

Rhythm and Meter in an Early Composition of Arthur Honegger

by Keith J. Waters

The music of Arthur Honegger is often defined by its eclecticism. The variety of genre (including twenty ballets, over forty film scores, five symphonies, operas, oratorios, concertos, chamber music) is matched by the diversity of pitch language (spanning tonality, extended tonality, polytonality, and atonality). Despite this eclecticism, however, certain compositional traits do persist. For example, contrapuntal procedures consistently appear throughout his *œuvre*, no doubt influenced by the seven years of counterpoint study with André Gédalge at the Paris Conservatoire.¹

Aside from this contrapuntal orientation, a strongly defined rhythmic and metric language is associated with the composer. Compositions such as *Pacific 231 (Mouvement Symphonique No. 1)* attest to the priority given to rhythmic organization over tonal organization. This priority is corroborated by Honegger's own writings. His conversation with Bernard Gavoty in *Je suis compositeur* provides an example:

Honegger: To me, the 'tonal design' is an abstraction. I do not even understand what it means. [...] What gives unity to a piece of music is the totality of melodic and rhythmic relationships, elements much more powerful to affect the listener's spirit than the ties of tonality. Not everyone has 'absolute pitch.'

Gavoty: It appears that Franck set down the tonal plan for his work at the top of his manuscript for his Symphony. It is said that he had decided upon it before having written a single note or jotted down the least theme.

Honegger: It is a technique completely foreign to me [...].
[...] Of much greater importance than tonal equilibrium are melodic and especially rhythmic balances.²

Even the earliest compositions display a systematic approach to rhythm and meter. Completing his first year of study in Paris in 1912, Honegger had finished the *Sonate pour violon et piano en ré mineur*³, whose chromatic post-Romantic harmonic language and cyclic form clearly display those Franckian conventions institutionalized at the Conservatoire. Additionally, though, the piece manifests elements of Honegger's mature style: formal clarity, systematic use of polyphony, and, especially, the demarcation of form by rhythmic and metric content. If d'Indy described César Franck's symphony as an antagonism of two tonal poles⁴, perhaps we can speak of a "rhythmic polarity" which is worked out during the course of this sonata.

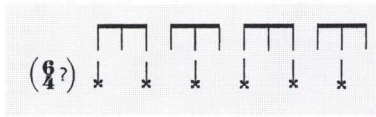
Example 1

In the first movement, it is the conflict of duple (eighth, sixteenth notes) and triple (eighth-note triplets) subdivisions of the beat which creates this rhythmic polarity. *Example 1* shows how the introductory theme (i) generates the two main themes: the dotted eighth and sixteenth notes of the first theme (Th1) derive their metric position from i, similarly the eighth-note triplet of the second theme (Th2) derives its metric position from i. Consistently, the first theme area is defined by duple subdivisions, the second theme area by triple subdivisions.

Moreover, the triple argument of Th2 is raised to the metric level as well: 4/4 yields to the triple meter of 9/8 during the second theme area. Thus the polarity of duple and triple subdivisions is projected onto the meter, effecting a transformation which relates the cardinality at the rhythmic level to that of the metric level. This correspondence between the rhythmic level and the metric level is used to magnify or heighten the rhythmic polarity expressed at the level of rhythmic subdivision.⁵

Example 2: Arthur Honegger, *Sonate pour violon et piano en ré mineur* (unpublished), mm. 87–89 (Paul Sacher Collection).

In the development section, the antagonism between duple and triple subdivisions of the beat is explicit, sometimes to the extent of using two simultaneous meters. Notice in *Example 2* that the 4/4 of the violin (4 sixteenths per beat) is placed against the 12/8 in the left hand of the piano, while the right hand alternates between 12/8 (3 eighth notes per beat) and 4/4 (four sixteenths). And despite the triplet grouping of the right hand in the 12/8 mea-



Example 3

sure, the pattern – which alternates C/E and A/G dyads – might suggest to the performer or listener an additional metric stratum of 6/4 (*Example 3*). Notice, too, the augmentation of the violin melody in the left hand of the piano, a typical contrapuntal maneuver for the composer.

Similar processes appear in the last movement as well, including a change of meter between the first and second theme, and the use of polymeter in the development section. In addition, a metric polarity organizes the composition at the largest level. While both the first and last movement close, cyclically, with a statement of *i*, the former begins in a “consonant” 4/4 meter and finishes in triple, and the Allegro of the final movement begins in triple, “resolving” to 4/4 at the finish.

Movement 1 (Movement 2 Introduction) Movement 3
 4/4-----9/8 3/4-----4/4

Although clearly an early work, the sonata does illustrate important examples of the composer’s rhythmic and metric style: Sections are defined by their rhythmic and metric content, a rhythmic polarity is expressed through the antagonism of duple and triple subdivisions, and this polarity is then projected onto the meter. Throughout his career, Honegger would continue to explore both the dramatic and the architectural possibilities inherent in rhythm and meter.

- 1 The counterpoint studies with Gédalge are part of the Paul Sacher Collection and include some 52 chorale harmonizations, 188 cantus firmus exercises, 10 studies in invertible counterpoint, and 40 partial or complete fugues.
- 2 Arthur Honegger, *I am a Composer*, trans. by Wilson O. Clough, New York 1966, p. 82–83; originally published as *Je suis compositeur*, Paris 1951.
- 3 Unpublished, Paul Sacher Collection.
- 4 Vincent d’Indy, *Cours de Composition Musicale*, Deuxième Livre, Seconde Partie, rédigé par Auguste Sérieyx d’après les notes prises aux classes de composition de la Schola Cantorum en 1901–1902, Paris 1950, p. 161.
- 5 For another example of this technique of projecting subdivisions of the beat onto the meter, see mm. 94–96 of Honegger’s *Symphonie pour cordes*, first movement.