Book Review


Reviewed by Craig Cummings

Paul Wilson’s book *The Music of Béla Bartók* presents a well-constructed theoretical framework and examines deeper levels of pitch structure in several important compositions. It is comprised of an introduction followed by two parts, the first of which outlines the theory while the second applies it in several detailed analyses. A conclusion ties together the theoretical framework and the analytical findings and places them into a broader intellectual context.

The introduction asserts that any account of Bartók’s music must be theoretical and that it should also consider any available secondary sources of biographical, analytical, and theoretical commentary. Wilson details the influences of eastern European folk music and the art music of central and western Europe, concluding with several important traits which span much of Bartók’s mature career: “constantly variational treatment of melody and texture,” a “penchant for structural relationships susceptible of multiple interpretations,” and “an evolving attitude toward tonality” (3-4). The author next considers the secondary literature, dividing it into Hungarian scholars and “others” (5-13). The Hungarian scholars, who generally emphasize biography and extramusical influences, include Lendvai and other scholars. The “others” are more concerned with the analysis of intrinsic musical structures and are comprised of Babbitt, Antokoletz, Salzer, Travis and a few others. Wilson summarizes many of the ideas of those named. The remainder of the introduction (14-15) outlines the theory, the details of which are presented in Part I.

Part I contains two chapters: “Fundamentals” and “A Model of Hierarchical Structure.” Chapter One begins with the fundamental idea that Bartók’s music may be approached by both atonal and tonal theory,
each applied where most appropriate. Wilson lists many basic set-theoretical terms but eschews any large-scale atonal framework such as Forte’s set complexes because the music does not present the consistent vocabulary and the inclusion and complementation relationships necessary for a successful large-scale set-theoretical analysis. In addition, the notions of tonal center and harmonic function override a strictly set-theoretical approach. He next presents four important components of his set-theoretical approach: a catalogue of set types, projected sets, large set types as potential context, and symmetry as a structural element. The catalogue of small set types (those with five or fewer pcs) begins with three categories of tetrachords: scale segments, extended tertian chords, and tetrachords which contain a perfect fourth or tritone. (As he admits, the labels overlap to some extent.) Symmetrical sets are singled out for their prominence in Bartók’s music. Wilson continues by listing three- and five-note set types, each of which is related to one or several of the tetrachords through direct inclusion.

The projected set is a critically important analytical tool throughout the book. Wilson defines it as “the emphasized simultaneous statement of a particular pc set, followed or preceded by the emphasized separated statement of each of its members in turn” (23). The author does not specifically clarify what he means by “emphasized” at this point, but he does provide two clear examples (see p. 24) and he cites an earlier idea by Joseph N. Straus as an important influence. Wilson presents several large set types as potential context, beginning with the aggregate, which is relatively rare in Bartók’s music; when used it is typically partitioned into two complementary subsets (for example, the diatonic collection 7-35 and its complement 5-35, the pentatonic collection). The octatonic collection is examined in some detail. Wilson points out that it seldom exerts exclusive control over an entire piece. He discusses the diatonic (013568t) and “heptatonia second” (013468t) collections, showing the seven octave species of each and including a caveat about labeling passages or entire pieces as “modal” when this term is not really appropriate. The whole-

\[1\]The letter “t” refers to the number ten.
tone (02468t) and pentatonic (02479) collections complete this exposition.

Wilson continues by examining symmetry in pitch and in the organization of musical forms, citing in particular the seminal work of Perle and stating that one must not simply identify symmetry, but in addition interpret its impact on the prevailing texture of the entire work.\(^2\) He then outlines some of Antokoletz’s ideas about symmetry,\(^3\) after which he wisely points out that “the discovery of a precompositional system is clearly a legitimate goal ... but other goals perhaps keep one in closer contact with direct musical experience” and that in his analyses symmetry “is called into play only where context makes it reasonable to do so” (32).

Having completed the explanation of set-theoretical ideas, Wilson advances to a detailed section concerning harmonic function. He cites Babbitt as he contends that “the attenuation of function in Bartók’s music involves a reduction in the structural range and subtlety of harmonic events compared with those of tonal music.”\(^4\) After listing the “essential elements of harmonic function,” Wilson states that “a central feature of the present theory is the divorce of harmonic function from any specific placement either within a gamut or with respect to a tonic” (34). He asserts that the greatest difficulty is recognizing and describing functions, and yet the functional actions must be easy to grasp in context. In addition, they must be corroborated by other musical parameters.

Wilson conveys seven harmonic functions, carefully leading the reader through the logical derivation of each one. The most important “tonic” function is the goal event, which is any final event in a phrase

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or other formal subdivision; non-pitch elements must corroborate its importance. A second important function is the initiating event, which "is reserved for the event that begins a thematic line, a bass voice, or some vertical complex that sets off a complete texture" (36). After reminding the reader that the scalar positional criterion no longer applies in all situations, Wilson presents "two weakened analogies to the single strong dominant function," the first of which is the local dominant, which is "a tone or event that prepares and leads to the immediate arrival of the goal tone" or event (36). The second dominant function is the large-scale dominant, which is an interior tonal center or goal event whose analogy with the traditional notion of "dominant" is strongest when there is only a single large-scale dominant present in a given movement or piece. The large-scale dominant is often a tritone removed from the overall tonic; Wilson indicates that this "is a direct contradiction of Lendvai," going on to state that "a rigid assumption of functional equivalence between two tritone-related notes may be problematic" (37). While there is not a clear "subdominant function," the author does allow the local dominant preparation as a possibility. Finally, Wilson presents tonic substitution and extension functions; the former occurs only when a goal event is well-established and powerfully expected and some other event takes its place, while the latter requires that "significant elements of the original context of the event be retained within some process of change or transformation" (39).

The chapter about fundamentals concludes with a discussion of "privileged pattern," which is defined as "a repeated and transposed motive, figure, or chord, in which the transpositions form a recognizable pattern in their own right" (39-40). There are two types: those in which the transpositional interval is repeatedly identical (thus producing a cycle of pc intervals) and those in which the transpositions form a line comprised of minor and/or major seconds, thus forming something closer to the traditional tonal sequence. Privileged patterns and large pc collections share status as specific precompositional resources, unlike the more contextually-defined harmonic functions.

The foundation having been established in Chapter One, Wilson continues in Chapter Two with a model of hierarchical structure, stating
that "any attempt to find complete and convincing analogies to prolongation in post-tonal music is doomed to failure" (42). Wilson then details the ideas of Baker, making the important points that for Baker tonal music is a closed system and that a closed system is a requirement for a multi-leveled structure. Baker thus questions the validity of multi-leveled structures in post-tonal music, since "no closed system has been disclosed for any corpus of post-tonal music." Wilson finds the necessity of a closed system suspect and wonders whether "the piece, the theory, or both must be closed systems in order that multi-level structures should be intelligible" (44). Wilson goes on to address the ideas of Straus, indicating that Straus's associational model is a "crucial source" for his Bartók analyses, adding that "the impact of a recognizable design linking the associated elements" is essential and that while Straus's model is more general, "Bartók's retention of at least some rudimentary tonal centers and functions allows us to characterize the hierarchical structures in his works as stronger than associations, though still falling far short of true prolongations" (46).

The remainder of the chapter defines the requirements for hierarchical structures. Structural weight is differentiated by "the seven categories of qualitatively defined function" delineated in the preceding chapter. The design of differentiated structural weights is created by the projected set, privileged pattern, symmetrical pitch or pc structures, and the general model of departure and return. In all cases, the author is careful to emphasize perception: the analytical findings must be aurally verifiable. The chapter concludes with "sufficient conditions for the presence of hierarchical structures," for which Wilson emphasizes the multiplicity of structures, providing clear examples and asserting that the overlay of several different structures is an important feature

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6Ibid., 168.

in much of Bartók's music. Listening to it thus becomes the "complex perception of multiple structures ... in tension with ... powerful forces for integration at the musical surface" (52).

Part II of the book applies this carefully-explicated methodology in analyses of five complete works or movements from them: Sonata for Piano (1926), Third String Quartet (1927), Fifth String Quartet (1934), movements II and IV, Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion (1937), movements I and II, and Concerto for Orchestra (1943), movement I. The analysis of the Sonata for Piano examines the entire composition and establishes the ordering used in all of the analyses: a brief amount of background information, a general discussion of form and harmonic vocabulary, and a more detailed analysis, concentrating almost exclusively on pitch. The ideas concerning form and harmonic vocabulary in the first movement are excellent, though Wilson presents the symbols b, b1, and b2 as "variants of a single basic idea" and might elaborate more about how the idea is varied. The more detailed analysis begins chronologically, showing relationships of goal tones and other material through the middle of the development, at which point the chronological approach is broken off and replaced by an examination of "thematic transpositions and large-scale structural overlay." Wilson convincingly details the way in which recurrences of the "a" theme make use of the transpositional cycles T9 and T7. The analysis moves on to examine the transposition levels of the other themes, after which Wilson presents a large-scale structural overlay of the entire movement (Example 3.13, 69). The example captures the tonal process throughout the movement very clearly, though to some degree it is more the superposition of five separate thematic, transpositional strands than a "grand synthesis" of the entire movement. The analyses of the second and third movements also examine the different themes and summarize the data with larger sketches.

The analysis of the Third String Quartet proceeds in the same manner as the Sonata for Piano, working chronologically through the prima parte, seconda parte, and ricapitulazione della prima parte. Wilson delineates five important elements within the prima parte, the most important of which are C♯ as the primary tone and its relationship
with F# and G. He goes on to contrast his findings with Lendvai’s ideas, pointing out that the interplay of C# and G is a substantial tonal motion (tonic to dominant) for Wilson, while to Lendvai it would be a less structurally significant motion within the tonic axis. The analyses of the seconda parte and the ricapitulazione are also excellent. Wilson clearly addresses four important issues within the ricapitulazione: the location of the prima parte material, changes in its restatement, the internal design, and the role of the ricapitulazione within the largest scale of the entire quartet. He clearly delineates the importance of the cluster C#-D-D#-E throughout the entire quartet, contrasting his analysis with that of Arnold Whittall, who simply finds an emphasis on C and C#.8

The fifth quartet, by contrast, is in five movements and exemplifies Bartók’s fascination with arch form. Wilson is thus wise to consider the second and fourth movements, since they exhibit numerous interesting similarities and differences. The analysis of the second movement begins with the usual discussion of form, followed by the assertion that the goal tones of the movement are D, G, and a return to D, and that C and C# bear important relationships with the goal tones. C is often associated with D, moving toward it at cadences, while C# is strongly associated with G.9 The detailed analysis is effective, though there are a few minor particulars which might be questioned. One of them is contained in Example 5.4 (124): the connections created by 5-32 and 6-Z44 are clearly evident, but omitting the initial Db5 in m. 11 from the bottom beamed group is not internally consistent. In addition, one might question whether invoking voice leading (Db5 to C5) is simply a way to account for a note which does not fit into the set-theoretical analysis.

The comparison of movements II and IV is especially effective, as is the detailed analysis of the fourth movement. A minor point about


9Note again that this connection is not necessarily related to Lendvai’s axis system.
Example 5.13 (131): the large-scale G-F-E-(D) line shown in half notes certainly is valid, but the structural weight of the D at m. 42 is questionable. The C# is more structurally significant, and Wilson hedges his bet by stating:

Without the presence of D in m. 42, the structure fails as a stepwise line. But D obviously is not a separate stage in such a line. Rather, the goal event itself is the dyad C#-D. (132)

Is the lack of a completed stepwise line a "failure" of some kind, or is it simply the musical fact in this case? The large-scale structure might then be symmetrical, as follows (combining Wilson's Examples 5.13 and 5.15):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>measures</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>23</th>
<th>37</th>
<th>42</th>
<th>54</th>
<th>62</th>
<th>64</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'structural tones'</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>C#</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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A final point regarding this analysis: the connections shown in Example 5.14 (133) are certainly valid, but the selection of the "structural," beamed notes from movement IV might be called into question. For example, in m. 43, the B5 really is less significant than the C6s which surround it, and in m. 44, the initial Eb5 is structurally superior to the F5 which follows it.

The common bond among the questions raised about the fifth quartet analysis is the notion of structural hierarchy in twentieth-century music. While what I hear agrees with virtually all of Wilson's voluminous analytical sketches, it is occasionally possible to hear something differently. And simply because my ear almost always agrees with Wilson's, are we "correct?" Despite Wilson's very carefully established theory, multiple interpretations certainly are possible and hierarchy remains a thorny, unanswered issue.

The analysis of the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* is particularly impressive in that Wilson reduces an enormous amount of musical data into only the most pertinent ideas. The "final large-scale analysis" of the first movement effectively addresses what Wilson views as the three most important issues:
the correlation of thematic form with harmonic functionality, the processive connections linking tonal centers with one another, and the thematic and rhythmic treatment of the sonata form itself. (155)

The analysis of the second movement is equally effective, with the possible exception of Example 6.19 (164), a sketch of a long passage filled with quintuplets whose fourth pitch differs from all the others. Wilson rightly shows the reiterated pitches as structurally superior but suddenly shifts to the single different pitch of each group beginning in m. 46--see the beamed F#5, C#4 and G#2. The T7 cycle could be shown just as effectively with the initial tones B♭5, F4 and C3, though the connection to the low G#2 of m. 48 would fit in less neatly.

As was the case with the first movement of the sonata, the analysis of the first movement of the Concerto for Orchestra effectively encapsulates a large amount of data. Wilson describes the form by addressing the combination of sonata and “adumbrated arch” forms and outlining relationships between the movement and the entire composition. The detailed analysis, which moves chronologically, balances specific and general ideas well; Wilson’s point that the first theme group exhibits a complexity which drives towards its own simplification is particularly well taken. The issue of structural hierarchy is problematic in Example 7.2 (173): Wilson’s desire for a single stepwise bass line from C#2 up to F2 may under-emphasize the E2 present in mm. 35-50. He rightly points out that mm. 51-57 negate the importance of the E2, but the question is whether the more abstract, large-scale stepwise motion and the recurrence of D#2 as E♭2 in m. 58 override the frequently-reiterated E2. Example 7.3 (175) addresses mm. 95-155 effectively, though there are some misprints or alignment problems in the passage from mm. 117-122. Similarly, in Example 7.8 (185) the F♯5 after m. 419 is a single misprint in an otherwise excellent sketch.

The conclusion of the book is well-crafted in that it draws together the analytical findings and makes important connections. In addition to placing the theoretical methodology within yet larger contexts, Wilson demonstrates the relationship between his ideas and those of David
Lewin and Charles Taylor.\textsuperscript{10} Perhaps the most important points Wilson makes about his theory are that structural overlay is not the same as the neo-Schenkerian view of prolongation and that the various types of structural overlay frequently include multi-level integration of structure in at least three ways:

1. Motivic repetition, especially as projected set and set type;
2. The inclusion relation, manifested in nested structures and in large-scale departures and returns; and
3. A sense of progression supplied by these structures at many different levels. The privileged pattern is perhaps the strongest of these forces. (190-191)

Wilson uses varied and excellent examples from all of the analyses to make these generalizations. He then outlines David Lewin’s argument, making several suggestions, extending it and concluding that his (Wilson’s) theory is “intended as one component of L, a language we employ in discussing or describing the music. It is also a component, if we so choose, of any context in which we perceive an event in Bartok’s works” (193-94).\textsuperscript{11} Wilson next compares his theory with Babbitt’s contextually-derived relationships and attenuated functionality and Straus’s associative model, and he explicates once again how his ideas differ from prolongational hierarchy. An appendix compares his theory with that of Lendvai, which Wilson finds to be of an “idiosyncratic nature … [it is a] very selective and uncontextual treatment of the music” (206). Wilson goes on to state that minor third and especially tritone relationships are important in Bartók’s music, but


\textsuperscript{11}Wilson points out that there must be some overlap in the components of the language, L, and the specific musical context, CXT. He goes on to list three likely general components for L: music theories; historical, stylistic, biographical, and critical information; and a natural language (e.g., English). See p. 194 for further details.
that Lendvai goes too far when he attaches the actual functional labels to them.

Paul Wilson’s *The Music of Béla Bartók* is an important addition to the recent literature on Bartók’s music and on twentieth-century music in general. The book emphasizes pitch to the exclusion of other parameters. The combination of atonal and tonal theory could easily lead the analyst to use the methodology which “works” the best rather than be internally consistent. Wilson almost always avoids this temptation, though one very occasionally has the feeling that the music is forced to fit the theory, most especially in the search for large-scale stepwise lines and privileged patterns. The problem of hierarchy in twentieth-century music remains unsolved, though Wilson’s effort sheds considerable light upon the issues. These details aside, Paul Wilson has created a significant theory and contributed several compelling analyses of deeper pitch structure in Bartók’s music.