Samsara

Samsara, for string quartet, is the combination of a number of musical ambitions of mine, and is the first stage in the development of a larger scale work which I intend to complete during the third year of my degree. Samsara is a word from the Sanskrit language used in the Buddhist and Hindu religions to denote the concept essential to both of 'cyclic existence' (Rahula 1959, p. 146), and my ambition is to take the principles of this concept and apply them to a piece of music. Proponents of these religions use Samsara foremost to describe a perpetual cycle of death and rebirth, but importantly also apply it across a wider range of scales, both larger and smaller (from the moment-to-moment level to the lifespan of the universe), and as such I have attempted to make as many features of the piece 'circular' as possible.

Another ambition of mine, as outlined in the learning contract I wrote at the beginning of the academic year, was to explore the compositional technique of the 20th Century composer Josef Hauer (1883-1959), who developed a method of twelve-tone composition shortly before the more successful Arnold Schoenberg but has largely been forgotten by music history. It was during research into this subject that I saw the potential of Hauer's method to bring my Samsara idea to life, since it by nature allows for a structure which it is possible to repeat *ad infinitum*. Starting with a tone row, the compositional process begins by partitioning the twelve tones into four trichordal voices (Covach 1992, p. 154). Each note appears in its assigned registral spot, and is displaced when the next note of the same register is reached in the row. Following the row through in its entirety brings the sequence back to the original chord, creating a loop of sorts. Hauer termed this sequence a *Kontinuum*,

and is the foundation of the composition to follow. My tone row and *Kontinuum* are as follows:

Tone row:
C, C#, G, A, G#, F#, D#, Bb, D, F, B, E

Fig. 1: Tone row and resulting *Kontinuum* used for Samsara

This *Kontinuum* is the basis of the first section of the piece (bb. 1-14). Note that this chord is built with the pitch classes {0, 1, 2} in the lower voice and {9, t, e} on top. The following three sections are generated using Hauer's technique of re-voicing the chord by moving the lowest voice to the top - an inversion of sorts - and after the halfway mark (b. 57) the *Kontinuum* is retrograded with the inversions descending back down to the original voicing. The overall shape, then, is of the music rising up until the halfway point and then descending back down to the both the register and harmony which began the piece, which, coupled with the harmonic sequences of each section, make the piece circular on two levels.

My smallest scale circles occur at the bar-to-bar level, which each consist of an arpeggio of a single chord (each bar contains one note change). Hauer keeps to his total submission to the tone row by deriving rhythms and accompaniment from it too, and I opted to use the information provided by the location of each new tone in relation to the one which preceded it to generate rhythmic detail. Where two changes happen in the same voice sequentially, the chord is struck *tutti* on the first quaver of a 6/8 bar, followed by a six-note arpeggio. Where changes occur in adjacent voices,

an arpeggio with two quavers played by each member of the ensemble either on the way up or down depending on whether the new tone was above or below its predecessor, where there is a voice between two changes three notes are played either on the way up or down, and so forth. In terms of dynamics, the piece begins *pianissimo*, climbs to *fortissimo* at the midway point and recedes up until the end, which is its final circular feature.

I envision the final product as being made of twelve sections. The number twelve is significant first of all to my concept, and secondly to my compositional method: in the Buddhist canon, the concept of Samsara is commonly associated with a text in which the perceived cyclic nature of existence is explained as being the result of a sequence of twelve *Nidānas* (causes or sources) (Harvey 2015, p. 47). As well as this, there are of course twelve notes with which to organise, and I hypothesise that I will make a larger scale structure possible by applying the *Kontinuum* principles to the row itself, removing the notion of a beginning and ending and making for a potentially infinite cyclic piece of music. Before this, I will need to gain a better understanding of the technique. As of present, the only feature I was able to control with the row was the 'trajectory' of each arpeggio, but I hope that creating better rules will make it possible to govern much more. My method does not yet yield results which are musically interesting enough to sustain interest over a longer period of time, but further experimentation and research may make this possible.

Bibliography

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