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MAJOR/ MINOR HARMONY AND MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS AN ANTHROPOSOPHICAL AND MUSICAL APPROACH TO LAUGHING AND WEeping

Miguel Ribeiro-Pereira, (CITAR/ Vniversitas Catholica Lvsitana)³⁶⁸

Resumo

O t3pico deste breve ensaio 3 a polaridade do rir e do chorar como express3o da vida interior espiritual do ser humano. Ser3, primeiro, descrita segundo a perspectiva antropos3fica de Rudolf Steiner (1910). Concentrar-me-ei, depois, em tr3s momentos fulcrais da modernidade europeia e da est3tica musical: o impulso humanista da Renascen3a; o impulso cient3fico do Barroco; e, por fim, o impulso espiritual do Romantismo. Da3 resultará ent3o um quadro da m3sica tonal como manifesta3o arquet3pica do sujeito moderno — em conflito crescente e cada vez mais mais auto-consciente — baseado na significa3o do intervalo de terceira, um novo tipo de harmonia capaz de congregar p3los ao mesmo tempo opostos e complementares. Rematar-se-3 o todo com um exame anal3tico do famoso Lied de Schubert “Lachen und weinen” (D. 777), sobre poema de Friedrich R3ckert.

Palavras-chave: antroposofia; rir/ chorar; harmonia maior/ menor; consci3ncia moderna.

Abstract

The subject of this brief essay is the polarity of laughing and weeping as the expression of a person’s inner spiritual life. It will be first described according to the anthroposophical perspective developed by Rudolf Steiner (1910). Then I shall focus on three crucial moments of both cultural modernity and musical aesthetics: the humanist impulse of the Renaissance; the scientific impulse of the Baroque; the spiritual impulse of the Romanticism. A picture of tonal music will thereby be given as an archetypal manifestation of the modern subject—in growing conflict and ever more self-conscious—based on the fundamental significance of the third-interval, a novel kind of harmony poised to embrace opposed but complementary poles. An analysis of Schubert’s well-known song Lachen und weinen (D. 777), setting a poem by Friedrich R3ckert to music, will round off the whole.

Keywords: anthroposophy; laughing/ weeping; major/ minor harmony; modern consciousness.

Prologue

What is the main focus of spiritual (or esoteric) knowledge in our time? Following Rudolf Steiner, “it is the obligation of modern initiation ... to seek as knowledge the rhythmical relationship of heaven and earth. ... Certainly, we must know heaven, and certainly we must know the earth. But then we must also look at human beings—in whom, among all the beings around us, heaven and earth work together to create a unity. We must look at the human beings—and that means we must look at them with our sun-eye, with our heart-eye, with the whole human eye” (Steiner 1922: 205-06). Such would be the task of current initiation knowledge: to know the human being spiritually and speak a *language of the heart*, a language where everything is related to activity and movement, in a world of weaving, interconnecting feeling.

Now, music is a language of the heart *par excellence*, arising from feelings. Tonal music, in particular, developing from the mighty humanist impulse of European Renaissance, meant to restore the ethical aim inherited from Classical Antiquity, even if never abandoning its calling to harmonize heaven and earth. This was a momentous time in the evolution of modern human consciousness: the *feeling* for the interval of the third, either major or minor—ever since associated with distinctive human features such as happy/sad—expresses a new personal, subjective mood. Intertwined were thereby the birth of opera and the rise of tonality (ca. 1600), in the time of Kepler and Kircher. This dual harmonic matrix of the key system would eventually turn into an ambivalent, split unity (ca. 1800), in the time of Goethe and Novalis. Such interchangeability of modes and moods alike, simultaneously major and minor, without transition—stressing emotion rather than reason, more intuitive than deductive—reflects primarily the soul-aspect of the novel Romantic sensibility, inward and fragmented.

The subject of this brief essay is the polarity of laughing and weeping as the expression of a person’s inner spiritual life. It will be first described according to the anthroposophical perspective developed by Rudolf Steiner (1910). Then I shall focus on three crucial moments of both cultural modernity and musical aesthetics: the humanist impulse of the Renaissance; the scientific impulse of the Baroque; the spiritual impulse of the Romanticism. A picture of tonal music will thereby be given as an archetypal manifestation of the modern subject—in growing conflict and ever more self-conscious—based on the fundamental significance of the third-interval, a novel kind of harmony poised to embrace opposed but complementary poles. An analysis of Schubert’s

well-known song *Lachen und weinen* (D. 777), setting a poem by Friedrich Rückert to music, will round off the whole.

Anthroposophical Perspective

A preliminary question ought to be asked concerning the topic addressed here: is this indeed a serious matter well worth of our attention, or is it merely commonplace, hence negligible in the face of higher realms of existence and spiritual-scientific facts? Right at the outset of his lecture specifically devoted to the subject, “Laughing and Weeping,” Steiner preemptively asserts the fundamental importance of looking for the spirit as it manifests in everyday realities, rather than speculating on exalted subjects: “[E]veryone who endeavors to reach the realms of spiritual life,” he advises, “will become more and more convinced that to advance quietly, step by step, from the familiar to the less familiar is a very healthy approach. Besides, you will know from many examples that the most outstanding minds—in fact human consciousness altogether—have regarded laughter and tears by no means as merely commonplace” (Steiner 1910: 25). He then goes on to offer two distinctive examples of wisdom: one taken from ancient Eastern culture, the famous *Zarathustra smile* which this outstanding individuality came with into the world for all creatures to rejoice and evil spirits to flee, revealing a kind of consciousness at work in traditional legends; the other from modern Western culture, the *bitter despair* of Goethe’s poetic character Faust before he finds his way back into the world (“tears spring forth, the world holds me again,” *Faust I*, 1:784), revealing a kind of consciousness at work in outstanding artworks.

So in order for us to understand the human spirit in the soul expressions we call laughing and weeping, to place them in that deep foundation, Steiner proceeds to articulate the whole being of man as seen by spiritual science. Three outer sheaths, he elucidates, which we have in common with the rest of earthly creation—the physical body with the mineral realm, the etheric body with the nature of plants, and the astral body with the animal kingdom—cover the human ego. This is the most individual part of human beings, the deepest center of their spiritual life, making them the crown of earthly creation. But what is the activity of the ego within the human soul? The ego always seeks to create *harmony* with whatever or whoever it encounters in the outer world, either exulting and embracing that event or else recoiling and rejecting it, either understanding it or not. And such a relationship with the environment “not only stirs the emotions of the astral body and brings change into the currents and movements of the

etheric body, but also affects the physical body” (Steiner 1910: 28). It therefore has a definite influence on the blood, for example, as when a person will blush of shame in the face of an embarrassing situation, or otherwise will turn pale when confronting a frightening experience. Indeed, the ego’s relation to the outer world *permeates* the whole human being right into the physical body.

The ego, however, may not achieve a satisfying relationship with the outer world, either by a rational or an emotional *mistuning* with its environment. In the former case, instead of feeling united with the incomprehensible thing outside, the ego withdraws its forces from and rises above it, thus enhancing its self-awareness. Now, the ensuing feeling of inner freedom from a bond of any kind with that being, according to Steiner’s clairvoyant observation, makes the “astral body [which would otherwise expend its energies in the physical body to keep its forces together] expand like elastic and go slack, whereas it is normally in a state of tension. ... [T]he physical expression of this expansion of the astral body is laughing or smiling” (Steiner 1910: 30). In the latter case, when a personal, loving attachment with the being outside has been torn out, the ego becomes depleted by grief over such loss, feeling its selfhood less strongly. Tears then are an overflow of the overall series of contractions fostered by the ego; but they are also a compensation for its depletion, thereby restoring a balance. “If an ego that has suffered a loss lets go as far as shedding tears,” he further adds, “these tears, in raising the ego’s consciousness to an awareness of its loss, give it a certain subconscious feeling of well-being” (Steiner 1910: 32). By contracting their ego when a bond with the outer world is broken and they no longer feel enriched by it, therefore, people feel their selfhood strengthened.

Not only is a person’s laughing or crying expressed in physiognomy, but in physiology too; not in the face alone, but also in its breathing. Following through the dual process of the inner being’s expansion and contraction, in the case of laughter the inbreathing is long and the out breathing short, the opposite occurring when sorrow goes as deep as tears. “A kind of liberation of the outer corporeality occurs in laughter, and then a long breath of air is drawn in. When we cry the opposite happens. We compress the astral body and with it the physical body, and the compression causes an out breathing on one long stretch. Here again,” Steiner (1910: 37) sums up, “we have an instance of the connection between the bodily expression of a manifestation of life and a soul expression brought about by the presence of the ego.” And this physiological breathing process, in turn, seems to express, in the pictorial language of the Old Testament, the

birth of our selfhood as breathed in from Jahweh (*Genesis 2:7*), thereby raising us to our present level of humanity, making us a living soul. The deepest and most inward spirituality is therefore at work when we consider laughing and weeping—a *unique* expression of the human ego. If however it progresses only by being in movement, increasing and developing through life, the ego must still find harmony between those polarities: “the ego will only find completion when it has found a balance, and never in swinging to and fro between exultation and despair,” Steiner (1910: 42) winds up. “It will only be able to find itself at the point of rest which can lead just as well in the one direction as in the other.”

Musical Perspective

While this issue concerning the pendulum’s “point of rest” shall be developed only in the following, analytical section on Schubert’s song, I will now tackle two other issues which should be considered in duly music-theoretical terms: one is “permeability,” a sequential chain of influences throughout the cosmos, referring to the age-old hierarchical conception known as the *music of the spheres*; the other is “ensoulment,” the breath of life and inner source of movement, referring to the historical evolution of how *musical intervals* intimately relate to human consciousness and its shifting balance. Musical tones, admittedly the medium most apt to express directly the dynamic of desire (or will), can finely resonate and plastically adapt to the inner movements of the human being as well as those of the outer heavenly bodies. Those indeed are tones that work formatively—not only sounds—imbued with distinctive will, feeling, and thinking qualities that actually permeate the cosmos and transform every-thing down to physical matter. Were we to reach back to the primordial beginning, such then would be the divine Word as reported at the outset of St. John’s Gospel. This sublime, creative Logos permeates and resounds through all the different hierarchical levels of creation: it is first conceived as intelligible cosmic harmony of simple numerical ratios (*musica mundana*), then innermost felt within the human soul (*musica humana*), and eventually perceived in sensible physical reality as a diatonic scale (*musica instrumentalis*). Such is the threefold compass of the manifested world as defined by Boethius, tagged “last of the Romans, first of the scholastics” by fifteenth-century humanist Lorenzo Valla, who was to recast the ancient Pythagorean-Platonic tradition and thus became the authoritative influence in music theory throughout the Middle Ages. Hence, from the start, music found its place among the scientific disciplines of the medieval *quadrivium*, along with

arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. Yet, unique among them, music was “associated not only with speculation [sharing with the other three the task of searching for truth] but with morality as well” (Boethius ca. 500: 2). Providing a physical link between truth and goodness, cognitive and ethical ideals, the art of music seems to embody the highest spiritual forces active in the human being. Its well-modulated tones harmonize heaven and earth.

Harmonic perfection was therefore the aim of art music during the Middle Ages, achieved through the only perfect intervals, without defect or blemish: the homophonic unison (and the octave, its reflection in register) was the ideal of communal life, a brotherhood’s identity expressed in chanting together the liturgical plainsong—in unity, *as one*; the heterophonic fifth and fourth (mutually invertible within the octave) were then used in creating the parallel-motion *organum*, the early polyphonic attempt to enrich the plainchant melody and make it resonate in the acoustical environment of Romanesque architecture. True polyphony, a multilayered texture composed of free albeit harmonic movement of melodic lines, implies the adoption of the interval of the third: “If thirds and sixths [their inversion] are not admitted as consonance, there can be no polyphony,” sentences D. P. Walker (1978: 36), while associating this new aesthetic phenomenon with the astronomical thinking of Kepler. A radically different human kind of freedom and (self-)transformation was dawning, a rebirth of human values, which finds its musical expression in the novel feeling for the third-interval. This was a time for expanding and perfecting the two main musical genres—the mass and the motet—whose thoroughly *permeable* contrapuntal texture greatly benefitted from and plastically fit the acoustical environment of the majestic Gothic cathedral. Eventually, vocal polyphony was brought to its ultimate harmonic refinement, the self-assured stage of the *ars perfecta* in the late Renaissance.

Another kind of balance was then to be sought within the human soul, so difficult to grasp, due to the upsetting role of human passions and subjectivity. Such was the ideal fostered by the mighty humanist impulse of early European Renaissance, the first moment of our modern cultural era. While the former cosmological science (*musica theorica*) yields to the latter expressive art (*musica poetica*), music finds its place now among the literary disciplines of the academic *trivium* (grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric). This modern shift in human consciousness correlates to a shifting experience of musical intervals: the perfect, static fifth was felt as void, whereas inner vitality was infused by the imperfect, dynamic third. Mutable and ambivalent, either major or minor,

the third-interval expresses *subjective* moods in music. For the first time, Steiner (1906-23: 52) corroborates, “man feels music in relation to his own physical organization ... feels that he is an earthly being when he plays music.” And in the difference between major and minor “the subjective soul element relates itself to the musical element.” No pure intervals from the ancient Pythagorean tuning system would stand anymore the urges of the *trias harmonica*—the unity of the third and the fifth, thus named in the image of the Holy trinity—which entails a subtle change of intonation and temperament: acoustical and personal *temperament*, that is, disposition of the tones in a musical scale as well moods in a human being. Only in 1558, however, did Zarlino justify in mathematical terms the imperfect consonance of the third, extending the Pythagorean superparticular ratios from 1 to 4 (*tetraktis*) to a system of six “sounding numbers” (*senario*). Quite symptomatically, he characterized it in anthropomorphic terms, inwardly experienced as a world of musical feelings: the major is joyful (*allegra*), the minor is sad (*mesta*).

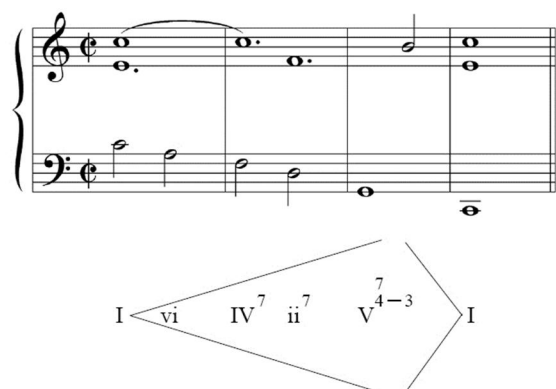


Figure 1. The Plastic Model of modulatory (or metabolic) tonal syntax

Tonal music is the aesthetic achievement of modern culture at the turn of the seventeenth century, the time for a newly self-conscious, autonomous human being. This too is the time of a gap in human consciousness, between the world of matter and the realm of spirit, the sciences and the arts. (Elsewhere, Ribeiro-Pereira 2016, I surveyed the evolution of human consciousness in the West, setting in parallel tonal music and the modern novel.) Interwoven with the emotional power of opera, a newborn musical genre thriving on conflict and strife, both the new tonal syntax and the key system will fully integrate the subjective feeling for the moody, temperamental third (Ribeiro-Pereira 2005). In accordance with Steiner’s idea (1924) that “the musical

element lies in the tension, relaxation, in the rising and falling of the movement,” my syntactic model is described as a rhythmic gesture “breathing out” (away from the opening unison), then “breathing in” (back to the closing one), in a context of growing dissonance (Fig. 1): it is an alchemy of most gradual transformations (by third), a complete revolution performed around a central axis (by third too). Dissonance’s *antagonism*, a forceful means now subservient to the words and the full range of passions they conveyed, can thus be transformed into harmony, and indeed perceived as an *integral* part of a living metamorphosis. Evolving between two polar opposed fields of the key—plagal and authentic—this pure harmonic model is ultimately an archetypal representation of the keynote’s inner life.

Schubert’s “Lachen Und Weinen”

This dual major/ minor harmonic matrix was otherwise shaped at the turn of the nineteenth century by the exalted sensibility of German Romanticism, a spiritual renaissance, furthering its bold Promethean task. Focusing intensely on the complex nature of the human self, turning its attention ever more to the mysteries of human soul, with inner conflicts and contradictions, Romantic introspective temperament set to explore inwardly its subjective awareness. Music was then to enjoy, in the avant-garde aesthetics of self-expression—indeed as never before since ancient Greece, nor ever since—the most prestigious status among the arts, as the quintessence of the poetic language: it is the ideal vehicle for knowing the *infinite* and disclosing the *sublime* in the aesthetic experience, a quasi-religious calling of the new age. Major-minor balance shifted too accordingly, casting its basic polar complementarity in the context of this subjective, introspective mood of modern self-consciousness (Fig. 2). Modal mixture or exchange, the radical shift of tonal patterns upon the same keynote, represents a novel approach to the traditional major/ minor key system. Reciprocally shared in the original version, the fundamental third-dyad C/E becomes the heart of diatonic tonality, its modulatory mean: an opposed harmonic matrix is inscribed upon the same dyadic core, recasting this modal-defining third through the progress of a transient root. In the later version, instead, the tonal-defining fifth is retained, wavering in modal identity within the frame of an intransient root. To be sure, the *point of rest* has changed thereby, as the static fifth-frame is ensouled *within* by the chromatic third. Torn simultaneously between two modes, two contradictory patterns of feeling, the interchangeability of parallel major/minor keys in nineteenth-century chromatic tonality directs us to a novel

condition of the modern human soul, stressing emotion rather than reason. Identifying itself with two superimposed images upon a single focal point, a new personality is then to emerge—self-centered, ambivalent, and split.



Figure 2. Major-minor system's articulation of relative and parallel keys

Etwas geschwind

6 6

8
La-chen und Wei-nen zu jeg - li-cher Stun - de ruht bei der Lieb auf so

15
man-cher-lei Grun - de. Mor - gens lacht' ich vor Lust, _____

22
und wa - rum ich nun wei - - ne bei des Abendes Schei - ne,

31
a tempo
ist mir selb' nicht be - wußt, ist mir selb' nicht be - wußt.

/ I

Figure 3. Franz Schubert's song "Lachen und weinen" (D. 777), first strophe

Now, this major/ minor inner split is one of Schubert's most distinctive stylistic features, a fingerprint, aptly coined in his song *Lachen und weinen*. Being a minute strophic form on Rückert's poem, whose second strophe reverses the order to "weinen und lachen," it borrows also from the ritornello: a dance-like instrumental music envelops each vocal strophe as a nonchalant prelude, interlude, and postlude. I therefore shall focus on the

first alone (Fig. 3). An English translation (by Keith Anderson, Deutsche Schubert-Lied-Edition, vol. 24) is provided here alongside the original German verses:

<i>Lachen und weinen zu jeglicher Stunde</i>	Laughing and crying at every hour
<i>ruht bei der Lieb auf so mancherlei Grunde.</i>	Can be caused by love for so many reasons.
<i>Morgens lacht'ich vor Lust,</i>	In the morning I laughed for joy,
<i>und warum ich nun weine</i>	and why I cry now
<i>bei des Abendes Scheine,</i>	in the evening light
<i>ist mir selb' nicht bewußt.</i>	even I do not know.

Swinging to and fro between joy and sorrow, light and darkness—a Romantic *chiaroscuro*—this is the portrait of a poet’s musing over his hypersensitive, capricious heart. Epigraphically inscribed upon the piano sequence by alternating, dancing fourths, the melodic inflection “laughing and crying” radically opposes two correlated motifs around the pivotal E^b: the former begins with an accented upward leap of a fourth from C; the latter ends a 7-6 expressive suspension with a downward semitone back to C. We hereby perceive the only dissonance—which further stresses the tonic syllable of “weinen,” still metrically accented—as the voice deviates from the regular sequence, highlighting a new declamatory utterance, only to rejoin in unison the piano on the closing semitone D^b-C. Its plaintive ^b6-5 echo (the traditional *lament motif*) then permeates the four-voice texture, exclusive to the instrumental cadence, chromatically “shedding a tear” that tinges the hitherto unconcerned major mood. These two opposed motifs will be further developed in the latter half of the strophe.

Exultant, the outburst of laughter strikes again an emphatically upward leap of a fourth upon the word *Lust* (incidentally, an alliteration of *lachen*), which reverberates through the sudden piano shift to the parallel minor. Conversely, in nuance *pianissimo* and marked *decrescendo*, the quiet weeping is cast upon a lengthy ^b6-5 inflection on the word *weine*, radically reinterpreting the same pole F^{#b}-E^b of the Lust-mood (first major sixth, then minor). Declaimed *recto tono*, rather than sung, upon a high reciting tone that sits on a static V⁷ harmony, the crucial Weinen-motif is now to lengthen the musical phrase, thereby breaking the square regularity of a four-bar hypermetrical dance pattern. Its harsh dissonance has indeed a disruptive effect: as the pounding dactyl rhythm of dance is kept throughout, the weeping two-bar extension seems to aptly represent a subjective notion of time as perceived under emotional stress; the compulsive pounding is inwardly felt in the troubled mind. Once again, the sorrowful note ^b6 in the voice

permeates the four-part piano texture to its very root, as the Weinen-polarity is relayed onto the ^bVI deceptive bass, much like the emotions of the astral body resound in the physical body of the human being. Now, the rhythmic activity dramatically slows down to a striking chorale-like style, whose vividly religious undertones are further induced by a reiterated plagal cadence (i.e. a downward fourth in the relative major and parallel minor keys), creating the distinctive sonority of the “Amen” of the mass—a solemn acceptance. This dual close is indeed to reverse the original upward Lust-motif of a fourth. Upon the arrival in the minor parallel (static) tonic, brought about after a gradual decrease in dynamics—*pianissimo, decrescendo, diminuendo*—the music pauses with a fermata over a silence! Such questioning (“Why do I cry?”) is quite a dramatic outcome: the emotional picture of a Romantic soul expressed in tone, physically resounding.

Epilogue

If the human being should lie at the center of today’s esoteric knowledge, as Rudolf Steiner proclaims, then tonal music fits nicely in our comparative exam. Particularly, when the deepest and most inward spirituality is at work as in laughing and weeping: a unique expression of the human ego. Tonal music, a conflictual experience of major and minor modes—be they intervals, chords, or keys—is thoroughly linked with uplifting and depressive moods, joyful and sad. The human being experiences the interval of the third inwardly, its moods as inner motions, right into the etheric and physical bodies. It is out of this experience of the tone structure, the soul relationship to it, that Steiner developed the novel art of Eurythmy, a subtle form of movement to poetry and music (*speech* and *tone* eurythmy, respectively). With distinctive dance-like movements, it is an art form that activates the etheric through the physical body, whereas music activates the astral body, and poetry expresses the ego. As a living expression of supersensory sound made visible in body movements, it means to cultivate the whole human being—body, soul, and spirit—and has a threefold use: a performing art, a pedagogical tool, and a therapeutic method. Recently, an anthroposophic doctor sought to explain the spiritual influences that determine human physiology and physical development according to musical principles. Concerning the interval of the third, Armin Husemann (1989) examines the inner motions of blood circulation and respiration: while the exhalation of the lungs and the arterial flow of the blood are connected with the major mood, inhaling and the diastolic flow of the venous blood are experienced in the minor mood. “The heart,” he concludes (Husemann 1989: 36), “transforms [with systole] minor into

major.” To be sure, this is the rhythmic human being, which is correlated to the realm of feelings, where music breathes and lives.

Human beings are therefore like musical instruments, harmonizing heaven and earth. Music, indeed, is experienced with the whole human being: while it reaches our consciousness through the ear, we feel a resonance, a reflection of its ensouling tones, which permeate all forms both with measure and quality, expression and meaning. So it is how we can comprehend the ancient conception of the “music of the spheres”: Johannes Kepler, a key figure of the Scientific Revolution, thus construed his planetary laws (the motion of the heavens) in terms of harmonics (real albeit soundless celestial music). We can also comprehend how “[t]he facts of human evolution are expressed in musical development more clearly than anywhere else” (Steiner 1906-23: 70): thus the feeling for the interval of the third was correlated to the modern human being’s increasing individuality. And ultimately, how the mastery over the soul element was to give Orpheus, the greatest artist, divine creative powers with his tones.

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