

# HARMONIC ANALYSIS OF BÉLA BARTÓK'S BAGATELLE OP. 6 NO. 2

Gonzalo Varela

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[gonzalo@gonzalovarela.com](mailto:gonzalo@gonzalovarela.com) / [www.gonzalovarela.com](http://www.gonzalovarela.com)

Study done to correct homework of students of the course “Armonía 4” (“Harmony 4”), as part of my work as a Harmony and Counterpoint student teaching assistant at the Escuela Universitaria de Música (University School of Music) of the Universidad de la República (University of the Republic), in Montevideo, Uruguay (chair: Alejandro Barbot). It is recommended to read the written analysis while also reading the analyzed score, included at the final pages of this document (and, as the analyzed score omits indications included in the original score, it might be convenient to read the original score as well).

Mm1 - 2: The note *A4* works in this part of the piece as an axis of symmetry, to the sides of which *Ab4* and *Bb4* are played regularly attacked.

Mm3 - 4: These notes become an accompaniment, over which two chromatic melodies start, an ascending upper one, at *B4*, and a descending lower one, at *G4* (symmetrical notes in respect to the axis mentioned) (of course that, because of the proximity in pitch, what is heard may be a compound melody, instead of two different melodies). The melodies alternate their attacks, with the upper melody starting, in such a way that the notes of the lower melody act as delayed mirror images of those of the upper one. Given the axis of symmetry, not only would the mirror image of *A* be the same note, but also the mirror image of *Eb* (at another octave), but when the moment comes for the lower voice to play *Eb4* as an image of the *Eb5* of the higher voice, it skips it, and plays *Ebb4* instead.

Mm5 - 7 (first beat): The *Ebb* acts a sort of *phrygian* dominant and cadences over the *Db*. The last three notes of this cadence are repeated 4 quarter-notes later. I consider everything that has happened up to this point (including the “double cadence”) to work as a sort of **Theme A** to which the piece will return later. Through a *C*, which can be

construed as a passing tone, we arrive at the start of measure 7 to the *G-B* simultaneity, being those the two notes that started the melody/ies.

Mm7 (cont.) - 8 (first beat): The non-octave-repeating scale that descends during measure 7 juxtaposes major and minor thirds (or, more precisely, movements of 4 and 3 semitones), but doesn't allow us to see a repetition module (a repeating model). We can see in this scale, though, a symmetry component, as we can consider that in the first three notes the axis is *Db5* (*Db4* if we look at the left hand) and that the *F5* is a mirror image of the *A4* (both notes are 4 semitones away from *Db5*), while in the following three notes the axis would be *D4*, and the *Gb4* is a mirror image of *Bb3* (again, both notes are 4 semitones away from *D4*). Seen another way, what occurs here is the arpeggio of two augmented triads separated by 3 semitones. This descending scale resolves through an ascending perfect 4th to an *Eb* that becomes "tonized". To the scale of thirds and its resolution I will call **Theme B**, only to facilitate their identification later.

Mm8 (cont.) - 10 (first beat): A fragment of the descending *Bb locrian* scale is played harmonized by two tonally distant chords (*Eb minor* -which we could consider a I degree because of the previous tonization of the *Eb* note-, and *C7*, with the 7th being played by the right hand), and this is repeated immediately. Then, something rhythmically similar happens, but at half the speed (eighth notes instead of sixteenth notes in the melody, half notes instead of quarter notes in the chords -the second chord is played only during a quarter notes, but then there is a quarter note rest, so that harmony lasts for a half note-), but the notes are others and the higher melody includes an anacrusis of two eighth-notes. The first four notes of the melody can be seen as two symmetrical pairs of notes with respect to a *C#5* axis (*D#* being a mirror image of *B*, and *D natural* being a mirror image of *B#*), while the following two notes can be seen as part of an arpeggio of the *F# major* chord that is being played by the left hand. The resolution of this melodic fragment is the same as the one for the fragments of *locrian* scale and the *phrygian* cadence, that is, through a descending semitone.

Mm10 (cont.) - 11 (first beat): The ascending melodic fragments of measure 10 can be seen as mirror images of the descending ones of measure 8, using the *lydian* mode instead of the *locrian* mode (these modes are symmetrical\*). Each fragment is a perfect 4th above the last one. Meanwhile, the left hand answers to these fragments with

arpeggios of chords (*Bb7-no3-* and *Ebm7*) whose root notes are a tritone apart from the *final* of each mode of the right hand (*E* and *A*), and whose rhythmic behavior is equal to the one of the right-hand melodic fragments. In measure 11 the last note of the fragment is harmonized with an *Am7* chord in first inversion.

\*The intervallic structure of one is the “retrograde” of the other:

-Lydian mode: 1 tone, 1 tone, 1 tone, 1/2 tone, 1 tone, 1 tone, 1/2 tone.

-Locrian mode: 1/2 tone, 1 tone, 1 tone, 1/2 tone, 1 tone, 1 tone, 1 tone.

This implies that the ascending *lydian* mode scale has the same intervallic sequence as the descending *locrian* scale.

Mm11 (cont.) - 14: It is possible to construe an *Am7* harmony from measure 11 to measure 13, only interrupted by neighboring (embellishing, non-structural) chords (and every time one of these chords is introduced, the same ascending chromatic motif is played on the right hand). Then, the structural harmony becomes *Dm*, and the embellishing harmonies become always *C#m*. The progression *Am7-Dm* can be seen as a I-IV (in *A minor*) or a V-I (in *D aeolian*), and the ascending 4th movement between the root notes may be reminiscent of the ending of the **Theme B**. In addition, if we take into account only the left hand, the *Am7* chords become *CM* chords, and we get only chords of roots *C*, *C#*, *D* and *Eb* (not in that order) between measures 11 and 14; being this movement between four root notes a semitone apart in the left hand relatable to the melodic movements of four notes a semitone apart on the right hand (*A*, *Bb*, *B*, *C*).

Mm14 (cont.) - 17 (first beat): In measure 14 a series of scales of thirds clearly reminiscent of **Theme B** begins (as in the scale of **Theme B**, all these scales have six notes by descending 3rds and then a resolve through an ascending perfect 4th). The first one, on the right hand, is a scale of major 3rds (octave-repeating scale, equivalent to the arpeggio of an augmented triad). The second one, on the left hand, is a non-octave-repeating scale, but which allows us to recognize a repetition module, since it alternates major and minor 3rds with no exception. The third one, on the right hand, is an exact copy of the second one, a minor 9th apart. The fourth one, on the lower voice, juxtaposes major and minor 3rds with no repetition module (as what originally happened on **Theme B**). The fifth one, on the upper voice, starts alternating major and

minor 3rds, but everything is interrupted when it plays the notes *G-B* (which had also been of structural importance on measures 3 and 7).

Mm17 (cont.) - 23: What happens now is a recapitulation of **Theme A**, transposed by a tritone (with *E<sub>b</sub>* as the axis of symmetry). The accompaniment (whose texture at the beginning is different) is now made of the notes *D-E*, and the melody/ies are also transposed accordingly. In addition, in this appearance of the compound melody, both “voices” are higher in pitch to the accompaniment. The most important difference, however, may be that the first time the theme was played the repetition of *E<sub>b</sub>* in two octaves was avoided through a skip on the lower voice (after the upper voice had played it), while now, before the upper voice plays *A* (note a tritone away from *E<sub>b</sub>*), it already omits the *G<sup>#</sup>*, and this way the ending of the melody is modified so that the “phrygian cadence” becomes *B<sub>b</sub>-A<sub>b</sub>* (a perfect 4th apart from the original cadence, not a tritone apart like the rest of the theme). This cadence is then repeated (6 quarter notes apart, not 4 quarter notes apart like in the exposition, and lengthen). In addition, from the first cadence (measure 21) a new motif with the notes of the accompaniment appears, sometimes in the original key (*A<sub>b</sub>-B<sub>b</sub>*, on the right hand), and sometimes on the key a tritone apart (*D-E*, on the left hand).

Mm24 - End: The **Theme A** appears for the third time, this time on the original key, but with the accompaniment produced entirely by repetitions of the recently introduced motif, and with both melodic voices below it. The cadence is again on *D<sub>b</sub>*, and the repetition of the cadence is again 6 quarter notes apart, and this time it is lengthen even more. This repetition of the cadence leads to an exceptional transposition of the new accompaniment motif, in m26, with the notes *D<sub>b</sub>* and *E<sub>b</sub>*. It may be important to point out that the last of the versions of the accompaniment emphasizes the *A<sub>b</sub>* over the *B<sub>b</sub>*, and since the *A<sub>b</sub>* is a perfect 4th away from *D<sub>b</sub>*, this possible makes the final arrival to this note more conclusive (generating a subtle V-I relationship).

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### Summary

There are two section in the piece that can be considered thematic: mm1 – 7 (until the third beat) (later referenced in mm17 – 23, and once again in mm24 – End) (**Theme A**),

and mm7 (from the second beat) – 8 (until the first beat) (later referenced in mm14 – 17) (**Theme B**). A peculiarity of **Theme A** is that in its first appearance the accompaniment is between the voices of the melody (in pitch), the second time is below both of them, and the third time is above them.

The perfect 4th interval plays an important role in the piece, but even more important is the one of the tritone. In **Theme A**, when the voice being reflected reaches a distance of a tritone from the axis (which would produce the same pitch-class in another octave) is when the symmetry is broken and the cadence comes. Modes with *finals* a tritone apart are also used (descending *Bb locrian* in m8, and ascending *E Lydian* on m10), as well as progressions of chords with roots a tritone apart (m9, and mm11 – 12). In m10 the right hand plays modes with *finals* a tritone apart from the roots of the chords that the left hand is playing (*E lydian* with *Bb7-no3-*, *A lydian* with *Ebm7*). In addition, when **Theme A** is recapitulated for the first time it is transposed by a tritone with regard to its original version, and the two versions of the accompaniment (one a tritone apart from the other) coexist in mm21 – 23, until the original version prevails. In the same way that in the classic repertoire it is common for a piece to start in a key, modulate to the key of the dominant and then return to the original key, here the piece starts in a “key” (not using the term in a strict sense), is transposed by a tritone, and also ends returning to the original key.

# Bagatelle Op. 6 No. 2

Analysis: Gonzalo Varela

Béla Bartók

1 Axis of symmetry: A | "accompaniment" with Ab-Bb 2 3

4 5 6

(initial notes of the melodies) 7 8 9

DbAug | GbAug | Ebm/3 C7/5 Ebm/3 C7/5 F#M/5

10 11 12

D#ø9(no3)/7 Bb7(no3) Ebm7/3

11 12

Am7/7 (Ebm/3) Am7/7

gonzalo@gonzalovarela.com  
www.gonzalovarela.com

(Ddim) Am7/7 (C#m) || Dm/3 C#m/3 Dm/3 C#m/3 Dm/3

(initial notes of the melodies)  
Axis of symmetry: Eb | "accompaniment" with D-E  
Transposed recapitulation

(both voices over the accompaniment)  
(omits G#5)  
phrygian cadence in Ab  
(a P4 -not tritone- apart from the original version)  
(tritone between motifs)  
(new accompaniment motif)

repetition of cadence  
(6 quarter-notes apart, and lengthen)  
(right hand in original key)  
Recapitulation in original key  
(both voices below the accompaniment)

phrygian cadence in Db  
repetition of cadence  
(6 quarter-notes apart, and lengthen more)  
(exceptional transposition of motif)

(emphasis on Ab in accompaniment generates subtle perfect 4th (V-I) relationship when cadencing in Db)