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Tonality and Neoclassicism in Stravinsky's *Sonata for Piano, Mvt. 2* (1924)

ABSTRACT: Igor Stravinsky's *Sonata for Piano* is an often overlooked yet important artifact of the composer's neoclassicism. His treatment of tonality in the second movement is both literally and aurally more conventional than one might first guess. Stravinsky's reliance on convention points to an ideology of continuity, one that honors the legacy of Beethoven and other heroes. In doing so, Stravinsky's *Sonata* brings forward old ideas wrought in new ways for a modern era. This essay examines ways of thinking about Stravinsky's neoclassic style through analysis of the second movement of the *Sonata* focusing on the use of post-tonal techniques to create surprisingly tonal music.

KEYWORDS: Neoclassicism, Modernism, 20 th century, piano, tonality

In his *Sonata for Piano* (1924), Igor Stravinsky created a solo work that is at once old and new, the embodiment of neoclassicism. The *Sonata* often maintains a sense of tonality despite moments where Stravinsky characteristically explores non-tonal material. The second movement is particularly interesting in this regard. In this essay, I examine this movement at length with a focus on Stravinsky's use of post-tonal techniques to create surprisingly tonal music.

I. Introduction

In describing the surface characteristics of *Pulcinella*, a work that is considered Stravinsky's first work in the vein of neoclassicism, Joseph Straus identifies a series of sonorities with "wrong notes" added "beneath the surface" of the functional harmony (1986, 314). Furthermore, "the wrong notes are added in such a consistent fashion that a new source of unification emerges superimposed on the old one... [in that] Stravinsky creates a small number of new, nontriadic harmonies which he uses throughout the entire suite" (ibid.). Straus concludes:

This results in a composition with two layers of structure, one based on traditional tonal relations and one based on recurring motivic structure or pitch-class sets. The tonal layer influences the motivic layer by providing material for it. At the same time, the presence of the motivic layer results in a reinterpretation of the tonal layer, and traditional formations come to be heard in a novel way (1986, 319).

In other words, Straus perceives the music of *Pulcinella* as occupying two conceptual planes—one old and tonal, the other new and non-tonal. It is this play between old and new that is at the heart of neoclassic style. However, this characterization is problematic (even in our most sensitive treatments of neoclassicism) in that it potentially removes creative agency by suggesting a compositional personality that consists largely of systematic borrowing and alteration rather than original musical thought.

How then can we use musical evidence to move beyond an old-new dialectic inherent in neoclassic definitions? For Stravinsky, neoclassic composition seems to be bound up in notions of continuity in relation to heroic models, especially Beethoven. While composing his *Sonata for Piano* (1924), Stravinsky recalls studying Beethoven's piano scores:

Though determined to retain full liberty in composing this work, I had... a strong desire to examine more closely the sonatas of the classical masters in order to trace the direction and development of their thought in the solution of the problems presented by that form. I therefore replayed, among others, a great many of Beethoven's sonatas... Above all, I recognized in him the indisputable monarch of the [piano]. It is the instrument that inspires his thought and determines its substance. The relations of a composer to his sound medium may be of two kinds. Some, for example compose music *for* the piano; others compose *piano music*. Beethoven is clearly in the second category (Stravinsky 1962, 115–16).

Stravinsky claimed to appreciate Beethoven's music without being swayed by the composer's imposing historical presence. Stravinsky apparently did not allow himself to be distracted by the legendary figure of Beethoven: "What does it matter whether the *Third Symphony* was inspired by the figure of Bonaparte the Republican or Napoleon the Emperor? It is only the music that matters" (1962, 117). It is interesting to speculate on Stravinsky's words here, especially in light of reactions to his neoclassic idiom. Contrary to "respectable (i.e. progressive)" criticism of the seemingly backward step that neoclassicism apparently meant for musical development, Stravinsky was confident that "a composer [could] reuse the past and at the same time move in a forward direction" (Griffiths 1982, 2). The ensuing debates over his revival of past musical techniques were for Stravinsky a nuisance that drew attention away from the music itself. It would certainly not be surprising if Stravinsky saw in Beethoven some reflection of himself. Consider Stravinsky's admonishment toward contemporary critics of Beethoven:

It is in the quality of his musical material and not in the nature of his ideas that his true greatness lies. It is time that this was recognized, and Beethoven was rescued from the unjustifiable monopoly of the 'intellectuals' and left to those who seek in music for nothing but music. It is, however, also time—and this is perhaps even more urgent—to protect him from the stupidity

and drivell of fools who think it up to date to giggle as they amuse themselves by running him down (1962, 117–18).

These “intellectuals,” it might be guessed, were of the same ilk that criticized Stravinsky's turn to classic models. The “recomposition” that Strauss treats with academic neutrality as discussed above was at the time regarded as outdated, a vestige of the past. Stravinsky's frustrated but steadfast defense of Beethoven, then, should also be recognized as a defense of his own work. The second movement of Stravinsky's *Sonata*, for example, is particularly inspired by Beethoven. Michael Steinberg notes that the Adagietto resembles slow movements of Beethoven's sonatas, especially Opus 10, No. 1, Opus 22, and Opus 31, No. 1 (1986). Yet, the sonata is more than just a “recomposition” of Beethoven. Stravinsky creates in the *Sonata* music for the present, not the past, using both tonal and non-tonal elements.

Stravinsky was known to compose at the piano, yet his works for the instrument are relatively few and largely produced in the 1920s. His *Concerto for Piano* (1924), *Sonata for Piano* (1924), and *Serenade in La* (1925) were completed in rapid succession during a particularly creative period. To understand the impact of Stravinsky's piano writing, however, it is important to understand his status as a composer in the early 20th century. With *L'Oiseau de Feu* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911), and *La Sacre du Printemps* (1913) coming in the 1910s, Stravinsky became a household name. Up until the 1920s, however, Stravinsky's public appearances were most often those in which he was conducting and rarely as a performer. Stravinsky biographer Charles Joseph suggests the composer wrote the piano compositions for himself, at Koussevitzky's urging, in part to satisfy the public's yearning to see the composer performing on stage (1983, 162). Indeed, Stravinsky's piano performances in the 1920s were big events, though often received with a mix of fascination and confusion, as Eric Walter White recalls.

One day I noticed Stravinsky's name on a poster advertising an orchestral concert to be conducted by Serge Koussevitzky at the Opera House [in Paris] on 22nd May [1924], and I bought a ticket immediately. The programme consisted solely of Stravinsky's works and I found that *Petrushka* made just as immediate an impact on me as *The Firebird* had done a few months earlier; but when we came to the *pièce de résistance*, which was the première of the new Piano Concerto with the composer himself as soloist, I felt somewhat baffled. I was fascinated by his appearance and performance... [yet] I found his neo-classical idiom strange and upsetting, and I was not at all sure how to relate this Concerto to the earlier ballet scores (1967, 32).

Though *Pulcinella* had come nearly five years before White's hearing of the *Concerto*, it seems to have been his first encounter with Stravinsky's neoclassicism. Despite White's fascination with the composer's performance and stage presence, his thoughts on the *Concerto* border on contempt. Where Paris had reacted with disgust at the premiere of *La Sacre* in 1913, they seemed now to want more of the same and responded with ironic bewilderment when their expectations were dashed less than a decade later. If the *Concerto* was the public's inauguration to Stravinsky's neoclassic pianism, then the *Sonata* undoubtedly represents the composer's commitment to writing for piano in a neoclassic idiom.

II. Analysis

Completed in October 1924 very soon after the *Concerto's* Paris premiere, the three-part *Sonata* is a comparatively smaller work but no less important in gauging Stravinsky's neoclassic ideology. Charles Joseph provides a definitive analysis of the *Sonata*, commenting extensively on the invention-like structure and octotonicism of the first and third movements but making no significant mention of the second movement (1983). In dialogue with Joseph's work, I examine the second movement at length in this essay. Where the outer movements are characterized by arpeggio-driven rhythmic figures, the Adagietto is lyrical and ornamented. Though there are certainly some "wrong notes," as Straus might describe them, these seem less obvious here than in the outer movements. Indeed, the most striking characteristic of the inner movement is its sense of tonality.

Structurally, the movement is organized around the variation, quasi-development, and return of thematic material, resulting in an asymmetrically ternary form (A¹, A², B, A³).¹ Variants of thematic material appear first in measures 1–6, then again in measures 7–12, which is followed by an extended section of new material. The final variant follows in abbreviated form in measures 40–41 whereupon new but related material replaces the remainder of the original melody until a final cadence on A^b, the principal tonality of the movement.

The decidedly modern deployment of harmonic structure in the *Sonata* is important in understanding the process of Stravinsky's neoclassicism. The overall harmonic motion of the first six measures of the movement is I–V⁺⁷–vii^o leading to I in measure 7. Though this is a rather conventional progression, the process of harmonic motion leading to these important points is unique. Measure 1 features an arpeggio of A^b Major in the left hand. This supports the melody beginning on C and leading to a trill on A^b in measure 2, at which point the harmony moves to vii⁷. This leads to an interesting F⁷ sonority on beat 3. Though the left hand indicates an A^{o7} sonority, the right hand outlines C-minor followed by

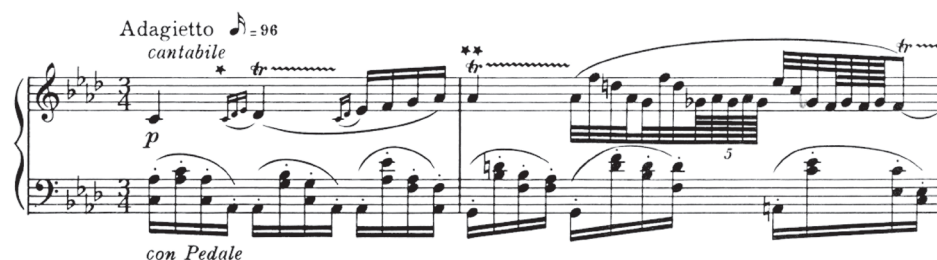


Figure 1. *Sonata for Piano*, II: m. 1–2

¹ Here I use the term "thematic material" to connote the return of certain melodic and harmonic elements, though the entire set of material is never repeated in the two variations.

an emphasis on F. These collective elements thus indicate an F⁷ sonority whose effect proceeds through beat 1 of measure 3 (Fig. 1).² Interesting also in measure 3 is the sequential motive on beat 2 that mimics the left-hand accompaniment. This pattern will return throughout the movement, most notably in the middle of the development.

Of the “wrong notes” in measure 3, some are simply passing tones. However, the G^b in the highest voice is much too prominent to be written off as such. I suggest the F⁷ functions as a secondary dominant of B^b, which occurs on beat 2. In this context, the resolution of G^b to F helps emphasize the fifth of B^b (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. *Sonata for Piano*, II: m. 3

A similar though decidedly more complex pattern emerges between beats 2 and 3 of the same measure. Here too are several non-chord tones on beat 2, many of which can be explained as passing tones. However, the E^b in the highest voice on the second half of the beat deserves some attention. However, before addressing it, notice beat 3. Here the right-hand run is telling: it begins with a D-B^b-G descending arpeggio then continues upward in stepwise motion passing again through B^b before reaching its peak on B^b, then turning downward to C, then upward toward B^b once again. Though the left-hand harmony indicates nothing more than a iii⁷ harmony, its first inversion puts E^b in the bass. This E^b coupled with the B^b in the first part of the melodic run functions as V⁺⁷. Though this sonority lasts for the space of only one sixteenth note, it is long enough to achieve a sense of arrival, one which is delicately undermined by the emergence of a iii⁷ harmony for the rest of beat 3. The dominant function here is further supported by the aforementioned E^b in the highest voice at the end of beat 2 which indicates motion to V, just as the G^b on beat 1 indicated a harmonic motion to B^b. In sum, the first three measures feature a harmonic chain of events that leads from I to V⁺⁷, clearly establishing a tonal center for the rest of the movement.

The harmonic stability established in the first three measures is soon obscured via a series of melodic sequences accompanied by a faster harmonic rhythm from the end of measure 4 through the beginning of measure 5. However, the movement from vii⁰ to I in measures 6 and 7 reaffirms A^b as tonic and sets up the first return of thematic material.

² All musical examples from Igor Stravinsky and Soulima Stravinsky, *Sonata: Piano Solo* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1980).

This return, however, is far from an exact repetition. The most striking difference here is Stravinsky's transformation of motives and characteristic intervals from various parts of measures 1–6 into several short sections of new material. Measure 7 is a slightly varied iteration of material from measure 1, featuring increased rhythmic activity and an additional line in the right hand at a third above the original melody. This leads to new melodic material from measure 8 through beat 2 of measure 9, yet the harmonic language remains very much the same.

The grace notes on beats 2 and 3 of measure 8 feature many of the same intervals (with some in inversion) as those of the melodic line from measure 2, suggesting both a conceptual and aural connection between these two points in the music. Most importantly in measure 8, however, is the F⁷ harmony on beat 3, the same position it occupied in measure 2 (where I suggested it acted as a secondary dominant of B \flat). In contrast to its initial iteration, the following measure here features a predominately vii⁷ harmony, yet with a B \flat -F dyad on beat 1 (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. *Sonata for Piano, II*: 7–10

The prominence of B \flat in measure 9 does not end there: B \flat appears throughout beat 1 in the right hand, at the end of beat 2 in the left hand, sounds as the highest note in five successive sets of grace notes on beats 2 and 3, and also appears as the highest two notes within the thematic sequence on beat 3 (which is reiterated a seventh up from the original material in measure 2) (Fig. 3).

The emphasis on B \flat concludes on beat 3 of measure 10. As discussed above, V $^{+7}$ immediately preceded iii 7 in measure 3 acting as the beneficiary of the B \flat secondary dominant. Here in measure 9, Stravinsky retains the emphasis on B \flat as well as the iii 7 , yet the V $^{+7}$ is missing because of the absence of the E \flat . Thanks to this somewhat familiar harmonic movement—and to the familiarity of the new music drawn from previous material—these measures sound as a variant of the initial thematic material.



Figure 4. *Sonata for Piano, II: 10–12*

The last beat of measure 10 features a transposed reiteration—with some important differences—of the last beat of measure 3 (Fig. 4). I have already pointed out the most obvious difference here, namely that this bit of material is displaced by a full measure from its initial thematic context. It is additionally sounded a fifth above the original, a pitch level achieved via transitional material (drawn from measure 2) beginning at the end of measure 9 that moves from C-minor to D o7 to A 7 . This A 7 acts as a leading sonority to B \flat , which occurs at the beginning of beat 3. Just as the E \flat^{+7} sonority functioned as a fleeting point of arrival in measure 2, here too B \flat satisfies a certain degree of harmonic tension given the emphasis on B \flat in the previous two measures.

From here, new material fills the last two measures of the repeat of this thematic material (again using intervals and rhythmic elements drawn from measures 1–6), with beats 2 and 3 of measure 12 featuring movement toward E-minor, the opening sonority of the development section. The harmonic language here (B \flat -octatonic to bii-iv-ii o7 -VII) reflects the tonal effect of a number of major- and minor-second intervals (Fig. 4). Indeed both major- and minor-seconds are very common throughout the first section of this movement.

In addition, the importance of major and minor triads—and to a lesser extent diminished and augmented triads—is also evident. This is perhaps most conspicuous throughout the left-hand accompaniment, yet triadic harmonies also often occur within motivic structures—as in beats 2 and 3 of measure 2 (Fig. 1)—or sequential structures such as those in measure 4 (Fig. 5). Here, three different sequential patterns feature triadic construction on beats 2 and 3.

Figure 5. *Sonata for Piano*, II: m. 4

This balance of seconds and triads establishes a decidedly tonal effect, with movements by half steps helping to smooth out dissonances in voice leading while triadic harmonies contribute to a sense of conventional musical structure despite the decidedly non-conventional harmonic progression. Additionally, Stravinsky's use of tonic-dominant relationships early on gives an impression of tonality that characterizes the non-developmental sections of the movement. It is when these relationships are obscured, and especially when seconds outnumber triads, that the music begins to lose its tonal center. The development, for example, features extended periods without clearly defined triadic harmony while major- and minor-seconds abound. Therefore, it is expectedly the least tonal area of the movement.

The development is introduced via a harmonic movement from a B \flat octatonic harmony on beat 1 of measure 12, to D at the end of measure 12, then to E-minor at the beginning of measure 13. I analyze this sonority as E-minor despite G sounding simultaneously with the E in the melody line. An alternate analysis would obviously be G-minor here, which would make sense coming from a D-Major sonority. This would also help explain the presence of B \natural in this measure. However, I suggest E-minor given the overall tonal characteristics of the movement. E is the flat-fifth of A \flat , the principal tonality of the movement, just as B \flat is the flat-fifth of E. The prevalence of B \flat sonorities throughout the first section thus prepares the listener for movement toward E.

The development is broken into three lines: melody on top, a major/minor second motive in the middle, and an accompaniment featuring octave doublings on the bottom. Formally, the development is further divided into three sections each characterized by a distinctive texture. Section one features octaves in the bass on beats 1 and 2; section two differs only in that the bass

line morphs into a pattern similar to that of the left-hand accompaniment from the opening of the movement and the sequential pattern in measure 2; and the third section features the disappearance of the octave doublings in the bass accompanied by the addition of thirds to both the remaining lines. Figures 6–8 contain two measures of each section of the development as examples of these textures.

= ♩ Doppio movimento
il canto poco marc.
 5-4
 *
p molto ritmico

Figure 6. *Sonata for Piano, II*: 13–14

Figure 7. *Sonata for Piano, II*: 22–23

f

Figure 8. *Sonata for Piano, II*: 32–33

As mentioned above, major- and minor-seconds play an important role in the development. The middle line features sharply articulated thirty-second-note duplets throughout the development, only twice featuring a leap greater than a major-second. I suggest the close intervals of this middle line are drawn from (or at least recall) the close intervals of certain parts of the opening of the movement, particularly those from beats 1 and 2 of measure 3.

Upon first hearing, the upper melody line sounds somewhat tonal, though clearly not centered on any certain pitch until measure 25 and then only briefly. This effect is achieved largely via the use of numerous minor-seconds and major-sevenths. Where the melodic line of the opening of the movement often outlines triadic constructions, the upper line of the development reveals a dearth of triadic harmony. Though triads are sometimes outlined, they are few and often obscured within disjunct movement.

In the bass line, the only interval larger than a major-second occurs in measure 23 where the imitation of the opening left hand accompaniment begins, ending five measures later. It is significant here that this particular pattern occasionally features leaps of thirds and fifths as well as major- and minor-seconds and coincides with the point at which the development sounds most tonal in measures 23–28.

After one full measure of C followed by a measure of D \flat an octave above, the melody begins sounding the pitch C (an octave above middle C) for 1½ beats for three consecutive measures, finally landing on an E-C dyad in measure 28. Arranged in the interval of a minor-sixth, this dyad sounds as an island of tonality against a sea of major- and minor-second movement in the middle line. This entire section is accompanied in the left hand by a pattern similar to that first heard in measure 1. It is difficult to explain the emphasis on C here, given the overall tonal center of A \flat , yet the intention is clear. The accompaniment recalls the tonal character of the opening of the movement, a notion that is supported by this brief tonality.

The E-C dyad in measure 28 triggers a change in texture beginning in measure 29. From here, the bottom line disappears, and both hands begin movement in parallel thirds (and sometimes sixths). As the development draws to a close, the built-up thirds in the bass line are reduced to single-note duplets again, as in the opening section of the development. This concludes with a G-A \sharp thirty-second note duplet. This abrupt stop is followed by one sixteenth-note rest before proceeding to the third iteration of thematic material beginning in measure 40.

Measures 40–41 are an exact repeat of measure 1–2 indicating a recapitulation of sorts, though clearly not a formal one. There is again emphasis on B \flat , especially in measure 42. Here too in the third measure of thematic material, F 7 is carried over from the last beat of the second measure. Above the left-hand accompaniment figure, Stravinsky now adds a B \flat -minor run in the right hand, which leads to strong B \flat harmonies on beats 2 and 3 (Fig. 9). This is the first time in three statements of the thematic material that B \flat has been so overtly stated in this position.



Figure 9. *Sonata for Piano*, II: m. 40–43

From here, elements introduced in the development begin replacing thematic material. This is particularly evident beginning in measure 44. Here the right hand features movement in parallel sixths with the left hand moving in close counterpoint. This counterpoint at the end of measure 44 features a line distanced only by the interval of a second from the top voice (Fig. 10).



Figure 10. *Sonata for Piano*, II: m. 44

Another interesting aspect of this section is the asymmetry of the left and right hands. Phrases here begin to extend over barlines, a displacement that Stravinsky realigns by inserting a bar of 3/8 at measure 47 (Fig. 11).

Figure 11. *Sonata for Piano, II*: 45–48

The subsequent bass line remains decidedly tonal, with the left hand outlining a number of triadic harmonies. The tonal effect of the right hand, however, obscures these triads with parallel sixths and thirds. However, from measure 50 to the end Stravinsky uses a motion by half-step to maintain a sense of tonality while remaining non-tonal throughout. The first of these occurs at the end of measure 50. Here B \flat in the inner voice resolves to B $\flat\flat$, the enharmonic fifth of the F sonority it creates. The first beat of measure 51 features a similar movement to E \flat with A moving to G in the inner voice. Finally, G $^{\circ}$ is formed on beat 2 of measure 52, here with both the bass and inner voice descending from C and E \flat to B \flat and D \flat , respectively, while G is maintained in the upper voice. This forms a vii $^{\circ}$ sonority that moves via a triplet run to A \flat in root position. Thus ends the second movement.

III. Conclusion

Viewed from a purely analytical perspective, Stravinsky used a decidedly unconventional means of achieving tonality, one that is full of “wrong notes” though nonetheless maintains a perceptible tonal center. This tonal sense is only in part produced through progression away from and back to tonic. Also important are the balance, imbalance, and re-balance of close intervals (particularly major- and minor-seconds) and triadic constructions.

The non-developmental sections of the second movement of the *Sonata* are characterized by triadic constructions with at times heavy ornamentation in the

right hand. These ornaments often serve to obscure the relatively stable harmony that is created in the left hand. Stravinsky's works are known for layers of tonality, yet I feel that this movement cannot be neatly explained in this manner. Though left-hand sonorities often form a foundation upon which the right hand becomes tonally detached, many of the "wrong notes" can be explained by stretching but not breaking the rules of conventional harmony. This is very often manifest in unconventional voice leading that foreshadows important harmonic moments in the movement.

Stravinsky's obstruction of tonality in the development is also important. This middle section is distinct from the outer sections of the movement thanks to an emphasis on motion by seconds in the middle line, a disjunct melody that sometimes outlines major and minor triads, a lack of functional harmony, and a lack of ornamentation that is so prominent in the non-developmental material. The three-part texture of the development is also revealing. Where the bottom two lines most often move by close, often chromatic intervals, the melody line is the most disjunct element of the entire movement, sometimes sounding intervals as large as a major-seventh. It is the imbalance of close intervals and their inversions over triadic functional harmony that makes the development feel so off-balance in a tonal sense.

In the end, the *Sonata* is an often overlooked yet important artifact of Stravinsky's neoclassicism. His treatment of tonality in the second movement is both literally and aurally more conventional than one might first guess. Moreover, this reliance on convention points to a continuity that honors the legacy of Beethoven and other heroes. Yet, Stravinsky's *Sonata* and other neoclassic works could scarcely be regarded as mere copies of classic models. Rather, his music brings forward old ideas wrought in new ways for a modern era.

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