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Theses on tonal music

In the following, the core ideas of the book “Tonal Music” are summarised in the form of theses, i.e. as mere assertions, without the explanations, arguments, and proofs that can be read in the book itself.

Tonal music is characterised by an aesthetic principle: Similar sound forms are placed in relationships in which they *fit together*.

1. The aesthetics of tonal music starts with the fact that tones fit together because of the accordance of their sound parts: The tones harmonise directly due to the coincidence of their partials. This principle is called *consonance* and is completely realised in major and minor triads. Even the formal differences in the occurrence of consonances – as basic forms or inversions of the triads – result from the principle of the accordance of the sound parts.
2. The tones of dissonances do not harmonise directly, but indirectly: as components of the dominant, subdominant and/or tonic. The relationship of these consonances to each other is determining for the dissonance, but also for the cadence. In both sound forms, the juxtaposition of the dominant and subdominant appears as a harmonic tension, which is resolved into the tonic. The dialectic of harmonic tension and release is characteristic of *tonality*. Tonality is the harmony between the tonic, dominant and subdominant, which crystallises in the key. Tonality is therefore also the harmonic principle of the key.
3. Keys, for their part, enter into harmonic interrelations: Here, too, their fitting together, i.e. their relationship, is based on the coincidence of their sound parts. The more tones they have in common, the closer the keys are related to each other. The harmonic relationship of the keys to each other is realised in the *modulation*. Modulation is the transition to a new key by a sound that does not occur in the tone inventory of the previous key. The identity of the new key is determined by its affinity to the previous key and by its compatibility with the modulating sound. Thus, the harmony between the keys defines the process of modulation.
4. The fourth principle according to which sounds fit together is that the harmonies follow each other in principle at equal time intervals. This principle is called *bar*. The bar is not something that is predetermined for the harmonies and to which they adjust themselves by changing at the bar line; rather, the bar is nothing other than the form that harmonies take due to their equal succession. It is only on this basis that the bar also becomes a guideline into which harmonies can insert themselves, so that a change of harmony can also take place within the bar.
5. The rhythmic going-together of the tones within the bar is based on an even *subdivision of the bar*, which continues step by step to form a hierarchical structure of the division levels. The bar is not the result of a grouping-together of presupposed tones, but, conversely, is presupposed to the segments into which it is divided; and the tones embody either individual segments of a particular division level or a product of the fusion of several segments. The segmentation of the bar is reflected in the relative accentuations of the tones: These depend on the ranking of the segments, which coincide with the position and duration of the tones. This also applies to syncopes. Insofar as the tones are components of harmonies that follow one another equally – as bars –, it does not matter at what pitch they sound. But as far as they represent bar segments that are fused together, the continuation of the pitch is essential.

6. Pitch is the criterion by which tones are placed in melodic relations: Accordance is now a matter of proximity in terms of pitch. The tones of a key thus appear in a scale – arranged not according to their harmonic determination, but according to their pitch. The different distances between the tones, in which tonality becomes noticeable, are less important than the order of the tones. In melody, the tones are representatives of *scale degrees*. The succession of tones is characterised by intervals, and intervals are measured by the scale degrees. When changing to a new key, the scale changes, and the melody continues to move on the degrees of this new scale. At this point in the melody, there is an interval between the degrees of different scales. This interval is determined by the fact that the common tones of the corresponding keys also represent melodically identical degrees insofar as the interval between them is always a prime. But the tones that the keys do not have in common also participate in this identity of the tonal stages: They appear as representatives of an altered scale degree, i.e. a scale degree that was already there before the change of key, but is now somewhat closer to the degree above or below it.

7. Melodies are set in melodic relationships to each other in polyphony: The melodies compare themselves according to the criterion of the form of their melodic movement. As a result of this comparison, the melodies are voices. Thus the voices move in parallel, in unequal intervals, in contrary directions, they progress or pause asynchronously. The aesthetics of these movement ratios is called *counterpoint*. The analysis of counterpoint shows that the distinguishability of the voices, which is presupposed in the relationship of the voices, is guaranteed by their own movement ratios, i.e. is at the same time a result of counterpoint. For this reason, the identifiability of the voices today is no longer dependent on distinguishable sound sources as it was in the development phase of the counterpoint.

8. The voices take up their previously made motion in their further progression, that is, they compare themselves in regard to their motions carried out step by step, be it within a voice, be it in the relation of the voices to each other. The form of crystallisation of this comparison is the *motif*. Because of the accordance with other passages of the melodic movement, a piece of melody becomes a motif. A sequence of tones is therefore not a motif because of its special properties and is therefore reused in any form whatsoever, but it is a motif regardless of its individual melodic shape and only as a result of its imitation. The motif is the aesthetic endpoint of tonal music, the last characteristic sound figure in which the aesthetic principle of music is manifested: The motif is the result of a relationship in which similar sound forms – in this case: tone sequences – fit together.

Of course, these are merely theses. And they also contradict the current views, which does not please everyone. But the theses are the results of a coherent, systematic explanation of the music, and this is something that can be verified:

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