Bolero Unraveled:
Dissonance as a Factor in Interpretation of Phrasing

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Most instrumental students develop their skills in phrase interpretation through study with a master teacher. Imitation is often the most used technique. Often when asked why play a phrase a certain way the player will answer "my teacher, or the great professor so-and-so played it that way."

Perhaps the greatest tribute to one's teacher is not to play everything exactly as they did, but rather to apply the techniques they taught to the interpretation of various solos. The use of analytical techniques in harmony and counterpoint can be invaluable when determining which notes of a phrase to emphasize. Working with both the solo part and the score can result in an effective and accurate phrasing technique.

The bassoon solo from Maurice Ravel's *Bolero* not only represents one of the most widely used audition excerpts but also a perfect example for harmonic interval analysis. The C pedal point pulses on the downbeat throughout the entire bassoon solo as well as most of the work. By identifying the dissonance above this pedal we can locate the points of greatest drama in the melody and make effective nuance. We can also see how Ravel uses rhythm and articulation to reinforce these dramatic moments.

Arnold Schoenberg believed that the resolution of dissonance had no place in "new music," that each sound was complete in itself and could move as it wanted.[1] This was, of course, his conception of new music. The analyzation of twentieth-century music by the use and resolution of dissonant intervals should be limited to those composers who continued to use tonal materials in their music, though not in the traditional sense of tonality. For example, Ravel makes use of a tonal center, such as C in the case of *Bolero*, without using chords in a functional way.

Analysis of intervals above a given bass note has been a standard way of identifying a composer's use of dissonance since the middle ages. The same method can be used with many later works, especially those composed using modes in the twentieth century. The following is a list of intervals in order of greatest dissonance:

Dissonance: tritone, Major seventh and minor second, minor seventh and Major second

Before analyzing the bassoon solo we should first look at the flute solo that opens the work. Ravel emphasizes consonance rather that dissonance throughout the first part of the solo. For the first eight measures his notes of emphasis are all within the C triad save for the D in measure 11 that immediately resolves to G. This D is then the dissonant point of emphasis in the second phrase of the solo but with mild consequences in relationship to the bassoon solo to come. The clarinet solo that follows copies the flute solo exactly. Ravel uses no pitches outside the C major scale until the bassoon enters in measure 45.

The B-flat opening is the minor seventh above the pedal, the third most dissonant interval behind the tritone and the semitone. Ravel emphasizes the B-flat four times in the first two measures, placing great emphasis on the second beat of the second measure with an accent. The repetition of the figure A-G-B-flat increases the tension of the melody, which then relaxes with a gradual descent to E-natural at the end of measure 3. The skips of a third in the first part of this sub-phrase also build tension while the conjunct, chant-like, descending line provides release. Though the E at the end of the sub-phrase sounds dissonant in relation to the B-flat opening, a melodic tritone, the interval of the pedal is a consonant major third. By placing E as the last pitch of this and the subsequent sub-phrase Ravel foreshadows E as the contrasting key area late in the work. The structure of the first sub-phrase shows the high C at the peak of the line, G as the longest note, and E as the ending, resulting in the outline of the descending tonic triad. Schenkerian analysis applies to Ravel by the prolongation of the tonic triad in the bassoon part as it eventually falls to the tonic C.

The second sub-phrase again starts with the B-flat but quickly ascends through C to D-flat with a stronger dissonance being a semitone higher and representing also the sound of the flat ninth above the pedal. The repetition of this dissonance along with the syncopation and increasingly shorter rhythmic values of eight note - triplet eighth - sixteenth note results in a tension that should be accompanied with a steady increase in dynamics. This repetition of the high D-flat is Ravel's method of dramaticizing the high point of the phrase. One might ask why Ravel accents the D-flat on the second and third beats of measure 6 and not the first beat of the next measure. Most likely he thought it unnecessary to accent the naturally

strong beat of the measure as he avoids doing that through the entire solo. The player therefore should not lessen the stress on those notes just because there is no written accent, but allow the metric accent to provide emphasis on dissonant tones like the D-flat. I use a double forked fingering for the high D-flat, with first and third fingers of each hand, the high d key, and the E-flat resonance key. This fingering provides a lower pitch than most and provides a resistance that I can blow against to achieve intensity without breaking the pitch. At the end of the entire first phrase Ravel accents the consonant G as it descends to E. The structure of this sub-phrase again shows Ravel's use of the descending tonic c triad.

The beginning of the second phrase of the solo on D in measure 9 shows how Ravel balances the beginning of the work by using the inversion of the minor seventh, the major second, as the first interval. The repetitive use of this dissonance at the beginning of the phrase is revealed through the intervallic analysis process and further strengthens this theoretical premise. Ravel resolves this dissonant D to E, then repeats it and moves upward to E. The perfect fourth is a harmonic dissonance and resolves to G, the high point of the sub-phrase structurally. The G receives decoration from the neighbor notes A-flat and F, eventually descending to E and C completing this sub-phrase's structure: G-E-C. The beginning of the second full phrase, like the first phrase, contains skips in the melody while the remainder of the phrase moves stepwise and should be played in a smooth catlike manner with nuance reflecting structure, dissonance, and articulation markings.

The B-flat in measure 11 begins our descent to the last note of the solo, the C. A very simple yet effective way to describe the overall structure of the solo is illustrated in the musical example. Descending two octaves with the top C and low C as the foundation and roof of the structure may not describe Ravel's artistry in ornamentation and rhythm, yet it does increase our understanding of the compositional technique and gives us a foothold from which to negotiate this difficult solo. The B-flat and D in measure 12 decorate the consonant C and E. Control of nuance by emphasizing the turns in the bassoon part can result in a twisting effect that perhaps can reflect the engagement of the bolero with the bull.

From the G in measure 13 Ravel begins a descent to the final C that includes an increasing amount of tension on each long held note: F - F-flat - D-flat - C. Could this descending phrygian tetrachord symbolize the death of the bull, or something more sensuous? While in most instances we could simply call the E-flat modal interchange, in this case we should call it a blue note, referring to Ravel's interpretation of non-chord tones. On the penultimate note of the phrase, the d-flat, shows again Ravel creating balance by using the most dissonant melodic interval from the first phrase of the solo to end the last phrase.

Differing phrase marks in various editions and excerpt books can be a point of confusion to students and professionals alike. The Stadio excerpt book divides the first long phrase of the solo into several smaller groupings. The score from Durand however has the entire first three measures under one phrase mark, as does the individual bassoon part. While division of the solo into groupings may help a student learn emphasis of motives within the phrase, it may also hamper smoothness or legato in the upper register. Often the player may play legato in the extreme registers of the bassoon and the listener may not be able to distinguish between tongued and slurred passages.

The ease of interpreting the bassoon solo in *Bolero* using dissonance as a guide results in part because of the constant pedal C. Other solos can and should be interpreted, at least in part by the relationship of the melody to the bass line or harmonies that accompany those melodies in order to determine the dramatic places of dissonance (tension) and consonance (resolution).

When Stravinsky composed the *Rite of Spring,* he helped to bring about the liberation of dissonance as its own sonority, not needing resolution for its completion. We can however analyze the intervals between the bassoon solo and the accompaniment below to see the different ways he harmonizes certain notes. For example, when the bassoon plays A in measures 2 and 3, the horns play C# then D then C# again for intervals m6-P5-m6. The new Stravinsky excerpt book shows the accompaniment below the solo. Knowing the accompaniment is essential to playing these passages in tune, which means you really should study each orchestral solo with a score to fully understand it.

Analysis of melody and harmony, coupled with good sense of drama and tradition can enable the student to develop a much needed maturity in the interpretation of phrasing. ❖

Footnotes

[1] Stein, Leonard, ed. Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Belmont Music Publishers, 1975) p. 99.

About the Author ...

Dr. Dale Clark *is assistant professor of bassoon and music theory at the University of Memphis and a member of the Memphis Woodwind Quintet. He earned his bachelor of science in education degree from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville in 1980, Master of Music degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1993, and Doctor of Musical Arts degree in bassoon performance from Boston University in 1997. His principal teachers have been Ed Knob, Keith McClelland, Gary Echols, and Matthew Ruggiero. Dr. Clark has performed as principal bassoonist with the New Bedford Symphony, Pythagorean Festival Orchestra and Boston Chamber Ensemble, as well as playing with the Boston Lyric Opera, Memphis Symphony, Granite State Symphony, Nashville Symphony, Knoxville Symphony, and Chattanooga Ballet*

Maurice Ravel
Bassoon Solo- Interval Analysis Above Bass