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Analytical Techniques

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The Tragic Narrative of Desenclos' *Prelude, Cadence et Final* for Saxophone and Piano

Prelude, Cadence et Final is a post-tonal composition by Alfred Desenclos that uses highly dissonant harmonies, melodies, and gestures, organized in an unusual form when compared to previous tonal structures. On the surface, it seems difficult to ascribe any sort of obvious narrative to the structure of the work. However, after deeper analysis of thematic presentation and transformation, a narrative becomes quite audibly and theoretically apparent. How does *Prelude, Cadence et Final* use thematic transformation to present a narrative, and what sort of narrative does this piece convey through its formulaic organization? The piece presents a *tragic* narrative through juxtaposition of two thematic ideas—a stable harmonic device that represents “order,” interrupted by a “transgressive” melodic fragment that is defeated in the end.

Almén defines musical narrative as “the process through which the listener perceives and tracks a culturally significant transvaluation of hierarchal relationships within a temporal span.”¹ These relationships are therefore defined by their rank order and the journey in which these ranks change. This battle between oppositional forces can create conflict in the patterns of music which generate a psychologically meaningful narrative. This can provide an approachable method to describing a piece’s elemental relationships and deeper implications towards storytelling and character development set up through musical symbolization. In a *tragic* narrative as defined by Almén, an emphasis of the defeat of transgression by order must be evident in the relationship

¹ Byron Almén, “Narrative Archetypes,” 12.

between musical elements.² The elements that Desenclos juxtaposed in *Prelude, Cadence et Final* present two opposing harmonic ideas, alternating between the dominant “orderly” texture, and transgressive thematic moments that interweave in and out of standard tonal expectations—most notably, the juxtaposition between major harmonies, and dissonant ones. The work completes its *tragic* resolution in the Finale, when the transgressive theme is finally overtaken by the orderly texture which confidently closes the work.

The work is organized around two categories of harmonic palates: A-ideas and B-ideas. The A-ideas are defined by their angular and “minor” harmonies—fully diminished seventh (stacked minor thirds), augmented (stacked major thirds), dominant and minor seventh, and a preference for tritone, minor ninth (m9,) and an inverse, major seventh (M7). This angular, dense, dissonant, intervallically asymmetrical, and minor-based harmonic language is presented as an overall thematic texture throughout the work, consistently following these harmonic categorizations. B-ideas sharply contrast with these categories, defined by its transgressive harmony and specific melodic motive—a major-based 4 bar melodic gesture that returns through the work (first found in measure 15). This motive returns with associated underlying major seventh and pentatonic harmonies, and throughout the piece, noticeably breaks out of the “A” harmonic texture (coming to its peak at measure 93 and 111 of the Finale). This B-theme provides sharp contrast from the harmonic language of A-material; the two harmonic and thematic areas are markedly juxtaposed in a post-tonal “major/minor” paradigm, and pitted against each other for narrative purpose. The groupings are broad, but this specific opposition is consistently apparent through all movements of the work under this A/B organization.

In the Prelude, the work opens with A-arpeggiations over a ground bass—fully diminished seventh chords set up the initial harmony and order. Minor ninth and tritone relationships are

² Almén, “Narrative Archetypes,” 18.

established, and major chords are transposed by tritone relationships. Chords are sequenced in a way that outlines augmented chords and diminished patterns, and angular motivic fragments such as (014) create the melodic sound world of the A-texture. The tonic of “G” is established and emphasized until chromatically descending and ascending in tritones.

The image shows a musical score for 'Prelude: Statement of "Order" - A-material' by A. DESENCLOS. The score is for Saxophone Alto and Piano. It features a 'Grave' tempo with a metronome marking of quarter note = 60. The saxophone part is marked 'A harmony' and 'appoggiatura'. The piano part is marked 'p' and 'G dim 7 - A'. The score includes various annotations such as 'tritone', 'sequencing', 'outlined aug. chord', and 'tritone'.

Figure 1 – Prelude: Statement of "Order" - A-material

Measure 15 introduces the first statement of markedly different material, in both harmony and motive. The “B-theme” is introduced for the first time (Figure 2), and is repeated and transformed through measure 27. The regular, arpeggiated triplet rhythms of the A-section are noticeably and audibly displaced by the ornamented, repetitive sixteenth note melody—defining a new, transgressive element. This motive is constantly transposed in quick succession, in comparison to the more slowly modulating and repetitive nature of the more static A-harmonies in the opening of the Prelude. Most importantly, iterations of the B-theme are almost always accompanied by major

The image shows a musical score for 'Prelude: First Statement of "Transgression" - B Motive'. The score is for Saxophone Alto and Piano. It features a 'T° B motive' and 'pp' dynamics. The saxophone part is marked 'T° B motive' and 'pp'. The piano part is marked 'p'. The score includes various annotations such as 'tritone', 'sequencing', and 'tritone'.

Figure 2 – Prelude: First Statement of "Transgression" - B Motive

seventh chords and pentatonic (add 6, 9) harmonies, (Figure 3). These divergent harmonies are consistently activated by this specific melodic fragment throughout the work, creating this differentiated “B” association of theme and harmony in comparison with the initial diminished and tritone material.

Figure 3 – Prelude: Initial Juxtaposition of A and B-material

The A-theme returns in almost exact repetition at the end of the Prelude (m. 32) to close off the movement in ABA form, signifying the dual-thematic nature of the work as a whole—an order, a transgression, and restatement of order. The organization of the prelude sets up the entire narrative structure of the work from this point—two markedly different sound worlds and thematic groupings in opposition. After the Prelude, the oppositional relationship between the two themes begin to emerge.

Figure 4 - Cadenza: Juxtaposition of A and B

The Cadenza represents the first challenging of rank between the two elements, beginning with a tentative, piano statement of B-material without its accompanying harmonic base. This statement is quickly overtaken with fast arpeggios that reference tritone and major seventh/minor ninth intervals; A-based material (*Figure 4*). This battle between elements increases in rhythmic, textural, and dynamic intensity that begins a flurry of arpeggios that best showcases the battle between two elements. On a macro level, the contour and interval of the B-theme is outlined by tenuto marks and denoted by the first note of each arpeggio grouping, while diminished arpeggios and half-diminished arpeggios, representing A-based material, fill the harmony of the section. This juxtaposition of elements—the B-theme’s melodic contour emerging from A-based diminished and half-diminished arpeggiations, represents a moment in the narrative where the rank is uncertain. Finally, the arpeggiations dissipate, and A-material dominates the texture—direct, relentless, and symmetrical transpositions of major seventh and tritone intervals (*Figure 5*).

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a cadenza, consisting of six staves of music. The notation is complex, featuring arpeggiated chords and melodic lines. The score is heavily annotated with handwritten notes and symbols in red, purple, and blue. The first staff is labeled "B theme - MACRO melody" in red. The annotations include chord symbols such as Gdim7, C#m6, Gdim7, Bbdim7, F#m, C#m, E#m, C#m, D#m, E#m, C#m, and G#m. There are also dynamic markings like "poco f" and "dim.", and performance instructions like "up tritone" and "down m3". The notation includes arpeggiated chords and melodic lines with tenuto marks.

Figure 5 - Cadenza: Battle between A and B (A wins!)

To further establish the dominance of the A-texture, the initial opening arpeggios in the Prelude are directly referenced at the end of the Cadenza, before launching into the Finale. After the conclusion of the Cadenza, the hierarchal relationship between A and B is much clearer in its presentation of a *tragic* narrative—A consistently defeats transgressive B interruptions, is presented in a much higher frequency, and once again, closes the movement just as in the Prelude (*Figure 6*).

In the Finale, the “A” harmonic palate is transformed to a more vertical, rhythmic, frenzied variation of the same harmonies—F# diminished seventh chords stacked with an extra tritone (E-Bb) are pounded out in the piano, transforming new “A” themes that consistently reference tritones, major seventh/minor ninth intervals, and diminished chords (*Figure 6*). This material proves the dominance of A-material, and further establishes the important rank of these harmonies—beginning a new section, including multiple themes, and transformed by its confident, percussive, and forte texture.

Figure 6 - Finale: Opening Statement of A-material

Quickly after this material is introduced, a new lyrical theme once again interrupts the intervallically jagged, diminished “A” material—a secondary “B” theme in a pentatonic mode accompanied by major seventh chords (*Figure 7*). This new theme, introduced in m. 5 of the Finale, references B-material—it is often in a pentatonic mode, accompanied by major seventh

chords, marked *espressivo/legato*, and is a markedly different “major” harmonic texture. This is the first true reference of B-material since the Prelude, signifying that the B-material has returned, and rank of elements may be challenged once more. The material alternates between B and A—signifying the dual relationship once more, and their consistent opposition through all movements of the work. The B-theme in its original form reappears in extremely brief allusions (m. 15 and 16), but is quickly defeated by the intense, angular A-based motives. This signifies a narrative arc—the original transgressor that seemed to dissipate and lose, returns and slowly builds again at the end for a hopeful second chance to defeat the orderly A-dominated hierarchy. From this point, transgressive interjections of B-material become more frequent and of greater length, perhaps alluding that the theme may dominate the ending of the work.

Figure 7 - Finale: Transgressive B Interruptions

After a lengthy, virtuosic, and rhythmic variation on A-material and a repetition of the alternating B and A-material, and the original B-theme returns with full accompaniment in m. 59 of the Finale (*Figure 8*). The widely spaced major seventh and tritone intervals end with the original diminished harmonies that plane downwards in diminuendo (m. 57-58), signifying a defeat of the order and introduction of this fuller statement of the B-theme. The original B-theme is accompanied by a D major seventh chord, quickly juxtaposed with diminished/tritone allusions to A-themes and harmonies in succession. This signifies that the theme is not quite strong, and continues to make only small advances on the overall texture of A.

The image shows a musical score for the first true statement of the B-theme in the finale, measures 54-59. The score is annotated with handwritten notes in red, blue, and purple. Measure 54 is marked 'A' with a red arrow. Measures 56-58 show a sequence of chords with annotations 'M7', 'tritone (A)', and 'dim. (etc.)'. Measure 59 is marked 'B' in a red box and 'finale theme' in blue. The score includes dynamic markings like 'pp' and 'poco', and performance instructions like 'rit.' and 'dim.'. The piece ends with a double bar line and the number '2' below it.

Figure 8 - Finale: First True Statement of B-theme

This battle ends with a loss; the order of A once again prevails through m. 69 into more lengthy recapitulation and variation of earlier A-material; the rank of order is strong, even with continued failed attempts of the transgressive B-theme to usurp power. However, in m. 93, the B-theme totally and unexpectedly overtakes A-material in a hugely climactic statement. For the first time in the work, major harmonies fully dominate the texture, with no allusion to a post-tonal language. The transgressive theme breaks from the texture in a full forte and high tessitura, under sweeping major 7th arpeggios. This section comes to a close with pentatonic arpeggiations in the saxophone, trading melodic and accompanimental roles with the piano. A-material makes no appearances in this section, marking the longest statement of the B-theme in its pure form—the rank of the B-theme has grown tremendously after this moment, and seems to overtake the unstable, diminished, and angular intervals of the A-material. In this moment, the *tragic* narrative seems to dissipate, and the emotional impact of this moment in the form is audibly apparent (Figure 9).

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system, starting at measure 92, features a saxophone line in the upper staff and piano accompaniment in the lower staves. A red bracket labeled 'B' highlights the B-theme in the saxophone part, which begins with a T° chord. The piano part includes a GM7 chord. The second system, starting at measure 94, continues the piano accompaniment with F# and A chords and a GM7 chord. The score includes dynamics like 'rit.' and 'a2'.

Figure 9 - Finale: Climactic Realization of B-theme

After this climactic moment, the energy, tempo, and texture dies down into a sparse accompanied “recitative” of unsure, tentative, and exploratory modal melodic fragments (m. 102). These fragments, at first, seem to reference the original major harmony of the B-theme (presented in the major-based lydian mode), but slowly added flatted notes and chromatic alterations signify that A-material is creeping back into the harmonic texture. The theme is overtaken by A in measure 105, where major seventh intervals are accompanied by unstable tritones, major seventh intervals, and minor ninths. As the work’s tempo and dynamic gradually increases under A-material, the B-theme unexpectedly screams out from the texture, as a final call of resistance (m. 111). This moment represents the climax of the entire work, represented by its sparse texture, extreme tessitura, and dynamic. This peak in the form completes the full *tragic* narrative cycle, as the transgressive B-theme’s final dramatic statement was finally and quickly defeated by A-based (014) melodic fragments and half diminished chords.

The image shows a musical score with three systems of staves. The first system (measures 109-110) has a red handwritten note "(A.....)" above the treble clef. The second system (measures 111-112) has a red handwritten note "SOLO" above the treble clef, a red handwritten note "A! (tragedy -> B defeated by A.....)" with an arrow pointing to a melodic line, and the instruction "laissez vibrer" below the bass clef. The third system (measure 112) has a red handwritten note "A" in a box above the treble clef, a purple handwritten note "half d.m." above the treble clef, and the instruction "très enveloppé de pédale" below the bass clef. The score includes performance instructions like "large et très déclamé", "rubato", and "laissez vibrer".

Figure 10 - Finale: Transgression is Defeated - B's Failed Final Statement

A-material concludes the rest of the movement, with a repetitive coda of material that combines all A-themes and harmonies found in the Finale: major seventh/minor ninth and tritone intervals, diminished chord structures, in a jagged, rhythmic, frenzied presentation. This final, strong restatement of A-material concludes with a unison, tutti fragmented melody that references and combines the initial contour and harmonic language of the very first arpeggio in the Prelude, with the angular presentation of the Cadenza and Finale—signifying the resolute, complete, and total cycle of A-dominance (*Figure 11*).



Figure 11 - Finale: Last Measure, Final Reiteration of A-theme and Order

Alfred Desenclos's *Prelude, Cadence et Final* presents a *tragic* narrative that pits two characters in opposition, with a clear winner. The initial order of A-material dominates the work, while transgressive B-material provides dramatic interjection that challenges the rank and hierarchy of order. The *tragedy* is found in the B-theme's inability to defeat order, and its sympathetic, allusions to a major tonality. It can be argued that this narrative alludes to the battle between tonality and atonality in the modernist era—the inability of tonal statements to match the drama of complex atonal gestures and figurations. Regardless, this highly successful work for saxophone and piano represents a permanent staple of the saxophone repertory, and its narrative implications draw listeners to its unusual post-tonal drama, dialogue, technical challenge, and emotional impact. The work's deeper *tragic* narrative is defined by clearly highlighting and tracking placement of tonal and thematic elements of the work that create opposition and rank in its musical narrative.

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