

Héctor Tosar's *grupos de sonidos* and their “derived forms”

Thematic topic: Theoretical propositions by Latin–American authors.

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of the concept of *grupos de sonidos* — a theoretical framework developed by Héctor Tosar in the early 1960s for harmonic organization in a post-tonal context — and to analyze in depth the concept of *formas derivadas* (derived forms), a concept that Tosar never defined formally although it was essential in his compositional practice.

Héctor Tosar Errecart (1923–2002) was the most important composer in the history of Uruguayan academic music and one of the most relevant of his generation in Latin America. He had a solid albeit conservative education, and his first orchestral piece, premiered in 1940 on the day of his seventeenth birthday, already reveals a mature technique. During the first period of his career, his musical language was mostly neo-classical, with increasing degrees of chromaticism during the 1950, but never leaving tonality. Actually, in his youth Tosar wasn't even aware of the existence of Schoenberg and atonal music, and had little or no contact with the avant-garde even after studying in the USA (1946 and 1947) and in Paris (1948 to 1951), where he studied under conservative composers like Copland, Honegger, Rivier and Milhaud.

The decisive turning point occurred in the early 1960s, with the “Four Pieces” for piano and “Stray Birds” for baritone and ensemble, both composed between 1961 and 1963. In these pieces Tosar faced for the first time in his career the problem of composing outside a tonal framework. Dissatisfied with twelve-tone serialism, he tried to find the way to organize pitch relationships in a non-tonal context. Tosar wasn't aware of the theories being advanced at the time by American theorists like Babbitt, Forte and Perle, and he had to tackle the problem on his own. He soon found the 12 basic forms of combining three pitch classes, coinciding with Forte's “prime forms”.

Unlike the aforementioned theorists, who used algebraic representations, Tosar used a geometric approach and represented each form or *trífono* (trichord) as a triangle in the chromatic circle. Although he never formulated a proper theory, by the mid-sixties he was already teaching the 12 *trífonos* and their manipulation to his students, and it was the basis of the compositional technique of his late period. In the late 1980s, and after having read an article published in 1982 by Peter Schat presenting a very similar approach as a novelty, Tosar decided to put his own findings in writing. In early 1992 he finished the manuscript of his book, and although it remained unpublished until this year, numerous photocopies have been circulating in the last decades.

In the book Tosar explores the 12 trichords, presenting for each the normal form and its inversion where applicable, as well as the ways they can be combined to complete the aggregate (Figure 1). For each trichord he also presents a variable number of what he calls “derived forms”, that are open dispositions of the basic group. Although the idea of “derived form” was very important

in Tosar's compositional technique, he never defines or explains the concept in his book. Moreover, the criteria used to generate the derived forms of each trichord are inconsistent. An analysis shows that Tosar uses a total of five different methods, that can be defined formally. Applied to the 12 trichords and their inversions, they would result in a total of 91 derived forms, of which only 41 are included in the book (Figure 2).

It can be seen that since the early 1960s and into the 1980s, the problem of post-tonal harmony was being tackled by many composers around the world, most of them independently from theorists like Forte and Perle, and with a more practical and technical approach. In cases like Tosar and others, like Elliot Carter, their theories were published at a much later date and remain outsiders in the prevalent post-tonal theory.

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