

Goal-Directed Projection of Dissonant Counterpoint in Louis Andriessen's *Hout* (1991)

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The living Dutch composer Louis Andriessen is credited with developing an aggressive and jazz-tinged strand of minimalism, often through hocketing. Here I discuss his 1991 work *Hout*, an 11-minute quartet for tenor sax, marimba, electric guitar, and piano, in which a single disjunct melody is hocketed in canon at the sixteenth note. Regarding the pervasive use of close canon in *Hout*, Andriessen explains “it has the complex chromaticism of uptown music but pulls rhythms from jazz and pop. ... Although the whole work is in principle a strict canon, the successive voices are so close together that it is more like a melody sung in unison with ramifications.” The result is not merely some dense study in dissonance: the aesthetic attitude, the almost-tonal materials, and the pervasive, almost didactic use of canon mutually reinforce an invitation to listen for the contrapuntal and formal “ramifications” of this chromatic line, to use his word. I propose that the deepest “ramification” is the goal-directed pursuit of an F5, harmonized by dissonant elevenths and ninths. Aside from the counterpoint, there are invitations to listen for goal-direction already, as the piece begins with motivic atoms that accumulate into lines, continues with the opening 18 bars restated a whole step higher, and culminates with a coda in unison rather than canon—the logical goal of a quartet aiming to speak as one—a coda punctuated by the sonority of the woodblock (hence the title *Hout*, in English: *Wood*). But it is precisely by accounting for counterpoint in a dissonant piece occupied with goal-direction—that is, by inquiring into these “ramifications”—that we can articulate how

the melodic ascents accord with the gestures of interruption and iteration, resulting in a comprehensive view of the form. I develop this interpretation while also addressing some issues that accompany the application of loosely neo-Schenkerian insights about long-range linearity to post-tonal music—namely, the utility of speaking of prolongation, tonal reference, or even analytic reduction in general. I conclude that this reading of *Hout* articulates an independent dimension of syntactic priority that would require a friendly amendment to a view of Fred Lerdahl's under which markers of structure in post-tonal repertoire are merely the same as those of salience in the absence of tonal allusion.

The disjunct lines in *Hout* tend to expand in register in both directions in the manner of a “wedge” before concluding with wide leaps that restate the entire span. I hear these melodic leaps as harmonic dyads. (The canon causes them to be heard as literal verticalities anyway.) Plotting the succession of dyads as I have done in your handout reveals linear motion, that is, motion in the upper strand of the counterpoint by one, two, or occasionally three semitones. Vertical sevenths, ninths, and elevenths predominate. The initial two dyads, marked here without stems are instead seconds and fourths—still dissonant—but not as dissonant as the ninth to which they direct. An atomistic conception of motive works alongside a preference for dissonance to establish the G-flat over F as the first goal. The eleventh of D over A at m. 18—actually *two* octaves and a fourth—summarizes the span of the entire motion of those 18 measures, and accords with the gesture of interruption and the presentation of the initial idea two semitones higher at the passage I have called “B”, divisions of my own devising as

suggested by the pattern of ascents. I'll play measures 1-21 so that you may hear this middleground wedge and the beginning of the transposed statement at "B".

[50 sec]

I'll continue by reading my sketch of each passage in order to demonstrate how counterpoint reinforces form on this interpretation.

Andriessen departs from strict transposition begun at "B" after the D-flat of m. 31, instead presenting a linearization of his so-called "tonic/dominant synthesis" chord, which is a dominant seventh with or without fifth sounded with its tonic root of resolution. His entire output is permeated by this sonority, but what is striking here is its use as "passagework" to provide relief from the wedge figures outlining dissonant dyads—instead relief by unidirectional motion often spanning octaves. After a brief digression the same D-flat over A-flat is regained at m. 36, leading to a D-natural in the manner of m. 18, only now supported with a more dissonant ninth. The upper strand hasn't reached any closer to F5, its goal, but the harmonic support progresses in dissonance.

At "C", a static D-flat predominates in the upper register, while weak impressions of ascents by minor third appear in the middle and lower registers. At "D" there is a stronger sense of ascent by minor third from C to E-flat in the upper register, before an E-natural is attained, only in the middle register. Interruption ensues. At passage "E", the E-natural appears in the high register via an approach to the as yet unheard goal of F5, but the F5 is denied harmonic support. The next harmonic dyad we hear is an eleventh under a D natural, much like m. 18. Passage "F" reiterates the D-flat to E-flat motion of the first four passages. An F5 briefly

appears at m. 107, only to be deemphasized by a consonant sixth. At “G” there is ascent by tetrachord to F5, only supported by a consonant tenth. F5 is finally supported by a dissonant eleventh at m. 152, only to be destabilized by E5 over F4, followed by a grand pause. This is the chief textural interruption in the piece, and I argue that the linear patterns here reinforce a contrapuntal and formal interruption, akin to the way scale degree 2 over 5 may constitute an interruption in tonal forms. A gradual ascent through passage “H” reaches an F5 with properly dissonant support by a seventh, only to be dramatically overshoot by a voice exchange that attains G-flat. This already references the voice leading of the initial gesture, and introduces some ambiguity: is F5 or Gb5 the ultimate goal? A faintly tonal bass line to the opening measures suggests the pitch class F as a center of gravity. The confirmation of F5 as a melodic goal only occurs in the last three passages. An ascent to E-flat5 at passage “I” leads from an uncharacteristically consonant E-flat5 to a characteristically dissonant—indeed, structural—F5 supported by an eleventh at m. 219. The coda consists of passages “J” and “K”, with the introduction of unison writing and a *piu mosso* at “J” and the woodblock sonority at “K”. “J” briefly summarizes this motion of E-flat5 to F5 over C. At “K” Andriessen provides a summary of the motion of the entire piece, beginning with the Eb4 of the opening in some sense “unfolding” the principal tones of the network of ascents through an entirely stepwise ascent to a final F5 supported more dissonantly than before, that is, by a minor ninth.

I will briefly mention what is omitted from this sketch. Unidirectional figures or figures compact in register cannot imply the compound melody I plot here. There is even a passage at m. 194 that alludes to a tonal descent over a pedal. The dramatic difference in counterpoint

and goal-direction leads me to hear these passages as digressions or “relief passagework” in the manner of the linearized “dominant/tonic” chords mentioned earlier. In place of a notion of “prolongation” I have instead highlighted the way in which intermediary goals are restated after explicit digressions such as these or after other passages not strictly digressions but rather subsidiary passages temporarily drawing motion toward the middle register, for instance. These are considerations that go beyond mere markers of salience; although not regularly in conflict with surface-level salience, they suggest a syntax of priority in which tonal allusion is explicitly excluded from the musical argument. I’ve intended to show how the pervasive use of gradual ascent and close canon invites listening for goal-directed dissonant counterpoint—the sense in which Andriessen’s melody generates its own “ramifications.” My hope is that it may inspire future research into the pitch language of post-tonal works that although thoroughly dissonant encourage a linear listening hypothesis without a trace of the usual tonal models. Thank you.