

PODCAST #15: CHORDS AS THE WHOLE BALL OF WAX

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Hello. This is the fifteenth in a series of podcasts dealing with different elements of music composition and the third and final podcast about various aspects of Western functional harmony. Today's title, chords as the whole ball of wax, is, I admit, both a bit melodramatic and a bit misleading, but I wanted to highlight a facet of the writing of many inexperienced composers, namely, their reliance on a couple or even several chords as the basis of their composition. I often point out that there's next to no melodic content in their music and that what they have can function as background material but isn't interesting or varied enough to be considered the main idea. Such a statement naturally raises the more general question about whether it is possible to create music in which the main idea is a series of chords with next to nothing which resembles a tune. The answer, I'm happy to say, is yes, it certainly IS possible, but like anything else in composing, it must be done thoughtfully. That is, just taking two chords and repeating them over and over doesn't cut it. What does work? Well, this certainly does (PLAY BAR 1 OF CHOPIN OPENING - 7"), as does this (PLAY OPENING TWO BARS OF HANDEL, beginning-15 ") and, in a very different way, so does this (PLAY PIANO THING FIRST VERSION). Why are these examples effective? Let's try to find out.

The first excerpt I played was the opening bar of the Prelude in C minor, Opus 28, #20 by the Polish 19th century composer Frederic Chopin. Although he loved his homeland, Chopin spent his short adult life in France so many consider him a French composer. In a lot of ways his is the prototypical story of a Romantic-era artist. Although he was well known among composers and other literati in Paris, he made little money from composing and died of tuberculosis before the age of 40. However, as a pianist he was superb, and it is his works for piano, mainly solo piano, for which he is chiefly remembered. His method of composing was to improvise a piece, then to continue playing and refining it until he felt it was finished, at which point he wrote it down. A great admirer of Bach, he followed Bach's systematic approach to using different keys and exploring different compositional elements in individual pieces. However, instead of Bach's dance suites Chopin wrote ballades or individual waltzes or polonaises. Instead of preludes and fugues as in Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, Chopin wrote a series of preludes and also several different series of etudes or studies. And of course Chopin used the harmonic and melodic language of his own time as well as the larger modern piano which had developed since Bach's day.

I just said that Chopin wrote a series of preludes for Opus 28. In fact he wrote 24 of them, arranged a la Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier in all major and relative minor keys so that our example, #20 in C minor, follows #19 in E flat major. Because he wrote so many preludes in the series Chopin could concentrate on exploring a single technique or mood in each one and that is certainly the case in #20. This piece is a great example of musical economy. It's only 13 bars long in a very slow 4/4 and really only uses about half the piano, almost exclusively the lower register of the instrument. It's slow, has very little purely melodic content and uses almost all homorhythmic sounds, that is, chords where just about all the notes are played simultaneously. How and why can such a piece be effective? Let's examine it to try and find out.

When we look at the first two bars, which sound like this when played by pianist Maurizio Pollini (PLAY BARS 1-2 OPENING - 14") we can hear just how disingenuous the title of this podcast is. In fact, we DO hear the uppermost notes as melodic and these contain not only some rhythmic variation from the straight quarter notes of the rest of the lower parts of the chords, but also some dissonances. These occur on the third beat of each bar so they are emphasized before they resolve. Let's listen again. (PLAY OPENING TWO BARS AGAIN) Because Chopin has marked the opening

fortissimo the music has a massive sound which helps the notes continue from chord to chord, minimizing the inevitable decay of piano sonorities. The composer uses one of the primary devices of this piece, the sequence, in moving us from C minor in bar one down a third to A flat major in bar two. He then uses a modified sequence over the next two bars to arrive at a half cadence on G at the end of the fourth bar. Listen to how he uses identical rhythmic content in each bar but a slightly different harmonic and melodic sequence in every measure to move the piece forward. (PLAY BARS 1-4 OPENING - 28“)

Following bar four, rather than repeating the opening, Chopin makes some radical changes. After a crescendo in bars three and four he lowers the dynamic level suddenly in bar five to piano and in that bar also moves the rudimentary melodic idea from the uppermost part to the middle of the right hand to change our focus to the left hand. He then uses a bar to transition back so that in bar eight he can make a modified version of bar two that somehow smoothly cadences to C minor. Let's listen to bars 5-8 (PLAY BARS 5-8, 29” - 58“). In bars 9-12 Chopin repeats five through eight but this time in a hushed pianissimo with a crescendo in eleven and twelve to end with a simple accented C minor chord in the final bar. (PLAY BARS 9-13, 59”- END) How does this work so well, when the composer uses the same rhythmic pattern in each bar, uses so little of the piano and has so little really melodic content? One big reason is he doesn't try to do too much, but concentrates on a single small idea. Remember that this is only one of a set of 24 preludes, giving the composer the opportunity to try out limited ideas in each one and come up with a set which overall encompasses great variety and richness. Speaking of richness, Chopin also understands his chosen medium and uses the lower part of the instrument where his massive chords will sound to greatest effect. Note that throughout he uses only octaves in the left hand to reinforce the sound. Finally, Chopin uses dynamics and dynamic changes to give drama and direction to this little piece. And all that in 13 bars.

Our second example is the opening of the choral anthem “Zadok the Priest” (or as we singers used to call it, “Zadok the Beast”) by George Frideric Handel. Handel originally came from Hanover in Germany and when he arrived in England after studying in Italy he lucked out. Not only did he find quick favor with the monarch, Queen Anne, but upon her death another Hanoverian named George became king. Our George quickly rose to become court composer and his well-known “Water Music” and “Music for the Royal Fireworks” were both ceremonial pieces written for the king. When George I died his son George II succeeded him in 1727 (actually the line went on for two more kings named George; I guess they decided they had a good idea when naming the first-born son). In any case, Handel wrote four coronation anthems for the occasion of which “Zadok” is the most famous at least in part because it has been performed at every coronation since. This is a longer piece than the Chopin and includes three choruses: “Zadok the Priest”, “And All the People Rejoiced” and “God Save the King”, all sung without pause to give three different moods within one anthem. We'll concentrate on the first chorus. Although we may have made fun of the title, all of us who sang the piece found it exciting and very dramatic. And yet this piece, if possible, contains even less melodic content than the Chopin. In a slow 4/4 the upper parts of the orchestra play arpeggiated chords for all 30 bars of the piece while the lower parts play steady eighth notes. Let's listen to the opening eight bars to get a feel for it. (PLAY FIRST 8 BARS OPENING- 38“) The chorus enters at the 23rd bar and sings long notes with only one chord per bar except in bar 38 where they sing two chords. Sound boring, right? And yet Handel was a dramatic master and knew that with a slow coronation procession in the long aisle of Westminster Abbey he needed something continuous and stately that slowly built to a climax at which point the chorus entered like the sun breaking forth, just as the soon-to-be-crowned king began to ascend the steps to the coronation throne. So he gave the orchestra a kaleidoscope of changing chords which provided variety with simplicity and continuity. He knew there would be plenty of melodic fireworks in the succeeding choruses. For now, great dramatist that he was, he was content to set the stage and build tension and excitement. Let's pick up where we left off at bar nine and note how in the final seven bars before the chorus enters Handel builds tension by varying the 16th note arpeggios every

two beats (except in bar 18) rather than every bar. Here's the final two-thirds of Handel's coronation anthem chorus "Zadok the Priest", as performed by the choir of King's College, Cambridge and the English Chamber Orchestra, all under the direction of Sir David Willcocks. (PLAY BARS 9-30, 38"-2'00")

And now for something completely different, as Monty Python used to say. Our final example is different in a couple of ways. First, it is a student work, the first I've used since Podcast #8, so we can watch as the composition develops. Second, this is the only piece I have used so far in these podcasts which isn't tonal in the usual sense. That is, it doesn't use a progression of triads as its harmonic basis and also doesn't center around a specific pitch as the tonic or home note. And yet I think it is one of the most successful and powerful works from a student I've ever heard and I feel it is equal to many pieces written by professional composers. Its creator is a 16-year old named Tim and it is a work for solo piano eventually called "Here and Now", but originally it was simply called "Piano Thing". The first sketch is only four bars long, but right away we can tell we're in a new world. (PLAY PIANO THING) Without looking at a score it's difficult if not impossible to tell what meter we're in because of the irregular lengths of the held chords and the syncopation. (As it turns out, we're in 4/4.) Tim starts with arpeggiated pitches alternating with block chords and the only single-note material that sounds melodic at all is a little line of three eighth notes at the end of the second bar. However, instead of the arpeggiated pitches and block chords consisting of triads we hear chords comprised of stacked fifths and fourths which give the music both a wonderful spaciousness and a sense of mystery. Let's listen again because this opening contains the basic material we'll hear throughout the piece. (PLAY PIANO THING AGAIN)

By the time we get to the second version of the piece, Tim has made significant progress. Not only has he expanded his opening section to 15 bars, he has added the beginning of a section with greater activity which uses the original left-hand rhythm modified, a very simple uppermost part and a middle voice of 16th note triplets which makes the music sound vaguely triadic. Here are the last 9 bars (PLAY PIANO THING2 23"-END). Notice how Tim has changed the mood through the greater activity? And yet the music still can't be considered very melodic in the usual sense.

By the next revision Tim has greatly expanded the middle section, added a return to the opening idea and has quadrupled the length of the piece to over four minutes. But it's what happens AFTER the return to the opening, a new final section, to which I wish to draw your attention. Tim does something pretty radical. He makes an octave scale transition with a ritard and then he brings in something which in some ways is reminiscent of the Chopin prelude I played earlier except that it's longer and more contemporary sounding with its open chords mixed with triads following a very simple progression which Tim manages to vary during the course of its 2 ½ minutes. Let's listen to the transition and the then the opening of the final section (PLAY PIANO THING FINAL REVISIONS 2'08"-2'57"). When I first heard this I thought "Can this work? It's so simple and the changes are so subtle." Not only that, but the final section takes up over half the total length of the piece. But even that first time, the way Tim had arranged the chords and the progression, something about his sureness in relying on such simplicity and repetition and his confidence in his material, had my full attention. I still can't listen to this piece without being very moved by it all, especially the final section. Let's listen to the ending, as performed by the composer on piano. (PLAY HERE AND NOW 3'51"- END)

So why are these and other pieces which rely so much on harmony successful? For one thing, they use interesting chords and progressions. For another, they use interesting rhythms and rhythmic patterns. And finally, they don't try to do too much. (By the way, one other fine example of this type of piece which is well worth listening to is the second movement of Beethoven's 7th Symphony.) If you want to make chords and only chords the basis of your piece, first make sure they are compelling enough to sustain listeners' interest, then give them a strong rhythmical element (even if it's simple, make sure there's rhythmic interest), and finally limit the scope and length of the work and your music can be successful too. Next time we'll move in the opposite direction to discuss counterpoint. Please

join me.