

Musical Forces Can Save Analysts from Cumbersome Explanations

Jaco Meyer

School of Music and Conservatory, North-West University, South Africa

rjmeyer.music@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Background

The solo flute composition *Syrinx*, or *La Flûte de Pan* as it was originally titled, by Claude Debussy (1862-1918) is regarded as one of the most important solo compositions in flute literature. Comprehensive and contradictory literature on this composition, the original manuscript, analyses, and interpretations of the composition exist. Analyses of *Syrinx* in literature were done using a wide variety of analytical approaches, including less conventional approaches like Gestalt perception and spectral analysis of flute tone quality. Most of the authors provide cumbersome explanations in their analyses and a popular topic of discussion in these analyses is hierarchies and interactions of musical tones in *Syrinx*.

Aims

The aim of this paper will be to show how existing analyses of *Syrinx* can be reinterpreted in terms of Larson's theory of musical forces. It is important to mention that it is not the aim or in the scope of this article to evaluate or criticise these analyses, but rather to show how these analyses can be understood differently and provide new insights when it is reinterpreted in terms of Larson's theory of musical forces.

Method

The vast majority of these cumbersome explanations can be explained simpler in terms of Steve Larson's (2012) theory of musical forces. I will use this theory as a method of analysis in this paper. Larson's theory of musical forces states that there are stable and unstable tones in tonal music. Unstable tones are then attracted toward more stable tones due to the interaction of musical forces. These musical forces are: **musical gravity**: the tendency of an unstable tone to descend to a more stable tone; **musical magnetism**: the tendency of an unstable tone to ascend or descend to the closest stable tone; and **musical inertia**: the tendency of a musical pattern to continue in the same fashion it started. I will present instances from existing analyses of Debussy's *Syrinx* as a case and an analysis of *Syrinx* in terms of musical forces as another case. The two cases will then be compared to show how the cumbersome explanations and arguments of the one case can be explained simpler by using the other case as an exemplar.

Results

In my analysis of Debussy's *Syrinx* I found that the theory of musical forces is a useful music analytical tool that can be employed in order to avoid cumbersome explanations in written music analyses. This analytical tool can also be employed in many other compositions or employed to simplify existing written analyses. Analyses in which the theory of musical forces were employed also open up alternative ways to interpret compositions and create opportunities for new topics of discussion.

Conclusions

The presentation of a musical analysis of Debussy's *Syrinx* can be simplified when musical forces are employed as an analytical tool to describe music phenomena.

Keywords

musical forces; analysis; *Syrinx*