

## REVIEW

*UNDERSTANDING POST-TONAL MUSIC*, BY MIGUEL A. ROIG-FRANCOLÍ. BOSTON: MCGRAW-HILL, 2008.

*ANTHOLOGY OF POST-TONAL MUSIC*, BY MIGUEL A. ROIG-FRANCOLÍ. BOSTON: MCGRAW-HILL, 2008.

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One of the pitfalls of writing book reviews is to argue that the book under consideration is not what you wanted it to be, or more embarrassing, not the one you would have written yourself. In the case of a textbook, an additional temptation to avoid is the impulse to filter everything through the reaction, “that’s not how I’d do it!” In contrast, it is far more beneficial to ask if a text could be a useful grounding for a course on its own terms, and, if one still has favorite ways of explaining things, to enquire if they can be enhanced by an approach that might differ from them significantly. After all, the goal is to educate, and a dialogue among approaches may foster a great deal of learning. Miguel Roig-Francolí, in his recent textbook *Understanding Post-Tonal Music*, offers ample opportunity for learning, along with room—and sometimes need—for dialogue.

To engage such dialogue it is necessary to consider some more general factors of the text, such as its goals, its stance towards the subject, how it seeks to unfold its lessons over the course of a semester, and at what level of discourse it addresses the reader (among other things). Roig-Francolí announces his goals with his title, and elaborates in the preface:

[T]he emphases of this book are on *understanding* and on *the music*. [. . .] Post-tonal music may be intimidating to some listeners and performers, and often one of the main

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\* I want to thank Marion Guck for her thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this review.

reasons is a lack of understanding of the compositional and musical processes involved in this music. (vii)

Roig-Francolí continues by emphasizing that his approach will start from the music itself, and let the coverage of theoretical precepts flow from the need for analysis. He understands his audience to be musicians, both performers and composers, as well as listeners, and his goal is to provide materials for undergraduate courses, as well as for general graduate courses. He clearly wants listening to be the starting point, and for the most part his analyses start from, and often finish with, a discussion of the music as heard.

Roig-Francolí sees his subject as a particular, if broadly varied, strain of music composed over the last hundred or so years. By electing to use the word “post-tonal” in his title, he is setting aside from his consideration a great deal of music of this period that is based on functional harmony, but he is clear to acknowledge that there is no bright line separating his area of interest from other music, and he is particularly clear to say his decisions are not to be taken as value judgments. Further, he is at pains to maintain a non-evaluative stance with regard to the different trends and interests within the volume’s arena of engagement. One of his central images for handling this issue is what he calls “the stylistic mosaic”:

We can think of the twentieth century, from the perspective of the history of musical styles and techniques, as a complex mosaic made up from many stylistic tiles. The tiles have coexisted in the historical mosaic, often with a large degree of independence among them, but also with numerous interconnections. [. . .] Composers, however, have been free to switch between tiles, or even to stand on more than one tile at a time. That is, the tiles of the mosaic are not exclusive; neither are they necessarily contradictory. (3)

This all-embracing approach allows the author to engage a wide range of music without revealing a critical position, and for the most part he is successful. To the degree he does not succeed, it is only to let slip his own enjoyment of the music, and his tastes would seem to be as

broad as his subject matter. This quality itself is a positive asset in teaching a course on music that may be known more for its reputation than as heard experience.

*Understanding Post-Tonal Music* is set up in a series of chapters that unfolds in roughly historical order. Some chapters lean more towards theoretical ends, while others tend more to stylistic features. No chapter seeks to offer a complete picture, leaving room for discussion and elaboration, and later chapters often contain reminders of issues left open in earlier passages. The author seems well aware that a course taught from this text will be incomplete on many fronts, and that students will need to understand the text as a series of doors opened for future exploration. To further this end, Roig-Francolí has provided both a strong bibliography and, more immediately, lists of related repertoire at the end of each chapter.

The book is accompanied by an anthology of more than forty pieces, some of which are discussed in the text, but some of which are presented as opportunities for further exploration by the students and the course instructor. Most of the major composers of the twentieth century are present, sometimes for multiple reasons, and if some of the selections are the old standbys, there are others that are less often taught. There is a nice balance between piano and orchestral scores, songs, chamber music, and choral works. One might question the inclusion of some of the more recent composers, but that aspect of such anthologies is always a crapshoot: it might be interesting to go through similar volumes from the past half-century to see who had seemed promising in earlier decades.

Roig-Francolí's mode of presentation is comfortably straightforward, in language that is approachable by students, and in terms that, as I have suggested, allow his own pleasure in this music to come forth. Each chapter is interspersed with notes on issues that might need special attention, and every now and then one finds a sidebar highlighted to consider some question

diverging from the central argument. This generosity of spirit extends to his willingness to mention other scholars in the body of the text, when what is presented is closely derived from their work.

Chapters are often set up with analytical vignettes to generate the need for a given theoretical development, and the main body of each chapter, with a couple of exceptions, is dedicated to more extended analyses. Chapters are complemented by suggestions for class discussion, reviews of terminology, further listening lists, and sets of exercises divided up into theory, analysis, and composition. There is a great deal here for any teacher to work with, and I find particularly welcome those exercises that invite students to compose using the ideas covered.

As I said at the outset, textbooks can provide an opportunity for dialogue with those who would seek to use them in the classroom. I would like to pursue four such conversations as a way of exploring how a teacher might want to supplement or even argue with the text, and illustrating how the text might be put into dialogue with itself.

I will start with that portion of the book that outlines what Roig-Francolí calls “nonfunctional pitch centrality.” He discusses the means by which such centrality may occur as follows:

These means are *contextual*, rather than systematic. That is, there are no such things as “systems” of nonfunctional pitch centrality, and to determine a center achieved by nonfunctional means we need to examine and interpret specific musical contexts. (5)

The beneficial take-away from this passage is the emphasis on contextuality, the importance of examining the particularities of a piece or a passage to determine how one’s sense of a pitch center might arise. He proceeds to guide the student through the examination of particular passages in the first two chapters of the volume, the first of which deals with modes derived from

the diatonic collection and pentatonic scales, and the second of which deals with interval cycles and symmetry. This latter chapter also includes discussions of the whole-tone, octatonic, and hexatonic scales. Both chapters are fleshed out with intuitively sensible introductions of the idea of sets and set-types (derived from motives), inversional symmetry (derived from examples in pitch space, and not called inversional as such at this point), and some analytical examples, both anecdotal and more extended.

There is much here to promote discussion and exploration on the part of the student, but where a teacher might enter into dialogue with the text would be in asking what distinguishes the materials as they are separated between the two chapters. One might start from the concept of symmetry, which is not engaged in the discussion of the diatonic modes. But the diatonic collection is itself symmetrical in just the way the author lays out in a clock-face diagram on p. 50, and notes in passing with regard to the Dorian mode on p. 58. And as he defines the diatonic collection as a seven-element segment of the circle of fifths, we can see how that ties in with his discussion of interval cycles, which is illustrated on clock-face diagrams on p. 39. So it would be easy for a teacher to lead students into the question of how diatonic and pentatonic scales warrant separate treatment from the other scales mentioned.

The answer, latent in the text, is not a question of symmetry, but of the different kinds of intervallic relations between the elements of the collections in question. As is well known, the diatonic and pentatonic collections exhibit unique intervallic relations between each of their elements and their remaining elements, while the other scales mentioned do not. Thus, there are effectively seven distinct and identifiable scale degrees in the diatonic collection and five in the pentatonic collection, while there are only two distinct types of scale degrees in the octatonic and hexatonic scales, and only one in the whole-tone scale. Using precisely the kinds of clock-face

diagrams found in the text, a teacher can lead students to a deeper understanding of what they may already find intuitively sensible in the apportioning of material in the text.

“But,” a sharper student may argue, “if pitch centricity is built into the fabric of the diatonic collection, why the emphasis on contextuality in the first chapter?” This is a reasonable question, but the teacher could point out that while the diatonic collection provides differentiations among its elements, it does not readily provide an interpretation of those differences. Thus, if a piece is based on a particular mode, the piece must provide the context in which we can identify that mode. Once that context is established, however, the resulting scale may itself provide a lot of direction to the ear and understanding. This is radically different from, say, the whole-tone scale, which can only offer pitch centricity through contextuality, and contains no inherent clues within itself towards that end.

Roig-Francolí provides an excellent opportunity in one of his analyses for a class to explore the difference of sound and experience between scales that are diatonically based and ones that contain fewer distinct scale degrees. Chapter 2 contains a discussion of Béla Bartók’s “Song of the Harvest,” no. 33 from the *Forty-Four Violin Duets*. The piece is in five short sections, alternating between two sets of motives presented in imitation. As Roig-Francolí points out, each violin uses only four notes, arranged in a scalar pattern, whole-step–half-step–whole-step. When these are combined at the tritone, as they are in the first five sections, they form various octatonic scales. In the last section, however, there is a very slight alteration: while the upper instrument maintains the same notes it had played in the previous section, the lower instrument transposes its four notes down a half step, creating a diatonic collection with its counterpart. To this teacher, that is the most striking moment in the piece, creating a radical change in effect from the strained, static standoff between each violin’s tetrachord in the pre-

ceding sections, to a quality of modal cooperation between them for the final phrase. That it is accomplished with such economy of means (the half-step shift of the lower violin) only adds to the pleasure of hearing this piece and teaching it.

Another conversational opportunity suggested by the text engages questions of form. In this case the conversation can be instigated between different parts of the book. One of the challenges of teaching post-tonal music is that we must juggle several topics simultaneously. Roig-Francolí is well aware of the problem, and addresses some of these questions on the fly, while not surprisingly spending most of his attention on building ways to think about the range of new issues concerning pitch with which we are confronted by this repertoire.

In one of the highlighted asides in the body of the text, Roig-Francolí erects a kind of scaffolding regarding form and formal growth that allows him to work through some of the more extended analyses he offers. He opens this discussion as follows:

Musical form is a dynamic concept, inasmuch as form unfolds aurally in time, and we always hear the musical present of a composition in relation to what we already heard and what we will still hear. [ . . . ] There are many approaches to formal growth, and they all involve some basic principles. Thus, themes and ideas are first exposed, then they may be manipulated in some ways, and then they may be restated literally or in a varied form. Formal processes involve the concepts of exposition, repetition in a literal or a varied way, possible contrast and possible return. (24)

There is, of course, much music that does this sort of thing, both within the repertoire of the text, and earlier. But one of the big developments in the music of the past century is the explosion of many of the assumptions about musical time and musical form found in earlier work. This is not only true for the likes of Cage and Stockhausen, but is very much part of the fascination one may have with the work of Debussy, Stravinsky, and Messiaen. Fortunately, Roig-Francolí provides a number of opportunities for a teacher using his text to dismantle these assumptions, taking down the author's scaffold to reveal some interestingly different takes on works under examination.

The analysis that directly follows the discussion of formal processes quoted above involves the opening of the *Rite of Spring*, and Roig-Francolí makes a point of drawing the student's attention to the way the music would seem to undercut more traditional ways of laying out a musical story.

Other pieces throughout the text offer similar opportunities for the teacher to draw out the threads of non-linear musical unfolding that, in the mosaic of twentieth-century music, coexist alongside those works that spin out in more familiar ways. In his chapter on neoclassicism, Roig-Francolí juxtaposes analyses of the "Agnus Dei" from Stravinsky's *Mass* with an interlude from Hindemith's *Ludus Tonalis*. These two composers seem to be looking in opposite directions when it comes to issues of form and continuity, and while they may be joined under the rubric of stylistic reference, their differences can be used to spark some valuable insights in a class.

Much later in the text, Roig-Francolí uses music of Stockhausen to motivate a discussion of non-linearity, and Jonathan Kramer's concept of vertical time. Someone using the text over a semester might want to either introduce some of these concepts earlier, or remind the students of the works they had explored at the beginning of the course when they reach this point in the book.

One more issue of form and time in much of the post-tonal music present in the text—more a latent holographic image than something explicitly outlined—concerns the ways so many different strands of this repertoire can subvert a sense of *now*, either in a composition as a whole, or from moment to moment. For example, one might want a group of students dealing with Debussy's "La cathédrale engloutie" to use the author's remarks about the ambiguities of its form (14-15) as a springboard for interrogating the assumption that the piece unfolds in a linear manner. Do we arrive at the big passage in C, or can we use other words to describe our sense of the moment? Is it something that comes into focus, or is revealed? If one accepts a kind of

archaic feel to the passage, could we imagine the music as something already existing prior to the piece that we are encountering, overhearing, emerging into the “now” of the piece? Could the use of modality in the piece be simply a framework for its pitch relations, or could it also contribute to the undercutting of the present in passages of the work?

The chapters on neoclassicism and quotation engage considerations of creative dialogue with the past, which open up issues of temporality, but we may take that further by using Roig-Francolí’s demonstration of Charles Ives’s patchwork technique in the song “The Things Our Fathers Loved” as a place to think about continuity arising from free association. If all the preexisting songs quoted in the music are freely floating in the mind of the singer/composer/protagonist, emerging in passing reference to the words, could one imagine another pathway through those quotations? Might it be possible to imagine the written song as simply one possible realization of the associational space it inhabits?

Roig-Francolí lets us know from the outset that he wants his text to be driven by encounters with the music, and much of his analytical work derives from hearings of pieces. As I noted earlier, he wants his theoretical tools to arise from a need to explain what is being heard, which leads him to pose and forestall a question that so many students are led to ask by such an approach. In a highlighted aside, headed “An Important Question: What Were the Composer’s Intentions?” (125), he faces head-on the issue of whether or not it is worth considering what a composer was aware of when making a piece, giving room for a quick sketch of the intentional fallacy, but also offering counterarguments. He outlines the position taken in the book, which is to try to avoid attributing intention inappropriately. Interestingly, he also admits for consideration approaches that take into account what composers may have written about their own music, and he contrasts the two analytical approaches as *interpretive* and *generative*. He qualifies the

use of the latter as follows:

Even when we know a composer's intentions to some extent, however, interpretive analysis can be very valuable: it can provide a different analysis of the piece to balance the composer's own, it can uncover aspects not discussed nor revealed by the composer, or it can also uncover things that not even the composer is aware of! (125)

It is good to see Roig-Francolí making this point; too often composers are given the last word about their own music. I would make two further points to underscore what the author is saying. First, composers can be unreliable narrators of their works, for any number of reasons ranging from simply forgetting what they were doing to willful misdirection. What we might find most interesting about a piece of music might be completely taken for granted by its creator, and what a composer might choose to share needs to be read with the skepticism one brings to any public-relations text. Second, no matter how much we might know with regard to a generative analysis, to use his distinction, an interpretive analysis is really a different thing entirely. The former can inform the latter, but the latter is ultimately an account of our own encounter with a piece of music. That is why Roig-Francolí's approach to his chosen repertoire through listening is so crucial, and needs to be maintained even in those places in the text where he shifts to a more generative approach. One frustration I encountered in this regard was in his discussion of Milton Babbitt's music, not so much from the discussion, but from his decision to use as his primary example a work, *Composition for Twelve Instruments*, for which there is no readily available recording.

My last dialogue with *Understanding Post-Tonal Music*, alas, will be a difficult conversation, as it entails an issue that can lead students into difficulties and confusion. And what is particularly distressing is that it arises from one of the more attractive aspects of the text, which is Roig-Francolí's down-to-earth writing style. While an informal tone can be welcoming and

instructive to read, it must be handled carefully lest it lead to elisions that obscure distinctions that are crucial to our understanding of some of the more technical ideas necessary for the author's arguments. A teacher using this text will need to be alert to potential confusions that may arise.

Take, for example, a helpful note on pitch-class labeling (38). After affirming to the student that pitches are sounds, and that various kinds of labeling are conventions that have various uses, he reiterates his point as follows: "When we use numbers to refer to pitches or pitch classes, keep in mind that the number is just a way of naming a pitch class and that what we are naming with a number, the same as with a letter, is still a musical sound (a note)." (38). This is a good reminder, but within this sentence is a potential pitfall regarding the difference between a pitch (e.g., a particular frequency, a specific key on the piano) and a pitch *class*, which is an abstract category based on equivalency under octave transposition. It isn't the central concern of the sentence, but a distinction that draws a line between two important concepts is needed.

Confusions like this tend to show up in the discussions of more abstract issues in the text. We have already hinted at this earlier, in contemplating the difference between scales based on diatonic collections and what Roig-Francolí refers to as symmetrical scales such as the whole-tone and octatonic scales (51). It is not hard to know what he is getting at, but, strictly speaking, the diatonic collection is inversionally symmetrical, calling into question the use of the term in making the distinction between it and, say, the whole-tone scale.

The chapters on set theory and on twelve-tone theory are in large part correct in what they impart, but they suffer from these sorts of confusions, even to the point of presenting statements that simply turn out not to be the case. For example, the claim, "Any row whose AIS [adjacency interval series] contains two instances of each interval class except for ic 6 (for which

there will be a single instance) can be written as an all-interval row” (165), is demonstrably false: the row <01426e58973t> contains two instances of each of the first five interval classes plus a tritone, but because the pairs of instances of ic 1, ic 2, and ic 3 are all ordered the same way (+1, -2, +3), it can’t be considered an all-interval row in the traditional sense. The condition as stated is certainly necessarily the case for all-interval rows, but it is not sufficient.

Part of what leads to this sort of problem entails the issues of abstraction surrounding ideas of pitch and pitch class, interval and interval class, and the notion of order. Let me lead into this aspect of our conversation by quoting another portion of the text:

Intervals in the realm of pitch classes (which we will refer to as **pitch-class space**) are of a different nature than intervals in the realm of pitches (or **pitch space**). In pitch space, intervals are directional (ascending or descending), and an interval and its inversion are not the same. [. . .]

In pitch-class space, on the other hand, intervals may still be ordered (if we take into account the distance between two pitch classes considered in a particular order) or unordered (if we take into account the shortest distance between two pitch-classes), but in all cases they will be *mod 12*. . . . (71–72)

One may tease out a reasonable comparison between intervals in pitch space and pitch-class space from the foregoing, but the passage depends on certain kinds of assumptions (“intervals are directional” vs. “intervals may still be ordered”) that need clarification. One approach to clarifying this would be to embrace abstraction in the following manner (and here I am willfully stepping into one of the pitfalls I invoked at the outset): by defining order as an abstract concept and noting that any linearly scaled musical dimension (time, frequency, dynamic level) can manifest order, we can clarify the differences among the abstract concepts of unordered pitch-classes (related by interval classes) and ordered pitch-classes without regard to any particular musical realization, as well as various kinds of manifestations thereof. Thus, pitches unfolding in time can be thought of as pitch classes both ordered in register (e.g., from low to high) and

ordered in time (from now to then). Any wariness about undue abstraction can be overcome by pointing out that students are already familiar with the concept of at least partial order of pitch classes in register from their earlier work in figured bass, and that the idea of a sequence of tonal functions (I–IV–V–I) adumbrates the idea of pitch class ordered in time.

Still other stumbling blocks in Roig-Francolí's discussion of set theory and twelve-tone theory arise from his understandable desire to connect with existing conventions in the literature. One such convention invoked is the use of the numbers from 1 through 11 to indicate directed interval classes in an ordering of pitch classes. This is used in what is a fairly laborious discussion of what happens under the interval preserving operations of the twelve-tone system. I might suggest, however (and here I step deeper into my earlier pitfall), that using plus and minus signs with interval class numbers can be more immediately revealing regarding what happens under the standard operations. Consider the following, based on an ordered interval-class string of minimal length:

+ X – Y	– Y + X
– X + Y	+ Y – X

Moving vertically in the box reverses the signs without changing the interval classes, while moving from one side to the other reverses the order of interval classes without changing their signs. Moving diagonally accomplishes both changes. We can translate this into the standard operations as follows: a vertical change is equivalent to inversion (I); a horizontal change is equivalent to retrograde plus inversion (RI); the retrograde of a string of pitch classes yields the diagonal moves, and transposition effects no change. This can be a helpful way of showing students that RI may be construed as a simpler transformation on an ordered string of pitch

classes than R, a point made repeatedly in Babbitt's writings, and musically in Schoenberg's compositions.

The foregoing is not offered to supplant the convention of using numbers from 1 to 11 to designate directed interval classes; after all, the fact that one can read the diagonals of a twelve-tone matrix as the directed intervals between the various equal spacings of pitch-classes in a row depends on this convention. But this particular observation is not made explicitly in the text.

One more argument I might have with the text is related to the preceding discussion of convention, and it involves Roig-Francolí's decision to use a labeling system for twelve-tone rows that, while regularly occurring in the literature, tends to impose certain assumptions of hierarchy among rows related by the interval-preserving operations. Roig-Francolí instructs students to build a matrix from a row by first transposing that row to begin on pc 0, and this is a good thing, because this way of formatting the matrix will indeed allow its diagonals parallel to the diagonal of 0s to be read as suggested above. But the problem arises in naming the elements of the matrix, or what I would call the members of the row class. The horizontals, read from left to right, are labeled as P followed by the pc number of their first element. The verticals, read from top to bottom are labeled I, followed by their the pc number of their first element; reading the horizontals and verticals in the opposite directions yield R and RI labels, with pc numbers taken from the last element of each row.

As I mentioned, this is a perfectly familiar labeling system, but it imposes at least subliminally a sense of primacy (i.e., P) to one fourth of the matrix, with the remainder labeled with respect to that orientation. A crucial point for students is to understand that abstractly, *no* member of a row class may be differentiated from any other: the rows, as elements of a row-class, are as indistinguishable as the scale degrees of the whole-tone scale, and it is only through

context, actual compositional realization, that any row (or complex of rows) might become centrally referential in a twelve-tone composition. To this end, a number of writers have adopted a different convention, which gives individual rows under consideration in an analysis neutral labels (e.g., X, Y, Sam, Charlie) but develops connections among them in the passage in question based on those operations that transform one into another. Decisions about the ways to express those operations are made contextually, based on the analytical point one might choose to illuminate. Those operations match the other convention's labels *if* we are always starting from P0, but it is very handy to be able to note that various pairs of rows in a composition might all be related by the same operation, no matter where one starts. The usefulness of this approach can be drawn out of Roig-Francolí's own analysis of the second movement of Webern's *Piano Variations*, Op. 27, and indeed the crucial analytical points are made in the text, but using this other convention could help streamline the process, while avoiding unwanted implied analytical artifacts.

Despite these disagreements, and occasional moments of unsolicited advice on my part, I have found my conversation with Miguel Roig-Francolí's text spirited and enjoyable, and I find much within *Understanding Post-Tonal Music* and the related anthology that can be effectively used in teaching a course in post-tonal music. Any textbook requires an interlocutor, and anyone who has taught a given subject for a length of time will have developed his or her own ways of telling the story. But students benefit from encountering multiple approaches, and often the disagreements between a teacher and a text will themselves help students to wrestle new insights from the material. Roig-Francolí provides plenty of opportunity for such scuffling, but he does so in ways that can ensure lots of learning in the process.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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