Linearity in Music
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Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss the relationship between polyphonic music and linearity. This will be regarded in the case of both harmonic and non-harmonic polyphony. To designate a melodic design, the notion of "line" was not used before the early 20th century, when it was introduced by the Austrian musicologist Ernst Kurth. Kurth's notion of linear counterpoint has been frequently interpreted as the opposite of harmonic counterpoint. Kurth's contemporary Austrian music theorist Heinrich Schenker, like Kurth himself, developed his theoretical system as a response to previous harmonically oriented interpretations of music. But whereas Kurth usually discusses linearity apart from harmony, Schenker regarded melodic motion as determined by harmony. During the 1920s and 1930s, linearity was one of the most fashionable terms in European, as well as Estonian, musical literature. This term was often used to designate non-harmonic polyphony. In Estonian music, it was used, first of all, to characterize the first two string quartets by Heino Eller (1887–1970). The problems arising from the analysis of such music will be illustrated by discussing Eller's piano prelude in G minor (1920), which can be regarded as a typical example of "linear counterpoint" or "linear harmony".

In section 1.2 ("What is Linear Music?") of Urve Lippus's dissertation *Linear Musical Thinking*, she wrote as follows:

> It is difficult to find a good adjective to denote the principal difference between melodies with harmonic structure and earlier monophonic melodies. […] It seems to me that the word "linear" is best used to characterize early European monophonic music, as well as other monophonic styles, in which implications of an underlying harmony are absent. In harmonic music all the notes of the melody also have some relations to underlying harmonies, whether or not those harmonies are actually sounded. (Lippus 1995: 10)

It is obvious that she meant by linear music, first of all, linear monophony which can be divided primarily into harmonic and non-harmonic monophony. Whereas the meaning of the latter is quite self-evident, that of the term "linear monophony" is more contextual. In this connection, a question suggests itself: what is the relationship between *polyphonic* music and linearity? The aim of this study is to discuss this question.

1. Harmonic Polyphony

In the *New Grove Dictionary*, the word "linear" is explained as follows:

> **Linear**. Characterized by conjunct motion in a given part; thus one of the chief characteristics of the musical texture commonly called "counterpoint". The expression "linear counterpoint", a literal translation of a term introduced by Ernst Kurth in his *Grundlagen des linearen Kontrapunkts* […], is strictly speaking a tautology; however, it remains useful as a means of emphasizing the melodic or "horizontal" aspect of counterpoint as opposed to the harmonic or "vertical." (Rushton 2001: 721)

The monograph *Grundlagen des linearen Kontrapunkts* by the Austrian musicologist Ernst Kurth (1886–1946) is a deep and original study of Johann Sebastian Bach's counterpoint, as well as that of the "free style" in general. To designate a melodic design, the notion of "line" was not used before the early 20th century. According to Lee A. Rothfarb, the psychologist-aesthetician Theodor Lipps (*Ästhetik*, 1903) "called on melody to exemplify continuity in his idea of 'line'" (Rothfarb 1988: