

Examples of 'Suggestive Harmony' in European Music of the 19th and 20th Centuries

When analyzing functional harmony, we usually proceed in two opposing directions: we look upon the music to get information on the key of the piece or the present section, and then, when having gained this knowledge, we assign a functional meaning to the chords according to their place within this tonal system. The key depends on the chords, and the functional meaning of the chords depends – partially – on the key. We are accustomed to the notion that there may be only *one* key in a piece of music. Deviations from this key can be understood as parts of a comprehensive tonal architecture built upon or around the tonic. So these deviations may be conceived as parts of this key in a wider sense, too. From this point of view key seems to be comprehensive, stable and static – yet occasionally somehow abstract. In listening to music key may be experienced as less clear-cut, more dynamic and ambiguous, depending on the actual progression of chords, their structure, on melodic harmony, and even the rhythmic and metric circumstances. Leonard Bernstein stressed such aspects in 'The Unanswered Question', his six talks at Harvard University in 1973. Tonal feeling basing on harmony that we are listening to at present may in parts of a piece be much stronger than the feeling for the key of the whole piece, it may replace or even suppress it. A lot of composers may have experienced this in a similar way.

In this paper I want to focus on two forms, two means, by which a composer may create the impression of tonal ambiguity. Firstly, he can use a chord which, according to its structure, is normally heard as a dominant or subdominant chord, but then avoid the corresponding tonic. We may get a sense of this key or even expect this tonic, but then our tonal feeling is drawn into another direction. Or, secondly, he can use a seventh chord which can be perceived as a combination of a minor and a major triad and emphasize this aspect by the way he introduces this chord, and so split our tonal feeling. To simplify matters, let me use the term 'suggestive harmony' for these two means of creating tonal ambiguity.

In Grieg's *Melody* the first 8 bars seem to be the antecedent of a regular period, proceeding from the tonic to the subdominant and dominant. The expected consequent, however, is only a transposition of the antecedent to the level of the subdominant D minor and thus ends with the major tonic being heard as the (secondary) dominant of the subdominant D minor. Grieg closes the theme with the tonic but gives us the feeling that D is the new tonal centre.

Edvard Grieg: Melody op. 47, No. 3, bars 1-42

Allegretto

p la melodia ben tenuta

7 Fed.

13 *dim.* *pp* *più mosso*

19 *stretto* *F* *A^b*

25 *f* *più f* *D* *A^b*

31 *ff* *ff^z* *dim. molto e meno mosso poco a poco* *D*

37 *poco rit.* **Tempo I** *p*

And again he doesn't proceed to this new tonic itself but continues with its subdominant, an inverted minor sixth chord. Two bars later, this chord is replaced by another minor sixth chord which again suggests a new tonic, F minor. The tension of the former chord hasn't been cleared up functionally, its tonic has been suggested but not established. We hear a sudden change of key, mediated, however, by two pitch classes that the chords have in common, B flat and G, and by stepwise progression or alteration in the other voices. After this change the music remains essentially in the same key, F minor, for four bars, including a short excursion to the dominant with its secondary dominant and a return to the minor sixth chord of the subdominant, but now with a voicing which corresponds to that of the chord in bar 17. In bar 23 an analogous change of key suggests A flat minor.

Four bars later, however, we encounter a different harmonic progression: As before, the chords have two pitch classes in common, D flat with its enharmonic equivalent C sharp, and F flat with its enharmonic equivalent E, but the progressions in the other voices lead to the structure of an inverted dominant seventh chord suggesting the tonal centre D. This is the most distant centre in relation to the key of A flat minor suggested so far, but very close to the original tonic of the piece, A minor. However, Grieg once more confronts the two opposing chords before a deceptive cadence marks the beginning of a series of more common progressions leading back to the original tonic A minor.

Of course Grieg wasn't the only composer using suggestive harmony. Five decades earlier, Chopin in one of his Préludes started with the tonic and dominant of E Minor but then wrote a series of tetrads suggesting different keys without establishing them:

Frédéric Chopin: Prélude op. 28, Nr. 4, bars 1-5

The musical score shows the first five bars of Chopin's Prélude op. 28, Nr. 4. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melodic line starting with a quarter note G4, followed by half notes A4, B4, C5, and D5, with a fermata over the final two notes. The left hand (bass clef) plays a series of chords: A (C), A, D/H D, G/E, and E. The chords are indicated by the following labels below the staff: A (C), A, D/H D, G/E, E.

A special feature in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* is the creation of distantly related chords by means of alterations, suspensions and enharmonic equivalent notes: the chord in the second full bar of the example may be heard as closely related to the preceding chord while at the same time pointing to the distant key of C minor.

Richard Wagner: *Tristan und Isolde*, Act 2, Scene 2

das Seh - nen hin zur heil' - - gen

ff

A A / F# C / (Eb) Eb

Nacht, wo ur - e - wig, ein - zig wahr

ff *ff*

A / F# C / (Eb) Eb / A

In the *Sanctus* of Fauré's Requiem inversions of dominant seventh chords quite clearly suggest different keys that aren't established subsequently:

Gabriel Fauré: Requiem op. 48, Sanctus, bars 15-22

p

De - us Sa - ba - oth.

pp

us, De - us Sa - ba -

p

San - ctus Do - mi - nus De - - us,

oth

F

Ab *F* *E \flat*

In the first bars of Debussy's 4th Prélude the four suggested tonal centres are situated side by side in the chromatic scale resulting partially from stepwise parallel movements of inverted dominant seventh chords:

Claude Debussy: Préludes, Premier livre, No. 4 (... "Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir"), bars 1-6

Modéré ♩ = 84

harmonieux et souple

(5) *pp*

pp
m.d.

m.d.

D *E_b* *E* *E_b* *F* *D*

Much more complex is the voice leading in the middle section of Louis Vierne's organ piece *Clair de lune* with its highly suggestive harmony:

Louis Vierne: *Clair de lune*, from: 24 Pièces de fantaisie, Deuxième suite, No. 5, bars 37-42

G. fonds 8

f

R.

Ped. fonds 8

Ped. P. R.

A *F#* *F#/A*

F# *D#* *D#/F#* *D/B* *B* *G#*

The first form of suggestive harmony was widely spread in music especially from the late 19th and early 20th centuries; other composers and pieces could have been named as well.

Another example seems quite interesting to me, a *Nocturno* by Jean Sibelius, as I suppose that the Lyric Piece *Notturmo* by Grieg served as a model for it in respect to the use of suggestive harmony.

In the middle section of Grieg's *Notturmo* the call of a nightingale is imitated and harmonized with a half-diminished seventh chord. This chord may at first be heard as a dominant chord as the preceding section ended with a G major triad. In the next bar, however, it may be heard as an inverted minor sixth chord with subdominant function, since the leading tone C sharp gives the D more functional weight. Finally, in the third bar of the example, a G is supplemented and thus a dominant ninth chord completed. These three bars are now transposed a minor third upwards. Here, in the functional context of the preceding bar, the half-diminished seventh chord will probably right from the start be heard as a subdominant chord, but in the final bar its structure is again extended to that of a dominant ninth chord:

Edvard Grieg: *Notturmo* op. 54, No. 4, bars 15-20

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system covers bars 15-17, and the second system covers bars 18-20. The piano part (left hand) consists of a steady accompaniment of chords, with dynamic markings *p* and *poco* and a *poco* hairpin. The right hand part features a melodic line with a trill and a triplet. Chord labels *C / (A)*, *A*, *C*, *C*, and *E \flat* are placed below the piano part.

Sibelius in his *Nocturno* also uses the half-diminished seventh chord (bars 9-10), adds the root G of a dominant seventh chord (bar 11) and then transposes the half-diminished seventh chord a minor third upwards (bars 13-14):

Jean Sibelius: Nocturno op. 24, No. 8 (from: Ten Pieces), bars 1-23

Andante

mp *cantabile*

6

11 *mf*

15 *f* *mp* *dolce* *p* *dim.* *poco allargando*

20 **a tempo** *mf*

Another parallel is to be found in the use of the second form of suggestive harmony: In the coda of Grieg's *Notturmo* a chromatically descending scale is supposed to complete an A minor triad at the beginning of bar 56 as was the case at the beginning of the whole piece and of the recapitulation. This time, however, at first an F major triad is to be heard and only a quaver later the expected A minor triad is completed and shortly after this a reminiscence of the nightingale call added. This major seventh chord can clearly and effortlessly be perceived as a combination of two triads:

Edvard Grieg: *Notturmo* op. 54, No. 4, bars 55-63

The musical score for Edvard Grieg's *Notturmo* op. 54, No. 4, bars 55-63, is presented in three systems. The first system (bars 55-56) features a piano (*p*) dynamic and a 'Ped.' marking. The second system (bars 57-58) includes a trill (*tr.*) in the right hand and a 'morendo' dynamic. The third system (bars 59-63) is marked 'Adagio' and 'pp' (pianissimo), ending with a 'Ped.' marking and an asterisk (*).

In bar 20 of Sibelius's *Nocturno* a B minor chord seems to alternate with an inversion of the corresponding dominant seventh chord and thus to form a simple cadence. In the following bar, however, where we may expect a B minor six-three chord, a completely unexpected G is added in the bass and one quaver later a major seventh chord is completed, which comprises the expected B minor triad but at the same time is a G major triad with the major seventh.

Five of the eight pieces or examples of suggestive harmony that I presented here deal with aspects of evening or night. Indeed these forms of playing with tonal feeling can often be found in music in which the composer wants to express a natural mood; thus they may be especially apt for such purposes.

The *Nocturno* by Sibelius seems to me interesting also in another respect: Its key remains unclear for a very long time. I suppose that during the first forty of its sixty-four bars it is quite difficult to get a feeling for this key from the music itself, that is without knowing the key signature. In order to give you an impression of this situation I didn't write a key signature at all but only the necessary accidentals. So, if you like to, you may guess which may be the key of this piece.