Robert Morris – "Book Review" – take 2

Having obtained a copy of Robert Morris's *Composition with Pitch-Classes*, a short review is now possible. As the book's title implies, a good deal of the text is devoted to giving examples of methods by which composers may write music. As opposed to the traditional "bottom-up" technique of explaining composition through a list of rules, tips, and tricks, Morris instead prefers a "top-down" approach, whereby he presents "compositional designs" that represent the "abstract, uninterpreted composition of pitch-classes" (Morris 3). Almost the entire sixth chapter (out of seven total) is dedicated to eight samples of such compositional designs. The preceding five chapters develop the conceptual world out of which these compositional designs derive, and it is in these chapters that a theoretician would find information of interest.

In fact, according to Morris himself, the book has four main concerns, three of which seem to relate directly to music theory. These three concerns are "(1) how pitch-class entities are related to pitch and other dimensions of music; (2) the kinds of hearable relations that obtain among pitch-classes; [and] (3) building arrays of pitches that function as compositional designs" (Morris xii). By addressing these concerns, the book ostensibly "consolidates previously unconnected work in pitch-class set theory, 12-tone composition, and general equal-tempered systems" (Roeder 240). An early topic in the book involves the differentiation of Contour-space, Pitch-space, and Pitch-class space. Of those terms, Contour-space was the most unfamiliar to me, although the concept is fairly simple and refers just to the general shape or "contour" of the music, such as whether notes are higher, lower, or equal to one another.

By Chapter Three, Morris has introduced "TTOs", the term being an abbreviation of "Twelve-Tone Operators". With this term, Morris groups together the four common operations of T_n, T_nI, T_nM, and T_nMI. The use of the term "TTO" throughout the text to describe these basic operations ties in to a criticism that a few theoreticians have leveled at the work, namely the overuse of abbreviations. John Peel and John Roeder, for example, both give such criticism in their reviews of the text. Another common complaint of reviewers, one that harkens back to my concerns over error detection in atonal analysis in my previous review, is of the book's high preponderance of errors. Peel opines that the "material is too complex and too rich in musical potential for us to founder in the formalism of a derivation, in mathematical notational ambiguities, or in computational and typographic errors" (413).

Chapter Four delves deeper into the powers of TTOs, and it is here that Morris starts to bridge his theory with his compositional designs. The discussion of two-dimensional arrays of pitch-classes in Chapter Five really seems to more fully make this transition and set-ups the formal discussion of compositional designs in the following chapter. But although Morris puts forth a lot compositional theory, the book does not show many if any musical examples. Similarly, "analysis in the sense of being the reverse process of composition is...not addressed by the book" (Solomon 94). Thus, if one can get through the "vast profusion of jargon, abbreviations, and buzzwords" (Roeder 240) contained in the higher mathematics of the book, one may gain insights to compositional techniques, but it is left to the reader to deduce their application in a completed piece of music.

WORKS CITED

Morris, Robert D. *Composition with Pitch-Classes*. New Haven, NH: Yale University, 1987.
Peel, John. Rev. of *CWPC*, by Robert D. Morris. *Journal of Music Theory* 33.2 (1989): 400-16.
Roeder, John. Rev. of *CWPC*, by Robert D. Morris. *Music Theory Spectrum* 11.2 (1989): 240-51.
Solomon, Bryan. Rev. of *CWPC*, by Robert D. Morris. *Music Analysis* 9.1 (1990): 88-95.