

# *O Venezia: Texts, Rhetoric and Compositional Process in a Post-tonal Tonal Context*

Graham Hair

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Example 1 is a characteristic example of a particular genre of musical composition, the piano étude. It was in fact composed by the greatest of all pianists and one of the greatest composers of music for the piano, Ferenc (Franz) Liszt. It is the sixth of twelve ‘exercises’ comprising Liszt’s early work *Étude en douze exercices*, a composition he revised and rewrote twice: first as one of his *Douze Grandes Études* and later as one of the most pianistically challenging of all sets of études, the *Études d’execution transcendante*. One of the characteristic features of this, as of many études, is that the shape and rhythm of the figure which appears at the beginning (in this case, in the first half of bar 1) is carried through the whole étude with a high degree of consistency. Étude figuration typically embodies some particular performance difficulty, in this case rhythmic co-ordination between the two hands at a very fast tempo. Although the figure is varied a little in a few places in Liszt’s piece, it always remains quite recognisable. In other words, the étude is *mono-motivic*. In the two later recomposed versions, Liszt had some second thoughts about the mono-motivic nature of the étude, and modified it to some extent, especially in the example from the *Etudes d’execution transcendante*. But beneath the more varied surface of these later masterworks, one can still sense the archetypal nature of the mono-motivic étude genre.

Example 2 could hardly provide a more startling contrast. It is the first few bars of the *Introduction* section of Milton Babbitt’s *Woodwind Quartet* of 1954. Nevertheless, one could look at this passage in something like the same way. The work from which it comes is a twelve-tone composition, composed, like all of Babbitt’s compositions, with a thorough-going compositional logic which relates all the facets of the quartet to a single basic underlying ‘idea’. An exegesis of this compositional process would be beyond the scope of this article, but in terms of shape, if not rhythm, one could perhaps also describe this passage as mono-motivic, for just as the *motif* in the first half of bar 1 of Liszt’s étude actually consists of a combination of components (the dotted rhythm in the left hand and the three-semiquaver pattern on the last three quarters of the beat, with its melodic rise and fall, in the right hand), so Babbitt’s *motif* is made up of a combination of components. I have divided the passage into four chunks, as indicated by the wavy lines drawn across the score. Each chunk presents an ‘aggregate’, of course, but setting aside for a moment consideration of the pitchclasses, consider purely the *shapes* which are presented in each chunk.

There are four shapes in fact. To summarise what happens in schematic form:

flute shape = rise > fall; oboe shape = fall > fall; clarinet shape = rise > rise; bassoon shape = fall > rise.

In the second, third and fourth chunks these same four shapes are combined in different permutations:

- (ii) flute shape = fall > rise; oboe shape = rise > rise; clarinet shape = fall > fall; bassoon shape = rise > fall
- (iii) flute shape = fall > fall; oboe shape = rise > fall; clarinet shape = fall > rise; bassoon shape = rise > rise
- (iv) flute shape = rise > rise; oboe shape = fall > rise; clarinet shape = rise > fall; bassoon shape = fall > fall

16

Molto agitato ♩=138

\*) Die unregelmäßige, vereinfachende Schreibweise der Quellen wurde in beiden Händen beibehalten. Die punktierten Achtel der rechten Hand sind nicht mit separaten Notenköpfen geschrieben und die jeweils beim 4. und 8. Sechzehntel gesetzten Viertel der linken Hand nicht nach Taktstrichen gegliedert worden, weil die korrekte Notierung das Notenbild unleserlich gemacht hätte.

\*) The irregular, simplified notation of the sources has been retained in both hands; the dotted quavers in the right hand have not been written with separate note heads and the crotchets placed above the 4th and 8th semiquavers in the left hand have not been notated according to the bar-lines since a regular notation would have rendered the music illegible.

Z. 12 903

Example 1 (beginning). Liszt: *Etudes en douze exercices no 6* (bars 1–37)

The image displays a musical score for Liszt's *Etudes en douze exercices no 6*, specifically bars 38 through 74. The score is presented in six systems, each consisting of a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The score includes various dynamic markings such as *f*, *ff*, *fff*, *p*, *pp*, *sf*, *sf rinf.*, *cresc.*, and *ff*. There are also performance instructions like *8* (octave) and *3* (triplets). The score concludes with a double bar line and a fermata. The page number 17 is visible in the top right corner of the first system.

Z. 12 903

Example 1 (conclusion). Liszt: *Etudes en douze exercices no 6* (bars 38–74)

It will be clear from this account that each instrument outlines all four components of the shape-combination in some permutation or other.

Example 2: Milton Babbitt: *Woodwind Quartet* (bars 4–10)

before moving on to discuss the passage from Babbitt in more detail, let me to return to Liszt and the *Étude en douze exercices*. More pertinent to what I want to say is not the archetypal mono-motivic no 6, but the preceding étude in the series. No 5 is described by Jim Samson in the following terms:

The fifth of the exercises is one of the most ambitious of the cycle, and also one of the most difficult to categorise in terms of conventional formal archetypes.....The true dynamic of the piece lies in an interruptive quality, where the moton-motivic character of the étude genre is not so much balanced, as interrupted by contrasted elements. (Samson 2003: 59)

Samson goes on to describe the elements of the étude in the following terms:

- (i) x: the principal theme;
- (ii) a: strident right-hand chords over left-hand scales to which the theme is a contrasted echo;
- (iii) b: conventional right-hand scalar figuration in modulating sequence;
- (iv) c: a counter-theme with alberti-like accompaniment of V of V;
- (v) d: a scalar figure in octaves with the character of closural gesture, but here functioning (like a) as a foil to x

12

Moderato  $\text{♩} = 66$

5. *sf* *p molto legato* *sf* *p*

4 *sf* *p*

7 8 *sf*

10

13 8 *cresc.* *f* *dim.*

16 8 *ff* *p leggiero*

Z. 12 903

Example 3 (beginning): Liszt: *Étude en douze exercices* (bars 1-18)

13

19 *f* *p leggiero* *f*

22 *P* *8*

25 *espressivo* *P*

28 *ff*

31 *tr* *f* *ff*

34 *P* *cresc.* *f*

37 *8* *ff* *1 2 3 4 5 4 3 2 1 4 3*

Z. 12 903

Detailed description: This is a page of a musical score for Liszt's 'Étude en douze exercices', specifically bars 19 through 39. The score is written for piano and consists of seven systems of two staves each (treble and bass clef). The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The time signature is 2/4. The piece begins at bar 19 with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The first system includes the instruction *p leggiero* (piano, light) and returns to *f*. The second system starts at bar 22 with a piano (*P*) dynamic and features an 8-measure phrase indicated by a dashed line. The third system, starting at bar 25, includes the instruction *espressivo* and a piano (*P*) dynamic. The fourth system, starting at bar 28, features a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic. The fifth system, starting at bar 31, includes a trill (*tr*) and fortissimo (*f*) and fortissimo (*ff*) dynamics. The sixth system, starting at bar 34, includes piano (*P*), crescendo (*cresc.*), and forte (*f*) dynamics. The seventh system, starting at bar 37, includes fortissimo (*ff*) and features a complex fingering sequence: *1 2 3 4 5 4 3 2 1 4 3*. The score concludes with the number *Z. 12 903*.

Example 3 (continuation): Liszt: *Étude en douze exercices* (bars 19-39)

The image displays a musical score for Liszt's *Étude en douze exercices*, specifically bars 40 through 60. The score is written for piano and is organized into seven systems, each with a treble and bass clef. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The time signature is 3/4. The score includes various dynamic markings such as *md.*, *p*, *sf*, *m.s.*, *f*, *dim.*, *cresc.*, *poco a poco*, *ff*, and *ben marcato*. There are also performance instructions like *Red.* and *sf*. The score is marked with asterisks (\*) and contains several slurs and accents. The page number 'Z. 12 903' is located at the bottom center of the score.

Example 3 (continuation): Liszt: *Étude en douze exercices* (bars 40-60)

61 15

64

67

70

73

76

79

Z. 12 903

ben marcato il basso

Example 3 (conclusion): Liszt: *Étude en douze exercices* (bars 61-83)

(vi) e: conventional closural gesture leading to a.  
These can all be identified in Example 3 above.

It may seem odd to begin a discussion of ‘texts, rhetoric and compositional process in a post-tonal tonal context’ (especially in relation to a particular vocal composition, namely my *O Venezia* for four women’s voices and harp), with a discussion of two entirely instrumental compositions by Liszt and Babbitt. However there is a reason for this, which the two Liszt études embody. Essentially, the rhetorical character of the étude genre (exemplified to an archetypal degree in Exercise no 6) is based around a well-defined procedure, the spinning-out of a single figure which is grounded in the very nature of the instrument’s technique, through a network of harmonic progressions. This well-defined procedure is subject to somewhat ‘transgressive’ revision in Exercise no 5. This is, in essence, the approach to vocal genre which I take in *O Venezia*.

This approach involves articulating a vocabulary of rhetorical gestures, which are then contextualised by compositional processes in new and different ways, particularly ways which are suggested by genres and compositional processes not linearly connected with the rhetorical vocabulary involved in a direct historical fashion. However, the interruptive approach to which Samson refers is only one of many means by which this ‘transgressive’ revision is played out. Techniques of elaboration, complementation, contrapuntal combination (and others), in addition to interruption, may be involved. In many cases, these will be suggested by the texts, and not only the texts of the passage in question. Since the history of vocal genres covers many centuries, even millennia, ‘re-contextualisation’ of vocal genres often involves considering this history as a whole and imagining how particular genres might evolve in the postmodern era.

By the early twenty-first century, the term postmodern has come to take on many different meanings. It is not my purpose to canvass all of these here. But I will make one or two points with regard to tonality, since my title refers specifically to ‘post-tonal tonality’. This is why I have introduced the excerpt from the Babbitt *Woodwind Quartet*. There are many forms of postmodernism in which tonality has played a part, but to consider them as ‘post-tonal tonality’ should surely require that they carry within themselves some sense of having engaged with atonality and produced a form of tonality which bears the marks of that engagement in its approach. Otherwise, we might do better to describe such approaches as ‘revivalism’: reactionary throwbacks to the practices of former times.

So let me now refer to the Babbitt *Woodwind Quartet* in this connection. Although I have read its rhetorical approach in terms of mono-motivicism and compared it to the mono-motivicity of the technique of étude composition, the form which mono-motivicism takes in this work has some very particular characteristics. For a start the four shape-components which appear in Example 2 exhaust the repertoire of shapes which are available to a three-note pattern, as do each of the four ‘chunks’ which are marked out by the wavy lines I have drawn in on the music. Thus one may reasonably speak of ‘completing the set’ of such patterns four times. Moreover each of the four lines of counterpoint in Example 2 do likewise. So the set of possible shapes is completed both vertically and horizontally.

To this point I have deliberately mentioned the twelve-tone aspects of this passage only in passing, but I will mention them briefly now. Each of the four chunks, and each of the four lines of counterpoint articulate the complete set of twelve pitch-classes, ie they ‘complete the aggregate’. Actually there is an additional form of set-completion as well: each of the four lines completes the four varieties of a particular trichord (S, I, R and IR) to form a ‘derived set’. To summarise in tabular form, noting the intervalclasses of the four lines in trichordal groups, and bracketing the inter-trichord intervalclasses:

- (i) flute = 11–4 (3) 4–11 (6) 1–9 (11) 8–1
- (ii) oboe = 11–9 (11) 9–11 (6) 1–3 (3) 3–1
- (iii) clarinet = 3–10 (9) 10–3 (6) 9–2 (3) 2–9
- (iv) bassoon = 2–1 (1) 1–2 (6) 10–11 (11) 11–10

It's not my purpose to consider here the twelve-tone structure of this passage in detail, let alone the way in which that notion of the 'thorough-going compositional logic which relates all the facets of the quartet to a single basic underlying 'idea' ' encompasses the structure of this passage in the context of the whole of the quartet. Suffice it to note that the four aggregates which are presented in this passage can be further subdivided into what I will call 'sub-aggregate' units. To summarise what happens in schematic form:

- (i) Aggregate 1 = 3 notes (clarinet) followed by 9 notes (flute + oboe + bassoon)
- (ii) Aggregate 2 = 6 notes (flute + clarinet) followed by 6 notes (oboe + bassoon)
- (iii) Aggregate 3 = 3 notes (flute) followed by 9 notes (oboe + clarinet + bassoon)
- (iv) Aggregate 4 = 6 notes (flute + oboe) followed by 6 notes (clarinet + bassoon)

Example 4 summarises the characteristics of this passage as *harmonic* collections in terms of these groups of 3, 6 and 9 notes:

Example 4: Babbitt, *Woodwind Quartet*, bars 4-10, *harmonic* structures

Note that the twelve pitchclasses of each aggregate are stated *once and once only*, and (concomitantly) the sub-aggregates divide the aggregate into two *discrete* parts, whether of 3+9 notes or 6+6.

I turn now to the opening of *O Venezia*, which is also structured in terms of aggregates and sub-aggregates. However, *O Venezia* is a tonal composition, and looking at the (very different) aggregate and sub-aggregate structures shows how this comes about. Example 5 shows the sub-aggregate structure of the first aggregate:

Example 5: *O Venezia*, bars 4-10, *harmonic* structures

The keywords describing the way in which the aggregate and sub-aggregate structures are treated in *O Venezia* composition are *variability* and *open-endedness*. Whereas each aggregate in the Babbitt quartet contains precisely two sub-aggregates, the first aggregate of *O Venezia* contains eleven. And over the course of the whole composition, the number of sub-aggregates per aggregate in *O Venezia* varies considerably. In order to see how this structure drives the music, consider Example 6, the opening passage of the first movement of *O*

# O Venezia

Introduction ("To the City of Venice")

To the City of Venice

Allegro (♩ = MM c 96 / = ♪ c 64)

The musical score is arranged in five staves. The vocal parts are Soprano 1, Soprano 2, Mezzo-soprano 1, and Mezzo-soprano 2. The Harp part is at the bottom. The score is divided into seven measures, numbered 1 through 7. Measure 1 starts with a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. Measures 2, 3, and 4 are marked with a '3' above the staff, indicating a triplet. Measures 5, 6, and 7 are marked with a '6/8' time signature. The lyrics are: 'Ur - bi - Ur - bi - Ur - bi - Ur - bi - Ve - ne - ti - ae - Ve - ne - ti -'. The Harp part features a complex rhythmic pattern with triplets and sixteenth notes.

*O Venezia*

Example 6 (beginning): *O Venezia* (first movement, bars 1–7)

2

8 9 10

Soprano 1  
- ne - - ti - ae Ve - ne - - ti - ae

Soprano 2  
- ne - - ti - ae Ve - ne - - ti - ae

Mezzo-soprano 1  
Ve - - ne - - ti - ae

Mezzo-soprano 2  
ae - - - Ve - - ne - - ti - ae

Harp

**in praise of its Patron Saint,**

11 12 13 14

Soprano 1  
in\_ lau - de

Soprano 2  
In\_ lau - - - - de

Mezzo-soprano 1  
in\_ lau - de San - - - - cti

Mezzo-soprano 2  
In lau - de Sanc - ti In lau - de In\_ lau - -

Harp

*O Venezia*

Example 6 (continuation): *O Venezia* (first movement, bars 8–14)

15 16 17 3

Soprano 1  
in lau - de

Soprano 2  
in lau - de San - cti

Mezzo-soprano 1  
su - i Sanc - cti su - i

Mezzo-soprano 2  
de

Harp

18 19 20 21

Soprano 1  
in lau - de San - cti su - i Pre - si - dis

Soprano 2  
su - i in lau - de

Mezzo-soprano 1  
Pre - si - dis su - i Pre - si - dis Be -

Mezzo-soprano 2  
in lau - de

Harp

*O Venezia*

Example 6 (concluded): *O Venezia* (first movement, bars 15–21)

*Venezia* itself. The eleven sub-aggregates of Ex 5 are distributed thus:

Agg #	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Bar ref	1–3	4–5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12–13	14	15–16

It is obvious from this table that the sub-aggregates do not divide the aggregate into discrete parts; they share common tones. Thus what results is what may be designated as a *weighted* aggregate, in which some tones appear more than others. The weighting is indicated by the following table, which gives the number of times each pitchclass appears in a sub-aggregate of the opening aggregate of *O Venezia*.

C	D <sub>b</sub>	D	E <sub>b</sub>	E	F	F#	G	A <sub>b</sub>	A	B <sub>b</sub>	B
9	1	4	4	5	4	3	4	1	2	6	1

The weightings indicate the dominance of C, with secondary stresses on E and B<sub>b</sub>: indicating, perhaps, something of a ‘mixolydian weighting’ within the chromatic collection of pitchclasses. Moreover, it will be noted that, unlike Example 4, where the *actual pitches* of each sub-aggregate unit in the Babbitt passage are indicated, the sub-aggregates of Example 5 indicate only the *pitchclasses* in each sub-aggregate of the opening passage of *O Venezia*. This is because, although each *pitchclass* occurs only once within each sub-aggregate ‘chunk’, it may be represented by pitches in several different octave positions.

I now return to the question of motivic shapes, with which this discussion started. Whereas each aggregate of the Babbitt presents each of the four component units of the ‘motivic idea’ precisely once, the motivic shapes which can be discerned in the 16 bars of this passage from *O Venezia* comprise what might be described (by analogy with the idea of the aforementioned *weighted aggregate* of pitchclasses) a ‘weighted’ motivic profile. Consider the 7 shapes which occur in these 16 bars and their placement, again in tabular form. (In the following listing D=down, U=up and V = voice; the numbers in brackets are bar numbers).

(1A) DUDU = V1(2), V3(5)

(1B) UDUD (inversion of shape 1A) = V2(3, 4)

(2A) UD = V2(1), V3(1), V4(1), V4(3), V2(5), V1(8), V2(8), V3(14)

(2B) DU (inversion of shape 2A) = V1(3), V4(4), V1(8), V2(8), V3(8), V4(8), V4(11), V2(13),

(3A) D = V1(4), V4(8), V4(12), V3(3), V1(14), V4(14), V1(16)

(3B) U (inversion of shape 3A) = V1(7), V2(7), V2(12), V1(13), V4(13), V1(15), V2(15), V3(15), V4(15), V2(16)

(4A) DUD = V4(7)

From this it can be seen that there is a certain progression of shapes over the course of the passage: from shapes 1 and 2 at the beginning towards shape 3 at the end.

### **Bibliography**

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