

REVIEW OF EDWARD VENN, *THOMAS ADÈS: ASYLA*, ROUTLEDGE, 2017

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THE LIFE AND WORKS of British composer Thomas Adès (b. 1971) have recently garnered much critical attention. Since the early 2000s, the number of scholarly articles and dissertations about Adès's compositions and his compositional procedures has steadily increased and shows no signs of slowing down.¹ The first book published about Adès's music was written in French by Hélène Cao (2007). The next book to appear was created by Adès himself in collaboration with music critic Tom Service. Together, Adès and Service (2012) published their conversations as *Thomas Adès: Full of Noises*.² Edward Venn's *Thomas Adès: Asyla*, published in 2017 by Routledge as part of their "Landmarks in Music Since 1950" series,³ adds to this short list of book-length studies that focus on the music of Adès. This pioneering text has laid a significant foundation for future Adès studies. Venn, who has published numerous insightful analyses (2006, 2014, 2015) on Adès's music, explains the goal of his monograph:

The account of *Asyla* offered in this book is by definition my personal response to a work that I have listened to, studied and enjoyed for nearly two decades. . . . I offer a close analytical reading of the score, along with theoretical reflection (both musicological and critical) upon this analysis. By carefully laying out the grounds for my argument, I hope to demonstrate (without overloading the text with theoretical jargon) why the music moves me in the way it does, whilst enabling readers to reach their own alternative interpretive conclusions: the semantic richness of *Asyla* makes the notion of a single, definitive reading nonsensical. (xv)

Thomas Adès: Asyla is symmetrically organized so that the outer chapters (Chapters 1, 2, 7, and the Epilogue) are biographical in nature and position *Asyla* (1997) not only within the composer's compositional output, but also in a broader cultural context, while the four central chapters (Chapters 3–6) provide in-depth analyses of all four movements of the work. Attached to the inside of the back cover is a CD recording of *Asyla* performed by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Sir Simon Rattle; until recently this was the only commercially available recording of *Asyla*.⁴ Venn provides the usual bibliographical references, and he also includes additional citations that are helpful for future research. For example, Venn lists two websites where readers can learn more about Adès's compositions and recordings as well as the web address to Faber Music, Adès's publisher, to view scores online for study purposes. Venn also provides a discography, lists two radio broadcasts that he discusses in the text, and includes a list of websites that the reader can visit for additional information.

¹ For the first dissertation on the music of Adès, see Travers (2004). Some of the early scholarly articles include Fox (2004), Venn (2006), and Roeder (2006, 2009).

² For an example of a scholarly article written by Adès, see Adès (1999).

³ Other monographs in this series include *Karlheinz Stockhausen: Zeitmaße* by Jerome Kohl (2017); *Iannis Xenakis: Kraanerg* by James Harley (2015); *Robert Saxton: Caritas* by Wyndham Thomas (2012); *Hans Werner Henze: Tristan* (1973) by Stephen Downes (2011); *Harrison Birtwistle: The Mask of Orpheus* by Jonathan Cross (2009); *Leonard Bernstein: West Side Story* by Nigel Simeone (2009); *Jonathan Harvey: Song Offerings and White as Jasmine* by Michael Downes (2009); *Olivier Messiaen: Oiseaux exotiques* by Peter Hill, Nigel Simeone (2007); *Louis Andriessen: De Staat* by Robert Adlington (2004); and *Shostakovich: String Quartet No. 8* by David Fanning (2004).

⁴ Seventeen years after the first recording, the second commercially available CD of *Asyla* was released by the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Thomas Adès. See *Adès: Polaris, Tevot, Asyla, Brahms* (Adès 2017).

“The first two chapters of the book,” Venn notes, “contextualise Adès and his music” (xvi). In Chapter 1, Venn reviews Adès’s early compositions and his public and critical reception in the 1990s, a decade when Adès was first being recognized for his talents as both performer and composer. In the second half of the first chapter, Venn focuses on “Adès’s early career in the context of Britain in the 1990s” (6). Venn provides a brief survey of the political climate in Britain as it relates to Adès’s social and political situation.

In Chapter 2, appropriately titled “Towards *Asyla* (1990–1997),” Venn describes some of the key compositional

techniques that continually surface when analyzing Adès’s music. For instance, Venn discusses an “expanding (or contracting) intervallic series” where successive intervals between pitches increase or decrease usually by semitones, e.g., a C–B–A–F♯–D melodic line projects the intervallic series of –1, –2, –3, –4. He further explains what he calls an “expanding (or contracting) harmonic progression,” which consists of the superimposition of different interval cycles in a strict rhythmic alignment. Venn’s Example 2.1, reproduced below, shows an “expanded intervallic series” and an “expanded harmonic progression.” The expanded har-

(a)

(i) semitones between adjacent pitches

(ii)

(b) [♩=88–96 Suspended: sempre quasi in sogno]

(a) expanding intervallic series (descending)

(c) expanding intervallic series (ascending)

(b) contracting intervallic series (ascending)

(d) contracting intervallic series (descending)

Pno

quasi legato, ma leggero

ppp sempre e lontanissimo

ppp legato possibile, ma leggero

Quasi sempre con pedale (do not allow sounds to accumulate excessively, but always clear gradually)

(c) (a)

Pno (r.h.) 22

(*ppp* sempre)

(-2)

(-1)

(-3)

(+2)

(+1)

(+3)

(-2)

(-1)

(-3)

mp semplice, quasi senza colore, ma sempre poco espress. (senza cresc.)

Chil - - - - dren's voi - ces in the or - - - chard

Soprano

Pno (l.h.)

p più chiaro (legato sempre)

come sopra

(d)

Example 2.1 (a) (i) expanded intervallic series; (ii) expanded harmonic progression; (b) ‘New Hampshire’, *Five Eliot Landscapes* Op. 1/i, bars 17–28.

monic progression provided in his example is excerpted from Adès's *Five Eliot Landscapes* (1990), which consists of the alignment of interval cycles 2, 1, and 3. Venn comments that this progression begins with A-major and B-major triads, and as a result, "the music recalls harmonic materials from a bygone era, but renders them strange in a new, modern context" (18).

In his discussion of pitch, Venn then explores how "[p]attern disruption frequently assumes a significant role in Adès's music" (19). For example, he discusses how the vocal line in mm. 396–401 of Adès's first opera, *Powder Her Face* (1995), unfolds an expanding intervallic series: E4–F4–G4–B♭4–D5–G♯5. Venn points out that, according to the intervallic pattern of this melodic line, G5—and not G♯5—should follow D5. Venn writes, "Here, the deviation from expectation has, amongst other things, a dramatic function. Despite the Duchess's mounting excitement and hopes of a future of unimagined wealth, the G♯ points to the fact that something is wrong. It might even be understood as standing for what we ... know is going to happen: her eventual divorce and disgrace" (19). Other topics in this chapter include Adès's use of rhythm (mensuration canons and intricate rhythmic patterns), sonority (extreme pitch registers), genre, external references, and metaphor. From here, Venn discusses the compositional background of *Asyla* and reviews some of the early debates surrounding the symphonic logic of the piece.

In Chapter 7, "Interpreting *Asyla*," Venn discusses the reception of the work from the public and the press, and he also reviews the "critical analysis of the work" (xvi). As Venn argues,

[t]he purpose of this chapter is to extend my interpretation of *Asyla* to take into account the broader discursive practices in which it is situated, and its active participation in meaning construction. Though it is not my intention to provide a comprehensive reception history of *Asyla*, the themes that I survey—asylum, moral panics and surrealism—are those that recur frequently in critical responses to the work. (138–139)

In the final chapter, titled "Epilogue: After *Asyla*," Venn chronicles Adès's compositions that were composed "[b]etween *Asyla* and *The Tempest* (1997–2004)," such as the Piano Quintet Op. 20 (2000) and *Brahms* Op. 21 (2001) (154). After a brief discussion of Adès's second opera *The Tempest* (2004), Venn reviews works "[a]fter the storm," including Adès's Three Mazurkas Op. 27 for piano and *Lieux retrouvés* Op. 26 for cello and piano, both composed in 2009, and *Totentanz* (2013) (159).

Chapters 3–6, the central section of the book, are devoted to thorough analyses of each movement of *Asyla*. The design for all four chapters is similar. Venn begins each chapter with a general overview that sets the stage for the analysis to follow. For example, his reading of the third movement (Chapter 5, "Ecstasio: A 'freaky, funky rave?'" begins with a discussion of electronic dance music (EDM) and how this dance form informs our listening experiences and expectations. Venn's introductory remarks are followed by a "Formal overview" of the movement. A form chart like Venn's Table 3.1 shown below provides an overview of each movement and includes the following annotations: Section or Subsection, such as A B A' Coda or strophe 1; Bars/Track Timing, which correspond to the timings on the book's accompanying CD of *Asyla* performed by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Sir Simon Rattle; Comments, such as "Con-

Table 3.1 Formal overview of *Asyla*, first movement

Section	Bars/Track Timing (CD #1)	Comments	Duration (seconds)
Intro.	1–13 [0:09]	Harmonic focus; tuned percussion prominent	35
A	14–27 [0:44]	First of four strophes; horns have melody	38
	28–51 [1:22]	Second strophe; melody in strings (then strings and horn)	34
	52–68 [1:56]	Third strophe; melody given to solo cello (then upper strings and trumpets)	31
	69–78 [2:27]	Final strophe; flutes, clarinets and violas have melody	29
	79–82 [2:56]	Closing section: tuned percussion prominent again	15
B	83–101 [3:11]	Two varied statements based around violent trumpet outbursts	34
	102–114 [3:45]	Contrasting section: homophonic material in the wind over melodic idea in bass	20
	115–139 [4:05]	Superimposition and development of ideas from bars 83–114	37
A'	140–154 [4:42]	Compressed recapitulation of A	35
Coda	155–165 [5:17]	Varied reprise of bars 1–13	13

Timings taken from CD accompanying this book.

Table 3.2 Formal details of *Asyla*, first movement, bars 14–82

Subsection	Bars	Phrase	Governing Set(s)	Concluding Dyad	Comments
Strophe 1	14–18 ¹	a ₁	CI octatonic	{B, F#} – from CII	Horns 1–3 have melody, harmonised by upper wind and string harmonics.
	18 ² –20 ²	c ₁			Texture separates into distinct strata; fragment of riff-like figure in bass.
	20 ³ –25	b ₁	CIII octatonic	{F, C} – from CII	Horns 1–4 continue melody; more active harmonic rate of change.
Strophe 2	25–27	c ₂			One-bar overlap between b ₁ and c ₂ . Riff-like material in bass extended.
	28–33 ¹	a ₂	CI octatonic/ WT0 whole-tone	{A, E} – from CIII	Phrase in strings enters bar 27 ² . Material from c ₂ continues in accompaniment, moving up into upper wind. Percussion enters in bar 31 ² to prepare for c ₃ .
	33 ² –43	c ₃			Tonal centre A in upper stratum, B in middle stratum, with brief bass riff in bars 39–41. Wind chorale begins in bar 41 (extending to bar 48).
	44–48 ²	b ₂	CIII octatonic	{B, F#} – from CII	Horns and viola have melody; material from c ₃ continues in accompaniment. Bass riff material overlaps end of phrase.
	48 ² –51	c ₄			Rapid figuration of c _{1–3} now in upper wind, beginning to resemble stylised birdsong.
Strophe 3	52–59	a ₃ /c ₄	CI octatonic/ white note	unstable (chromatic slides)	Solo cello has melody, accompanied by extension of c ₄ .
	60–68	b ₃ /c ₄	CIII octatonic	unstable (chromatic slides)	Upper strings and trumpets take melody (bars 60–3); oboes and cor anglais extend closing figure in three-part counterpoint (bars 64–7).
Strophe 4	69–72	a ₄ /c ₅	CI octatonic/ WT0 whole-tone	{A, E} – from CIII	Flutes, clarinets and violas have the melody; countermelody in horns, decoration in upper strings. Pedal C# in bass, bars 71–2 (c ₅).
	73–78	b ₄ /c ₅	CI octatonic	{B, F#} – from CII	Violas continue with melody without break; upper wind double the line as well as echo it. c ₅ continues in bass; tuned percussion recalls figuration of introduction.
Closing section	79–82				Four strata: strings/wind with sustained harmony; tuned percussion; upright piano, celesta and harp.

trasting section: homophonic material in the wind over melodic idea in bass” (48); and Duration (in seconds). In the form chart for the first movement (see Venn’s Table 3.2) Venn includes additional information in columns detailing “Governing Set(s)” and “Concluding Dyad” for each strophe (53); he thus lists the different octatonic collections or major/minor tonal centers that unfold in the movement.

Following his overview and discussion of form, Venn then provides a detailed analytical tour of each movement in temporal order from the first measure to the last. He continually makes use of the analytical tools outlined in Chapter 2 to aid in his analysis. All four analytical chapters include excerpts from the score, oftentimes accompanied by annotated reductions to clearly illustrate the compositional procedures that occur. Although Venn’s analytical chapters are organized chronologically by movement it is possible to easily follow his arguments in each chapter without consulting the earlier prose. Each chapter can be taken as an independent guided analytical tour through one of the movements from *Asyla*. For a summary of one of Venn’s analytical tours I will focus on Chapter 6, titled “Asylum gained?,” which is devoted to the fourth movement of *Asyla*. Like the previous analytical chapters, Venn begins with an overview of the finale, discussing its formal and musical issues. The movement is based on a passacaglia theme, which recalls the final movement of Brahms’s Symphony No. 4. Venn suggests that this passacaglia provides “continuity underneath the surface contrasts of texture, sonority and theme; these in turn articulate the underlying

form” (116). Venn then provides an analysis of the movement in temporal order, beginning with a detailed discussion of the harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic structures of the passacaglia theme; the opening section of his analysis, Example 6.1, appears below.

He argues that the tonal center for the opening of this movement begins in A minor and explains how the melodic material (C₂–D₂–D₂–C₂–C₂–B₁) above the descending whole-tone passacaglia bass line (A₁–G₁–G₁–F₁) creates tensions and releases. He interprets the initial C₂–D₂–C₂ melodic line as a neighbor figure, but when the melody returns to C₂ it creates a harmonic tension (a perfect 4th) with G₁ in the bass. For Venn, the consonances and dissonances of the passacaglia theme thus create an “expressive but gently ambiguous musical environment” (121). Venn next focuses on the first (mm. 9–12) and second (20–23) choral themes. These two themes feature descending semitones, which contrast with the whole-tone structure of the passacaglia. Venn notes that the first choral theme is “even less harmonically focussed than the opening eight [bars], for the tonal materials brought into play are more diffuse—octatonic in the upper stratum, diatonic fifth-based progression in the middle and whole-tone in the bass, with only occasional points of contact between them” (125). Venn interprets Section B (mm. 29–60) as a kind of scherzo, with its dance-like tempo and its “light, quicksilver figuration.” Venn further writes, “[t]he [B] section begins with chirruping flutes that resemble the stylised birdsong of the first movement, singing out over

Tba solo con sord., D.b. *p dolce espr., legatiss.* Timp., 2 B.D. *ppp*

D.b. {-2; WT1}

5

p ppp *dolciss., molto espr.*

D.b. Tba, D.b. {-2; WT1}

9

(compare with Ex. 6.2a)

permuted *passus duriusculus*

(a:vi ii V bvi) (c:iv I⁷ bII⁷ V)

{-2; WT0}

Example 6.1 *Asyla* Op. 17/iv, bars 1–12 (reduction, with melodic details of bars 1–8).

Asyla
 Music by Thomas Adès
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a static E \flat in the bass (the ostensible tonic of the second movement)" (128). In this contrasting section, Adès employs expanding harmonic progressions and expanding intervallic series. Venn then analyzes the A section (mm. 61–66) and argues that it is the climax of the movement despite an arrival to E \flat minor instead of the A-minor harmony that opened the finale. Venn notes a similarity to the Scherzo of Mahler's Third Symphony and the role played by E \flat minor in *Asyla*. For Venn, the most important moment in the A' section is the return of the whole-tone passacaglia theme in an inner voice that descends from E \flat to F. Venn concludes the chapter by describing the musical procedures of the Coda (mm. 67–72), noting that "[t]he conclusion presents another of Adès's 'arial overviews' as the camera zooms out from this human drama to something altogether more dispassionate and objective" (134). Throughout his analysis of this movement, Venn not only refers to the compositional materials that he explained in Chapter 2 (interval cycles, expanded harmonic progression, etc.), but he also discusses how certain passages of Adès's finale recall musical procedures and topical allusions from previous movements. He writes, "[t]he return to the musical and expressive state just prior to the opening of the symphony suggests that the whole cycle of violence, refuge, madness and ecstasy is to begin once again, repeating infinitely" (134).

There are moments when Venn's analytical approach resonates with David Lewin's (1982–1983) transformational attitude. For instance, in his description of the opening melodic line from the first movement of *Asyla*, Venn writes,

the conclusion [of the opening melody] is unexpected: the fall of a perfect fifth to an F \sharp , rather than the (anticipated) rise to a D creates a kink in the tail, establishing a musical tension, a pattern of inclusion and exclusion, for the F \sharp does not belong to the underlying octatonic set of the rest of the melody. (43)

Lewin would certainly talk about the "urge" of this melody to eventually "resolve," noting that it is "suggestive to think of these generative lusts as musical tensions and/or potentialities which later events of the piece will resolve" (1982–1983, 341). Venn similarly uses this notion of "musical tensions" and "pattern[s] of inclusion and exclusion" to describe how we might understand the first movement "in terms of the 'symphonic logic' arising from the interaction between a long, unfolding melody and the semi-independent harmonic environments through which it passes" (43). Venn's most compelling analytical readings highlight these kinds of "musical problems" in *Asyla* and how these pitch deviations resolve (or not) in the course of a single movement or the entire composition.

An especially enlightening discussion in Venn's monograph concerns how *Asyla* relates to the symphonic genre. In Chapter 2, Venn reviews the public and scholarly

debates surrounding the "symphonic logic" of *Asyla*, noting that even "Adès avoids describing *Asyla* as a symphony, despite being in four movements and employing an orchestra" (38). Venn further recognizes that "[t]he early publicity for *Asyla* made much of the ... strained relationship between the work and the symphony as genre" (38). This contentious relationship is a theme that surfaces throughout Venn's book. For instance, the title of Chapter 3 alone ("Trying to find refuge: The symphonic logic of the first movement") indicates that this topic will be addressed. And in Chapter 5, Venn writes, "'Ecstasio' [the third movement] is thus characterised by its precarious balance between the foreground trappings of EDM and certain musical developmental processes associated with the symphonic genre" (99). This argument recalls James Hepokoski's notion of "dialogic form" (2009). Hepokoski suggests "that grasping the full range of an implicit musical form is most essentially a task of reconstructing a processual dialogue between any individual work (or section thereof) and the charged network of generic norms, guidelines, possibilities, expectations, and limits provided by the implied genre at hand" (2009, 71). To argue that *Asyla* is or is not a symphony misses the point. It is more important to recognize that the expressive power of *Asyla* results from how the symphonic logic of the piece is in dialogue with traditional definitions of a symphony, and this is beautifully captured in Venn's approach. After all, one of Venn's goals for his monograph is to "enabl[e] readers to reach their own alternative interpretive conclusions" (xv).

Venn's *Thomas Adès: Asyla* serves as an invaluable source for a deeper understanding of Adès's orchestral work. One may assume from the title that this study is focused just on *Asyla*, but the monograph is not exclusively devoted to discussions and analyses of its musical structure. Although the central part of the book is dedicated to an analysis of the score, Venn places the work in a broader cultural context and Adès's position within it. Indeed, Venn's scholarly book is a pioneering work for prospective Adès studies, and future commentaries and analytical studies that focus on Adès's music will no doubt draw inspiration from Venn's monograph.

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