

# Tonality and Affect Today

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For Sianne Ngai<sup>1</sup>

*„Die Figuren sind ja selbst eine Sprache der Affekten.“*  
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## I. Tonality Today

Tonality<sup>3</sup>, or better its negation, sits at the center of the foundational myth of New Music. Leaving behind both its syntax of consonance-dissonance tension as well as its expressive vocabulary for a liberation of sound, for immediacy of expression, shaking off the ‘stale, implausible, anachronistic, dissonant, murky rhetoric insistency of the tonal idiom’<sup>4</sup> (Lachenmann) defined the very identity of New Music and seems to have justified its capital N and capital M for generations. What began as an emphatic drive to ‘Kill the Father’ of tonal language made place for a set of much less intense feelings over time: The ‘father’ has been killed long ago, and tonality is now treated in most of European and US-American New Music that sees itself coming from a modernist tradition with slight irritation or with complete indifference rather than with revolutionary rage.<sup>5</sup>

When we zoom out from the narrow focus on a modernist understanding of New Music, the picture changes, though. Tonality is alive and kicking. Besides its function as an undercurrent of Minimal Music and Post-Minimalism, it is the lingua franca of popular culture from Soul to Country, from Pop to Folk Music, from EDM to experimental rock or electronica, from most of film music to the soundtracks of television or video games. Tonality never went away, and more importantly, it blossomed, developed, and kept innovating its language constantly over time. From Sondheim’s text-music relations to bitonal textures in Hip-Hop, tonality has shown itself to be quite the opposite of the ‘rotting dead corpse, zombie-like performing the ever-same moves with the ever-same functions’, as the hagiographers of a simplistic ‘us-against-them’ modernism have tried to cast it. Even the Classic-Romantic repertoire (let alone Early Music) has re-emerged, when reinterpreted in the true sense of the term ‘interpretation’, as a musical language that can speak quite powerfully to and of our contemporary existence. And among New Music composers a development can be

described in which tonal figures no longer simply serve as material for parody or regressive nostalgia, but as a musical idiom that might be able to capture or articulate a specific set of feelings in late capitalism.

From Alex Temple's dreamy chromaticism to Ted Hearne's pop-harmony-influenced vocal settings; from Laure M. Hiendl's Vaughan Williams pastiche «*Seht meine Wunden und an meinen Beinen, die Narben meiner Wunden*» (*denn wir sind lange gewandert*)<sup>6</sup> to my own works from the past decade: There are many examples of contemporary composers that are not associated with a post-minimalist aesthetic but nevertheless explore a re-functionalization of tonal harmony.

## II. A New Set of Feelings

The need for a reassessment of tonality today does not lie primarily in the new developments of tonal language that have appeared during the past decades, nor in a simplistic anti-utopianism ('It's here and alive, so deal with it'), though. It lies instead in a fundamental change in the way we might see our feelings positioned in the world today. In his book *Affective Mapping* Jonathan Flatley points out how the transformation that came with the industrial age – the alienation experienced in the modern workplace, the destruction of nature under industrialization, a new concept of clock-time and history that replaced pre-industrial experiences of time and community, the creation of identities based on racism etc. – contribute to a melancholic sense of loss:

'It is not difficult to see how modernity – in its meanings as a particular experience of time and as a set of concrete transformations of the material world of everyday life – is related to the experience of loss. [...] However, modernity has also signified on a quite different register as well, a more optimistic, utopian, even revolutionary one. [...] the promise of endless human perfectibility, progress, democracy and universal equality, self-determination, better living through the advances of reason in the realms of medicine, technology, economy, and elsewhere – in short, progress and reason, progress through reason. [...] Yet precisely the utopian promises of modernity put the modern subject in a precariously depressive position. **This is because the promises of modernity are never fulfilled.** At any given moment, the preoccupation with the ways the world has not met the promises of modernity renders the world apparently lackluster, stale, and profitless even if (or precisely because) the possibility of transformation always seems to lurk on the horizon.'<sup>7</sup>

As Flatley points out, our understanding of our own position in the world and our feelings toward that position have changed radically from the original euphoria towards a modernist project, which is of course the very pro-

ject of New Music as well. That is not to say that the ideologies fueling the powerful forces of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century have disappeared – quite the opposite. The ideologies of global capitalism (or their neo-liberal, postcolonial, and post-industrial variants) with its instrumentalized treatment of humans and its unsustainable destruction of natural resources on the one hand, and concepts of ‘beauty’ or ‘the sublime’ in Arts and Humanities institutions on the other hand, concepts that have nothing to do with people’s actual experience, but instead recycle the ever-same hierarchies and modes of domination – all of these ideologies are here and powerfully so. The dominating ideologies have not disappeared, but our feelings toward them and the promises of their endings might have changed. As Lauren Berlant writes:

‘Political depression persists in affective judgments of the world’s intractability—evidenced in affectlessness, apathy, coolness, cynicism, and so on—modes of what might be called detachment that are really not detached at all **but constitute ongoing relations of sociality**. The politically depressed position is manifested in the problem of the difficulty of detaching from life-building modalities that can no longer be said to be doing their work, and which indeed make obstacles to the desires that animate them.’<sup>8</sup>

Not only melancholia, but also these feelings of affectlessness, apathy, or coolness, are tied to the way we experience a world in which the euphoria towards modernism’s transformations has waned. And as Sianne Ngai analyzes in *Ugly Feelings*<sup>9</sup>, affects of detachment, irritation, and boredom are weaker and more ambiguous in their determination compared to the passions of the past. They are defined by ambiguity towards history and its project of progress, and they carry an uncertainty towards their very own meaning: It seems less and less clear ‘how we feel’ towards the collective forces that shape our contemporary life.

These feelings of loss, melancholia, disillusion, and the many other affects that have come to the forefront of our contemporary existence are not just individual feelings, though. They are tied to larger collective experiences. The melancholy I am feeling may not just be me ‘going through a personal phase’ (or at least not only), but may in fact be tied to a modern experience of disappointment towards history and the modernist project; the constant drone of more or less suppressed anxiety a college student might feel is not just them ‘having a nervous day’, but is connected to feelings of insecurity and a sense of the impossibility of success in an economy of constant stagnation (and of course also connected to the increasing violence of public discourse, at least in the US). The list of affects that are connected to collective experiences could go on.

Whether we face a new set of feelings, or a new understanding of those feelings: A music that on the one hand wants to express our affective

reality and therefore be more than just sonorous reality, and which on the other hand strives to capture those feelings that tie subjective experience to collective historic forces, will have to look beyond the sound of immediacy that has dominated New Music. It will have to look for musical figures that mediate between the personal and the public, that can speak of my subjective experience of angst, excitement, irritation, or despair, and tie it at the same time to a wider collective language. Tonality as a 'common praxis', a shared system of musical syntax and expressive vocabulary, sits right in the center of this project. It has been formed and shaped by historic ideologies, but it has the potential to capture and express the multiple affects of our collective experience facing this ideology at the same time. And with that potential it brings possible means to transcend the very ideology in which it is rooted.

In a way one could say that the so-called European avant-garde and US-American Modernism have moved on.<sup>10</sup> The use of tonal materials (and at points tonal syntax) is ubiquitous in contemporary Classical Music in North America, as tonal idioms can be found across various styles and compositional schools there. A more detailed discourse on the techniques associated with this use and its ties to new understandings of contemporary affects is – with a few exceptions – nevertheless missing. And when looking at Darmstadt, one of several long-established institutions concerned with developments in New Music in Europe, it is clear that the ideological fights that characterized the Ferienkurse in the 1970s ('against the Neo-Romantics'), the 1980s ('against Minimalism' and 'against Spectral Consonance'), or the 1990s ('against the anything-goes of Post-Modernism') have in recent years made space for a more open and truly collaborative discourse. Nevertheless, and interestingly enough, a discussion of tonality is absent here as well. On the surface an agreement on what is considered progress in New Music (let alone a demand to follow such a consensus) seems to have been replaced by a multivalent platform of different styles and techniques, but the ideology of New Music as sound exploration and its praxis of trying to discover ever new and not-yet-conceptualized sonorous figures is as prevalent in Darmstadt as it lacks critique. This is not the place for an ideology-critique of New Music: how it is tied to institutional settings and expectations, how it is rooted in standardized compositional praxis ('For my new piece I met with performer x and tried out the following extended techniques'), and how it is tied to a lack of aesthetic alternatives in the New Music 'scene' (the moves towards an 'outside' of music, whether towards Performance Art, Visual Art, or Conceptual Art, could be seen in this context). A 'jargon of immediacy' ('Here is sound X!') is omnipresent in Darmstadt, though, and the result is a strongly felt need for a more dialectic concept of those sounds; for their consideration as objects and experiences mediated by a musical language, by syntaxes and semantic connotations existing outside a given piece and its often rather solipsistic claim for immediacy.

The following paragraphs provide a few examples in which the use of tonal language is contextualized with affective experiences. The use of functional harmony in these examples is not meant to be radically innovative. Quite the opposite: some examples of earlier usage can be found for almost all of them. There is no doubt that the project of a quest for radical musical inventions that stake out new territory of material progress remains of great importance. But that is not what this paper is about. The compositional techniques described below serve instead as examples in which specific nuances in the use of tonal syntax and vocabulary attempt to capture affective contemporary experiences and maybe find a way to express these experiences in musical terms to which a wider public can relate.<sup>11</sup>

### III. Musical Examples

#### Bitonal Scales and Chords

Ex. 1.1                      Ex. 1.2                      Ex. 1.3

#### Modulating Scales

Bitonal scales, or more specifically scales combining adjacent keys, provide the harmonic backbone to my opera *Dark Spring*<sup>12</sup>. The presence of both C-natural and C-sharp in example 1.1 or the B-natural and B-flat in 1.2 enables musical figures whose tonal ‘base’ is ambiguous. (The degree of dissonance can of course be increased without limits, moving from ambiguity to multiplicity: 1.3 is an example of a scale encompassing four key areas C,G,D,A.) The semantic implications are multifold as they relate to a lost sense of a clearly defined ‘home’: They touch on negative affects such as rootlessness or dysphoria, but also on more neutral or at points positive affects such as desire for ‘something other’, and even a somewhat euphoric *Aufbruchsstimmung*. (Ex. 1.4)

leicht und verspielt (♩ = c. 90)  
Tr.  
p f  
Key: Ab Eb Bb

Ex. 1.4 Hans Thomalla, *Dark Spring*, Act I, m. 1

Bitonal (or polytonal) chords function similarly: stacking thirds until the added 15th modulates the chord into a different key area (from G to D in Ex. 1.5 or even from G to A in 1.6).



Ex. 1.5

Ex. 1.6

The set of feelings that are associated with the use of this harmonic structure in *Dark Spring* can encompass a ‘larger than life’ affect – Moritz ‘embracing the world’ in his songs of the first act – but also more anxious feelings related to the impossibility of containing multiple desires, demands, identities in one (Moritz’s last song, example 1.8).

Ex. 1.7, Hans Thomalla: *Dark Spring*, Act III, m. 910

The fourth movement of Ted Hearné’s *Sound from the Bench*<sup>13</sup> (‘simple surgery’) is another example of key-center ambiguity created by the presence of both C-natural and C-sharp in the vocal line. The correspondence to the perceptive ambiguity expressed in the lyrics and their hint at a more far-reaching sense of destabilization is obvious. (‘What I thought was a sudden chip in the metal was actually a drop of water’). While the C-natural places the line in the key of G (with a structure hinting at B-Phrygian), the shift to C-sharp re-casts the harmonic context as D (although on a subdominant harmony). The polytonal confusion increases even more when the chord progression in the guitar parts is considered.

Ex. 1.8, Ted Hearné, *Sound from the Bench*, Movement 4, m. 4

### Non-Scale Neighbor Tone (Fifth/Major Second)

A melodic trope derived from the scales and chords of Example 1.1. and 1.2 is the non-scale neighbor tone. The leaps from A-sharp to E-sharp (Ex. 2, mm. 2-3) and from B-sharp to C-double-sharp (Ex. 2, mm. 4-5) are both variants of a technique in which the melody briefly leaves the ‘home’ scale to enter an adjacent key area – a momentary longing for ‘something other’, a desire to briefly ‘step out’.

plötzlich ganz weich und weit (♩ = c. 144) Wendia *p*

*Ilse* *weit / broad* *f* in or der,  
Love him so much with one's whole heart. one can not help but cry

Ex. 2, Hans Thomalla: *Dark Spring*, Act II, m. 47

### Added Raised Fourth (Clusterization)

Another technique derived from the bitonal scales and chords of example 1 is that of adding the dissonance of a raised 4th or – in heightened intensity – of both the natural 4th and the raised 4th to a chord.

Ex. 3.1

Ex. 3.2

Ex. 3.3

It does not simply function as a suspension to either the 3rd or 5th scale degree, since both notes are part of the chord themselves, but as a tension that simply won't go away (Example 3.4).

Ex. 3.4, Hans Thomalla: *Dark Spring*, Act I, m. 168

In its mildest form it confronts us with a feeling of irritation – the existence of a contradiction that seems impossible to resolve. (The E-flat high pedal hovering over the D tonality in the first movement of *Sound from the Bench* is a prominent example). And as with the bitonal scales and chords of examples 1.1 to 1.6, the degree of dissonance can increase (added raised 1 in Ex. 3.3, added raised 5, etc.), changing the mood from that of mild irritation to oppressive dread when almost every pitch of the chromatic scale is present (a technique dominating scene six of *Dark Spring*).<sup>14</sup>

#### Harmonic Drift

Moving away from the bitonal or polytonal aspects of the scales and chords of example 1, example 4 presents a structure that can be described as harmonic drift. While the traditional concept of modulation delineates a process of transition between two areas of stability, harmonic drift points to a tonality constantly on the move without ever coming to a true sense of ‘home’. While textures of constant modulation are well known from late Romantic music, the case with harmonic drift is different: It has less in common with Wagner’s highly dramatic use of secondary dominants, deceptive cadences, and ellipses, and more with the quiet background hum of the algorithms that seem to steer and modulate the fabrics of our everyday life. The harmonic progression of example 4 avoids dominant-tonic tensions altogether, but continuously tonicizes subdominants instead. There is a slow, glacial drift ‘down’ the circle of fifths – a movement that leaves no space for any agency of individual musical subjects: they drift along with it, in it, maybe even swim against it for a while, but the harmonic process carries on regardless. (Similar structures can be found in the orchestral works of John Luther Adams [*Become Ocean*] or James Tenney’s ensemble works, as well as in the harmonic structures of earlier Minimalist compositions). The analogies to Sianne Ngai’s concept of ‘stuplimity’ is obvious: the overwhelming harmonic forces with their evocation of a sublime Rheingold-Prelude-like harmonic pace on the one hand, and the sense of numbness and even boredom on the other. It comes with the complete detachment of the



individual gestalt from the harmonic forces to which it – unlike the harmonic structures in Classic-Romantic tonal language – contributes nothing, as there is no agency left for it to contribute.

Ex. 4.1, Hans Thomalla: ... *the Brent Geese fly in long, low, wavering lines* ..., harmonic structure mm. 1-152

The 6<sup>th</sup> song in Alex Temple's *Behind the Wallpaper*<sup>15</sup> ('Fishmouth') is another example of tonal drift, albeit one that is more chromatically defined. It starts in a mysterious waltz-like character placed somewhere between *For the Benefit of Mr. Kite* and *La Valse*. While the harmonies shift rapidly with a downward-moving bass line, the strange effect of these measures stems from the constant re-definition of dissonant pitches as consonances. The E and A of the B-flat minor harmony in the beginning – functioning here as dissonant major 7<sup>th</sup> and raised 11<sup>th</sup> – become the stable root and fifth of the A minor harmony in measure 5. The D ninth of the C minor harmony in measure six transitions to the root of the D major chord in the following measure, while the major seventh of that chord, the C-sharp, with its neighbor-tone motive, is an enharmonic reinterpretation of the viola's D-flat in the opening measures. Alex Temple describes the affective context of the work:

'The piece tells the tale of someone undergoing a mysterious transformation and ultimately finding a home in another world, superimposed on our own but invisible to the uninitiated. Many of the dreamlike images in the songs were inspired by my experience with gender transition. But my hope is that the story will feel familiar to anyone who has ever felt alienated from the broader culture.'<sup>16</sup>

$\text{♩} = 64$       *eerie; light and breathy*

When you walked in the door, they were waiting.

*p*      *n*      *p*      *sfz*      *sfz*      *sfz*

*p*      *n*      *mp*      *sfz*      *mf*

*p*

Example 4.2, Alex Temple: *Behind the Wallpaper*, Movement 6

#### Harmonic Shift

Laure M. Hiendl's work for ensemble, »*Sehr meine Wunden und an meinen Beinen, die Narben meiner Wunden*» (*denn wir sind lange gewandert*)<sup>17</sup>, inhabits a quote from Ralph Vaughan Williams for its one-hour-long duration. The four bars from the composer's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony are themselves characterized by a certain lack of cadential directionality in their use of modal parallel voices. Only the upward movement in the flute at the end suggests a certain directionality, pointing 'someplace else'. The seemingly endless loops of excerpts from the already small original sample, softly moving through different instrumental groups while never solidifying into a real sense of meter, eventually lead to a meditative calm that amplifies the aimlessness of the original material. The diatonic mode of the repeated measures becomes a familiar landscape, even though the rhythmic-metric perspective on that landscape and the way it is colored are constantly changing. The sudden shift to a different key in the middle of the piece (measure 983) therefore comes as a quiet shock, like one of those moments in one's life where a seemingly minuscule change recasts everything that has been familiar as radically different: a change in mood that is as dramatic in its effect as it is subtle in the way it happens.

Chm.  $\frac{3}{16}$   $\frac{2}{8}$   $\frac{9}{16}$   $\frac{2}{8}$   $\frac{3}{16}$   $\frac{2}{8}$   $\frac{9}{16}$   $\frac{2}{8}$   $\frac{3}{16}$   $\frac{2}{8}$   $\frac{9}{16}$   $\frac{2}{8}$   $\frac{3}{16}$   $\frac{2}{8}$   $\frac{12}{16}$

Hp.  $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $mp$   $f$   $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $mp$   $f$   $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $mp$   $f$   $ppp$

Pno.  $ppp$   $p$   $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $ppp$   $pp$

Ex. 5, Laure M. Hiendl: «Seht meine Wunden und an meinen Beinen, die Narben meiner Wunden» (denn wir sind lange gewandert), mm. 965-990

B. Fl.  $\frac{12}{16}$   $\frac{1}{8}$   $\frac{3}{16}$   $\frac{3}{8}$   $\frac{3}{16}$   $\frac{1}{8}$   $\frac{3}{16}$   $\frac{2}{8}$

Eng. Hs.  $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$

B. Cl.  $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$

Hs.  $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$

Tp.  $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$

Tbn.  $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$

Chm.  $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $mp$   $f$   $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $mp$   $f$   $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $mp$   $f$   $ppp$

Hp.  $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $mp$   $f$   $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $mp$   $f$   $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $mp$   $f$   $ppp$

Pno.  $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $mp$   $f$   $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $mp$   $f$   $ppp$   $pp$   $p$   $mp$   $f$   $ppp$

Vn. I  $\frac{12}{16}$   $\frac{1}{8}$   $\frac{3}{16}$   $\frac{3}{8}$   $\frac{3}{16}$   $\frac{1}{8}$   $\frac{3}{16}$   $\frac{2}{8}$

Vn. II  $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$

Vla. I  $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$

Vla. II  $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$

Vcl.  $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$

Cb.  $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$   $mf$

### Melodic Drift

Melodic Drift describes a similar phenomenon of seemingly aimless modulation, in this case tied to melodic processes: the sudden re-interpretation of pitches as scale degrees in remote keys. (In example 6 the pitch of F is suddenly recast from 7<sup>th</sup> scale degree in G-flat major to the root of F major).

blessed / flowing ( $\text{♩} = 96$ )  
sempre poco rubato

$p$   $ppp$   $p$   $ppp$

Scale Degrees: 4 3 2 1 7-1  
Key: Gb → F

sempre

Scale Degrees: 4 3 2 1 7-1  
Key: A → Ab

Ex. 6, Hans Thomalla: *Air* for Violin Solo, m. 7

There are many examples of such sudden harmonic shifts into remote key areas in music literature: it permeates in all variants the music of Shostakovich, for example, where its relation to a certain lack of agency and passivity towards the forces of modern history cannot be overlooked. Motives are pushed from one moment to the next into remote keys, tonal centers slip up or down minor seconds, drift into mediant or tritone relations – and even the zaniest runs and figures of the surface activity cannot hide an utter lack of agency over the forces that are shaping our lives. (As a side note: The melodic structures of examples 4 and 6 also make use of the bitonal harmonies described in example 1.) The affect here is more ambiguous, though, as the passive drift can also evoke positive feelings of flow, of freedom and liberation (a slightly melancholic freedom of ‘letting go’ that defines the tone of my *Air* for Violin Solo). The harmonic language in Eisler’s *Hollywood Liederbuch*, for example in *Erinnerung an Schumann und Eichendorff* or *Über den Selbstmord*, is full of similar techniques of melodic drift.

#### Major/Minor-Second Stops

Ex. 7.1                      Ex. 7.2                      Ex. 7.3                      Ex. 7.4

A harmonic-melodic technique that sits on the border of harmony and timbre is what could be called Major/Minor-Second Stops. To the main notes of a chord or of a melodic line are added either diatonic or chromatic seconds, as if pulling organ stops. The effect is either that of chords nested onto other chords (Ex. 7.5) – destabilizing a sense of harmonic clarity and even opening up windows into distant key areas – or of a blurred pitch identity that can smudge a melodic line into thicker and thicker clusters (Ex. 7.6).

Key: D IV                      (ii ♭ Stop)                      (E♭-Major)

(iv ♭ Stop)                      (iii-minor)

Ex. 7.5, Hans Thomalla: *Dark Spring*, Act I, m. 189

schwebend (♩ = 100-108)  
 Pno. dicke Notenköpfe deutlich hervorheben / fat noteheads clearly in foreground

The image shows a musical score for piano. It features a complex, multi-layered texture with overlapping lines. The tempo is marked 'schwebend' (♩ = 100-108). The instruction 'dicke Notenköpfe deutlich hervorheben / fat noteheads clearly in foreground' is written above the staff. The score includes dynamic markings such as *f*, *p*, and *poco*. The notation is dense, with many notes and rests, creating a sense of a 'foggy' or 'blurred' sound.

Ex. 7.6, Hans Thomalla: *Harmoniemusik*, Movement I, m. 207

The affects associated with this technique can be multifold: ranging from an increasing brutalization of an individual line, where all distinct contour of the melodic subject has been bludgeoned into a 'general' shape, to a true sense of multiplicity, where one harmony broadens to others that are closely or remotely associated. Both the harmonic as well as the melodic iteration share a sense of destabilized subjectivity, a foggy, valium-like blur of physiognomy.

#### Fifths/Ninths Harmonies

The last two paragraphs in this small collection present sonorities that seem too basic to function as tonal harmony quite yet; they are too undefined to take on roles in the complex hierarchies and tensions of tonic-dominant-subdominant relations, of major-minor modes, of leading-tone expectations and resolutions. The affect of examples 8.1 and 8.2 is of a similar passivity to example 8. It remains ambiguous whether the tension-free sonorous world is one of happy and calm relaxation or of utter emotional exhaustion and – in the end – deep sadness. What seems clear, though, is that we experience a musical texture with very little investment left for 'drama': no (more) dissonance or conflict.

The image shows a musical score for piano. It features a simple harmonic structure with sustained chords and a steady melodic line. The notation is clear and uncluttered, focusing on the basic harmonic relationships.

Ex. 8.1, Hans Thomalla: *Harmoniemusik*, harmonic structure of Movement 1, Section A

verträumt (♩ = 96)  
 IV. *flautando* Flageoletzgriff *ord.* IV.  
 harmonic fingering

The image shows a musical score for piano. It features a complex texture with rapid sixteenth-note passages and dynamic markings such as *pppp*, *pp*, and *p*. The score includes the instruction 'verträumt' (♩ = 96) and 'IV. flautando Flageoletzgriff ord. IV. harmonic fingering'. The notation is dense and intricate, with many notes and rests, creating a sense of a 'dreamy' or 'trance-like' sound.

Ex. 8.2, Hans Thomalla: *Air for Violin Solo*, m. 7

### Major-Second Harmonies

The harmonic technique of example 10 dials up that of examples 9.1 and 9.2. Not even fifths or fourths are left but only major seconds: a dyad that seems to inhabit the grey area between still interval and already harmony depending on the context in which it is placed. It carries affects of anxiety as it seems to have crouched down almost catatonically in a corner of total retreat – many harmonies would be possible by adding notes to the dyad, but none are dared or committed to. At the same time the complete loss of harmonic ties evokes a sense of complete openness: once every attachment is gone or has been taken, almost every development is possible.

Ex. 9.1, Hans Thomalla: *Dark Fall*, End of Act I

The list of examples stops here purely for reasons of space. It could be endlessly extended, both by additional examples in the categories already given (with ever more semantic nuances) and by adding additional categories of harmonic techniques: From zany circles through mediants, to the dysphoria of an enharmonic drift through a Riemannian Tonnetz – there are limitless tonal techniques available, corresponding to a seemingly endless range of affects, moods, or feelings today.

### 'A Real Social Experience'

The limits of such an expressive 'dictionary' are obvious. Music can function as a representational language only within very narrow borders: Expressions

immediately run into questions of semantic ambiguity, vagueness, of dual or even multiple meanings. (I am aware of the fact that the reaction of many readers to the examples above might be ‘I hear a completely different affect here.’) Furthermore, the examples focus on harmonic relations, but other musical parameters can easily undermine the implied semantic connotations. Changes in dynamics or in tempo can turn a longing affect into aggression. A change in register (collapsing chords from registral extremes to a single middle octave) can turn an experience of displacement into one of manic insistence. The ways these examples are actually used in the works from which they are extracted explore many of these transformational possibilities, of course. Expressive ambiguity does not diminish the affective potential of the tonal elements, though. Quite the opposite: in their ambiguous nature these techniques might in a way be more adequate as expressions for ambiguous and arguably weaker sets of feelings today. (As described earlier, we are not dealing with the romantic passions – clear individual experiences of strong feelings such as hate or anger – but with their more insecure and often ‘weaker’ contemporary descendants: irritation or frustration, apathy, melancholy, minor attraction, etc.) And music is ambiguous only to a point; no one would contest the meaning of a C major brass fanfare or a minor-second lament motif in a Bach cantata. Furthermore, verbal language shares this ambiguity (if not to the same degree), as changes in tone or punctuation can greatly transform the expressive quality of a sentence. In this context, Lauren Berlant’s critique of a simplistic understanding of the transmission of affects and emotions seems important:

‘If this essay were a polemic, it would argue that our current view of the communication of affect and emotion is too often simply mimetic and literalizing, as though their transmission were performative rather than an opening to all sorts of consequences, including none at all. It would aim to counter the unfortunate tendency in much contemporary affect theory to elide the difference between the structure of an affect and the experience we associate with a typical emotional event. It would also argue for slowing down how we apprehend these phenomena. To slow down amidst the emergence of an intensified situation is to sense much better what’s becoming undone, what is firing off and dissipating into nothing or a general atmosphere, what is sparking and getting taken up, and how people ride the wave of the happening, shifting it and themselves around in it, and sometimes making an event out of it. For the affective event is an effect in a process, not a thing delivered in its genre as such.’<sup>18</sup>

Nothing would be further from my position than imagining musical expressivity as a one-way channel, in which feelings are frictionlessly translated via musical figures into their perceptions by a listener. As composers, we write artistic works, not dictionaries, and tracing ambiguities, setting up transfor-

mations of the music's affective connotations, pitting one musical parameter against another (or balancing them) lie at the core of our activity. We create a musical fabric where the sounds are meaningful, i.e., related to experiences beyond the music itself, but at the same time are more than just messengers of our affects. They carry ambiguity, the possibility for shifting determination, and in the end a sense of sonorous autonomy.

The non-representational aspect, music's sonorous immediacy, has without doubt been dominant during New Music's century of a 'liberation of sound' – a project that has been and continues to be of enormous importance. The purpose of this essay has been to focus attention on music's other aspect: its possibility to set and express moods, affects, feelings.<sup>19</sup> Harmonic techniques take on a major role in this process. The discussion could (and should) be extended to investigations of other musical categories under a similar analytical point of view, looking into aspects of common practice musical language: rhythm and meter and their function today, or the role of genre for form and narrative in music.

The feelings connected to the harmonic techniques in the examples above share aspects of collectivity as well as a certain affective weakness: The brief gesture of excitement in example 1.4 is not one of euphoric epiphany. It stops as suddenly as it begins and then listens almost insecurely to its own resonances; the 'desire for something other' of example 2.1 retreats as fast as it stepped out of its own melodic boundaries; the harmonic progressions of example 4 are not articulations of self-assured progress into new harmonic territories, but an aimless drift 'downwards' instead. The same lack of passion can be said to characterize the negative affects connected to the harmonic examples above. They share a certain weakness and ambiguity, as if they are coming to terms with what they are actually feeling. The irritation of example 3.4 seems to be a minor affect compared with the utter terror of mad scenes in bel canto operas; the melancholy of examples 5, 6, or 8 seems 'no big deal' compared with the utter desperation of 'Zerfließe mein Herze' from the St. John Passion.

What seems even more important regarding the distinction of these affects from the strong individual passions of the past is the fact that they are decidedly collective in their experience. As Sianne Ngai writes in the Introduction to *Ugly Feelings*:

[...] The nature of the sociopolitical itself has changed in a manner that both calls upon a new set of feelings – ones less powerful than the classical political passions, though perhaps more suited, in their ambient, Bartlebyan but still diagnostic nature, for models of subjectivity, collectivity, and agency not entirely foreseen by past theorists. This is why, for Virno, even an unattractive feeling like opportunism can provide a 'kernel' from which to shape 'transformative behavior'. For all its pettiness the feeling calls attention to a real social experience and a certain kind of historical truth.<sup>20</sup>



Theorists like Ngai or Flatley point to the social and collective aspects of sets of feelings that have become crucial in the understanding of contemporary experience – feelings such as envy, boredom, irritation, paranoia (Ngai) or melancholia (Flatley). They can only be understood in the deep connection between individual and collective affect, between the micro-level of personal experience and the macro of the historic forces of modernity and late capitalism. As Jonathan Flatley has noted:

‘Our most enduring and basic social formations – patriarchy, say, or capitalism itself – can only be enduring to the extent that they are woven into our emotional lives in the most fundamental way. Gender differences or class distinctions are not just tools we use to make sense of our worlds, they are things about which and in relation to which we all have a whole range of emotions, from the teenager’s shame among his wealthier classmates at the shabbiness of his family’s car or his parent’s working-class accent to the particular anxiety of a woman alone on a city street at night. Whole sets of affects – about family, profession, sexual practices, physical appearance, eating habits, and so forth – come into being only through categories of class and gender. [...] Because our social formations work through affect, resistance to them must as well. Substitute objects of positive affective attachment must be provided where necessary, counter-moods evoked, and the emotional valence of various objects and ideas changed through processes of rearticulation and recontextualization.

And if we want to form politically agential collectives, this is most directly a question of moods, structures of feeling, and affects; anxieties must be overcome, alliances must seem not just logical but emotionally compelling. Insights about one’s political oppression are unlikely to motivate resistance unless they can be made interesting and affectively rewarding.’<sup>18</sup>

Why tonality? What role does tonality play in the articulation of these affects or in the setting of moods from which they stem or to which they contribute? How do syntax and semantics of functional harmony relate to these sets of feelings and their meaning in today’s world?

Tonality is a shared, collective musical language – with all the limitations and aspects of alienation that come with its Eurocentric historic formation. It mediates between the personal and the social. It enables articulation of moods and affects that go beyond the ‘expression’ of personal feeling and that tie the subjective experience into a larger collective historic context: The dissonance-irritation of example 3.4 is not just the expression of an individual’s feeling of nervousness, but connects to a larger social experience of anxiety; the melancholy of the tensionless consonant pulses at the beginning of *Harmoniemusik* does not just capture a subjective mood of sadness,

but connects to a much wider feeling of loss in regards to our contemporary experience. The material developments of post-tonal music will never lose their relevance, nor will the project of discovering ever-new sonic landscapes. But tonality and its syntax of functional harmony provide a medium to capture the collective nature of these ‘new sets of feelings’ (Ngai), and – maybe just as important – articulate them in a way in which a collective public might feel addressed; in which it might recognize the often ambiguous, foggy, and insecure affects of our time, and thus eventually feel empowered to act upon them and connect them to a potential for real social change.

1 I am very grateful for the many suggestions and the critique that I received when drafting the final version of this essay. Ryan Dohoney’s, Alan Pierson’s, and Sianne Ngai’s thoughtful comments were crucial in developing the core concepts of the text.

2 Johann Adolf Scheibe, ‘Critischer Musicus’, Leipzig 1745. In: Dietrich Bartel: *Handbuch der musikalischen Figurenlehre*, Freiburg 1982. ‘But the figures themselves are a language of the affects.’

3 I am aware that a term as broad as ‘tonality’ has taken on many meanings over time and continues to carry a certain ambiguity. I used it here in a sense that focuses on its syntactic and expressive aspects: tonality as a musical language in which individual pitches are strongly defined through the position they have in a referential system (a key): the position of notes in the scale, from root position to leading tones, or the cadential functions of chords. Furthermore, a concept of tonality for me includes that the context for the use of musical elements is understood by listeners that are more or less familiar with this language (a V → I progression is heard as a cadence, as is the resolution of a leading tone), and even connected to meaning beyond a purely musical system of signs. (e.g. deceptive cadences, lament motifs, rhetorical figures, etc.)

4 Helmut Lachenmann, ‘On Structuralism’, *Contemporary Music Review*, 1995, Vol. 12, Part 1, p. 94.

5 The neo-romantic, neo-tonal composers from the 1970s onwards did not really innovate tonality, as their position has been predominantly sentimental: retreating to the musical idiom of an idealized tonal past rather than re-functioning tools and techniques of tonality for a truly contemporary musical language. Even Minimal Music stayed largely away from the core of tonal language – the tonic-dominant tension – and replaced it with the often tension-free stasis of modes.

6 Laure M. Hiendl, ‘*Seht meine Wunden und an meinen Beinen, die Narben meiner Wunden*’ (denn wir sind lange gewandert) for ensemble, 2022.

7 Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*, Cambridge, 2008; p. 29ff highlight by HT

8 Lauren Berlant, ‘Cruel Optimism’, in: *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Duke University Press 2010, p. 97, highlight by HT.

9 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge 2005.

10 The focus on European and US-American New Music here is purely for reasons of space and familiarity, as my own biography ties me to those two continents. Further studies regarding tonality in a post-colonial context, as fascinating as that topic is and as urgently the research seems to be needed in the current cultural situation, would go far beyond the scope and ability of this essay.

11 I focus primarily on my own works for reasons of familiarity, but also since it seems crude to rip a moment from a complex work and reduce it to a possibly implied tonal affect – a violence better handed out on one’s own compositions than on that of others.

12 Hans Thomalla, *Dark Spring* – Opera in 11 scenes, Lyrics by Joshua Clover. Berlin 2020.

13 Ted Heame, *Sound from the Bench*, Text by Jena Osman, 2014.

14 The example shows the possibility of many of these techniques to move beyond tempered scales. In *Dark Spring* the added ‘dissonances’ include multiphonics and non-tempered 5th or 7th partials – different degrees of exteriority to a given harmony.

15 Alex Temple, *Behind the Wallpaper*, 2014-2015.

16 Quote from <https://newamsterdamrecords.bandcamp.com/album/behind-the-wallpaper>; retrieved 3/20/2023.

17 Laure M Hiendl, «*Seht meine Wunden und an meinen Beinen, die Narben meiner Wunden*» (*denn wir sind lange gewandert*), 2022.

18 Laurent Berlant, 'Thinking about Feeling Historical', in *Political Emotion – New Agendas in Communication*, Edited by Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds, New York 2010. I am grateful to Ryan Dohoney for bringing this text and its relevance for my project to my attention!

19 A more careful distinction between the categories of mood, feelings, and affects and the meaning of that distinction for tonal language would be important but goes beyond the scope of this essay.

20 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge 2005, p. 5, highlight HT.

21 Flatley, 'Affective Mapping', p. 79.