*, included several studies in its autumn issue commemorating the Adès anniversary. Over the past

decade and a half, the number of articles, book chapters, doctoral dissertations and theses written about Adès has increasingly been growing at an ever-accelerating pace.

Among the analytical studies written about Adès, we find several works that are technical descriptions of his methods of organizing pitches and harmonies. However, while reading them, I had the impression that in most of the writings there is little mention of how all the elements coalesce into a coherent musical language that is sensitive and maintains a close relationship with the history of music. In my thesis, the works of the British composer are in constant dialogue with the repertoire of music history.

II. Sources

The primary sources of my dissertation were the compositions of Adès published by Faber. For my thesis, I selected pieces from different periods of his career – works that allowed me to examine Adès' relationship with pitches and harmonies. *Asyla* (1997), *Traced Overhead* (1996), *Polaris* (2010), *Blanca variations* (2015) and *Növények* (Plants) (2022) were particularly important in this regard. In addition, I often referred to the composer's thoughts from his interview volume, *Full of Noises*.

I used many books and studies as secondary sources. Particularly important to my research were Drew Massey's five essays, Edward Venn's monograph on *Asyla*, and Jake Willson's analysis of *Traced Overhead*.

III. Method

In my thesis, I focused on the composer's ways of organizing pitch and harmony. The first chapter is a kind of theoretical foundation of the analytical tools with which I examine Adès' music. In the second chapter, I explore the composer's melody and harmony creation techniques. In this central, longest chapter of the dissertation, I attempt to comprehensively present Adès' approach to pitches and harmonies with the help of details taken from works written in different stages of his career. In the third chapter, through the analysis of a complete Adès movement, I look again at the musical phenomena that were revealed in the second chapter of the thesis.

The primary novelty of my work is the presentation of the dynamism of Adès' music similar to the tonal-functional repertoire, as well as the examination of the spontaneity manifested in his complex musical structures.

IV. Results

My dissertation is the first analytical work related to Adès in Hungarian. I was also encouraged to write this thesis by the fact that, as a lecturer, I noticed that many of the students majoring in composition at the Academy of Music are interested in Adès's music. Although international Adès research has become extremely intensive in recent years, most studies and dissertations were written in English, so I felt it was especially timely to write an analysis in Hungarian.

I think that the examination of the problems raised in the thesis can be useful not only for those interested in Adès' music. My analysis can serve as a source of inspiration for all musicians who deal with the relationship between music history, traditional tonal harmonic processes and the phenomena of the 21st century.

V. Documentation of the activities relevant to the topic of the dissertation

The art of Thomas Adès had a great influence on my thinking as a composer. When I came across the music of Thomas Adès as a music academy student, I felt that after many 21st-century works focusing on timbre, I had now encountered music where harmony as a parameter has a major and decisive role. In addition, I found the way Adès relates to the tradition of music history very inspiring. Traces of all these appeared in my own compositions.

The pieces of mine that are most closely related to my Adès research are *Komm* (2019) and *Postludes* (2023). In the former, I use a lot of microtonal elements inspired by Adès' scepticism about the structure-driving ability of quarter tones. The latter work – which I started writing during the period of working on the dissertation – consciously reflects on certain harmonic and stylistic problems arising in the thesis.