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The Movement of New Tonality: An Analysis of Robert Beaser’s Piano Concerto

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Abstract

Robert Beaser (b.1954) was one of the first composers of his generation to be labeled as a “New Tonalist” and was one of the first to move away from the avant-garde musical orthodoxy of the mid-20th century. “New tonality” is a term that was first used in a publication that was co-edited by Beaser and was used to attempt to define a group of American composers who were moving away from the avant-garde musical styles during the 1970s and 1980s.

My document focuses on Beaser’s Piano Concerto as a prime example of his compositional practices. It also addresses some of the issues raised by the definition of the term “New Tonality”, and how this relates to, or does not relate to, Beaser. In addition to combing through reviews and publications contemporaneous with the Piano Concerto, my research is deeply indebted to extensive personal interviews with Beaser. These provide insight into his own philosophy of composition and his compositional process. I also explore Beaser’s background and provide context for Beaser’s perspective about the musical environment at that time. The history of the creation of the Piano Concerto is also explored, and the paper includes an in-depth theoretical analysis of the work. In particular, there will be particular attention paid to how Beaser both creates and subverts expectations through his use of tonal areas. In my conclusion, I state that the work is a great piano concerto that is also a major representative of this movement to recover tonality, despite the issues I have with the definition of “New Tonality” itself.
Foreword

This document is a study of the composer Robert Beaser, focusing particularly on his Piano Concerto. Robert Beaser is currently the Chair of the Composition Department at the Juilliard School of Music, is a winner of an Emmy Award, the Charles Ives Award, the Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a nominee for a Grammy Award, and was the youngest ever composer to win the prestigious Rome Prize. He has been commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and the Saint Louis Symphony, among many others, and serves as trustee for American Academy of Arts and Letters. Beaser was one of the first composers of his generation to truly embrace the move away from the avant-garde compositional aesthetic prevalent in the first three-quarters of the 20th century. He was also unfortunately lumped in with the overly-broad definition of “New Tonality”. “New Tonality” is a term for the movement of music, started in the late 1970s, that fully embraced tonal elements. It was one of several reactions to the extreme avant-garde nature of music of the time (what Beaser calls the “dark heart of the 1970s orthodoxy”). Like many composers of his generation, Beaser began his career writing in the academically accepted style of the time. For example, his polytonal string quartet won him the Rome Prize in 1977. Soon thereafter, however, being a melodist by nature, and not wanting to just emulate other composers, he moved away from this tradition, and began composing using his own unique voice. He wanted to make a statement of his own calling. This caused him to have to work very hard to gain acceptance in the contemporary classical music world of the time.

Beaser and his piano concerto are the focus of my paper for several reasons. I personally have worked with Beaser several times, and I commissioned a work from him that was on my album “Paganimania.” His piano concerto was commissioned by the St. Louis Symphony and was composed for

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1 This statement will be further explored in Chapter 1.
pianist Pamela Mia Paul in 1988. It is a piece that best represents his compositional process, and, in my opinion, is at the pinnacle of the concerto genre. Furthermore, I gave the Asian premiere of the work with the National Centre for the Performing Arts Orchestra in Beijing, China, and I feel that as one of the few pianists to have ever performed this work (at the time of this writing, only three other pianists have performed the work), I am in an ideal position to represent the piece to the fullest capacity.
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Prologue

As I reached the final climatic passages of Robert Beaser’s Piano Concerto, the question that ran through my head is one that many performers of contemporary music are familiar with: “I wonder what the reaction to this work will be like?” Nevertheless, I continued to push through the last virtuosic passages, with particular intent on nailing the thunderous octaves that lead up to the final chord, and I powered through the majestic successive octaves that consume the last two measures. Then, as I hit the final octave of the work, there was a moment of silence that felt deafening to me. It felt to me like it lasted forever, but in reality, was only one brief second long. To my own relief, the thunderous applause and loud cheers that followed from the audience in the Egg’s 2,017-seat concert hall, and the three curtain calls, made it clear that the piece was an absolute hit with the crowd.

This performance took place on May 19, 2012 at the Egg Concert Hall in Beijing as part of the opening concert of the 10th Beijing Modern Music. Nevertheless, the audience consisted of both contemporary music composers and performers and regular Chinese concert goers. Most of the Chinese concert goers had come to the concert just to see the magnificent new concert hall with their own eyes. This is important to mention because this is not usually a combination that would be ideal for a good reaction to a contemporary piece. It is quite often that a contemporary music work does not play well to both regular concert goers and contemporary musicians simultaneously. However, the positive reaction of the audience made it clear that the piece spoke deeply to both crowds and confirmed my belief that it is a masterpiece.
In early July 2010, two years before this performance occurred, I received a phone call from Narong Prangcharoen, who is the director of the Thailand International Contemporary Music Festival. Narong was on the phone to ask whether I could learn several works for the music festival that was to happen in just a week and a half. One of those works that I was to perform was “Souvenirs” for Piano and Clarinet by Robert Beaser. Before this, I had heard of Beaser’s name in passing, but I had neither played nor heard of any of his works. A week later, I was told that the first rehearsal scheduled with the clarinetist was to occur the next day. Due to scheduling difficulties, Beaser would attend only our first rehearsal. This is not how rehearsals with composers usually happen; the performers don’t want the added pressure of having the composer there until they’ve made some progress learning the piece, and the composer would rather not be there until that happens, either. However, upon arrival at the Rangsit University, which was the location of the festival that year, I was told that the rehearsal would start about 45 minutes late, as there was a last-minute additional rehearsal of Beaser’s orchestral work “Double Chorus” that was to be performed the following night. As the orchestral hall was not far away, and the clarinetist had not arrived yet, I decided to walk to the hall to go attend the rehearsal.

What I heard upon arrival at the hall surprised me, as the sounds that were coming from the stage were producing nothing short of cacophony. On stage, the musicians were obviously sweating and playing away nervously as they struggled to get the right notes, and the conductor, who shall not be named, also seemed to have many beads of sweat rolling down his forehead from the last-ditch attempt of keeping the work together in any shape or form. As I walked in to take a seat, I saw a man hunched over the seats with his head between his hands
and shaking his head with stress. At the time, I wasn’t sure who this was, but I sat nearby. As the work was reaching a disastrous conclusion, I came to the realization that the man I had just sat near to was Robert Beaser.

Thankfully, Steve Davis, who was the conducting professor at the University of Missouri Kansas-City at the time, was also in attendance at the festival to conduct other works and was on hand to eventually take over conductor duties. After several more intensive rehearsals and careful planning on Davis’s part, the performance went beautifully. Regardless, after the rehearsal, the clarinetist Christhatai Paksamai and I had our first and only rehearsal with Beaser. Thankfully, since Paksamai is a superb clarinetist, the rehearsal went super smoothly, and aside from some minor adjustments, Beaser seemed happy and suggested that we cut the rehearsal short and just meet each other on stage at the performance. After a couple more rehearsals with myself and Paksamai, the performance of “Souvenirs” went beautifully, without a hitch, and in no time, we were heading out to get celebratory drinks after the performance.

During the dinner cocktails I decided to propose something to Beaser: I wanted to commission him to write a piece for a CD that I was planning on putting together in the next few years. Happily, he agreed. The piece that Beaser wrote for the CD was titled “Pag-Rag” and was a merger of rag-time and Paganini’s 24th caprice. The CD, entitled “Paganimania,” was released in 2014 and was well received by several magazines, and one review even specifically mentioned Beaser’s work as being “amusing and ingenious.”² Nevertheless, I did not realize at

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the time that this collaboration would lead to several more opportunities to me to perform other works by Beaser in the future.

Following my proposal regarding the CD project to Beaser, he approached me with two propositions. First, he wanted me to premiere his work “Pag-Rag” along with nine other premieres for the “Petrushka Project” event organized by Schott Music Publications in Juilliard's Paul Hall. The second proposition from Beaser was the most relevant one to this paper. Beaser had just been approached to have his Piano Concerto performed at the Beijing Modern Music Festival, and as he enjoyed my performances of his other works, he insisted to the festival that I must be the performer of the work. However, the performance was to occur in just three months.

When the score arrived a few days later, I was both mesmerized and horrified at the same time. On the plus side, the work really struck a chord with my musical sensibilities and I was loving trying out every note in the work. Yet on the negative side, the work was insanely difficult, and I had only three months to learn it! Nevertheless, three months later, I was on stage with the orchestra and was having one of the best experiences in my life.

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Chapter 1: Beaser’s background

Robert Beaser is an American composer, born on May 29, 1954 in Boston, Massachusetts. He was born into a nonmusical family. His mother was a chemist and his father a physician. While his parents were non-musical, Beaser still credits a lot of his musical upbringing to them:

“[My mother] invented Elmer’s glue. [She] didn’t get any money for it but she invented it... Elmer’s glue, the wax in the milk cartons and Perma Starch are the three things she invented. Made no money off of it though. But, the scientific methodology of my mom made me interested in combining things. And that stuck with me... [My parents studied] no music [themselves], but my dad, who was tone deaf, along with my mom both felt I needed to be exposed to classical music.”4

Robert Beaser5

His brother took piano lessons when he was young and Beaser was very interested in emulating him. Beyond that, Beaser was always interested in composition, and at his brother’s

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recital when his brother was five, Beaser even went on stage to perform his own music.\textsuperscript{6} His father made him listen to Chopin from an early age, and he remembers that the first piece he ever listened to was Smetana’s \textit{Má Vlast}.

Beyond that however, he grew up listening to a lot of jazz. As was true for many composers of his generation, the proliferation of radios in homes made it possible for people to hear music from every genre instantly. Composers prior to this generation had a harder time finding the opportunities to listen to music from other genres. As a result, composers born after the Second World War were more exposed to different types of music. Therefore, Beaser’s influences are very diverse, which is clearly an important feature of his early musical upbringing. Listening to rock and roll led him into playing percussion instruments, and he played in a rock and roll band throughout high school. Jazz drums became a big part of his youth also and he sat in with some Jazz groups in downtown Boston. He was part of musical productions as an actor and singer at a young age. For a brief period during his youth, he also was interested in writing for Broadway. This was partly spurred on by Leonard Bernstein’s foray into Broadway musicals, and Beaser himself admits that he could have easily become a Broadway composer. He was also making money singing in church and both church and musical productions led him to sing consistently in his youth. Beyond this, he was also deeply into folk music since a young age due to the summer camp Walt Whitman, which he attended and where he was exposed to the music of artists such as Pete Seeger. He also listened to a lot of AM radio which led him to be in love with the Motown classics. Furthermore, he was also in an

orchestra as a youth. “I was playing in a classical orchestra [with] the Greater Boston Youth Symphony⁷, so I was able to learn the repertoire from that angle. I was very interested in orchestral music, and loved the orchestra. I just found it to be the greatest thing since sliced bread”.⁸ Beaser showed a knack for conducting since he was a young age and even conducted the premiere of his own composition “Antigone” with the Boston Youth Symphony in 1972 at the age of 16.⁹

The primary pedagogic influence on the young Beaser was the composer Arnold Franchetti. Arnold Franchetti (1911–1993) was an Italian composer who lived the most of his life in the USA and was the head of composition at the Hartt School of Music for 31 years. He started teaching Beaser in 1968. When Beaser was fifteen and in high school he was introduced to Franchetti while Franchetti was a professor at a summer program at Trinity College in Hartford. Beaser would go to study with Franchetti for several hours every day, six days a week. Beaser admits that this was a very intense experience, but also that it allowed him to have all the foundations necessary to grow in the future. He even continued to study with Franchetti during his first year of college. He mainly credits Franchetti for the foundation of his compositional technique:

“He was an insane man, but he taught a lot of people, he was actually a well-known teacher of a lot of people [including] Martin Bresnick for example. But, most of his students he didn’t get along with. I was very young when I started studying with him, and he pretty much broke everything down. And he said ok, I’m going to give you the figured basses that Richard Strauss gave me, and he actually gave me the figured basses. He taught me Renaissance counterpoint that he learnt in Munich and that was really

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⁷ This is now the Boston Youth Symphony.
remarkable. So, I studied intensely with him for my junior and senior year in high school.”

“Everybody else gave interesting lessons, but nothing really hands on about my music. Franchetti was an interesting man because he was out on a limb by composing his own style. It was Atonal, but it wasn’t serial. He really hated the Serialists, and really railing against Milton Babbitt. Of course, I was Milton’s boss for many years and I told Milton about this. He used to complain about this and that, and he was very polemic and crazy, so I got this strange education.”

Franchetti caused Beaser to drastically change his compositional style. He taught Beaser all the works of Berg, with a special emphasis on Berg’s operas. Yet at the same time, he was teaching Beaser how to control the elements of counterpoint. This allowed Beaser to experiment in finding tonal centers while using a non-tonal language. In simple terms, Franchetti helped Beaser relearn his compositional techniques to create an indestructible foundation. Franchetti helped Beaser break everything down and look at music from a different perspective. The music that Beaser composed during that time was adhering to a lot of the rules that were set in place at the time, such as not using triads and octaves, while also studying the basics of counterpoint on the side. Nevertheless, Beaser was always strong in his sense of direction, and he tried to find his own unique voice even during this time.

“I was trying to find melodic and expressive nuggets in this music that was relatively disjunct. I was peeling away that and always looking for vertical sounds and how they related and long harmonic schemes where everything is moving from one area to another. But, I was really just following my instincts and my ear. Also, before studying with Franchetti I had zero counterpoint. But as I mentioned he taught me that. In high school I had very minimal theory. I was pretty much ok without it. Everything seemed intuitive to me, so I was ok without it. He also taught me Renaissance counterpoint. He taught me monody and modal counterpoint. The principals of note against note still are basic tenants of the way sound is ordered. Without counterpoint you do not have freedom. The notes are either tethered to chords, or you don’t see how you can liberate the line. And the liberation of the line, having two or more independent lines, and being

11 Ibid.
able to control those is critical to a way of thinking about music which translates down the road to every possible and imaginable order of music that can be written. Even Music Concrete [have] sounds you can use in counterpoint. It’s the idea of seeing what is consonance, what is dissonance and what is parallel or not.”

As can been seen from even this brief history of his musical upbringing, Beaser was very well versed in many different types of music from a young age. That’s not to say that before Beaser’s generation composers were not aware of other musical styles such as jazz and popular music. However, composers before his generation were more inclined to keep musical styles separate due to the rigid orthodoxy that existed. While there were some composers such as Gershwin that were able to blend different musical worlds together, they were the exception to the norm. Nevertheless, because of his musical upbringing, he wasn’t interested in a traditional music conservatory training for his college years, and so made the decision to go to a liberal arts college. While he was accepted to several conservatories, including Juilliard and Oberlin, and other universities including Harvard, he decided to go to Yale. Beaser felt that there was too much of a focus on just music in conservatories, so he “decided to go to Yale because Yale was a good balance between good schooling [in] music and liberal arts.”

Beaser started as a music major, but in his senior year his major became Scholar of the House. Twelve Yale seniors are chosen every year to pursue an independent study project which migrates their majors to be Scholar of the House. Beaser chose to write a symphony. The faculty composers he studied with were Yehudi Wyner and Jacob Druckman. Beyond this he even continued to hone his

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conducting talents further, studying with Otto-Werner Mueller and William Steinberg as an undergraduate at Yale.

After his years at Yale, Beaser applied for the Rome Prize, submitting his highly complex String Quartet and his Symphony for Soprano and Orchestra. The style of these pieces played perfectly to a jury that included Elliot Carter, and Beaser was awarded the Rome Prize in 1978. Fortunately for Beaser, the changes in his way of composing from his early years had brought him closer to Carter’s style, as opposed to the methods of compositions that were used by the Darmstadt school, methods that were widely imitated at the time. Even more specifically, he was not particularly interested in the serialist aesthetic championed by Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen.

However, Beaser had drastic changes occur to his philosophy of musical style during his time in Rome. Every Rome Prize winner spends a whole year in Rome composing, but Beaser gained a different point of view while he was there. He was deeply affected by the art, the history, and the culture in Rome, which led to great change in his perception of the musical world. One particular location that Beaser identifies as a turning point is the Brancacci chapel in the Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence. Even more specifically, it was the Tribute Money fresco by Masaccio that truly inspired him. The way the art was structured there made Beaser realize that he wanted to start composing music that carried more substance in terms of emotional weight than what he was capable of at the time. He felt that being forced to be tied to the avant-garde, prevented him to compose music that meant anything to him. Beyond that, it was the time away from his home in America which also allowed him to see his own music
from a different perspective. Furthermore, Beaser realized that he was not at all interested in the music of the avant-garde including the music of Elliot Carter.

“After seeing thousands of years of history layered on top of one another, you get to understand your place and see what it is important and essential. Not the rococo. Too much rococo was going on and not enough substance... And why Rome? Because, it is much easier to see yourself when you are away. It’s like being in a helicopter. You can look down and get perspective when you go away. Rome takes you out of your habitat and natural things and you start to think about what makes you American... But the fact is that, Rome afforded me the ability to reflect and to really have a reckoning about what was important to me... at a certain point I realized I was the youngest person sitting in the Rome Plaza and I realized I [didn’t] want to be [composing] in this style or the rest of my life. It didn’t interest me.”

Beaser felt that his time at Rome allowed him to think outside the system. The urge to please his teachers during his time back home was too strong and he felt that he was unable to break out of his square box because of this. Beyond that, Beaser was concerned that if he was to start composing outside of the avant-garde tradition at the time, the composers and teachers that could help him would turn their backs on him. But one day while sitting in the Chapel in Rome, Beaser broke through of his own prison and said to himself that “I’m throwing it out, and I’m going to start over.”

Then one year later, in 1979, Beaser wrote his breakout piece, a setting of seven poems by Anthony Hecht which he titled “The Seven Deadly Sins”. And in the eyes of his colleagues during that time, the deadliest sin that Beaser committed in this piece was to end his massive vocal work with a D Major Chord.

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15 Ibid.
Chapter II: The Silent Air of Change

During the 1980 Tanglewood festival, there was a small soiree where Beaser simultaneously played and sang his “Seven Deadly Sins” for a group of colleagues. Prior to Beaser’s performance, several other composers had gotten up and performed their own works, and generally, the soiree was usually all good natured and friendly. Composers would play for each other to warm receptions and would exchange kind words after each performance. But, after Beaser’s performance ended, there was nothing but the sound of crickets.

“Because it ended on D Major, when it finished there was a stone silence. And I could see Olly [Knussen]\(^\text{16}\) as though I had just stepped on his grandmother... You know it was too early to do something like this as the change hadn’t happened yet... It was the iciest reception, I felt completely finished.”\(^\text{17}\)

Beaser had decided to compose the “Seven Deadly Sins” on his own time. There were no commissions that led to the creation of the work. This freed him from any constraints, so he could compose in any way he wanted to. Beaser truly believed in the work and played it for several more of his colleagues and mentors, including Samuel Barber. However, Beaser realized that he would not win the approbation of his colleagues, at least not for the time being. This different style of tonally-based composition would not be widely accepted for several more years. Only a few composers during this time dared to step out of the zone of the avant-garde,

\(^{16}\) Olly Knussen tragically passed away during the writing of this paper on the 8\textsuperscript{th} of July 2018. He was the head of the new music program in Tanglewood, but at the time of the 1980 Tanglewood festival was just working there in the new music program.

and Beaser was one of them. And while during the decade before, several other composers were experimenting in the non-avant-garde realm of music composition, it was more about the trend of musical happenings.

“Of course, it was the 60s, so everything was about musical happenings. Everyone was on drugs; the Beatles were writing what they were writing. People would smash violins over busts of Schoenberg and pieces like that. It was fun and games, but it wasn’t anything I was particularly interested in. The thing that drew me to music, was music itself. The expressivity of music, the rhythmic energy of music, all of the things that we know and love about music is what drew me to it. That I think is something that is universally shared by a lot of people. I just found that no one was accepting in the community of [formal] compositional practice, no one was accepting [of] what I wanted to do. I was either being forced to do this or do that, if I wanted to be cool or whatever it was, it was just putting a square peg in a round hole. It just wasn’t working.”18

Other composers who were stepping away from the avant-garde to compose more tonal music included John Corigliano and George Rochberg. Nevertheless, these composers had a different approach from Beaser in composing in a tonal realm. Beaser felt that this older generation of composers was trying to recover tonality and some sort of connection with the past but that it was literally about just trying to recover tonality, with less of a regard for allowing music to speak on its own terms.

For Beaser it wasn’t about the tonality. He was trying to set out to create music that spoke to him personally. It wasn’t just about the chords or the melodies. It was about creating sounds that were necessary for what the music was requiring to portray in its pure form. Beaser wanted the music he was creating to naturally grow out of his compositional process, and not to be artificially created from any outside influence or pre-determined system, no matter if that system was functional tonality or serialism. The music was composed to speak for itself, and

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not for any political or philosophical statement. Beaser wanted his music to be from the heart, and not from only the brain, because he felt that much of the music being composed during that period was very self-conscious.

“It was kind of like they were just left out of the mental institution. Like they were saying “OH MY GOD! It’s a CHORD!” It was kind of like that. It was very self-conscious. And in fact, self-consciousness was the hallmark. We had just got through the grinder. Schoenberg tried to dissolve tonality after the war like everybody said. It was all this bad German stuff, so we should go to the French. So then after the war, they decided, science is going to cure everything so it’s going to be science. So, everything was about investigation. The idea of actually putting music together in some sort of narrative for just wasn’t happening. You couldn’t do it. Not to mention you couldn’t write a tune, not to mention you couldn’t write a chord, not to mention you couldn’t write octaves. There were certain rules, and those rules were really dominant, and if you wanted to be taken seriously at all, you had to do it.”

Regardless, Beaser found his voice and his footing and continued to develop his own style. And during the subsequent years, more and more composers started to follow in similar directions. In an entry in the *Grove Music Online* encyclopedia, James sees Beaser’s music from then as music that “onwards embraces the tenets of Romanticism in its epic scale, use of programmatic elements and tonal foundation. His melodic gift and finely developed sense of irony, however, elevate his compositions above mere exercises in nostalgia.” As mentioned previously, and will be explored more in a later chapter, Rochberg had a knack for composing pieces that acted as nostalgic compositions as he would emulate multiple older composers with great skill. However, there are certain composers, such as Arvo Pärt, who can take a nostalgic

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idea and develop that into his own unique compositional style. With the case of Pärt he took the old compositional methods of chant and developed them to create his own unique style for which he coined the word “tintinnabuli.” Even though critics may view Beaser’s music now as more than just “mere exercises in nostalgia”\textsuperscript{21}, Beaser was considered a composer in the New Tonality genre during the 1990s.


The two defining features that seem to be consistent among critics regarding the “New Tonality” are that the definition is extraordinarily broad, and the term is used and understood differently among different critics. Terry Teachout wrote in Commentary that he believes that the “new tonalists” are “united in their rejection of the hermeticism of late modernism... they seek to compose serious music intelligible to the common listener.” 22 This alone creates several questions: what is serious music? What is intelligible? The idea alone is too broad to be a useful term and definition to explain to a listener what to expect. A big reason for the need for definitions of genres is to be able to educate and allow a listener to be able to know what to expect from a particular composer. Yet, the definition of “New Tonality” is so broad that composers from all different styles and backgrounds are suddenly linked together despite sounding completely different. Several problems stem from this, as composers are suddenly lumped together into a type of music that they themselves might not believe in.

Critics also suggest that the music is supposed to speak to an audience regardless of its roots. For example, in contrast to Teachout, composer Larry Bell wrote in the Contemporary Music Review that he believes that the roots of New Tonality come from quotation.23 Quotation in music is where a composer takes either a direct or a veiled musical passage from another work – most often from another composer -- and uses it in his or her own music. An example that directly relates to Bell’s article would be George Rochberg’s Symphony No. 5.

Throughout the work, Rochberg channels Mahler by using many sections of Mahler’s own music in the symphony. This is juxtaposed between sections of atonality composed by Rochberg. Bell specifically calls out Ives, Berg, Stravinsky, Rochberg and Druckman as exemplars of this style. One only has to look at the biographies of these composers to see how citing them to represent New Tonality creates complications. Charles Ives was an American composer born in 1874, Alban Berg was an Austrian composer born in 1885, Stravinsky was a Russian composer, born in 1882, who relocated to the USA later in life, Rochberg was an American composer born in 1918, and finally Druckman was an American composer who was born in 1928. Furthermore, and more importantly, stylistically speaking, these composers are widely different. That they all use quotations in their music doesn’t really explain very much: whom they quote, how they use the quotations, and how their original music sounds are crucial details that are overlooked by simply labelling them as quotation composers. Indeed, the technique goes back to the very beginnings of Western music, in, for example, the many pieces based on the “L’homme Armé” tune starting in the 15th century and continuing in music by nearly every composer since then.

Beaser doesn’t believe in the idea of quotation just for its own sake. His goal was to recover tonality out of the need in his music, and not to please the audience, or to channel other composers. However, one cannot say that Beaser doesn’t include outside elements in his music, or that he occasionally references another work. Nevertheless, he would use the elements in a different way from how most other composers at the time did. For example, the

aforementioned composer George Rochberg would literally quote major sections from other composers, in part to demonstrate the connection between their music and his, and also to be an implicit criticism of musical modernism. In other words, Rochberg seeks to make a critical statement about modernism; Beaser does not.

A prime example of Rochberg’s aesthetic is found in his String Quartet No. 6. The movement is titled Variations (on Pachelbel) and is based on Pachelbel’s infamous Canon in D. The second violin and the cello literally quote exactly note for note Pachelbel’s canon for the first thirteen measures. On top of that part, during the first twenty-four measures, the piece doesn’t deviate much from a style that would not be that different from something that Pachelbel could have created, albeit with a few more uses of extended chords. During the middle section, Rochberg deviates more, taking the music through essentially a guided tour through music history, until ultimately returning to a direct quotation from Pachelbel during the last several minutes of the work. Yet, even in the middle section of the piece, the work still has that feeling of Pachelbel. It’s almost like what the work would sound like if Pachelbel lived in the 20th century and composed this work himself. While the work is stunningly beautiful, although quite controversial when it was first performed in 1979, it is not how Beaser uses quotations. Beaser will only quote if it suits a particular part of a piece and not just for the sake of quotation. In other words, the quote would be used only if there were musical reasons for it, and if the piece called for it at specific moments, not for any polemical reasons.

Interestingly, whether intentionally or not, Beaser had a hand in creating the term “New Tonality” as The Contemporary Music Review journal that was published in 1992 – the first journal to prominently feature the term “New Tonality” – was co-edited by Beaser and Paul
Moravec. This issue includes some of the most important writings about the movement and idea of bringing back tonality. It is also in this issue that both Larry Bell and John Harbison describe the new trend as “New Tonality”. The one underlying through-line regarding the composers that are linked with the “New Tonality” term and the critics that spoke about it: they believed that tonality in some shape or form should return. How, and in what context, was different for each contributor. This is rather fascinating since it shows that even though each writer had the same goal, everyone was going about approaching tonality differently. This is especially true for Beaser. Most of the other contributors approached tonality with the point of view that tonality should be taken back from the non-tonal tradition, and that tonality must return regardless of context.

For example, composers such as John Harbison at that time looked towards the early 20th century for the inspiration to write tonal or neo-tonal works. He stated that “Harmonic symmetry, a powerful organizing principle in the early works of the twentieth century, has recently reappeared in a surprising form - in pieces which might be described as tonal or at least neo-tonal.” He goes on to demonstrate the usage of these types of passages in his own music. In contrast, Beaser seems to consistently avoid making these types of comparisons. Furthermore, while it is unfortunate that Beaser did not contribute an article for the Journal, his current point of view on his own compositional style is that the tonality should grow out of the needs of the music. That means that if the music wants to be tonal it should be tonal. But if it wants to be non-tonal, then it should be that way. He is not doctrinaire about it: the harmonic

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26 Ibid.
and tonal vocabulary should be chosen because it is an appropriate, even necessary, way to
support and reflect the musical material.

To explain this in non-musical terms, imagine a writer who has decided to write a novel
about modern-day society. The style that he has chosen to use is a Shakespearian style of
English. But, yet, despite the novel not calling for or needing this style of writing, perhaps
because the subject matter and the narrative has nothing at all to do with Elizabethan times,
the author must force this writing style on the work. The disconnect would potentially cause
the novel to not work since the novelist has not written the novel in a style that is called for in
this situation. That is not to say that this disconnect would not work, but without careful
consideration, the work would fall apart. And for lesser skilled artists, this is most likely the
case. Beaser elaborates on this by talking about what the work should be created from:

“It should start at the center of the music. People would accept it for what it was, while I was combining things that “shouldn’t” be combined. And that has continued in my music to this day, and it’s [a] sort of a whole mark to what I do. It’s that it’s juxtaposing [material? gestures?] that somehow don’t belong together while making it work. And making you forget that that juxtaposition actually happened. Because it’s one thing to say that I’m going to take hip hop and just marry it with Bach. Clearly there’s going to be a train wreck there. I didn’t want anybody to say, “oh that’s what he is doing.” I want them to listen to the music and accept it for what it was. A lot of people would review my music as postmodernism. And I would reply that “No, it’s not post modernism”. What I’m trying to do is actually trying to make music speak on all the levels that I’ve loved music in the past.”

Postmodernism has been a point of contention among historians as there has been
multiple disagreements as to what counts as “post” and what is modern. When discussing
postmodernism, the Grove Music Online Encyclopedia states the following:

As a historical period, postmodernism can denote that which postdates the period 1450–1950, reflecting a crisis of cultural authority and world view, especially that vested in Western culture and its institutions [Jameson, 1991…] Postmodernism can also signal a change from developments that began around the beginning of the 20th century. Some see this as a shift from imperialist centralization, nation states and utopian philosophies to a decentralized world economy, supranational entities and relativism. What is postmodernist in this sense depends on one's definition of Modernism.28

Essentially, the notion of postmodernism stems from the shift away from the musical traditions that developed in the period following World War Two, which itself was a tradition that shifted away from the cultural musical norms at the time. The modernist shift was particularly prevalent in the Darmstadt school, led by such composers as Boulez and Stockhausen, and in the United States, by Milton Babbitt and Charles Wuorinen.

Postmodernism, therefore, is a response to and move away from the avant-garde aesthetic that of the 1950’s and ‘60’s. But for Beaser, it wasn’t about reacting to the avant-garde. Beaser wanted his music as a whole to stand out for itself, regardless of genre and regardless of definition. That’s why the “New Tonality” genre as a term is, to his point of view, would have a potentially negative impact against his music and others who have been lumped into this genre. Audiences could easily come to an incorrect conclusion about their work before they have even begun to listen to it. This is especially difficult with this term because it is just too broad. Regardless, Beaser does admit that no matter the definition or musical style, the most important element is to create a strong foundation.

“Every time you use something, you have to be stronger than the thing that you use. Of course, I’m not saying I’m stronger than Beethoven, but you can’t be like you’re trying to be like another composer while that composer is casting a shadow over you.

The piece has to be strong on its own and make enough sense in terms of terms of its own inner logic and architecture that you’ve created. Anything else is irrelevant, it consumes all other influences that are going on.”29

No matter how he used tonal elements in his own music, Beaser believed in supporting other composers who used it very differently. He and the composer Daniel Asia started the contemporary music ensemble Musical Elements in 1977. The aim of the group was to include composers from a very wide range of styles, influences, and aesthetics. However, they were unsurprisingly met with prejudice from many of their peers, particularly from the “contemporary music establishment. There were several new music groups that already existed in 1977 in New York. The main ones were the New Music Consort, Parnassus, and Speculum Musicae, which was led by Charles Vernon with Robert Black and Don Palma.30

Each of these groups exclusively programmed highly avant-garde twelve-tone and serialist music. In contrast, the idea behind Musical Elements was that they would program many different genres, regardless of their personal preference. They performed works by many composers including George Lewis, Anthony Davis, Hans Abrahamsen, and Paul Reuter. The composers came from different compositional backgrounds, including experimental composers, jazz-based composers, among many others. They even did the premiere of “Shaker Loops”, a minimalist piece, by John Adams.

“some of them were composers I had nothing to do with, but we performed their music because we could and wanted to... all of [the other ensembles] were programming one way. They were planning exclusively uptown 12 tone music... Musical Elements came along and broke the mold and we were doing different programming. We were hated. Absolutely hated, ignored and shunned by the other groups. Eventually, those other groups were moving in the directions that we had started off with. But

30 Ibid.
there was extreme resistance to that where we would be bad mouthed by other people and saying that our performances weren’t very good. But we got the attention because we were doing something different. It was clear to me that we were pushing against an orthodoxy and herd mentality and we were breaking [it] up.”31

For several years, Musical Elements was alone in carrying the torch to support different types of composers. It wasn’t until 1983, when Jacob Druckman (Beaser’s teacher at Yale) started the New Harmonic Horizons Music Festival in New York, that more alliances in this new type of programming came to be. Before Druckman started the Horizons festival, he visited Beaser and requested to look at all the programs that Musical Elements had organized. Beaser said that “I gave him all the programs as he wanted to look at them. He then programmed the horizons festival like we programmed our concerts. Nobody knows that.”32

Druckman programmed the Horizons Festival with a very eclectic frame of mind. Music by Luciano Berio, Lukas Foss, David Del Tredici, and Bernard Rands, among many others, was performed. Soon afterwards, many other new music groups started to follow suit. One consequence of the Horizons Festival, and the subsequent new music festivals, was that more and more composers started to feel free to write tonally again. And, as Beaser mentions, without what he and Daniel Asia had started, the movement might have gone in a different direction or, at the very least, the revolution might have started later.

“Between 1985 and 1995 [contemporary music] was being led in different way and everything was at stake. And I was sort of leading that. Whether I get acknowledgement for that or not, but I was starting it as nobody else was doing it. When the turn of the century happened, everything sort of went to hell, and there was another huge shift in music. But, it was after the Horizons festival through the 90s

32 Ibid.
people were intrigued that suddenly they could write octaves again, repeat things again... I was already writing pieces that were satisfying that.”

The Horizons Music Festival plays another significant role in this paper, since some of Beaser’s music was performed and Jacob Druckman then curating Beaser’s work to be performed in other places. Beaser was also commissioned by the St. Louis Symphony to compose a chamber work titled “Songs for the Occasions.” Pianist Pamela Mia Paul attended both performances and it was after these performances that led Leonard Slatkin, then the music director of the St. Louis Symphony, and Pamela Mia Paul both approached Beaser to discuss the possibility of a commission of a brand-new work for her and the St. Louis Symphony. Several years later, that work would materialize to become his Piano Concerto.
Chapter IV: The Commission

The first performance of the Beaser Piano Concerto was on May 4, 1990 with the St. Louis Symphony at Powell Symphony Hall conducted by Leonard Slatkin with Pamela Mia Paul as the soloist. Slatkin had previously conducted one other world premiere for Beaser, the orchestra and vocal version of his seminal “The Seven Deadly Sins.” Beaser credits Slatkin for really supporting him during his early years of breaking away from the avant-garde tradition.

“I was fortunate at a young age that [Leonard] Slatkin took an interest in my music... Leonard was the reason I got commissioned because he liked my music. I believe I met Pamela there at the time I was doing the Occasions in St. Louis. I believe I met her there as part of that. And I believe Leonard told me that I need to talk to Pamela because she’s interested in a piano concerto and he suggested me. I remember meeting Pamela who was enthusiastic and ebullient, and filled with optimism. She was just, ‘I want a concerto’.”

Pamela’s father was a composer for soap operas and was composing some of the music for “General Hospital” at the time. By coincidence, Beaser said that he used to turn on General Hospital in the background while composing before he even had met Paul. In fact, he had never met her before the performances of his work. However, Pamela’s own recollection was much more detailed and slightly more ebullient:

“My manager at the time had said to me something along the lines of “what you need now in your career is a boost by commissioning a concerto from a composer who is rising and has the attention of a major conductor, and I didn’t like hearing that, as I was a Juilliard product at the time, it meant that to me a modern 20th century composer was Rachmaninoff and that was it for me. So, I had no idea, who are the living composers? Who is alive? I was living and teaching in St. Louis at the time and I was friends with Leonard Slatkin, So I went to see him in his office and he didn’t have much

on his desk I remember but he did have a copy of Bob’s flute variations. And he kind of pushed it towards me and said “Bob Beaser, Bob Beaser.”

On the 2nd of June 1984, Pamela decided to attend a concert curated by Jacob Druckman for the New York Philharmonic called the New Romanticism because she saw that there was to be a piece by Robert Beaser on the program. The work on the program was the Orchestrated Version of “The Seven Deadly Sin.”

“We bravely bought tickets and went to the New York Philharmonic and I was tremendously excited. Right before the piece began they were setting the stage up, and I saw that the stage was absolutely covered with instruments. And I said, “oh this is going to be good!” And, sure enough, it was, and I went and scurried along to backstage to see Bob. I had never met him before, he never had a clue who I was, and suddenly this very young enthusiastic young woman, hurls herself at him yelling “You have to write a concerto for me! Leonard said you have to write a concerto for me!” And Leonard was also conducting in the concert, so Bob signals his hand to Leonard’s dressing room and said, “but I have to write a piece for him first!” And I said, “But as soon as you finish that piece you’re writing a concerto for me!””

Pamela had just relocated to Texas to begin a position on the faculty of the University of North Texas. After she decided that she was going commission the concerto from Beaser, she and her family agreed to be the commissioners. Thankfully, Beaser’s music spoke deeply to Pamela Mia Paul, so her decision to pull the trigger was an easy one.

Leonard Slatkin then decided to set a date for May 4, 1990 with the St. Louis Symphony for the premiere. Pamela Mia Paul was very nervous yet excited about the concerto commission, mainly because she had never worked with a living composer before in her life.

37 Ibid.
Later, after the commission was already in motion, Pamela married the conductor Richard Dufallo, who was a specialist in contemporary music.

“I basically considered myself as a total fraud, as I didn’t know a single thing about living composers at the time. I didn’t realize the truth about working with living composers until after I had met my husband. However, after I worked on the piece with Bob, I realized there is nothing like working with living composers. It’s exhilarating. And I remember being in the basement of the Steinway hall before the New York premiere, and we already had our performance in St Louis, and he was working on me with things that I hadn’t quite gotten the first time around, and I had this amazing wave that came over me and said “Oh My God, what it must have been like if this were Brahms had I been there, and this was us going over the second piano concerto”… it really makes you look at the music of the dead composers in a completely different way.”38

Beaser was composing other pieces at while working on the concerto and recollects that it probably took three years to come up with all the ideas for the piece, while the actual composing of the work took about one year. He remembered that the concerto was finally completed late 1989, just a few months before the premiere was set to occur. However, Pamela’s own memories of the compositional deadlines are very different from Beaser’s. One can speculate that her recollection is probably more accurate, since it is from the performer’s point of view:

“When he finally started working on the concerto, I joked to him about the old John Browning - Samuel Barber story. And then a little later I lived it. So back then he was FedExing a few pages at a time. And so, every few weeks or so a FedEx truck would pull up and I would get a few more pages to work on. And my neighbor who lives across the street, who wasn’t a musician, was enjoying the sounds that were floating out the house, and she said to me one day “I really like what you’re playing, but you always stop in the same place!” And then I said to her “Well, you just keeping watching for a FedEx truck to pull up and you’ll hear a little something more!” So, this went on for a while, and it gets to be mid-March where we are about 8 weeks from the premiere, and I don’t have a third movement. So, I called Bob and I just said “Bob, it’s early March!” and Bob

replied, “Don’t worry, I’m starting to get some ideas” and I replied, “That’s great, Bob, but I need something to practice!!” And beyond that, I remember receiving more notes in a passage in the first movement cadenza by fax close to the performance. Originally the piano part was just whole notes there, so I called Bob up and said, “There are enough notes!” But Bob replied “No, I really need to fill up this passage!”

Pamela Mia Paul never received a second piano part for the last movement before the performance and still to this day has not seen it. Nevertheless, the first rehearsal was rather stressful, since the complete score had been sent in by the copyist not too long before it was to occur. Pamela found the rehearsals disorienting. The lack of time with the music beforehand was most likely the culprit. However, the rehearsals eventually came together, and the music started to lock in to place.

“I’ve never had as much fun in my life as when I was playing this piece. That’s because the way the piece is written it’s just so rewarding for performers. He writes for the instrument and writes based on what technically works for the instrument. And I think that’s why lots of performers like to play his music. There’s also just so many fabulous colors and this great rhythmic sense that is so visceral. It’s not just complication for the sake of complication. There are very few pieces, and this is one of them, that where you feel this electric charge right before you launch into a passage because it’s just so dynamic in every way. It’s real music to me. I know that’s not a quote on quote academic term, but it is. Especially in comparison to a lot of the music that is being written today, where the music is just written on a computer with no regard to what tempos are realistic or what technical challenges a performer can overcome.”

I also agree deeply with Pamela Mia Paul’s statement that Beaser has a knack for writing idiomatically for all instruments. Yet, at the same time, his writing is highly virtuosic and

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40 This is significant, because preparing for a concerto of any type is extremely difficult if the pianist does not have access to a reduction of the orchestral part. The pianist is put in the position where they never get to hear or see in a simplified form of what the orchestral part is supposed to sound like. As a result, figuring out when to start playing and what to listen for can be very complicated especially with a brand-new work.
41 Ibid.
challenging. Beaser usually freely sketches and improvises through most of his compositional processes, sitting down and improvising and afterwards only writing down the material that he was pleased with. He had a particular ease writing the piano concerto because he is a proficient pianist himself and made sure that he was able to play every single passage himself. This is most likely what Pamela is referring to, as Beaser tends to compose with high regard to the performer’s needs. No matter what the instrument, he makes sure that everything that is composed lies naturally for the performer while at the same time being extremely challenging and demanding. This delicate balance allows for a special use of color from the performer that can only be achieved if the composer truly knows how to write naturally for an instrument.

Robert Beaser and Christopher Janwong McKiggan

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42 McKiggan, Robert Beaser And Christopher Janwong Mckiggan at the Prince Mahidol Hall Bangkok, Thailand. 2018.
Chapter V: The Reception

The premiere performance was a great success in terms of reaction from the audience. There was thunderous applause after the performance ended, and Slatkin came up to Beaser after the performance to declare “Big success, big success.” Pamela Mia Paul remembers the same reaction, with the audience in St. Louis truly eating up the performance. After riding high for a couple of days from the spectacular reception from the performance, the music critic for the local newspaper came along and “poured an ice bucket over everything.” Beaser had received the worse review of his career, and it continues to be his worst review until this day.

“After bearing all 32 minutes of it on Friday, I'm inclined to say they were the crassest of the lot... Like most works introduced by major orchestras these days, this one was written on commission. In this case, the recommendation that Beaser be the composer came from Symphony music director Leonard Slatkin and the funding came from the pianist. There's nothing dishonorable about a soloist "buying" a new piece; in fact, it's a throwback to a very honorable, even heroic, tradition that started to fade only after World War II. The tradition that reeks here has to with what I suspect is a warped view of virtuosity. Historically, concertos have almost always featured a certain amount of razzle-dazzle material for the soloist. But in the viable concertos the razzle-dazzle is purposeful. It does not come across, as it does in Beaser's offering, as just one bucket load of fast, loud notes poured on top of another. I listened on Friday with score in hand, and most of the time Paul was in the right place with presumably the right notes. Had she been off the mark by as many as a dozen measures it probably would not have mattered; little of what she was asked to play was so ferociously bad much to do with the mishmash of clichés borrowed willy-nilly from Copland and Bernstein, from Rachmaninoff and Liszt that made up the accompaniment... It's commendable that Paul, long in the mainstream, has finally decided to enter the world of modern music; it's too bad that for her calling card she chose such a stinker of a piece.”

Beaser was taken aback by such a negative review. He also recollects a premonition that had had a week before the premiere was to occur. Recollecting the dream that haunted him,

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Beaser stated: “I remember having a dream of the concerto a week before the premiere, where Leonard Slatkin came up to me to strangle me and say, “How could you write this piece?” and then the review came out and sort of said that which turned out to be self-fulfilling in a weird way.”

Nevertheless, during the several weeks following the performance, there were several letters sent to the editor of the newspaper stating that they disagreed with the review. Reviewers have assaulted first performances of works many times in the past and the astonishing book *A Lexicon of Musical Invective* has a fabulous collection of these assaults. One such review insults the aforementioned Rachmaninoff concerto that the above critic uses as an example of good writing, showing that critical reviews often mean very little in the scheme of things:

“Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto is... a little too much like a mournful banqueting on jam and journey... He writes pieces full of the old astounding musical dislocation... There was a day, perhaps, when such worked served. But another day has succeeded to it. And so, Rachmaninoff comes amongst us like a very charming and amiable ghost.”

The assault on Rachmaninoff is much like most assaults on Beaser’s work. The reviewer mentions that the “old” sound that Rachmaninoff creates is essentially out of date. In several of the reviews, the reviewers bring up how Beaser is looking back on the better works of

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Rachmaninoff, and only gaining momentum in an attempt to recover tonality. This is, ironically, much like the assaults on Rachmaninoff’s own music. However, as mentioned previously, unlike many works from the postmodern period, Beaser’s music was not written in an attempt to recover tonality, ironically or otherwise, much like Rachmaninoff’s music was not an attempt to move away from any other traditions that were prevalent at the time.

Based on Pamela Mia Paul’s recollection and my own experience, the audience reaction to the work in subsequent performances continued to be positive. With strong devotion to the concerto, Pamela Mia Paul and her husband performed the concerto in several times in Europe in the following years, including performances with the Arnhem symphony orchestra at Apeldoorn (9-2-1992), Arnhem (10-2-1992), Doetinchem (11-2-1992) and Nijmegen (12-2-1992) and performances with the Monte Carlo Philharmonic in Monte Carlo and the Dutch Radio Symphony in Amsterdam.

There have only been a few other performances of the piece. One stemmed from it being the required concerto for the Juilliard School concerto competition in 1998. The winning pianist, Eric Huebner, performed the work with the Juilliard Symphony on February 3, 1998 under David Loebel in Alice Truly Hall. And finally, the Asian premiere of the work (and last performance of the work at the time of this writing) occurred in 2012 with me as the soloist with the National Centre of the Performing Arts Orchestra, in Beijing under the baton of maestro Lü Jia.

Furthermore, in 1994 there was the aforementioned CD of orchestral works by Beaser released by Argo records which included the Piano Concerto. The performance was by the
American Composers Orchestra under the baton of Dennis Russell Davis, with Pamela Mia Paul as the piano soloist.\textsuperscript{47} This is the only published recording of the Concerto, and there is only one live video recording of the Piano Concerto and that is by me from the performance at the Beijing Modern Music Festival.\textsuperscript{48}

Nevertheless, Pamela Mia Paul was pleasantly surprised by the reception of the premiere with the St. Louis Symphony. She had lived in St. Louis for several years prior to her appointment at the University of North Texas and knew that the audience was rather conservative. In 1979, Leonard Slatkin had only just taken over the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra when Pamela arrived at her position as Chairman of the Piano Department at the St. Louis Conservatory. He would program a different contemporary work every week in an attempt to start acclimating the audience to contemporary music. Pamela recollects the circumstances surrounding the general attitude of the audience leading up to the year of the Piano Concerto performance:

“I first started my job in St Louis, which doesn’t exist anymore, in 1978, and I regularly attended the symphony concerts. And I remember a concert where John Browning was going to perform the Prokofiev concerto and I’m sitting in front of two much older concert attendees and I saw them open the program the program up and then I hear them say “oh dear... Prokofiev... Well maybe we can wait in the Lobby until after intermission.” And I asked myself “Where have I moved?!?” And of course, after Lenny’s time there, things changed. But in the 90s it was a midway point for this change.”\textsuperscript{49}


\textsuperscript{49} Mia Paul, Pamela. 2018. \textit{Conversations with Pamela Mia Paul}. Interview by Christopher Janwong McKiggan. Phone Interview.
The concerto performance was smartly programmed with Gershwin’s “An American in Paris” preceding Beaser’s new work. Brand new concerti are generally the time slot where a famous soloist performing a famous concert is programmed to sell tickets. So, the programming was crucial to the success of the concert. The performance was sold out, proof that the strategy was successful.

“I was amazed it was sold out. They were hysterical about it. I think that everyone was pleasantly surprised that they went through 33 minutes of a piece they don’t know at all, and actually enjoyed it. As a result, they were extremely excited at the end.”\(^5^0^0\)

Yet, even though there have been positive audience reactions to the work, there have been multiple negative receptions from multiple critics. After the subsequent performances and the CD recording that was released a few years later, several critics reacted negatively to the work. For example, Keith Potter from Classical-Music.com said about the CD that “[the] three works here, dating from the late Seventies and early Nineties, reveal that he has nothing to say with the tonal language he has chosen”\(^5^1^\). Also, Gary Higginson from musicweb-international.com said about the concerto that “try as I might I could only find surface excitement and an interest which soon evaporated”.\(^5^2^\) While some positive reviews do exist, there seems to be a slew of negativity from critics at the time towards the work. This wasn’t just towards the piano concerto, as there were also several negative reviews of other works by

\(^{5^0}\) Mia Paul, Pamela. 2018. Conversations with Pamela Mia Paul. Interview by Christopher Janwong McKiggan. Phone Interview.


Beaser during this time frame. In both reviews, it seems that the tonal language used was a big part in the reviewers’ choice to negatively review the work.

Furthermore, the work has been seldom performed after its first few years. I have a hunch regarding why this might be. The piece is almost 35 minutes long, and while I don’t feel that the piece is even one second too long, it is very challenging to get a modern work to be programmed that isn’t a premiere let alone a thirty-five-minute work. For example, before the performance in Beijing was to occur, there was pressure from the festival to perform just the first movement. However, Beaser insisted that the work be performed, and there was a great reception from the audience. When asked about the length being an obstacle to programming, Beaser agreed, but he feels that the work should not be cut as it would be too big of a detriment to the entire work:

“It’s hard to get any 30-minute concerto done... We both know the politics of the orchestra and that it’s hard to get a new piano concerto performed that is not a premiere. It’s just hard to break into the standard repertoire of piano concertos. And there are very few concerti that have done it. It is a long piece; however, this is not a piece that I would consider cutting. There are a couple of pieces that I might allow to cut due to technical limitations, but I don’t do anything lightly. I don’t release anything until I think it’s the right form. And with the piano concerto, could it be cut? Probably. But it makes a lot of sense for the scale and that it’s true to its scale. There are hundreds of other works that I would listen to and say they are doing too much repetition and that it could be trimmed. However, this work I’m not repeating anything that is mindless. It’s all integrated. If I cut something it would have implications for the rest of the piece because it’s balanced and proportionate all throughout the piece.”\(^{53}\)

As Beaser makes clear, even though there could potentially be an easier way to promote the work by making it shorter, he just is not interested in that because he believes that the cohesion of the movements and the overall structure are paramount to the success of the

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piece. I feel that had the concerto been written more recently, it would have garnered more
attention and success in terms of repeat performances. Audiences and critics have reacted
positively to Beaser’s recently composed guitar concerto, and the work seems to have gathered
a lot more attention than the piano concerto has. Nevertheless, I truly feel that if the work was
to start getting more performances again, the possibility to gain traction in the modern-day
musical world is much more likely. But those wheels have not yet started turning.
Chapter VI: The Concerto

Robert Beaser’s Piano Concerto was written during the late 1980s, which was a time when postmodernism was all the rage. Beaser wanted to create a piece that would meet the challenge of being a true concerto. As he says,

“Many of the concerted works being created at that time were attempting to reposition the way that soloists interacted with orchestra, and hermetically wink and comment on existing conventions... I would not try to re-invent a form which had yielded one of the great repertoires in musical history; instead, I would work from the inside to make it my own. I wanted to write a piece which celebrated the incredible visceral power, range and nuance of the piano; that articulates a complex dialectic between soloist and orchestra mapped out on a large scale.”

And that he did. The piece is a gargantuan dialogue between the orchestra and the piano with incredible virtuosic passages for many of the instruments, not only for the piano. Yet, there is no doubt that the piano is the star here. Unlike several other concertos written during this time, the piece is constructed to highlight the virtuosity of the piano. For example, Tcherepnin’s Piano Concerto No. 5, which was composed in 1963, is clearly not a composition that features pianistic virtuosity, and the music is focused mainly on the colors created rather than pure technical prowess. The work even starts off with just a simple octave F# to G pattern which lasts for over half a minute. Beaser’s concerto, on the other hand, hearkens back to the style of composition of the concerto from the 18th to early 20th centuries. Even the forms are based on the expanded-sonata forms, which will be explored in a detailed analysis in a later chapter. In particular, Beaser took inspiration from the form of the late-romantic form of

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concerto writing. More specifically, Beaser wanted to avoid creating a work that was mimicking other composers from the 1960s-1980s.

“Usually 90/100 times those pieces were unsuccessful because the whole nature of how a concerto started in the first place had to do with virtuosity... When I started writing the piano concerto, I had to confront the idea of what I really want to do... Why else would you put one player forward in front of an orchestra unless you were going to pay attention to the age-old principals of interplay between instruments and make that instrument a world unto its own that can go up against an accompaniment.”

Beaser’s note on this topic might be a little bit of an overstatement, as there are several concertos written during this period that do follow this interplay, such as the Barber Piano Concerto (1962), the Kabalevsky Piano Concerto No. 4 in C Op. 99 (1975), or any of the Kapustin Piano Concertos. Rather, Beaser is making a statement about the concertos written in this period in general; clearly some did follow the old principals, but these were not considered “cutting-edge.” For example, Adams’ Century Rolls for orchestra and solo piano, “pays tribute to the intricate mechanisms of piano rolls of the 1920s, as well as to Nancarrow’s Studies for Player Piano.”55 The piano part, while certainly virtuosic in nature at times, is clearly an extension of the orchestra. The music was most certainly composed with the color and texture in mind first, rather than having the virtuosity of the solo instrument at the forefront.

Regardless, as a result, the sensibilities of the piano concerto form, structure, and instrumentation from the late-romantic period flow through the entire construction of Beaser’s work. To start, the instrumentation is massive, with woodwinds in pairs, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 2 trombones, a bass trombone, tuba, celeste, harp, strings, and almost thirty different percussion

instruments. Texturally, the instrumentation is also extremely varied with many different instrumental combinations throughout the work.

The piece starts off with a beautiful clarinet solo that is based on a four-note motive consisting of two sets of rising perfect fourths (see example 1). This Americana-like motive sounds Coplandesque, but there is a funny anecdote about where it comes from. Beaser said that when he was working at Carnegie Hall frequently with the American Composer’s Orchestra, the chime which brought back people to the second half was a four-note motive. This four-note motive was to become the “opening to the first movement of the piano concerto.” Beaser uses these little veiled inside jokes from time to time. For example, he used the Big Ben tune from Westminster Abbey for his Flute Concerto. But again, where the quote comes from is rather anecdotal and not the focus of the structure. It is what he does with it that matters, much more so than from where he got it.

Example 1

57 Ibid.
This four-note motive gives the impression of being the beginning of the exposition, but it quickly becomes clear that this is not the case. In measure six, Beaser suddenly introduces a different rhythmic piano pattern that only lasts for a few more measures, albeit still based on the same four-note motive (See example 1.1). After that it is followed by a short cadenza like figure in the right hand that is based off the last eight notes of the opening clarinet motive (See example 1.2 and 1.3)

Example 1.1 Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 1st movement Measure 6

Example 1.2 Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 1st movement Measures 11-12

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60 Ibid.
Example 1.3 Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 1st movement Measures 4-5

After a short transitional passage, the piano continues with an intense rhythmic figure. For the next fifty measures, there are completely different types of passages following each other every eight or so measures. If the opening section seems very fragmented that’s because it’s supposed to be. Even though on first viewing, the opening section seems like an introduction, or even a fragmented first-time exposition, after analyzing the whole opening measures, it becomes clear that Beaser is just introducing fragments of what is to come. This is achieved by exploring the themes that will occur later in the work, with an emphasis on the first theme. For example, if one was to look at measure 8, the melodic material is clearly exploring the first theme that is to occur in its full nature starting at measure 64 (See example 1.4 and 1.5).

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This method of composition demonstrates Beaser’s compositional process. This is particularly interesting when combined with this statement by Beaser:

“Trying to make thing relate. Coming up with what I call Musical Identities. And those identities are like characters in a play that you meet in the first act that change over the course of the play. But you know it’s the same character. So, you try to come up with ideas, characters in music, in which you need multiple characters. I look for something that develops but maintains its core character and same properties. So, at the end you can say that the material has changed but it’s the same material.”

This whole opening developmental section is intended to show each musical identity and to introduce these different characters from several angles. With the amount of variation on the opening four-note motive throughout this opening, Beaser successfully introduces

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63 Ibid.
provocative aspects of intricate and complicated characters before we get to experience them in their full context. Beaser even introduces modified material of the second movement at the beginning of this introduction\developmental section of the first movement (see example 2.1 and 2.2). The outline of the top notes in measures 8-10 is almost the same melodic contour and the same intervallic material (albeit in a different order) to the introduction of the piano in measures 11-15 of the second movement. As a tease, Beaser plays with this motivic outline throughout the entire opening developmental section, without the melody ever being clear in the first movement and finally the payoff happens almost fifteen minutes later in the second movement.

Example 2\(^{65}\) Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 1\(^{st}\) Movement Measures 8-9

![Example 2.1](image)

Example 2.1\(^{66}\) Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2\(^{nd}\) movement Measures 11-12


\(^{66}\) Ibid.
Regardless, after this whole introduction/developmental section, we are finally given the first theme in its entirety at measure 64. It lasts for eight measures, entirely based on just the four-note motive. (The entire theme collection can be found in the addendum of this paper). The piano rests while almost the entire huge orchestra presents the first complete statement of the theme. The second half of the first eight measures are constructed from the rising perfect fourth motive but in inversion (see example 2.2). This is followed by sixteen measures of transitional material that leads back to the restatement of the first theme but with just the piano at measure 88. Interestingly, the first theme is stated in the same tonal area as it was the first time it was stated without modulating to another key area. Furthermore, it is even the same tonal area that was established by the clarinet at the opening of the piece. Upon further inspection, there is a constant pull towards the tonal area of the note B, throughout the entire work. This will be explored more later in this paper.
Regardless, the restatement of the theme in the piano shows the real first evolution of the first “musical identity” of the piece. While the theme does come back in its entirety, there are extra notes added to develop the theme further. After a few more measures of transitional material, the second theme finally is stated at measure 99 with just the piano to start off. The energy of the second theme is drastically different from the first with lots of rhythmic propulsion leading to each 2\textsuperscript{nd} eighth not of each measure. The basic construction is the use of a long note followed by a succession of sixteenth notes. Then the melody continues in the flute with syncopated quarter notes while the piano continues the rhythmic drive as a countermelody. Beaser then takes the syncopated quarter notes in the flute and expands this motive to create a second melody during the second theme at measure 107. (See example 3 and example 3.1)
After a massive section of 130 measures of juxtapositions of the fragments of the material from the exposition and the opening of the development, we are given the first small cadenza for the piano at measure 255. This short cadenza then leads straight back into the recapitulation at measure 264. Interestingly, Beaser skips the first four measures of the first theme and goes straight into the second half of the theme. It is usually standard practice to state the recapitulation of the first theme in full in the classical concerto form, but again it seems that Beaser is subverting the very expectations that he has created. Underneath, the piano is playing the same rhythmic figure as the second theme from the exposition. However, the melodic material in the piano is very different from the second theme. Then Beaser

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69 Ibid.
continues with the same transitional material as in the exposition only for the music to return to the first half of the first theme but in augmentation. We finally get a full-size cadenza at measure 290 with the cadenza being based on all the material that has occurred up to this point.

Then the second theme then returns at measures 314-321 in the orchestra this time. Aside from instrumentation and tonal area changes, Beaser follows the same basic layout as the exposition in the recapitulation. The piano then plays the section that was originally a codetta, but this time turns into a completely new section. The orchestra also states little fragments of the first theme throughout this new section. Then Beaser leads into the final coda section which is massive and seems to be deeply based on the two developmental sections in the piece as a lot of rhythmic and motivic material used in the development is used here. Then finally Beaser ends on a B Major over D Major chord at the end of the movement.

Despite the modifications to the sonata form that Beaser uses, the control of the material in sonata form is very masterful and it is very surprising to learn that this is only one of two times that Beaser decided to use this form:

“Sonata form again is very retro, and the only two times I used it is in the last movement of the Variations for Flute and Piano and in the concerto. For the concerto, I explored material while curating the overall form of the development, and when the recapitulation came in I
understood that it needed to be altered and changed. I very conscious about how it would all play out.”

The form of the second movement is extremely complicated to analyze. This is because even though it follows the general concept late-romantic tradition of concerto form, albeit with more intricate motivic development and transitional material, there is a usage of certain techniques which cause analytical complications. This is due to something that Beaser calls “Contour Variations”. This means that material that might return later in the piece could look very different but is bred out of just the overall idea of the motive.

“In serial music it’s very structured and all about the sets. But I’m about the shape and feel of the motivic material. So, at the end of the second movement, it’s the contour of the line that matters for the variation. The notes and intervals have changed but you know that it is the same line. It’s all over this piece.”

As an easy example to understand this “contour variation”, the opening of the second movement from measures 1-7 sounds very similar to the section at the end at measures 183-188. Yet if one were to analyze the content, it seems that Beaser changes a lot of the harmonic, melodic, intervallic content, and to some extent the rhythmic content, while mainly only keeping the general line and direction of the opening section when it returns at the end (see examples 3.2 and 3.3). For example, when comparing the melodic content of the opening theme and its return at the end of the work, it is revealed that while the motive stays relatively the same in the first measure, instead of ending on an F# like the first rendition of the melody,

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Beaser chooses to end on the C# on the second statement of the theme. For the second statement of the return of the four-note motive, Beaser moves to a completely new tonal area, and changes the melodic content even further while only keep the original rhythm intact. Furthermore, the countermelody is also restated differently the second time around rhythmically, melodically and harmonically. Melodically, Beaser has a falling minor 3rd motive the first time round, while the second time there is a falling motive of minor 2nds. Rhythmically the countermelody is also very different, with three against two rhythmic content being used the second time round, while the first time he uses continuous eight notes with decorative 16th notes in between the eight notes. With all these differences, one might assume that the return is unrecognizable. But because Beaser’s use of the contour variation technique, the second time the material returns sound eerily like the first time despite drastic differences. While, this type of technique is not unique to Beaser and has been used before his time, Beaser does an effective job of utilizing this material throughout his work.
Example 3.2\textsuperscript{71} Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2\textsuperscript{nd} movement Measures 1-6

Example 3.3\textsuperscript{72} Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2\textsuperscript{nd} movement Measures 183-187


\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
Beyond just using the technique of “Contour Variation”, in the 2nd movement Beaser also makes use of a highly modified form of double variations. With a formal set of variations, there is one theme that is stated to completion multiple times, albeit with different rhythmic, textural, melodic and/or harmonic content. With a typical double variation form, the same processes occur as a normal variation, but with two themes being stated alternately. However, in Beaser’s version of the double variation form, all the variations have rather fragmented statements of the two themes. This contributes to the difficulty of the analysis because the entries of each theme are not clearly stated. Beaser has also stated that this movement is like a set of ‘ghost’ variations, and this really rings true as the material appears and disappears rather frequently.73 Beyond this, the ghostly, fragmented nature of the movement combined with the use of contour variations make several statements of each theme rather veiled which to me makes it feel like there are more than just two themes at play.

The opening pattern of the first measure in the second movement (see example 3.2) is again a four-note motive. Beaser states in his program notes that this four-note melodic material is a reference to the opening of the second movement of the Beethoven Violin Concerto, second movement (see example 3.4). I have labeled this theme as intro ‘A’ (see example 3.5) This opening passage seems at first glance to be the first theme. However, upon closer inspection, this whole opening section from measure 1-20 acts as an introduction. Furthermore, much like the first movement, Beaser first presents fragments of these ideas which he will further develop during the actual variation set. The first statement of the two themes

themes start at measure 20 and the first theme lasts until measure 28 (see example 3.5). The second theme is stated from measure 29 through measure 46 (see example 3.6). These themes do stem from of the opening section, as both themes take the rhythmic element of a dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note and quarter notes from Beethoven’s concerto as the basis of the rhythmic structure of the melody.

Example 3.4 Beethoven Violin Concerto, 2nd movement Measures 1-2

Example 3.5 Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2nd movement Measures 21-25

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Things become more complicated after the first statement of the two themes, as there are no traditional statements of each variation. Beaser treats each new section more like a development from a sonata form section with inconsistent statements of each themes throughout. The main structural points that define each variation set are shown through the use of textural, rhythmical and instrumental changes. For clear examples of this, if one were to compare the beginnings of variations 2, 3 and 4, one would find that each variation has drastic differences on multiple levels (see examples 3.61, 3.62 and 3.63). Furthermore, while there are clearly contrasted sections that signal the beginning of each new variation, each variation acts more like a continuous development of ideas that stem out of the two themes that were stated earlier on.

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Example 3.61 Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2nd movement, Beginning of Variation 2

Example 3.62 Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2nd movement, Beginning of Variation 3

The first variation starts at measure 52 with the opening material of this variation stemming out of the second theme. The second theme has a descending melodic minor figure with harmonies that shift between C# minor and D lydian. Similar to this, the first part of the first variation has a melodic minor figure that follows a similar contour to the second theme and is based on E flat minor and F flat Lydian (see example 3.7). In both occurrences, the shift of tonal areas is one of a minor 2nd, which creates a relationship of tonal areas that are adjacent to each other yet far apart in terms of the notes shared between the two tonal areas. As mentioned previously, the statements of the themes are more developmental and fragmented, and the second half of the variation juxtaposes between stating the ending of the second theme with the middle section of the first theme. (example 3.8)

Example 3.7

Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2nd movement Measures 52-53

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Example 3.8\textsuperscript{81} Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2\textsuperscript{nd} movement Measures 63-66\textsuperscript{82}


\textsuperscript{82} *1 is first theme fragment and *2 is second theme fragment.
The second variation starts at measure 71 and is much more improvisational and textural in nature. This is also the most fragmented of all the variations, as there are no clear statements of the theme and one can only infer that this is a completely new variation due to the difference in texture, mood, and tempo. Even brief quotes don’t exist, and all the other variations do contain some moments of clarity in the melody. What Beaser does here is to use another technique that he likes. This is the idea of taking new material that stemmed out of the original material and developing that further. This idea seems to be influenced by the technique of developing variations, a term that was coined by Schoenberg but had been used by composers such as Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, to name just a few. *Grove Music Online* defines this technique as “where every motif is transformed before it can gather associations for the listener there can be no intensification of meaning through development; where no pattern establishes itself only extreme contrasts cheat expectation, and then not for long.”

This is precisely what happens in this section of the Piano Concerto as the material here is the rhythmic figure that starts in the piano part in the first variation (see example 3.7). This material morphs into the figure that is stated by the oboe at measure 75 (see example 3.9). The intervallic material of C-sharp-D-C natural is then developed even further during the following section of this variation and is stated multiple times throughout the section (see example 3.10).

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The third variation starts at measure 89, and Beaser again gives the audience completely new material during the first half of this variation. The opening of this variation is linked to the rest of the piece by quoting the intervallic material from the previous variation (see example 3.11). Once Beaser has developed this intervallic material Beaser finally gives the clearest statement of the second theme from all of the variations at measure 126. Beaser states the second theme in its entirety underneath the virtuosic passages in the piano which had developed out of the preceding intervallic material (see example 3.12).

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85 Ibid.
During the last set of variations, Beaser starts quoting the introductory material from the piano section as short veiled quotes. This is juxtaposed between a varied version of the second half of the first theme (see example 3.13) The opening material finally returns as a coda at measure 183. After a complete, albeit modified, statement of the opening section, Beaser states the very beginning of the second theme at the end of the movement to close it out.

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87 Ibid.
The third movement is a return to the sonata form, with a more traditional take on the sonata form as compared to the first movement. It opens with a four-measure introduction with a semi-tone motivic idea that consistently returns throughout the movement. At measure 5, the first theme is introduced. The first theme combines two motivic ideas. The first one is a rhythmic pattern in triplets with melodic material that consists of perfect fifths and major ninths (see example 3.14). The second idea takes the opening of the second movement and modifies it to be veiled and to suit this first theme (see example 3.15). This is followed by seven measures of transitional material which leads into the second theme in measure 27. The second theme is the most chromatic and dissonant part of the entire piece (see example 3.16). After a very brief second theme, Beaser gives the audience another theme which is to be the third theme at measure 36. Then finally the fourth and final theme starts at measure 46.

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In the solo part of the third theme, the clarinet starts a solo line reminiscent of the second theme from the first movement (see examples 3.17 and 3.18). The third theme repeats another time in another tonal area before finally moving into the development section after a very brief codetta at measure 73. The entire development section is almost entirely built around the fourth theme. At measure 95, the first theme comes back, and the entire recapitulation almost follows the exposition beat by beat (much like the traditional sonata


Ibid.

Ibid.
form) although with movements to different tonal areas. After the restatement of the second, third and fourth themes Beaser brings back the developmental section that leads into a very short piano cadenza at measure 200. Then at 210 the first half of the coda finally starts with Beaser recalling every single theme either in whole or in fragments. In an unusual turn, Beaser gives a second short cadenza in the middle of the coda before finally ending the work through the motivic material of the first theme of this movement.92

Example 3.17\(^\text{93}\) Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 3rd movement Measures 47-53

Example 3.18\(^\text{94}\) Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 1st movement Measures 107-110

The occasionally fragmented nature of the work could have had some negative impact on the reception from the critics on their first hearing of the work, particularly regarding the second movement. It could have potentially felt jarring and inconsistent to newer ears, especially since the critics could have been expecting that they would be hearing more traditional tonal work. As Beaser’s music does consistently jump between being predictable and

\(^{92}\) Traditionally, there is only one cadenza, but Beaser again teases the listener but taking different turns than expected.


\(^{94}\) Ibid.
unpredictable, perhaps this was what led to the negative reviews at first. However, upon multiple listening sessions, it becomes clear that the music is very clear in its construction, and it is simple enough to grasp once one knows what to listen for. While the 1st movement, and especially the 3rd movement, don’t have to deal with this fragmented issue as much as the 2nd movement, I still feel that the musical intent that Beaser wants for the piece as a whole is very clear, yet the work can reward listeners even further upon multiple playthroughs.
Chapter VII: The Tonality, Harmony and Counterpoint in the Concerto

Before talking about any other aspect of the construction of tonality in Beaser’s work, one would be remiss to not talk about a big signature in his music, namely, the use of simultaneous major and minor triadic harmonies. It would be easy to assume that this in reference to a type of polytonality or bitonality, but since Beaser does not use the triads in a functional way, this is not the case.

“They aren’t triads, I’m thinking of them as blocks of sound. I love the feeling of them maintaining their property as a triadic entity, so they can move out in anyway functionally, while at the same time they can just work as blocks of sound. This is so they can be combined in any order. It’s the same thing as when I combine the Major Minor chords. Franchetti said you need to find your own clichés. Well if you go out and subconsciously look for them it’s not so good. You need to follow them and find it naturally.”  

The first example of this particular sound is in the first introduction of the piano. Just during the first four beats, Beaser overlays four non-functional Major and Minor triads on top of each other both from the same Key area and from different Key areas. The first beat for example is a C sharp Major chord over a C sharp minor chord. The second beat is an A major chord over an A flat major chord. This is followed by a B major chord over a C Major Chord. Beaser also really has an affinity towards the dominant seventh chord and this first measure finally ends with a F sharp major chord over an E dominant seventh chord. (See example 4)

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As can be seen, the harmonies that are chosen are nonfunctional, which is prevalent throughout almost all of the work. So, the question arises: how does Beaser pick his harmonies?

“I don’t think harmony was thought about deeply in the latter part of the 20th century. It was about a lot of other things, it was about sets and collections etc. things which I use regularly. I use hexachords and sets, and I find them harmonic. Most dodecaphonic music I hear tonally. What is tonality? Hierarchical tonality is basically the notion that there are certain areas which have the need to resolve somewhere.”

His method of choosing harmonies does seem to slightly vary from piece to piece, but in the Piano Concerto it seems that Beaser has a tendency to choose the top harmony based on each particular melodic note being played at that time with the lower harmonies being based on either the pure beauty of each vertical sonority or tonal area. As an example, for the upper

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harmonies, at the aforementioned motivic outline at measures 7-10, on each note which outlines the melodic material, Beaser changes the harmony based on parallel major triads with the fifth of the triad being the melodic note. (see example 4.1)

Example 4.1 98 Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 1st movement Measures 7-10

An even clearer example would be at the first full statement of the first theme. Beaser uses a major triadic harmony on literally every melodic note change. He does this to keep a consistent harmonic sound throughout the passage (see example 5) Cleverly, right at the end of the passage, to use the expectation of harmony to great effect, suddenly Beaser changes the major triads underneath the melodic material to augmented 5ths and tritones. As there are no functional harmonies in this section, Beaser seems to be creating a cadential point through the use of different harmonic sonorities to bring the theme to a close. (see example 5.1)

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“I like to create expectations in music somehow. And then thwart those expectations, which is very Wagnerian. And I like to use it within all the parameters that I am working in. If all your phrases are too rounded and closed, they can’t open into other vistas. If you keep coming to a cadential point you are stopping the music. It needs to have an ebb and flow where you are constantly like liquid that can move in any direction. It’s a very living force that has energy. So how you create that without using functional tonality is the key. And that’s my music.”

Beaser tends to prioritize vertical sonorities. He uses his ear and his aesthetic taste to find beautiful sonorities without being limited by traditional harmonic patterns or expectations.

He creates expectation in his own way, through the use of parallel major triads with the melody

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100 Ibid.
on top only to subvert expectations at the very last two measures. The type of harmony often used is the same sonority as the dominant seventh chord, albeit used not functionally.

However, this does not mean that Beaser never uses harmonies in a traditionally functional way. This method of using harmonies in a non-traditional way is used to create a sense of false security in harmonic direction. Yet Beaser knows that audiences have been trained for hundreds of years to expect a descent of a perfect fifth to arrive at a tonal center after the use of a dominant seventh chord. So, several times during the work, Beaser moves to a different tonal area through a modified version of V-I. We will explore this more later in this paper.

Another idea that Beaser uses constantly in his music is the counterpoint of ideas. A great example of this is at measure 153. Beaser layers three ideas over each other in perfect counterpoint. In the flutes and clarinets, Beaser takes the second half of the new theme from the developmental section. The piano is playing a figure that has been modified from Measure 139, while in the violins, they are playing another figure from measure 137 which was originally from the piano part (See example 6). All uniquely different ideas, but Beaser constructs this measure to allow all the ideas to work in counterpoint with each other. This is only possible because Beaser carefully constructs each idea and motive to completion before he even starts placing them on the page.

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102 Counterpoint traditionally is the combining of melodies that harmonically and rhythmically make sense with each other while being independent and equal. However, Beaser takes ideas that aren’t related and that shouldn’t work together, but skillfully finds ways to put them together.
“So, what we’re talking about here is not exactly second species counterpoint, we’re actually talking about idea against idea. Or larger things can be in counterpoint with each other. It’s a matter of how much control you have over each parameter of music, not just note against note. Since I like to work with conflict and dichotomies in music, you know back and forth from dark to light, it seems to me that it’s like setting up these entities right next to each other without them affecting each other. It can be very powerful especially when used at the right moment.”

Tonally, the work clearly has pulls to certain tonal areas throughout the work. Beaser, has certain philosophies regarding the nature of writing for tonal music.

“There is no question that I work with tonal centers within the music. What I like to call them as analogs. I like to have a home place. Sometimes that home place can just be a collection of pitches. And when you move away from them you’re using different pitches. When I’m actually using chords or tonality per say – I don’t write modally usually – I still try to stay away from labels. But I do try to hear and sense what the areas are

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sounding like. I’m sure there are areas in the piano concerto that you can put a key signature to. You could at least temporarily put a key signature to most of the work.”

The opening of the work is a great example of this. The clarinet line clearly starts in the key of b minor, with a clear pull to the note b, and with the accidental notes C sharp and F sharp which are from the b minor key signature. But, since Beaser does not want to state outright that there is just a tonal area of B, he constructs the melody so that it also has a feeling of e minor, which is a closely related key of B. However, at measure 4, the clarinet suddenly plays a shocking C natural followed by consecutive descending 3rds to lead us away from the key of B (see example 6.1).

Example 6.1 Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 1st movement Measures 1-5

The reason Beaser does this is to again subvert expectations. He makes sure to keep the audience in key of b minor just long enough to feel comfortable only to surprise the listener a few measures later. However, he does make sure to set up the surprise also, as the note C doesn’t just come out of nowhere. The note before the C is an E, which creates a leap of a
minor 6th up to the C. Before this, Beaser sets up two consecutive minor 6th leaps from F sharp to D and B to G. (see example 7) This way, Beaser sets up the C note, while keeping all the preceding material in the key b minor.

Example 7 Beaser Piano Concerto, 1st movement Measures 3-4

As Beaser mentions, he could have easily put a key signature to the passage (in the case the key signature of b minor), but he doesn’t because it could have limited his creativity to move out of the key area of b minor by feeling subconsciously limited in freedom by the key signature.

Coming back to the topic of tonal areas, there is a clear pull to the tonal center of B throughout the concerto. Firstly, to mention the most important tentpoles of the work, as mentioned previously, the piece starts with the note b, and the key area is clearly b also. Every time the first theme comes back, both in the exposition and the recapitulation, the key area is still centered around b. Then, to conclude the first movement, Beaser also ends the work with a B major chord. Furthermore, the second movement starts off in the Key of D major, which is the relative major of b minor. Beyond that, to set up the key of D major even further, underneath the B major chord at the end of the first movement, Beaser also has the notes D

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and A set up under the B major chord to create the expectation for the audience regarding the upcoming tonal area. (see examples 7.1 and 7.2)

Example 7.1\textsuperscript{108} Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 1\textsuperscript{st} movement Measures 390

Example 7.2\textsuperscript{109} Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2\textsuperscript{nd} movement Measures 1-2

As if to state without a doubt about the clear B tonal area, starting at measure 144 of the second movement, the orchestra part rhythmically states the notes B and F Sharp without a break for 39 entire measures! Other instruments state fragments of the tonal area of B


\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
throughout this entire passage also (see example 7.3). Then the relative tonal area of D returns immediately following this passage.

Example 7.3\textsuperscript{110} Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2\textsuperscript{nd} movement Measures 144-149

The last movement opens with B-A sharp (the leading tone of B) repeatedly, almost as though to state to the audience that we are actually in B (see example 7.4). Beyond that, the first theme also keeps coming back to the note B, with the not B also being the highest note of this theme. Even though this theme is not in the key of B, the ears a continually drawn to that note. To solidify that the main tonal area of the concerto is B, the work finally ends with a very clear B major ninth chord.

Example 7.4\textsuperscript{111} Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 3\textsuperscript{rd} movement Measures 1-4


In terms of tonal areas throughout the piece, even though it is possible to use traditional methods to analyze significant parts of the work, it is not very useful to do so. Again, this returns to the notion of non-functional tonality in his music. However, it is possible to view all major destinations in the work to see how the tonality works in the piece as a whole and how it affects the form.

As previously mentioned, the whole introduction section as well as the first theme are in the tonal area of B. Like traditional sonata form, the transitional material fluctuates between tonal areas. Once the music reaches the second theme, things become more complicated to analyze as the complex layers of dual nonfunctional triadic harmonies that Beaser uses make pinpointing the exact tonal implications more difficult. However, there are many assumptions that can be drawn from both listening to the work and analyzing the work from a broader perspective.

Firstly, we can look at the first four measures of the second theme as a hint. The notes in the first four measures in the melody consist of C, B-flat, A-flat, G and F with special emphasis on the note B-flat both through instrumentation and being rhythmically weighted on the B-flat (see example 8) On the down beat of the next measure, the harp, double bass and the left hand of the piano have a very singular, clear D sharp. At first glance, this might seem to be at odds with the other notes that came before this, but enharmonically spelt, this note is also an E flat (see example 8.1) Coupled with the fact that the violins hold the notes B flat and E flat on the fourth beat, and the glockenspiel also plays a B flat at the same time, it seems this entire second theme is in the tonal area of E flat. Even the solo in the Clarinet that follows stays
basically in the key of E flat major/minor, and finally ends on a B flat to F to E flat which is a very traditional cadential point.

Example 8\textsuperscript{112} Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 1\textsuperscript{st} movement Measures 99-101

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example8.png}
\end{figure}

Example 8.1\textsuperscript{113} Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 1\textsuperscript{st} movement Measure 102

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example8_1.png}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
A fascinating note about this tonal area of E flat (enharmonically D sharp) is that this could be viewed as the mediant of B. While traditionally, it is not standard practice to modulate to the mediant during the second theme in sonata form, many composers have done so, perhaps most famously Beethoven in his “Waldstein” sonata. Even though the modulation to the mediant technique is more common during the romantic era, the fact that Beaser has a veiled quote of Beethoven’s violin concerto at the opening of the second movement, it seems that the inspiration to move to this tonal area could have been a very conscious one, even though it wasn’t explicitly stated by the composer himself.

The developmental section starts off very briefly with a tonal pull towards E flat, but quickly becomes unstable. Again, as previously mentioned, the work returns to the tonal area of B with a very interesting addition right before it. Immediately before the chromatic running note passage in the piano that leads into the recapitulation, Beaser writes in a very clear F sharp dominant seventh chord in the piano that is labeled quadruple forte with an accent on top! (see example 9) This is followed by a big entrance from the orchestra halfway through the first theme melody which is in the B tonal area in the recapitulation. It seems as though Beaser is using functional harmony at the most important cadential point of the movement to help create a climatic point of the piece.
Since the second theme of the recapitulation essentially follows the same structure as the exposition, it is easy to figure out the tonal area of F by using the same analysis of the second theme. After continued instability in tonal areas throughout the cadenza in the piano and the coda, Beaser seemingly just decides to give the audience a B major chord at the end without any preparation on a first glance. However, even though it is very subtle, Beaser does prepare the listener for a setup of a cadential point even though it is brief. In the octave piano part several measures prior, there is a sequential pattern that Beaser alters at the last minute to end with A sharp and ending on a big octave B in both the orchestra and the piano part (see example 10). Almost as though giving a quick, altered V to I in that split second.

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Example 10 Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 1st movement Measure 386-388

The second movement starts off in the tonal area of D which is the median of the tonal area B. Beaser quickly modulates away from this opening key of D, which causes the first theme to be in a non-stable tonal area. However, during this introductory section, Beaser still wants to establish a clear home area for the listener and clearly brings the music back to the tonal area of D, albeit briefly, through the use of the dominant chord A Major (see example 10.1). All the melodic notes and harmonies that follow are also from the tonal area of D also.

Example 10.1 Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2nd movement Measures 11-13

This is followed by the first theme which again returns to the main tonal area of B by being in the modal key of B Dorian (see example 10.2). This tonal area continues throughout

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116 Ibid.
this entire first theme, and finally Beaser modulates to the key of C# minor for the first part of the second theme (see example 10.3). Yet again, Beaser doesn’t leave the B/D area for too long, and he juxtaposes between the tonal areas of C# minor and D Lydian during the second theme (See example 10.4). Once all the themes have been stated, Beaser tonally treats the variations section like a developmental section, as his tonal areas throughout all the variations are unstable. It’s not until the aforementioned section at measure 145 where the tonal area becomes stable again and returns to the area of B. Finally, at the return of the very first theme near the end of the work at measure 183, Beaser states a modified version of the first theme again in D Major (see example 10.5). However, in a departure from the rest of the work, Beaser modulates away from the B/D tonal area and stays away from it at the end of this movement by ending in the key of A flat minor. However, Beaser still gives a little tease of the tonal area of B six bars before the end by giving the minor version of the dominant seventh chord at measure 200 (see example 10.6).

Example 10.2\(^{117}\) Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2\(^{nd}\) movement  Measures 21-24

Example 10.3\(^{118}\) Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2\(^{nd}\) movement  Measures 29-34

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\(^{118}\) Ibid.
Example 10.4\textsuperscript{119} Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2\textsuperscript{nd} movement Measures 35-37

Example 10.5\textsuperscript{120} Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2\textsuperscript{nd} movement Measures 183-184

Example 10.6\textsuperscript{121} Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 2\textsuperscript{nd} movement Measure 200

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
Previously, I had mentioned that the opening area of the third movement has a strong pull towards the note B, and I would like to expand on that now. After careful analysis of the first theme, it is clear that the tonal area is in C Sharp with an emphasis on B.

Earlier in the paper, I had mentioned that Beaser focuses on using any type of material, both tonal and non-tonal, for the prime reason of serving the music. The second theme is a prime example of this, because for the first time in the work, a main theme is very chromatic and is not really centered around a single tonal area. Interestingly, instead of the proceeding transitional material being unstable in key area as in the rest of the work, Beaser is very careful to balance out the instability by centering the following transitional material, even though brief, around the tonal center F.

For the next theme, to show the importance that Beaser clearly places on this section, it must be quoted that Beaser “[doesn’t] write modally usually”. Yet, at this next section it is clearly in the D flat Lydian mode, as the entire collection of pitches (with one brief moment of the note E) is from that mode. (see example 11) Beaser even then uses the D flat as a dominant to the restatement of the theme in Gb Lydian which immediately follows. This once again solidifies Beaser’s statement that he will use any method of composition, even ones he states
he doesn’t usually use, if the music requires it. Furthermore, as previously mentioned in this paper, Beaser uses the Lydian mode several more times throughout the work.

**Example 11**

Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 3\textsuperscript{rd} movement Measures 47-53

This then is followed by an unstable developmental which bring us back to the restatement in the key area of C sharp. In an interesting move, after the unstable tonality in the second theme, Beaser goes back to state the third theme in the exact same key areas as in the exposition. After a transitional period, and a very short piano cadenza, we have a statement of the third theme melody in the A lydian mode, which is closely related to the home tonal area of B (See example 12). And after a brief statement in the relative major of B minor, and a short unstable coda, Beaser gives a loud leading tone in the lower registers for two whole measures, followed by a strong a definitive ending on the chord B major ninth! (see example 12.1)

**Example 12**

Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 3\textsuperscript{rd} movement Measures 210-216

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123 A point that must be mentioned is the consistent use of the lydian mode. This is essentially the only mode that Beaser uses throughout the entire work. This could be due to the Tritone nature of the scale which can cause instability to the tonal area. As Beaser consistently likes to play with expectations throughout the work, the lydian mode is used to create a feeling of unease in an otherwise stable tonal areas that Beaser establishes. Furthermore, the Lydian mode creates two leading tones, which again refers to Beaser’s choice to use the relationship of the minor 2\textsuperscript{nd} which occurs several times throughout the work.

Example 12.1 Robert Beaser Piano Concerto, 3rd movement Measure 265

One of the most fascinating aspects of the movement is the overall tonal areas in each major section. If one were to take the tonal areas of each major stable section of the last

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movement, we would get the notes, B, C sharp, D flat, G flat, C sharp, D flat, G flat, B, D, B. (See example 12.2) Spelled enharmonically it would be B, C sharp, F sharp, C sharp, F sharp, B, D, B, all of which are important tonal elements of the tonal area of B. (See example 12.3 and example 12.4) Clearly, Beaser has carefully constructed each tonal area to make cohesion within the construction of the last movement to balance out the use of nonfunctional standalone harmonies throughout the work.

Example 12.2 Pitch collections of major tonal areas

Example 12.3 Pitch collections of major tonal areas spelt enharmonically
Example 12.4 Simplification of the 3rd movement’s important tonal areas
Conclusion

My original intention for this paper was to explore the Beaser Piano Concerto as a prime example of “New Tonality.” However, after going through the research on Beaser himself, along with the areas regarding the genre of “New Tonality,” I realized that this is a prime example of a great concerto regardless of genre. The term “New Tonality” is problematic because the definition is far too broad to have any impact or power. With composers varying from the vastly different George Rochberg to Aaron Jay Kernis and to Lowell Liebermann being called “New Tonal” composers, there clearly needs to be terms that can better define each of their styles. It is true that some terms such as “Neo-Romantic” have been thrown around to define some of these composers, but I still find the definition too broad. Beyond that, Beaser himself would rather not be associated with the term as a composer, even though he was the one who edited the journal issue that coined the term to begin with. I personally feel that even though Beaser clearly has personal signatures in each of pieces, his work is too varied from piece to piece as well as in comparison to other composers to be easily categorized by one term.

Regardless, through analysis of the concerto, one can see that the construction of the work is superb, and the musical material used is crafted with delicate care. He clearly has a passion for music both old and new, and he tries to go beyond trying to just embody composers from the past. Beaser tries to have his own personal voice heard; a voice that has been crafted over decades of integration with music that speaks for itself regardless of categorization.

Beaser wrote in an New York Times opinion article that that “I needed to create simpler syntactical structures, material that would be comprehensible, arguments that could be
combined in provocative ways and recontextualized throughout the course of a piece... I never completely abandoned the modernist dictum of originality; but the surface in music — powerful and seductive as it may appear at first blush — was not the only thing that mattered to me.”

Beaser clearly wanted to make his own voice be heard, and not be influenced just by trends and genres. While it is impossible to completely divorce one’s voice from the surrounding noise, to the opinion of this author, Beaser achieved the goal of creating his own unique voice with full force.

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Bibliography


Appendix: Theme Catalog

Theme catalog

FIRST MOVEMENT
Theme 1 short version

Theme 2 A

Theme 2 B

Development New Theme

SECOND MOVEMENT
Intro A

Intro A2

Theme 1
THIRD MOVEMENT
Theme 1

Transitional material call back to second movement opening

Theme 2