

Black Narratives in the White Racial Frame

Dialogue, Persistence, and Structure in Florence Price's Piano Sonata in E minor

There is a strong likelihood that everyone listening to/reading this presentation is familiar with Philip Ewell's recent publication and SMT keynote address regarding what he describes as music theory's "white racial frame." To summarize quickly, Ewell (2020) makes a case that in the field of music theory, "whiteness—specifically the music and theories of white people—are given systematic precedence, and advantage over the music and theories of non-whites," and it is typically assumed that "[t]he music and music theories of white persons represent the best, and in certain cases the only, framework for music theory." In other words, the ways in we go about our everyday business of analysis often tends to be informed by systems and practices developed in a Euro-centric framework. Ewell uses Schenker as a representative of this framework, noting that while Schenkerian analysis is one of the cornerstones of music-theoretic studies, Schenker's project includes an astonishing amount of racist commentary and undertones, such that his project can be seen as designed to privilege Euro-centric values.

This paper, however, is not—or at least not directly—about Schenker. Instead, I want to contemplate, and hopefully build on, Ewell's claims regarding the white racial frame by considering the concept through another context, namely the ways in which music theory typically discusses the concept of "narrative" in music. In particular, I want to examine the type of typically tonal narrative strategies that revolve around the concept of what Joseph Straus (2011)—among others—describes as "heroic overcoming," or the *per aspera ad astra*, narrative. Such narratives, as Hepokoski and Darcy (2006, 306–307) describe, can be applied on the largest scale, and describe the move from a problematic state to a positive one:

If we understand sonata form as a metaphor for an idealized but nonspecific human action, minor-mode sonatas provide the means by which an initially negative state (the minor mode) is acted upon in order to seek to overturn it by means of major-mode assertion . . . even though that quest might be unsuccessful.

On a smaller scale, this idea of an overcoming narrative often invokes the idea of “the tonal problem.” Straus (2011, 45), who links the concept to Arnold Schoenberg, describes tonal problems as “a musical event, often a chromatic note, that threatens to destabilize the prevailing tonality.” In such cases, the music “contrasts its normative content with a disruptive, deviant intrusion whose behavior threatens the integrity of normal functioning of the musical body” (45–46). Straus describes the well-known C# in the first movement of Beethoven’s Third Symphony, as well as the G♭ in the first movement of Schubert’s Piano Sonata in B♭ major D.960 as examples such tonal problems.

While there is nothing inherently wrong in reading these pieces this way—and Straus’s discussion of these narratives in relation to disability studies is particularly enlightening—such narratives also centralize eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European values. In this case, outsider ‘threats’ to the governing tonic-dominant hierarchy, or to the idealized major-mode, must be eradicated to “reach a satisfactory state” (Maus 1991). While such views are certainly, as Hepokoski and Darcy frame it, nonspecific in terms of what actions are being undertaken, and who is specifically undertaking them, these narratives also prioritize events experienced from within the hierarchy. That is to say, such narratives privilege the dominating structure, and treat “others” outside that structure as needing to either conform or be destroyed. It is, of course, not difficult to make the association between these views of narrative and the type of Euro-centric imperialism that flourished in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. Ewell cites Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who describes how

When race emerged in human history, it formed a social structure (a racialized social system) that awarded systemic privileges to Europeans (the peoples who became “white”) over non-Europeans (the peoples who became “nonwhite”). Racialized social systems, or white supremacy for short, became global and affected all societies where Europeans extended their reach (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2018, 8–9, cited in Ewell 2020, 2.2).

In other words, one can easily read these type of narratives as reflecting a highly Euro-centric perspective, in which the narratives must reinforce the dominance of the dominant class, which in turn seems to reflect directly the type of framework Ewell describes: a “white worldview [encompassing] persisting. . . racial prejudices, ideologies. . . interpretations and narratives” (Feagin [2009] 2013).

Having given a short overview of the framework within which I'm working, I want to turn now to the second movement of Florence Price's Piano Sonata in E minor. Owing to space considerations, I have not reproduced the score in its entirety here, and encourage everyone to pause here for a moment and listen to a recording of the piece (several performances are available on Youtube). I will begin by providing an analysis of the movement, focusing in particular on how $\hat{6}$ is treated within the tonal framework, before pivoting to discuss ways in which we can consider narrative in this piece in ways that diverge from these typically Euro-centric narrative types. Ideally, I would want to situate this analysis directly against Schenker's contentions regarding race and genius in music composition, but owing to time constraints, this analysis can only provide a basic overview of some of the features of the movement that figure into my narrative interpretation.

II

The movement is in the form of a five-part rondo. The A section, shown in Example 1, consists of a sentential theme (under $R=2N$) that is repeated three times with increasing harmonic elaboration. Figure 1 provides an analysis of the first of these repetitions, with the understanding that the other two follow a similar structure, save for the elaborations. As seen in Figure 1, the theme operates under mostly typical tonal harmonic and melodic processes, save for a few interesting divergences. The opening, for instance, begins with a tonic chord, but it is a tonic chord that contains a sixth. Typically, one might refer to this as $I^{(add6)}$, a familiar Jazz idiom and distinctive within this otherwise tonal context because the sixth is treated as hierarchically equal to the fifth. By this I mean that conventionally a sixth over the tonic triad is treated as a dissonance that resolves to the more consonant fifth in such a way that the hierarchic relationship between the two is made clear, as shown in Figure 2a.¹ Here, the sixth does not resolve to the fifth, but instead skips up to $\hat{1}$ as part of an initial $\hat{6}-\hat{1}-\hat{3}$ arpeggiation, rendering the traditional hierarchy between $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{5}$

¹ David J. Heyer (2012) discusses the structural aspects of add6 chords in relation to a Schenkerian framework, noting that "an orthodox approach requires $\hat{6}$ to ultimately derive its meaning from a more stable pitch at a deeper level of structure. Aldwell and Schachter (2011, 348) likewise describe that "the basic function of the accented 6/4 [is] to delay the arrival of an expected melodic or harmonic event. Accented 6/4 's—including cadential ones—depend on their chords of resolution."

indiscernible, as shown in Figure 2b. I refer to this breakdown of hierarchy at the local level “persistence,” which to me suggests that $\hat{6}$, rather than being subsumed, is asserting an existence more independent from its more typical subordinate tonal role.²

This unconventional persistence of $\hat{6}$ recurs at the close of the theme in m. 4 as well. As shown in the analytic graph, the cadential dominant is a V^9 chord, containing the dissonant A above G in the bass. Typically, this dissonance would resolve down by step, and in one sense it does, as a motion from the outer voice into an inner one. But on the musical surface, the final melodic gesture of the theme is a distinct $\hat{6}-\hat{1}$, which also gives the impression that, again, $\hat{6}$ is not conforming to its traditional tonal expectations. This is made even more clear in the final cadence of the A section, in which the A once again sounds over the dominant, and after initially appearing to resolve down to G in the tonic chord, persists throughout the tonic chord such that the section actually ends on the same $I^{(add6)}$ sonority with which it began.

The B section, shown in Example 2 and analyzed in Figure 4, is equally—if not more—clear-cut in its tonal processes. Cast as a relatively typical period, this theme begins with $\hat{6}$ of the local tonic A struck on the downbeat of m. 21. As in the A section, this emphasis on $\hat{6}$ leads to a $\hat{6}-\hat{1}-\hat{3}$ arpeggiation leading back to the main melodic tone E. What is different in this section, however, is that here $\hat{6}$ is treated in a far more traditional manner. On an immediately local level, it serves as a neighbor tone to $\hat{5}$ in the opening V^6 chord. On a slightly deeper level, it serves a similar function as a neighbor tone (displaced by an octave) to the E in m. 22 that serves as the main melodic tone. As noted previously, the $6-5$ motion is the expected behavior of $\hat{6}$ in tonal contexts like these, and the F demonstrates this behaviour over two different levels of structure.

² While this opening arpeggiation may seem unconventional, one can easily see a deeper-level parallelism: the tonal relationships of the movement, C, A, and E (Figure 3) are reflected here in the more surface-level iterations of harmony and melody. The initial ascent arpeggiates the melodic pitches that represent these three key areas ($\hat{6}$, $\hat{1}$, and $\hat{3}$), while the opening harmonic progression of $I-vi-iii$ reflects another parallelism. Even the use of $\hat{6}$ within the opening tonic harmony reflects a parallelism of the deeper-level structure: the pitches C–E–G–A all reflect the important tonal events in the movement (if one includes the retransitory dominants).

The C section, which is cast as a small ternary form, is shown in Example 3. Like the A and B sections, this section also begins with a similar horizontalization of the $\hat{6}-\hat{1}-\hat{3}$ motif that had characterized the harmonic and melodic parameters of the preceding sections. Here, as shown in Figure 5, the opening $\hat{1}$ passes through the modal $\flat\hat{7}$ en route to $\hat{6}$, supported by a 5-6 motion in the harmonic domain. This 6-shift is then undone as $\hat{6}$ steps down to $\hat{5}$, which then passes through $\hat{4}$, supported by the predominant-functioning ii, on the way to $\hat{3}$. Note how the downbeats of the opening three measures accentuate $\hat{1}$, $\hat{6}$, then $\hat{3}$: a different ordering of the pitches from the preceding sections, but clearly outlining the same motif. Like the B section, the treatment of $\hat{6}$ here is more typical of tonal processes, in contrast to the treatment of $\hat{6}$ within the A sections: $\hat{6}$ arises from the passing $\flat\hat{7}$ in the 5-6 transformation of the tonic, and then steps back down to $\hat{5}$ as one would expect of the less stable $\hat{6}$.³

The final reprise of A begins at m. 81 and consists of a full restatement of the initial four-measure sentence, as well as an embellished repetition that resembles a combination between the second and third repetitions from the opening of the movement. While the four-measure repetition of A from mm. 81–84 concludes with an identical PAC to the one in m. 4, the second repetition and Coda struggle to replicate this closure. At the first point of what should be a cadential articulation m. 88, shown in Example 5a, the melodic line reaches $\hat{1}$, but the harmony beneath it—a $B\flat$ major-minor seventh chord that serves as an augmented-sixth of the subsequent A^7 chord—does not support this tone, and instead launches the music into a series of sequential progressions. A second attempt at a cadence, shown in Example 5b, is made at mm. 96–97 where E is sounded above a harmony comprised of G, B, and F. The expectation here is that this V should support the descent from E ($\hat{3}$) to D ($\hat{2}$) prior to reaching harmonic and melodic closure on the tonic triad and $\hat{1}$. The E, however, persists, and instead of allowing a PAC, is instead retained as a

³ The contrasting middle section of the small ternary is a harmonically adventurous fantasia-like passage, which is loosely in the key of D—though this is never confirmed by a cadence, and the initial tonic contains a sixth in place of the fifth. Instead, D acts as a larger-scale composing-out of the $\flat VII$ chord, ultimately unfolding, as $\flat VII$ tends to do, down to the dominant of E minor that serves to retransition to the reprise of the a section.³ As shown in Figure 4, this middle section supports an $F\sharp$ that neighbors $\hat{1}$, and the common-tone relationship between D major and V of E reinforces the $\flat VII$ function of the D-major prolongation.

thirteenth above the V chord, undermining the finality of this cadence—an IAC instead of a PAC (this E is shown in parentheses in Figure 3).⁴ The tonic is then extended plagally via vi and IV, which support a final $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{1}$ – $\hat{3}$ arpeggiation in mm. 99–100, before the A finally relinquishes, and resolves down to G for the final tonic chord.

III

In the preceding analysis, I focused explicitly on the difference in how $\hat{6}$ is treated in the A section as opposed to the B and C sections. There is, I believe, some narrative interest in this. Price’s biographer, Rae Linda Brown (1997), for instance, describes the A section as “reminiscent of the spiritual, with syncopated rhythms and simple harmony.” Conversely, Brown describes the B and C sections as “more classical in orientation, reminiscent of Chopin and Schumann respectively.” The fact that the treatment of $\hat{6}$ is far more conventional in these sections compared to its treatment in the A section suggests to me that there is a dialogue happening in this piece, something that engaging the piece through a structural framework helps to demonstrate.

In the A section, $\hat{6}$ is treated as an outside element that is present, but remains segregated from the various contexts in which it appears. It does not fit into the typical tonic triad over which it is appended at the beginning and end of the section, nor does it successfully find integration via the dominant triad, where its resolution to $\hat{1}$ undermines a functional role. It is only in the IV chord where the A truly finds a stable home. Conversely, in both the B and C sections, emphasis on $\hat{6}$ remains a prominent motif, but in both cases its treatment is far more conventional, serving as a dissonant embellishment of $\hat{5}$. As David J. Heyer (2012, 2.2) suggests, “Schenkerian views [require] $\hat{6}$ to ultimately derive its meaning from a more stable pitch at a deeper level of structure—a level of structure consistent with common-practice harmony. Citing an

⁴ Heyer (2012, 3.3) likewise discusses the hierarchic role of the thirteenth, noting that “escape tones are one of the clearest origins of V^{13} chords. While $\hat{3}$ appears over the dominant chord, and is the note that immediately precedes the arrival on the tonic, the note is clearly an embellishment of, and thus dependent on, the preceding $\hat{2}$. Heyer’s discussion then proceeds to discuss the various ways in which $\hat{3}$ can be understood as dependent on $\hat{2}$, even in cases where there is no $\hat{2}$ present, as in the case of Price’s Piano Sonata.

unpublished article by Henry Martin (Martin, no date), Heyer (2012, 2.1) summarizes Martin's claim that "a $\hat{6}$ supported by the tonic serves one of three functions: (1) a dependent non-chord tone (a surface-level embellishment of $\hat{5}$), (2) an independent chord tone (reducible only at a deeper level of structure), and (3) an inclusive chord tone (consonant and therefore left unreduced).⁵

This difference in how $\hat{6}$ is treated in terms of hierarchy in an add6 chord compared against how it is treated in terms of common practice harmony suggests that, as Heyer notes, "the tonic added sixth chord sets jazz and common-practice harmony apart on the surface." In the case of the A section in Price's sonata movement, the added sixth seems to serve Martin's second function, in the sense that throughout the movement it acts as both an independent entity that does not conform to the hierarchic expectations of a sixth, but it behaves this way in contexts where it flirts with the expectation of resolving at a more structural level (occasionally it does resolve in a veiled manner, and then ultimately does so reluctantly in the coda of the movement). In this way, while one could say its behavior is at odds with conventional treatments of tonality, one could equally discuss the ways in which it exists in dialogue with the more traditional treatments of $\hat{6}$ in the B and C sections; the fact that the A section is clearly rooted in jazz idioms, while the other two sections are reminiscent of Chopin and Schumann, reinforces that there are narrative tensions between the three sections.⁶

These tensions surrounding $\hat{6}$ suggest to me that it could be possible to read a distinctly non-white narrative in this movement, one that reflects the experiences of its composer existing outside the white racial frame, as opposed to the experiences of composers within that frame. As Alex Ross (2018) describes, Florence Price "is widely cited as one of the first African American classical composers to win national attention, and was unquestioningly the first black woman to be so recognized." But the path to recognition was not an easy one for Price. In a letter written to Serge Koussevitzky, who was the conductor of the

⁵ Schoenberg ([1922] 1978, 57) suggests that a sixth can be a dissonance by appealing to overtones: the sixth above the bass is not one of the primary overtones of the bass note, and as such, it creates a sense of friction, or dissonance. See also Mirka (2015) for an encompassing overview of the historic context of consonance-dissonance debates regarding the sixth in six-four chords.

⁶ The use of $\hat{3}$ to avoid closure in the final A section (discussed above) likewise suggests that the music in A comprises a more jazz-like idiom, with the chordal thirteenth being treated as hierarchically unrelated to the $\hat{2}$ from which it is meant to be derived structurally (again, see Hyer 2012).

Boston Symphony Orchestra at the time, Price begins with the statement: “My dear Dr. Koussevitzky, To begin with I have two handicaps—those of sex and race. I am a woman; and I have some Negro blood in my veins” (Ross, 2018). As Ross describes, Price “plainly saw these factors as obstacles to her career,” and “had a difficult time making headway in a culture that defined composers as white, male, and dead.” Price’s experience then, as her letter suggests, is one of an outsider trying to find acceptance within a dominating framework. With this context in mind, it becomes difficult to not consider the differing treatments of $\hat{6}$ in the Piano Sonata as reflecting this narrative: in the jazz/spiritual refrain $\hat{6}$ resists subordination to the dominating hierarchy, finding ways of instead standing on its own within that framework. Comparatively, $\hat{6}$ in the B and C sections—again, based in more traditional idioms—is forced into that subordinate role in order to integrate within the structure. In other words, the narrative in this piece can be read as distinct from the “overcoming” or “integration” narratives typically attached to composers such as Beethoven or Schubert; instead, an alternate narrative centered on how Price saw her position with respect to the white racial frame emerges. As $\hat{6}$ strives to create a place for itself as an equal to $\hat{5}$ within the tonal framework, while resisting the traditional role as the structural subordinate to $\hat{5}$ that $\hat{6}$ plays in the more classically oriented B and C sections, so too did Price deal with a societal framework that resisted allowing her to have her compositional voice heard as equal to those of the white German composers.

This suggests to me that contrary to the claims of scholars like David Beach or Timothy Jackson, it is not enough to simply “publish some sophisticated analytical graphs of works by black composers” (Beach 2019, 128), but rather to consider with a greater level of critical awareness what implications an analysis suggests. In the case of Price’s sonata, analysis in a more Schenkerian tradition can indeed effectively model the musical structure—counter to Schenker’s own unsupported claims—but can also model how Price’s syntax engages in a dialogue with that structure. This more dialogic approach allows us to read a narrative that exists outside the traditional white framework in which we discuss music. More broadly, by treating Schenker’s analytic theories as more dialogic—that is to say not as the gold standard for demonstrating musical genius—it becomes possible to recontextualize what Schenkerian theory can say about music, and

thus by extension the types of narratives that we consider. As Suzannah Clark (2019, 141) suggests, “the benefit of a more inclusive music theory is that new perspectives bring new questions to the currently dominant mode of music-theoretic thought.”

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