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Narrativity in Thomas Adès's *Ecstasio*

One of the most consistent features in reviews of *Asyla* (1997), a four-movement work for orchestra by the British composer Thomas Adès, is the impact of the third movement, *Ecstasio*. In a manner similar to the scherzo of a nineteenth-century symphony, *Ecstasio* draws on contemporary dance music to provide a repertory of musical gestures and topics, and it is on this aspect that commentators have focused. For Mathias Tarnopolsky, who wrote the work's first programme note, „«Ecstasio» (…) is inspired by the insistent rhythms of club music and has a very primeval feel"[1]; Paul Driver, writing for the *Sunday Times*, felt that the „mind-blowing, unforgiving beat" contributed to the „lurid, deafening re-creation" of electronic dance music[2]; and for Andrew Clark, the third movement was at its heart a „freaky, funky rave"[3].

Despite the immediate international success of *Asyla*, critical discussion regarding *Ecstasio* has rarely questioned the manner in which dance gestures have been appropriated; such gestures have been considered to be transparent and self-evident. One possible reason for this may be that literature about electronic dance music tends to focus on the sociological, cultural and technological aspects of the medium, rather than the „notes themselves". For critics working within the score-based Western art music tradition, the deceptive simplicity of dance music and the relative unfamiliarity of the technological and cultural practices that shape it act as barriers towards interpretation.

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[1] M. Tarnopolsky, programme note to *Asyla*, first performance Faber Music, 1997.
[2] P. Driver, *A new spin on the cycle*, „The Sunday Times", 12 October 1997.
[3] A. Clark, *Adès delights the ear*, „Financial Times", 3 October 1997.

There are further reasons why commentators have responded as they have, not least due to the composer's stated inspiration for the movement. Of *Ecstasio*, Adès has said that he

> noticed that in dance music today that things are repeated 8, 16, 32, 64 times – it's very powerful indeed. It has an effect over huge crowds of people, it creates a convulsion in a crowd which is a very important discovery (…) and [he] wanted to use it in a big movement. Its ecstasy [Ecstasy?] but it's also threatening and vertiginous[4].

In speaking of the power of these gestures, and by referring to the crowd, Adès chooses to emphasise the collective over the individual. From this perspective, dance music might be felt to share with minimalism those musical processes in which

> neither listener nor composer [can] express themselves in a proper sense, [subordinating] themselves to the power of the music and to experience ecstasy by merging with it. When listening to [or dancing to such] processes, one attends an emancipatory, impersonal ritual. Such processes leave no room for mental improvisation[5].

In other words, dance music, like minimalism, offers very little scope for modalization, and thus for narrative interpretation. With no opportunity for „mental improvisation", critics might be forgiven for their superficial treatment of the movement.

The motivation for this present study comes from my own experiences of listening to *Ecstasio*, for my responses seem to me to be far less unambiguous than those of the commentators. Although I can of course hear the explicit topical references, it seems to me that there are at least two different sets of musical processes set in motion, only one of which corresponds to that of electronic dance music. The other might broadly be termed „symphonic", for in its four-movement design, *Asyla* appears to toy with symphonic archetypes of both form and process. It is through the interaction between these processes, and between the emergent states of „being" and „doing", that the scope for narrative interpretation is made possible. In outlining a narrative, I contend that one can better understand the semio-musical structures that give *Ecstasio* its unique character, and through this move beyond the simplistic descriptions that have been attached to the movement to date.

1.

Drawing on the work of Eero Tarasti, my account of *Ecstasio* is based upon the principle that narration is impossible without modalization[6]; indeed, I shall show that the presence of the „symphonic" voice is a necessary condition for making narrative in the structural sense possible at all in this movement. Although my account will fall short of a formalised grammar of modalities, the categories of „being" and „doing", and the tran-

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[4] T. Adès, *Music for the 21st* Century. Produced and directed by Gerald Fox (LWT 1999), included as a bonus feature on the 2005 DVD release of Adès's *Powder her Face* (Digital Classics DC 10002).

[5] E. Tarasti, paraphrasing Steve Reich, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1994, p. 279.

[6] *Ibidem*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

sitions between them, will be critical in my enterprise[7]. More specifically, I shall explore the ways in which a subject and object emerges from the musical discourse, and by looking at how the former can be considered to be conjuncted to or disjuncted from the latter, I will touch on what is fundamental to „the basic activity of any narration"[8].

Despite the importance of the symphonic voice, the dominant isotope of *Ecstasio* is undoubtedly that of dance music; the commentary on the movement cited above clearly supports this observation. A reasonable first step in an analysis would therefore be to ask what potential there would be for segmenting the movement based on this isotope, ignoring for now the presence of the symphonic voice. Tarasti has noted that „some genres or form types (…) can function as «ready-made» contexts, which filter an immediate musical experience into a form and offer a self-evident isotopy for sound events"[9]. That dance types can be considered an isotopy is clear from, for example, Tarasti's analysis of the opening theme of Beethoven's Op. 109 in terms of the sarabande and his discussion of the waltz in his analysis of Chopin's Ballade in G minor[10]. The possibility of electronic dance music providing such a „ready-made context" for analysts has been heightened and enabled by a growing number of studies from the perspective of a competent listener which together are establishing a repertory of what might be considered normative dance gestures[11]. Informing this study is the branch of discourse about electronic dance music that Tarasti labels „technological"[12], embodied in particular by the models advocated by Rick Snowman in his *Dance Music Manual: Tools, Toys and Techniques*[13].

The formal structure of *Ecstasio* strongly suggests that Adès was thinking in terms of dance music rather than more traditional symphonic archetypes. The normative dance track as explicated by Snowman is intimately bound to the function and desired affect of the music, and can be characterised by a series of sections increasing in kinetic energy, followed by „drops" in intensity[14]. The introduction and codas are relatively neutral, to allow for the seamless mixing of tracks over one another. Phrase lengths tend to be 2, 4 or 8 bars long, with 8 or 16 bars (32 or 64 crotchets) being the norm.

There are significant correspondences between *Ecstasio* and this kinetic model. Table One offers an overview of the form of *Ecstasio*, using the peaks and troughs of

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[7] *Ibidem*, p. 22.

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 106.

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 8-9.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 9 and pp. 154-180.

[11] For instance: H.S. Reynolds, *Energy Flash: A Journey through Rave Music and Dance Culture*, Picador, London 1998; P. Tagg, *From Refrain to Rave: The Decline of Figure and the Rise of Ground*. „Popular Music" 1994, nr 13 (2), p. 209-222; M. Butler, *Turning the Beat Around: Reinterpretation, Metrical Dissonance, and Asymmetry in Electronic Dance Music*, „Music Theory Online" 2001, nr 7 (6), http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.01.7.6/mto.01.7.6.butler.html and M. Butler, *Hearing Kaleidoscopes: Embedded Grouping Dissonance in Electronic Dance Music*, „twentieth-century music" 2005, nr 2 (2), p. 221-243.

[12] E. Tarasti, *op. cit.*, p. 16-17.

[13] R. Snowman, *The Dance Music Manual: Tools, Toys and Techniques*, Focal Press, Oxford, 2004.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 48. There is a connection between this and Kurth's notion of the *Bewegungsphase* (discussed by Tarasti in *A Theory of Musical Semiotics*, p. 100). In Tarasti's formulation, the composer interrupts the *Bewegungsphase* „for a more narratively effective point". As we shall see in my analysis of *Ecstasio*, the formal divisions I have suggested do indeed articulate clear sections in the unfolding narrative.

its kinetic energy as a guide to segmentation; the labelling of sections (A1, A2 etc.) was determined by motivic content[15]. Comparison between section lengths and the „normative" length (derived from Snowman) reveals minimal metric alterations that subvert the normative phrase length, and a coda that in comparison is overly long and complex. As will be shown, on the local level, there are frequent disruptions and contradictions that do not show up in a synoptic overview that suggest a more complex engagement with the normative models. It is my contention that such disruptions are created by the „symphonic voice", and it is through these that deeper narrative structures emerge.

Table 1. Formal overview of *Ecstasio*

Bars	Section	Length (in crotchets)	"Normative" Length (in crotchets)	Recording Timings		
				A	B	C
1-24	Introduction	94 ½	96	0.00 – 0.45	29.11 – 29.55	13.10 – 13.55
25-83	Section A1	189 ⅔	192	0.45 – 2.23	29.55 – 31.35	13.55 – 15.38
84-115	Section A2	124 ⅓	128	2.23 – 3.23	31.35 – 32.34	15.38 – 16.40
116-148	Section B	130 ½	128	3.23 – 4.22	32.34 – 33.33	16.40 – 17.42
149-172	Section C	93	96	4.22 – 5.04	33.33 – 34.14	17.42 – 18.26
173-221	Coda	151 ⅓	–	5.04 – 6.21	34.14 – 35.30	18.26 – 19.46

The Introduction to *Ecstasio* demonstrates how the musical surface pulls against the expectations generated by the topical background. The section is built up from overlapping material: pairs of tenths (A-flat to C; G-flat to B) alternate every two bars; an eleven-bar pedal C-sharp (D-flat) is introduced in the second bar and repeated in bar 13; and the fourth bar sees the introduction of an oscillation between E and E-flat, each held for four bars. All of this occurs in the upper registers of the orchestra (outer spatiality) which implies a lack (the bass) to be filled later. Although the harmonic motion establishes a slow pulse, the beginning is both temporally and spatially „disengaged"[16];

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[15] Bar numbers refer to the published score (Faber Music Ltd., 1997). Timings given in the table and elsewhere in the text refer to three recorded performances of the work. The recordings are as follows: A: Sir Simon Rattle (cond.), City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (EMI 5 56818 2); B: Thomas Adès (cond.), BBC Symphony Orchestra (included in the *Music for the 21st Century* documentary), (Digital Classics DC 10002), Title 3; C: Sir Simon Rattle (cond.), Berlin Philharmonie (EMI DVD 7243 4 90325 9 0). At the time of writing, performance A was available to listen to for free at http://www.we7.com, though note that the timings in this version are about 10 seconds later than in table 1 as a result of advertising.

[16] See: E. Tarasti, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

only from bar nine (A: 00.17; B: 29.26; C: 13.28), when overlaid percussion provides a one- or two-bar pattern, can one really begin to sense a build-up of energy. Whilst the processes described here more-or-less follows the regularity to be found in dance music, the harmonic language (inner spatiality), although arguably tonal, is more complex than most rave music. This is achieved in part through the use of interlocking durational cycles more closely related to art music traditions than those of electronic dance music. There is no uncertainty regarding the position of the downbeat, but the interlocking cycles cut across the periodic structure, colouring the harmonies and creating mild hypermetrical ambiguity. A small metric deletion at the end of every eight bars serves to intensify this effect.

For all of the alluring surface similarities between these opening bars and dance music paradigms, the different tonal, rhythmic and metric emphases suggest that *Ecstasio* cannot simply be reduced to a token of a pre-existent type. The distance between the introduction to *Ecstasio* and the background dance music expectations – that is to say, the relative levels of disengagement apparent in both temporal and spatial articulations – opens up an interpretative space, enabling the construction of a narrative that is played out over the course of the movement.

The clarity with which the narrative structures emerge can be demonstrated with reference to the climaxes of sections A1 and A2 (Section A1, bars 66-83: A: 01.54-2.23; B: 31.07-31.35; C: 15.07-15.38; Section A2, bars 111-115; A: 2.52-3.23; B: 32.04-32.34; C: 16.08-16.40). Both sections culminate in pounding percussion simulating quantised kick drums and maximal temporal engagement with the dance music topic[17]. In the same vein, the manipulation of textural density (through the accumulation of layers, saturating the dimension of outer spatiality) and timbre (as material is passed from high registers to low) parallels archetypal developmental strategies of electronic dance music. However, the melodic material is also subjected to motivic and rhythmic developmental processes that are alien to the style. At first, these developments are subsumed within the dominant dance isotopy, insofar as they occur within the context of repeated two-bar units. At the climax of each section, though, they are subjected to free development more akin to symphonic traditions. The superimposition of developmental strategies from two different genres results in both cases in complex isotopies in which material that embodies the dance music topic is in conflict with material that is temporally and spatially disengaged from it. Thus these sections play out in miniature the conflict that shapes the entire movement[18].

So far in my analysis I have concentrated on spatial and temporal articulations, with little reference to actorial articulation. This is not to neglect the latter, for one of the most fascinating by-products of the conflict just described is the way in which musical subjects flicker in and out of perspective. I have already alluded to the fact that within the electronic dance music tradition, in a manner analogous to minimalism, musical subjectivity is apparently absent. In Eero Tarasti's terms, „in «being» we do not experience music as a stage on which a subject moves while attempting to reach an object"; this

[17] P. Tagg highlights the „almost continually metronomic kick-drum knocking out the crotchet pulse" as a distinguishing characteristic of electronic dance music. P. Tagg, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

[18] In Robert Hatten's terms, the interaction between the two topics in *Ecstasio* gives rise to a *trope. Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1994, p. 168-172.
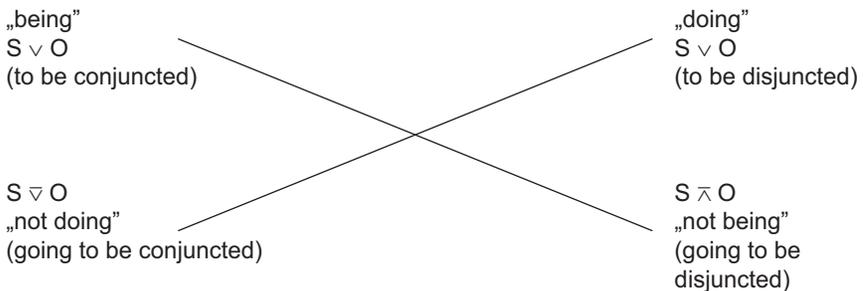
leads to the case of „deactorialized music, in which the problem of an absent subject arises"[19]. More specifically, Philip Tagg has suggested that the relationship between figure and ground in dance music is a contributing factor towards this sense of an absent subject[20]. Yet the repeated melodic figures of sections A1 and A2, which at first blur the distinction between figure and ground in the manner discussed by Tagg, very soon begin to take on forms that cut across the repeated phrase structure of dance music, and which wrench themselves free from the dance music „object".

In terms of a more formalised narrative grammar, the relationship between object (the background dance music isotope) and subject (the emerging theme-actor) can be represented using Greimasian categories. Thus S^O, in which the subject is conjuncted to the object, is here understood in the traditional manner in which the „subject is joined to (…) the object"[21], but with the awareness that this joining occurs as an *overwhelming* in which figure and ground (subject and object) become indistinguishable. Conversely, when the subject is disjuncted from the object (SvO), it carries with it connotations of *vouloir*, of striving, but it is not necessarily the case in *Ecstasio* that such desire is linked to a return to the object. It is at these moments, by virtue of processes alien to dance music, that a musical subject, in the form of a (classically) traditional „theme-actor" emerges, and through which modalization, and hence narrativity, becomes possible.

2.

A narrative model charting the conjunctions and disjunctions of the subject and object can therefore be constructed for the movement in order to chart the relationship between the two, and how this is manifested in terms of being and doing. For this, I am borrowing a semiotic square of Eero Tarasti's[22]:

„being”
$S \lor O$
(to be conjuncted)

„doing”
$S \lor O$
(to be disjuncted)

$S \triangledown O$
„not doing”
(going to be conjuncted)

$S \overline{\wedge} O$
„not being”
(going to be disjuncted)

[19] See: E. Tarasti, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
[20] P. Tagg, *op. cit.*, p. 216-220.
[21] E. Tarasti, *op. cit.*, p. 274.
[22] *Ibidem*, p. 179.

The Introduction is premodalised by section A1: it has the quality of „going to be conjuncted", for there is no subject present to join with the object. At the start of section A1, the dominant isotope is confirmed; the subject is bound up with the object (S ∧ O). Over the course of sections A1 and A2, the state of being associated with dance music is continually challenged; the music threatens to become disjuncted, and by the end of section A2 this is indeed the case, in a passage of maximum dislocation between subject and object, in which the object – represented by the pounding bass drum marking a constant 4/4 – aligns momentarily every 32 crotchets with the subject, now independent of the object and barred irregularly (bars 111-115; A: 2.52-3.23; B: 32.04-32.34; C: 16.08-16.40). Although dance music has always depended on a degree of disassociation between rhythm and pulse[23], the temporal disjunction found in *Ecstasio* go far beyond the norms of the style and evoke instead contemporary art music: it is a case that the subject is „going to be disjuncted" from the object.

A second section of relative neutrality (section B), again premodalised by the section that follows, serves to redress the balance. Formally, this section corresponds to what Snowman calls a „break"; it is based on a repeated 4-bar phrase characterised by a syncopated rhythm reminiscent of „piano anthems" of the early 1990s. The assertion of normative dance phrasing and rhythmic structure suggests that the subject is going to be conjuncted with the object once again (S^O). This is strengthened by the fact that the theme-actor is absent from the discourse.

A potential candidate for the theme-actor emerges once more in Section C. Here, the melody in the treble, revolving around a dominant seventh on D, relates to the theme-actor of Sections A1 and A2. The regular crotchet tread of the theme synchronises with the incessant beat of the kick-drum: a potent symbol of a seemingly euphoric conjunction between subject and object (bars 149-156; A: 4.22-4.36; B: 33.33-33.48; C: 17.42-17.58). Even when the theme drops a crotchet at the end of every eight bars – a rationalising of the irregular deletions found elsewhere in the movement – the otherwise undifferentiated crotchet poundings of the drum provide a fill to articulate the earlier-than-expected downbeat.

In previous sections, passages of relative topical stability (that is, temporally and spatially engaged) such as this had been subjected to some measure of disruption as symphonic developmental processes intruded. This resulted in medium-level metrical ambiguity that necessitates a constantly shifting focus between periodic grounds and aperiodic figures – that is, between states of being and doing, and between antinarrative and narrative. But because the figure and ground in section B are as one, disorder is created instead through the superimposition of material in the brass (bars 157–172; A: 4.36-5.04; B: 33.48-34.15; C: 17.58-18.26). Occupying a different temporality to the dance music, and projecting strongly directed progressions as opposed to harmonic stasis, the addition of this material results in the second complex isotopy of the movement. However, unlike the equivalent passage closing section A2, there is no reinstatement of the simple dance isotopy: there is instead a final, irrevocable disjunction between subject and object.

Although formally fragmented, with rapid juxtapositions of texture and timbre, the Coda to *Ecstasio* is characterised by strongly directed harmonic motion, governed by chromatic lines in the treble and alluding to an almost conventional cadence in B ma-

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[23] See: for instance: M. Butler, *Turning the Beat Around…*

jor (bars 173-178; A: 5.04-5.16; B: 34.15-34.28; C: 18.26-18.38). (The eventual close comes in bar 205; A: 5.56, B: 35.10; C: 19.22). There are two attempts to restart the dance: one assertive, but frustrated after an uncharacteristic three-bar period, the other ghostly (beginning respectively in bars 179 and 185; A: 5.16 and 5.26; B: 34.28 and 34.39; C: 18.38 and 18.48). In the context of the directed motion of the Coda, these reminiscences sound alien; the subject has been emphatically disjuncted from the dance music object. This would point to a dysphoric conclusion to the movement, and yet the music sounds strangely affirmative, with no sense of striving to return to a state of conjunction.

What are we to make of the affirmative Coda? Rebecca Leydon, in her analysis of minimalist tropes, draws on Naomi Cumming to make the distinction between the kinetic energy of gesture and the intentional energy created by syntax[24]. In the case of *Ecstasio*, the Coda abandons the kinetic gestures of dance music for a directed linear-harmonic syntax; it abandons a state of being for a state of becoming. In the context of dance music, it is the difference between a state of being in which the object is permitted to influence the subject (Tarasti's „impersonal ritual"), and a state of becoming in which the individual is able to assert his or herself.

In this sense, the disjunction of subject and object represents a triumph of the individual over the collective, revealing the dance isotopy and the theme-actors associated with it to be false, belonging to the category of untruth[25]. The sense of euphoria that accompanies the close suggests that the „true" isotopy of *Ecstasio* is related to the symphonic „voice" through which the theme-actor asserts its individuality from the collective. This process is summarised in table 2. In the context of *Asyla*, in which the symphonic voice plays a greater role, *Ecstasio* might therefore be seen as a proposition – the placing of the collective over the individual – which is explored but eventually rejected.

Table 2. Narrative program of *Ecstasio*

Bars	Section	Narrative
1-24	Introduction	S ▽ O
25-83	Section A1	S ∧ O → S ⋏ O
84-115	Section A2	S ⋏ O → S ∨ O
116-148	Section B	S ▽ O
149-172	Section C	S ∧ O → S ⋏ O
173-221	Coda	S ∨ O

[24] R. Leydon, *Towards a Typology of Minimalist Tropes*, „Music Theory Online" 2002, nr 8 (4) http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.02.8.4/mto.02.8.4.leydon.html.
[25] Tarasti's analysis of Chopin's G minor ballade came to the same conclusion about the waltz isotopy which dominated this work. E. Tarasti, *op. cit*., p. 174.

At this stage of the analysis, narrative grammar has been used in order to ground my initial interpretative responses to *Ecstasio*. In doing so, it has been shown how the relationship between a musical subject (a theme-actor) and an apparent object (the dance music topic) is more complex than had been hitherto entertained in commentary on the work. Furthermore, by tracing the ways in which complex isotopies are arrived at, and how these relate to the states of „being" and „doing", a tentative narrative structure for the movement has been sketched out.

Although the analysis has stopped short of formally defining the modalizations that emerge from the actorial, spatial and temporal levels, such an approach would follow naturally from this work, and would clarify further the ways in which *Ecstasio* compellingly engages the listener.

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