

## Set Work:

# Thomas Adès: *Asyla*, Movement 3: *Ecstasio*

Peter Reynolds

## Thomas Adès Biographical Note

- Thomas Adès was born in London in 1971 and is generally regarded as the leading British composer of his generation. He is also a virtuoso pianist (he was runner-up in the BBC Young Musician of the Year in 1990) and a conductor.
- He studied at the Guildhall School of Music, London, and then King's College, Cambridge, with the composers Alexander Goehr and Robin Holloway, graduating in 1992 with a double starred first.
- He quickly established his name with works including his *Chamber Symphony* (1991), *Living Toys* (1994) and, in particular, his opera *Powder Her Face*, based on the scandalous life of Margaret, Duchess of Argyll, (1995). In 1994 he was appointed Composer-in-Residence to the Hallé Orchestra.
- In the years that followed he was appointed Artistic Director of the Aldeburgh Festival in 1999 (the festival was set up by Benjamin Britten in 1948) and Music Director of the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (1998–2000). His orchestral work *Asyla* (1997) established his reputation. Sir Simon Rattle later performed *Asyla* at his first concert as Artistic Director of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in 2002.
- In 2004, Adès's opera *The Tempest* (based on Shakespeare) was premiered at the Royal Opera House, London and both courted controversy and marked him out as a fully mature composer. Works he has produced since then include his violin concerto, *Concentric Paths* (2005), the orchestral work *Tivot* (2007) and *Totentanz* (2013).
- Adès has a reputation for being reluctant to give interviews as a result of some unhappy experiences with the press early in his career.
- Adès describes his working habits as 'chaotic'. He does not remember how individual pieces of music were written and seldom listens to them afterwards, unless he has to conduct them. The hard work of bringing an idea to fruition on the page is almost forgotten when the piece is complete. 'When it's over, I can't recall the feeling while I was working on it,' he says.

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## Thomas Adès and British Music Since 1980

British music in the 1960s and 1970s was dominated by the 'Manchester School': Harrison Birtwistle, Alexander Goehr and Peter Maxwell Davies. These 'post-Britten' composers, born in the 1930s, made a break with the previous generation, adopting modernist approaches (particularly with regard to atonal and serial music) coming out of Europe in the 1950s from composers such as Boulez, Stockhausen and Berio. By the 1980s a new generation of composers born in the 1940s and 1950s were beginning to find a rapprochement with tonality, in the context of movements such as Postmodernism, Polystylism and Minimalism. In Britain, composers such as Robin Holloway (1943), John Tavener (1944), Judith Weir (1954), Sally Beamish (1956) or Mark Anthony Turnage (1960) composed music that acknowledged modernism but also drew on tonality, music of the past or other genres, such as jazz or non-Western cultures. At the same time, another new generation of composers such as Brian Ferneyhough (1943) or Michael Finnissy (1946) extended the ideas found in Modernism (the movement is sometimes controversially called 'New Complexity'). What emerged, by the end of the 1980s from this melting pot of different styles and idioms, was the beginning of a culture of musical pluralism which has become increasingly dominant in the last twenty-five years.

Thomas Adès comes from the first generation born after the Modernism of the 1950s and 1960s. Like many composers who emerged in the 1990s, he draws his ideas and influences from a wide variety of music. His most immediate contemporaries include Julian Anderson (1967), Tansy Davis (1973) and Huw Watkins (1976).

## *Asyla* Background Notes

- *Asyla*, Op.17, was first performed on 1 October 1997 by Sir Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. It was commissioned by the John Feeney Charitable Trust for the CBSO.
- The work is in four movements and has often been called a symphony in all but name.
- Adès has never entirely explained the work's title, *Asyla*. The word is a plural of Asylum and so might refer to both the idea of sanctuary and the madhouse.
- *Asyla* won the Grawemeyer Award in 2000 – perhaps the most prestigious award that a contemporary composer can receive.

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## Concept

- *Ecstasio* is the third movement of *Asyla*. Like the third movement of many Classical or Romantic symphonies, *Ecstasio* is based on dance music: in this case the dance music of the 1990s. Adès has referred to it as coming from both 'House Music' and 'Techno'.
- Like the word *Asyla* itself, Adès has never entirely explained why he called this movement *Ecstasio*. He refers to contemporary dance music as 'very powerful indeed. It has an effect over huge crowds of people, it creates a convulsion in a crowd which is a very important discovery (...) and [I] wanted to use it in a big movement. It's ecstasy [Ecstasy?] but it's also threatening and vertiginous.' (Thomas Adès, 1999)
- In *Ecstasio* Adès uses two kinds of structure simultaneously: one based on the regularity and repetition of dance music and one that has a developmental symphonic structure. This symphonic structure differs from dance music in being a journey: the music moves through different levels of intensity and atmosphere and is in a continual state of transformation. It reaches a very clear central climax from which it recedes. It also differs from dance music in that its material is in a constant state of change, aided by rhythmic and harmonic transformation and a series of contrasting tonal centres.
- The music is almost entirely divided into very clear groups of eight bars throughout (more precise details can be found under 'Rhythm'). This reflects Adès's experience of dance music: '[I've] noticed that in dance music today that things are repeated 8, 16, 32, 64 times – it's very powerful indeed.'
- Like much dance music, *Ecstasio* is based on the use of repetition. Although the repetitions are very clear, they are more complex than those found in most dance music. An example of this can be seen in the final bar of each 8-bar section where there is frequently a change of time signature (these vary, but typically the change might be to  $3/8 + 2/4$  or  $5/8 + 2/6$ ). The repetitions are also subject to various cross-rhythms and polyrhythms.
- Alongside dance music, other music is referenced in *Asyla*. Adès has claimed that Wagner's music is 'all over *Asyla*' with the end of Act 2 of *Parsifal* used at the close of *Ecstasio* (see 'Harmonic Language' for more details).

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## Some Quotations

'*Ecstasio* (...) is inspired by the insistent rhythms of club music and has a very primeval feel.'  
(Matías Tarnopolsky)

'So I bought some techno music and listened to it, just quietly, to get the structure rather than blast my head off. I realised that, in techno, you have to repeat things 32 or 64 times. So I tried to orchestrate it one night in my living room, repeating all these figures over and over, on this massive score paper, 30 staves to a page. At 3am, I went to bed and, as I sat there, realised my heart had stopped beating. I thought, 'Christ, I'm having a heart attack'. I rang the hospital and then they sent an ambulance. My heart gradually started again, but very shallowly. The ambulance took me to the Royal Free, where I waited for two hours among other Saturday night casualties. And finally a doctor saw me and said, 'You hyperventilated'. I thought, 'Thank God. It's not my heart, it's just my brain...'" (*Thomas Adès, The Independent, 27 May 1999*)

'I hadn't planned the third movement of *Asyla* as having a house music element, but once I started the piece rushed in that direction. The devil was on one shoulder and an angel on the other, and I remember thinking I might never be taken seriously again. But it was never going to be *Hooked on Classics*. It's a knight's move away and is related to house music in the way a Haydn minuet might be related to music in a Viennese square. David Lynch said all his films have a scene which he calls 'the eye of a duck.' A duck is this feathery thing apart from the eye. But without the eye the rest of the duck would not have its duckness. This is my eye of the duck.' (*Thomas Adès, The Guardian, 5 July 2008*)

What technical aspects of dance music can be found in *Ecstasio*?

How does *Ecstasio* differ not only structurally but emotionally from both modern dance music and that of the past?

Attempt a definition of both 'Techno' and 'House Music'. How are they applied in *Ecstasio*? Does Adès differentiate noticeably between the two?

How does the nature of dance music affect the tempo marking for *Ecstasio*?

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### Structure

The different sections of *Ecstasio* may be shown as follows:

1–24	Introduction
25–83	Section A1
84–115	Section A2
116–148	Section B
149–184	Section C
185–221	Coda

### Detailed Resume of Structure

#### Introduction (Bars 1–24)

An introductory passage increasing in intensity and orchestral density.

#### **Bars 1–8**

A sustained slow-moving harmonic pattern in the high strings (see ‘Harmonic Language’ for more details). See Example 1

There are 7 bars of 2/2 plus 1 of 7/8.

Ex. 1  
Harmonic Outline  
b. 1 - 8

#### **Bars 9–16**

A slightly varied repeat of bars 1–8 in the strings now in 4/4.

A decorative figuration of the string pitches is added in the harp, celesta, piano and percussion.

At bars 12–13 the first two notes of a theme that will dominate Section A1 is introduced – a falling semitone (D – C#) repeated at bars 16–17 and 20–21.

An overlapped 1-bar rhythm is introduced in percussion 3 and 4 starting at the end of bar 12, continuing to bar 23 (varied in the upper part after bar 15). These two rhythms are made up of a rearrangement of the same three note values: 8: 5: 3 semiquavers. See Example 2

Percussion 5 has a regular semiquaver pulse.

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bars 12 - 14

etc...

Ex. 2



8 5 3

3 8 5

### Bars 17–24

A slightly varied repeat of bars 1–8 in the strings.

At bar 21 the clarinets, bassoons and brass share pitches found in the strings (C<sup>b</sup> (enharmonic B) – G<sup>b</sup> – A<sup>b</sup>).

The previously overlapping rhythm is maintained in percussion 2 (later 1) and 3.

The regular semiquaver pulse in percussion 5 is maintained.

There is a gradual increase in the number of orchestral instruments used between bars 9 and 24 and a short transition to the next section at bar 24.

- What is the relationship between minim = 65 at the outset and the change to crochet = 130 at bar 9? Does the speed of the music itself change?
- From the end of bar 11 there are regular repeated rhythmic patterns in percussion 3 and 4. In what way are the two rhythmic patterns related to one another?
- What string playing techniques can be found in the section from bars 1–8?

### Section A1 (Bars 25–83)

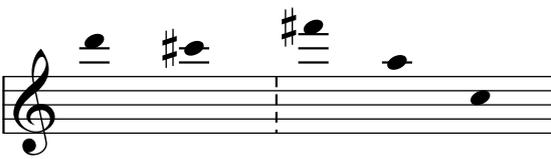
This consists of a 2-bar phrase (starting on an upbeat) distributed through the whole orchestra, repeated throughout the whole section. It is constantly transformed by gradually adding notes and harmonies. See Example 3

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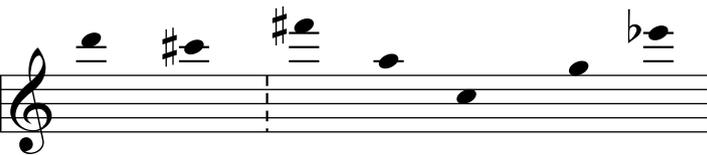
## Ex. 3

25 - 32



Musical notation for measures 25-32, showing a treble clef staff with a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.

33 - 40



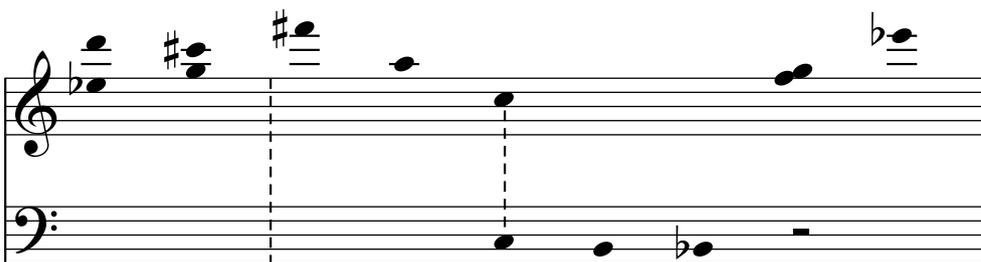
Musical notation for measures 33-40, showing a treble clef staff with a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4.

41 - 48



Musical notation for measures 41-48, showing a bass clef staff with a sequence of notes: G3, F3, E3, D3.

49 - 56  
57 - 64



Musical notation for measures 49-64, showing a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4.

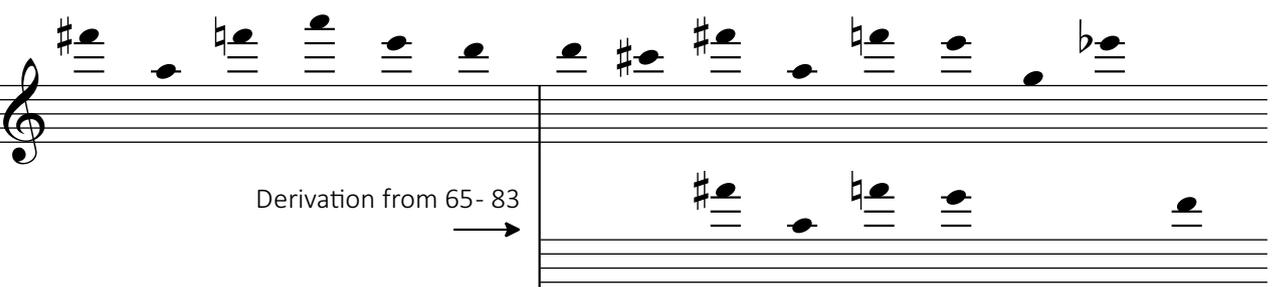
65 - 83



Musical notation for measures 65-83, showing a treble clef staff with a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4.

missing

84 - 110



Musical notation for measures 84-110, showing a treble clef staff with a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. Below the staff, the text "Derivation from 65-83" is followed by an arrow pointing to a simplified version of the notes from measures 65-83.

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### **Bars 25–32**

Starting on an upbeat to letter C (25–32): a 2-bar 5-note phrase (D – C# – F# – A – C), 2 and repeated 3 times, 2+2+2+2.

The previous 8-bar structure is maintained, but now as 8 x 4/4 bars (without the irregular bar at the close).

A pedal point on the notes C and D is heard in the upper and lower strings.

Bars 33–40

A repeat of previous 8 bars and the same phrase (D – C# – F# – A – C ), with 2 notes added (G – Eb).

The C – D pedal is maintained. D is articulated as irregular ostinato in basses and bass clarinet.

### **Bars 41–48**

The previous phrase is suspended for 8 bars and a 3-note descending phrase is heard in the double basses (C – B – Bb). 2+2+2+2 bars.

The pedal of C alone is maintained in high strings.

### **Bars 49–56**

Starting on an upbeat at bar 48 there is a return of the repeating 2-bar phrase as heard at bars 25–26 combined with the double bass phrase from bars 40–41. Harmony is added to some of the notes (for instance, a major 7th followed by an augmented 4th on the upbeat to the phrase starting at bar 50).

There are 7 bars of 4/4 plus 1 of 7/8 for the final bar.

### **Bars 57–65**

Starting on an upbeat at bar 56 is a varied repeat of bars 49–56, but with heavier and more varied orchestration.

The original 8-bar pattern is maintained but with the final bar now notated as two bars: 5/8 and 2/6.

### **Bars 66–74**

Starting a bar before letter H, the phrase is now radically changed with the addition of 3 new notes and the omission of the C#. The phrase is now also fully harmonised. The harmonisation is characterised by the use of common chords and sevenths (i.e. D major, A7, G7, etc).

The original 8-bar pattern is maintained but with the final bar now consisting of a combined 3/8 and 2/6 bar.

### **Bars 75–83**

Starting on an upbeat to bar 75, the phrase and harmony remain the same as in the previous section but with slightly more orchestral parts and elaboration added.

There is one combined 3/8 and 2/6 bar at the close as before.

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Although the idea heard in the wind and brass at bars 25-32 is repeated in regular 2-bar phrases, the rhythmic construction of the phrase itself is not regular. Define why.

Comment on the orchestration of the 2 bar phrase at bars 25-32. What is unusual about it?

What is unusual about the register of the pedal points held in the strings at bars 25-32?

Comment on how the irregular ostinato heard in the double basses at bars 41-48 is structured.

What kind of harmony can be heard when it is introduced into the repeated phrase between bars 49-56?

Two different elements from bars 25-32 and 41-48 are combined in bars 49-56. Elaborate on these.

Bars 57-65 are essentially a repeat of bars 49-56, but the orchestration has changed in some details. Give three examples of these changes.

What is different about the kind of harmony used in the repeated phrase at bars 66-74 to previous versions of the repeated phrase?

## Section A2 (Bars 84-115)

This continues the process from Section A1 and builds to the climax of the two sections.

### **Bars 84-96**

A further radical transformation is made to the phrase. The first two notes (D – C#) are removed and the rest of the phrase is pared down to a new 5-note phrase (see Example 3). The rhythm is also radically transformed. The descending bass phrase heard at bar 41 is dovetailed to the end of the new phrase (initially bars 86-87).

The phrase is now subject to continual alteration through the use of additive rhythm. See the section 'Tempo, Metre and Rhythm' for more details.

An approximate 8-bar background is retained (i.e. the passage is just under 30 crochets in length), but disguised by being broken down into a number of smaller irregular metres (2/4 – 3/8 – 2/4 – 2/6, etc).

### **Bars 97-110**

The phrases and harmony remain largely the same but the individual phrases are often lengthened or shortened (for instance, look at the woodwind in bars 104-108: at 105-106 it is lengthened and at 108, drastically shortened).

Bars 97-103 remain as before, but 104-110 are rhythmically modified.

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### **Bar 111**

This forms the climax of the section.

This section consists of a two-part polyrhythm: an 8-bar 4/4 section in strings and percussion 3–5 against 15-bar section of changing metres in wind, brass and percussion 1 and 2.

The 15-bar section in the woodwind, brass and percussion is a modified repeat of bars 97–110 at the same pitch as before.

Because of the use of two simultaneous metres, the passage as a whole has been given one bar number.

### **Bars 112–115**

A varied repeat of the previous section, again with a two-part polyrhythm: the 4/4 section in the strings consists of 7 x bars of 4/4 plus 2 bars of 2/4 and 2/6.

Bars 112–112(f) in wind are the same as bars 111–111f, but is varied thereafter.

The 6 bars in 4/4 at bar 112 are largely similar with small changes in detail.

Because of the two simultaneous metres, the first 6 bars of 4/4 and the changing metres in the wind, brass and percussion have been given one bar number. The whole orchestra returns to a unified time signature at bar 113.

How has the composer changed the shape of the melody at bars 84-85 from that heard at bars 74-76? What process has it gone through?

What unusual playing techniques are the clarinets using from bar 86 and the horns from bar 111b?

What unusual string techniques are being used in bars 111 and 112?

What devices does the composer use to vary the repeats of the different phrases in the passage between bars 97-110?

Bars 111 and 112 consist of many bars of music. Why are they given just one bar number?

Explain what a polyrhythm is.

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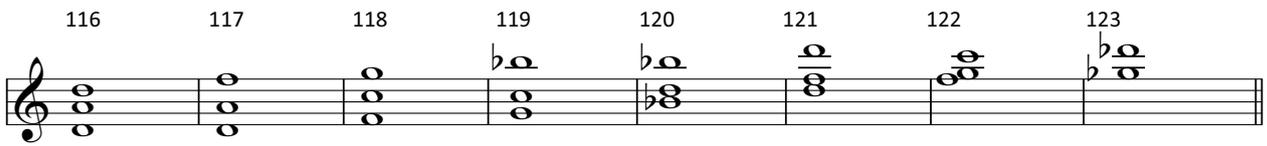
### Section B (Bars 116–48)

This section consists of a new series of harmonic progressions, repeated four times (untransposed) over a period of 32 bars, divided into four 8 bar sections in 4/4 building to a *crescendo*. See Example 4

**Ex. 4**

116      117      118      119      120      121      122      123

Harmonic  
Background  
116 - 123



### Bars 116–123

A sequence of 8 chords (one per bar) rooted around D minor, but ending on an open 5th of G $\flat$  – D $\flat$ . The phrase ascends from D to D $\flat$  and is characterised by open 5ths and 3rds.

This series of chords is given a sense of movement through a series of ostinato given to different instruments of the orchestra.

### Bars 124–131

A second repeat of the 8-bar harmonic sequence, but with varied orchestration and use of contrasting ostinato, as before.

### Bars 132–39

A third repeat of the 8-bar harmonic sequence, but with varied orchestration and use of contrasting ostinato, as before.

### Bars 140–48

A fourth repeat of the 8-bar harmonic sequence, but with varied orchestration and use of contrasting ostinato, as before.

This section has 7 x 7 bars of 4/4 plus a 5/8 bar added as transition to the next section.

How does the composer turn a simple series of 8 chords, heard at bars 116-123, into an active and busy orchestral texture?

Identify three different ostinati from the passage between bars 116-48.

What technique is being used in the horns and later in the trombones between bars 116-131?

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### Section C (Bars 149–84)

The climax of the movement and most simple in melodic and harmonic terms: a repeated one-bar phrase in D major.

#### **Bars 149–56**

A repeated 1-bar, 4-note melodic pattern (F♯ – G — A – D) in D major over a tonic pedal. In two of the bars, the first two notes of the phrase are reversed (see 152 and 156).

There are 7 x 7 bars of 4/4 plus 1 bar of 3/4 at the close with a shortened version of the repeated pattern).

A repeated off-beat pulse is distributed throughout the low wind and tuba (quaver, crochet, crochet, quaver) throughout. See Example 5



Combined rhythm of clarinets 1 and 2,  
contrabass clarinet and contrabassoon

There is also an interlocking rhythmic pattern distributed between two pianos and harp that make up a continuous series of semiquavers.

A continuous crochet beat is maintained in the timpani, bass drum and basses.

#### **Bars 157–164**

The repeated one-bar phrase continues with the previous rhythmic patterns.

Two new rhythmic patterns are added to the texture: a series of interlocking sextuplets in the flutes, oboes and clarinets (see Example 6) and a series of syncopated triplet figures in the brass which harmonically is bitonally opposed to D major (i.e. a sequence moving from C – E♭ – B♭ minor). See Example 7



**Ex. 7**

158      159      160      161      162      163      164      165

Harmonic Background Brass



158 - 172

There are 7 x 7 bars of 4/4 plus 1 bar of 3/4 at the close.

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## **Bars 165–172**

Strings and percussion remain generally as before.

The off-beat syncopated pattern found in the lower wind in the previous three sections is now transferred to percussion 5 and 6.

The upper wind maintains a more elaborate version of the sextuplet rhythm found in the previous section.

The brass maintains the previous syncopated harmonic sequence in triplets but with a different harmonic sequence but still bitonally opposed to D major (see 'Harmony and Melody' for more detail). The harmony from the brass is again reflected in the woodwind texture.

There are 7 x 7 bars of 4/4 plus 1 bar of 3/4 at close.

## **Bars 173–84**

The repeated one-bar phrase stops. Between bars 173–78, a series of harmonic progressions based around B minor over a D major pedal point in piano anticipate the tonality of the coda – see Example 8 (bars 185–221). There is a 3-bar return to the D major one-bar phrase (179–181) followed by a three bar transition to coda. See Example 9

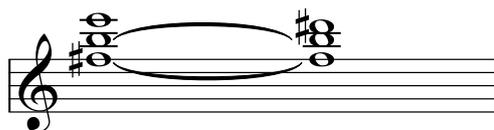
### **Ex. 8**

Harmony  
173 - 176  
Strings



### **Ex. 9**

182 - 183  
Strings



What is the name of the harmonic device used from bar 157 in the brass and wind in relationship to the 'pure' D major of the rest of the orchestra?

What device is being used in the flutes, oboes and clarinets between bars 157-164 to maintain one rhythmic line?

What unusual feature is found in the parts of violins, violas and cellos from bars 149-172?

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### Coda (Bars 185–221)

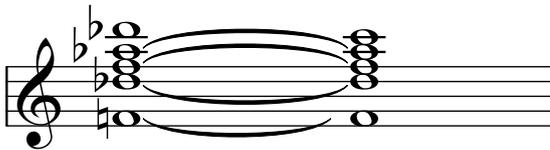
This passage is predominantly concerned with harmonic structure.

#### **Bars 185–199**

A brief return to the previous melodic figure is heard *ppp* in the cellos, piano, celesta and harp. At bar 187 a slow harmonic sequence in the strings, oscillating around  $G^b$ – $D^b$  / a chord of  $D^b$  major with auxiliary C and B. The harmony is elaborated in a series of varied accompaniment figures in the rest of the orchestra. See Example 10

#### **Ex. 10**

185 - 191  
Strings



#### **Bars 200–204**

A build-up and *crescendo* to the final chord. A cadence to bar 205 in the form of a distorted B minor chord with an added  $C^\sharp$ , references the appoggiatura found in the closing bars of Act 2 of *Parsifal*. See Example 11

#### **Ex. 11**

Harmony Brass  
200 - 205

Musical notation for Example 11, showing Harmony Brass (200-205). The notation is in two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. It features a series of chords that build up and crescendo to a final chord in bar 205. The final chord is a distorted B minor chord with an added C-sharp. The notation includes a 'Tutti (205)' marking.

#### **Bars 205–221**

A *fff* final chord based on the notes  $F^\sharp$  – B –  $C^\sharp$  fading away, *a niente*, followed by a 6-bar measured silence.

This again references *Parsifal*. Act 2 closes in B minor with a prominent  $C^\sharp$  appoggiatura in the oboe falling to the tonic, four bars towards the end. The final chord here appears to be a distorted collapsing together of these elements with an  $F^\sharp$  in the bass (i.e. in 6–4 position with the B above and the  $C^\sharp$  at the top of the chord. No D is included. This in itself produces a chord of three superimposed 5ths – a harmonic unit that dominates the harmony of *Ecstasio*.

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What are the differences in the style of music found in the coda to what has gone before?

What relationship does the harmony in bars 200-204 have to Wagner's opera *Parsifal*?

What aspect of the notes that make up the final chord relate to the harmony of the rest of *Ecstasio*?

## Tonality

In his original programme note for *Asyla*'s premiere, Matias Tarnopolsky claims that '*Asyla*'s tonal centre of gravity' is E $\flat$  minor. In *Ecstasio* it is possible to trace a scheme of tonal centres as its harmony and melodic lines often have very strong pull towards certain pitches.

- The opening passage in the strings from bar 1–24 (Introduction) has a gravitational pull towards C $\sharp$ . If the passage is re-notated using F $\sharp$ s, G $\sharp$ s and D $\sharp$ s with C $\natural$  as B $\sharp$ , it will be seen that all the notes belong to C $\sharp$  minor. The effect of the way in which the notes are arranged though blurs this. See Example 12

Ex. 12



The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music consists of several measures of music with a strong pull towards C# as the tonal center. The notes are arranged in a way that blurs the tonal center, but the overall effect is a strong pull towards C#.

- In Section A1 the single line initially has a gravitational pull of F $\sharp$  (minor), despite the widely spaced pedal point of D and C. This persists to bar 65, but with the harmonisation of the passage from bar 66 and addition of more pitches to the melodic line, the centre of gravity moves to E $\flat$  (the supposed tonal centre of the whole work). See Example 3
- In Section A2 (bars 84–115) with the transformation of the melodic line, the centre of gravity now changes to D major, which persists throughout.
- In Section B (bars 116–148), D remains the tonal centre, though now as D minor (this is an 8 bar harmonic sequence ending on G $\flat$ , repeated four times). See Example 4
- Section C (bars 149–184), the whole section is rooted unequivocally in D major.
- At the beginning of the Coda (bars 185–221), the music does not settle in any direct tonal centre, but moves towards a clouded B minor, eventually resolving onto a very ambiguous B – F $\sharp$  with an added C $\sharp$ . It will be noted that these three pitches represent important tonal centres within the work overall.

The key centres might be shown thus:

Introduction	Section A1	Section A2	Section B	Section C	Coda
C $\sharp$ minor	F $\sharp$ minor – E $\flat$	D major	D minor	D major	Moving to B minor

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Which sections of *Ecstasio* have fixed unambiguous tonal centres?

What elements in the layout of the score in the Introduction make it difficult to identify the main tonal centre?

Does the composer ever use key signatures, or are we left to identify the various different tonal centres for ourselves?

## Texture and Sonority

As has already been seen, the underlying harmonic and melodic characteristics of *Ecstasio* are relatively simple. The music's surface though (its orchestration and layout) is complex and very detailed. This section draws attention to some of features of its orchestration.

- Orchestral colour plays a large part in *Ecstasio*, creating the primal insistent world of dance music.
- The strings do not carry the main material. Indeed the musical line is often passed around the orchestra so that there is a constantly evolving series of sonorities.
- The writing for the string section is particularly marked by held notes and slowly moving melodic lines high up in the strings' highest register (see all of the Introduction, Section A and the Coda). To help create this high bright sound, Adès makes extensive use of harmonics (see the lower second violins, violas and cellos in bars 1–24 and the whole section in 124–31).
- The strings are also used to create rhythmic and ostinato figures that drive the texture forward (see bars 116–48).
- The strings also use techniques such as *glissando* throughout (see particularly bars 111–15), Bartók *pizzicato* (see 111–15 again), *pizzicato* behind the bridge (cellos 84–108), *col legno* and *sul ponticello*.
- The only section where the strings consistently have the central melodic material is throughout Section C where violins, violas and cellos play in unison (the passage is very high indeed for the cellos), creating a hard steely sound.
- Adès uses pointillistic textures throughout, but a particularly notable passage can be found in Section A1 (bars 25–66). The two-bar repeated phrase is not given to any one instrument, but spread throughout the orchestra with multiple interlocking doublings.
- The percussion are used throughout the movement, but Adès avoids imitating the sound of dance music, apart from the use of the loud bass drum at bars 111–15 and throughout Section C.
- Adès asks for several unusual effects, including a second piano tuned a quarter-tone lower than the rest of the orchestra. The score also contains parts for a piccolo trumpet and six percussionists playing a wide range of instruments including a 'bag full of metal knives and forks'.

## Set Work:

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What particular feature of *Ecstasio*'s orchestration makes it different from more traditional orchestral scores?

What register of the strings is particularly exploited in *Ecstasio* and what technique is frequently used to aid this?

It is relatively rare to find extended solos for one particular instrument in *Ecstasio*. What technique does Adès employ to share the material throughout the orchestra?

## Harmonic Language

Most of the harmony in *Ecstasio* uses common chords or elements of them, but its harmony is never functional in the traditional manner. Adès rarely, if ever, has entered into detailed technical discussions of the processes behind his music, so analysts and musicologists have been left to make their own observations on how his harmony and other aspects of his music is planned. This analysis confines itself to describing the underlying harmony as it is found, drawing attention to the dominance of certain intervals throughout.

- Most of the harmony in *Ecstasio* moves predominately slowly, often with a harmonic rhythm of one chord to a bar.

### Ex. 13

Derivation  
of 1 - 18 as  
super-imposed  
5ths.



- Sections are generally built over a series of slow moving harmonies or groups of notes that can remain in play for very long periods.
- The slow or even static harmony in *Ecstasio* reflects the similarly static use of harmony in dance music which is usually driven forward by rhythm.
- Although a bar of music might look very complicated, this is due to its orchestration and figuration. An example of this can be seen in bars 116, 124 and 132 where the underlying harmony is just a 5th (D – A). As the music gains in momentum, Adès will sometimes add other notes to this harmony, as in bar 140. The main harmony here is still the two notes D and A, but other notes now begin to appear in some of the inner parts (see the clarinets and bassoons), which are in the nature of passing or decorative notes.
- In certain sections, there is almost no harmony as such. For instance, in Sections A1 and A2 the musical interest is mainly confined to just one melodic line heard against a pedal point (see bars 25–66 or 84–115). Where harmony is used, in bars 66–85, it tends to harmonise the line in rhythmic unison (as opposed to line and accompaniment).
- The harmony that Adès uses is often based around the interval of a 5th. Sometimes the harmony might consist of nothing more than a 5th whilst at others it might consist of superimposed 5ths (or 4ths): see for instance bar 117, 122, 123 or the brass at 159–160.

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Indeed, the final chord of the movement is essentially a series of superimposed 5ths ( B – F# – C#), though in this instance they are not voiced as such (the F# is at the root of the chord). (Adès talks in detail about his use of 5ths in *Full of Noises*, pp. 32–34.)

- This use of superimposed 5ths is sometimes disguised, but often lies at the heart of the way in which the harmony has been built up. For instance, see the very opening of the movement (strings, bars 1–8) where a series of seven notes is kept in play. If these are rearranged, it will be seen that the passage is built from a series of superimposed 5ths rising from E to D# with the addition of a C. See Examples 1, 12 and 13
- Other chords can typically consist of just 3rd (see bars 120–21), major or minor chords (see 117, brass at 163–64 and strings at 185) and occasionally 7th chords (see the passage starting at 66).
- Much of *Ecstasio* uses pedal points both in the bass and in the higher strings. These do not necessarily reflect the tonal centre of the sections where they appear. These are present throughout most of the first 83 bars in one form or another and also feature at 111–15 and 149–72.

How might the use of harmonic rhythm be described in *Ecstasio*? In what way does this relate to the use of harmonic rhythm as found in much dance music?

Give examples of passages where harmony is almost dispensed with altogether. What type of textures replace it?

What interval particularly is prominent in Adès's use of harmony? Give some examples of where it can be found.

## Tempo, Metre and Rhythm

### Tempo

The tempo for *Ecstasio* is 130 bpm, which is the standard tempo for most dance music (the movement opens *alla breve* at 65 bpm, which is half of 130. It changes to 130bpm at bar 9).

### Bar Structure

*Ecstasio* falls into continuous 8-bar sections of 4/4 throughout, with some exceptions:

- In the final bar of each 8-bar section there is frequently a change of time signature (these vary, but typically the change might be 3/8 + 2/4, 5/8 + 2/6 or 3/4). Adès inserts these in order to slightly destabilise the regularity of the beat.
- In bars 84–96 and 97–110, the same number of crochets is maintained (8 bars of 4/4 = 32 crochets) but with changing time signatures, thus giving the impression, on paper, of being longer.
- Bar 111 and 112–115 both last for 32 and just over 30 beats respectively and are notated as one very long bar due to the polyrhythm between the bass drum and the wind, brass and percussion (see the section on Polyrhythm below for more details).

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- From bar 178 until the end, the 8 bar phrase structure disintegrates falling into approximate groups of 6, 5 or other section lengths.

## Unusual Metres

*Ecstasio* is predominantly in 4/4 with some other time signatures occasionally inserted to create a sense of instability.

- Some of these are relatively straightforward such as changes to 2/4, 3/4 or irregular bar lengths such as 5/8.
- Adès also uses certain unusual time signatures that are often a feature of his music, such as 2/6 or 1/6. These can be found throughout the movement – for examples see bars 65, 74, 83 and so forth).
- These time signatures are related to triplets and represent two beats or one of a triplet (imagine a triplet across a 2/4 bar followed by a 2/6 bar, which would consist of just two beats of the triplet in the previous bar). See Example 14



## Polyrhythm

A polyrhythm is where two different metres are played simultaneously. A very simple example would be two beats against three or four against five. In *Ecstasio*, Adès writes several polyrhythmic passages of considerable complexity.

- In the long bar 111, there are 8 bars of simple 4/4 in the bass drum against which is a different series of changing metres in the woodwind, brass and percussion that pass through 2/4, 3/8, 2/6, 4/4, 2/4, 2/6 and so forth.
- Sometimes the polyrhythms are more hidden from view. For example, in bars 12 – 15, in the percussion, two short rhythmic patterns both in 4/4 are overlaid, but slightly out of phase. See Example 2

## Additive Rhythm

In several places, a rhythm that has been heard several times is 'displaced' by either adding notes to it, or subtracting them – this is a well-known technique that can be found in Stravinsky. It can be found in several instances in *Ecstasio*, most particularly in bars 84–115 (Section A2).

- At bars 84–85 a rhythmic unit in 2/4 and 3/8 is followed by another unit in triplets (bars 86–87). These two alternating patterns are repeated throughout the section, but always with differences made by changing the rhythms by adding or subtracting notes. For instance, at bar 90 the rhythm heard in the wind and brass at bars 86–87 is increased from 5 to 6 notes.
- A more complex version of this can be seen by comparing the rhythm in the wind from bar 84 with that at 94. Here the first note of the earlier rhythm has been removed. The whole of Section A2 is built on this basis.

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## Irregular Rhythm

Although *Ecstasio* is based on the idea of the regular repeated rhythmic units found in dance music, these are subverted throughout by patterns of irregular rhythmic units.

- Although the repeated two-bar phrase starting at bar 25 emulates the idea of repetition in dance music, the rhythm of the phrase itself is very irregular. Starting with an upbeat on the last two notes of a triplet, the notes in the subsequent bar are all irregular and ‘off the beat’.
- An ostinato pattern found in the bass clarinet and basses starting at bar 33 also turns out to be very irregular, consisting of alternating patterns of 2 + 3 + 2 + 3 + 3 + 2 + 3 + 3 + 2 (etc) beats. See Example 15

2 beat units

Ex. 15



3 beat units



What particularly unusual metre is found in *Ecstasio* and how does it work in relation to the metre that proceeds it?

In *Ecstasio*, many passages almost fall into 8 bar periods. How does Adès sometimes slightly curtail these passages?

What is additive rhythm? Give examples of where it is employed in *Ecstasio*.

## Dynamics

The dynamic level of *Ecstasio* is generally high, reflecting its relationship to contemporary dance music. However, dynamics contrasts are used to shape the music's structure. Edward Venn has noted that dance tracks are ‘intimately bound to the function and desired affect of the music, and can be characterised by a series of sections increasing in kinetic energy, followed by ‘drops’ in intensity.’ This is a characteristic of *Ecstasio* as a whole.

- The Introduction to *Ecstasio* (bars 1–24) starts quietly (*ppp*, *senza espressivo*) and the work also ends quietly. This has been described as coming from the culture of dance music with the opening and closing described as ‘relatively neutral, to allow for the seamless mixing of tracks over one another’. (Edward Venn).
- Section A1 opens loudly (*ff*), establishing it as the start of the main substance of the movement, rising to *fff* at the end of the section (bars 65–83). There is then a drop in intensity and the level is reduced to *f* for the start of Section A2 at 84 rising to *fff* for the climax of Section A at 111–115.

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- Section B (bars 116–48) commences with a dramatic drop in intensity in order to prepare for the main climax of Section C. The dynamic range falls back to *ppp* for the opening of Section B with a crescendo to *fff* for the conclusion at 148.
- Section C (bars 149–84) is the climax of the movement, commencing *fff* and maintaining a *fff* in the strings throughout to 172. There is a brief dip in the dynamic energy at 173 with a crescendo back to *fff* for the close at 184.
- The Coda is mainly at a lower dynamic level, with a brief rise to *ffff* for the final chord at 205 before fading a *niente*.

The dynamic structure of the movement might be shown thus:

Introduction	Section A1	Section A2	Section B	Section C	Coda
<i>ppp</i> < <i>ff</i>	<i>ff</i> < <i>fff</i>	<i>f</i> < <i>fff</i>	<i>ppp</i> < <i>fff</i>	<i>fff</i>	<i>ppp</i> < <i>ffff</i> > <i>ppp</i>

What are the main characteristics of the way dynamics are used in dance music?

How does the composer use dynamics in *Ecstasio* to make the large scale structure clear?

## Relationship with Other Music

‘Eclecticism ... is undoubtedly characteristic of the music of Thomas Adès ... frequently alluding to different compositional models – for instance, Couperin, Brahms, jazz, tango and music hall song.’ (John Roeder).

- **House** music emerged in the 1980s at a time when there was a splintering of genres in pop music, linked to an explosion in music technology and a move away from more traditional verse/refrain styles. House originated in Chicago in the early 1980s and is a dance-based music characterised by a repetitive 4/4 beat, generated by electronic drum machines. Its minimalistic aspect and repetition are particularly important elements. It emerged from warehouse club culture and music based on a mesh of electronic sound effects.
- **Techno** is another form of electronic dance music that emerged in Detroit in the 1980s. Its first recorded reference was in 1988 and it was a combination of African and American music. Like House, from which it emerged, it is characterised by repetition in 4/4 time.
- **Richard Wagner** (1813–83) was a central figure in the development of opera, or music drama, in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century. Adès has been famously critical of his music, referring to it as ‘fungal’ and ‘parasitic’, yet commenting that ‘the material is fascinating’. He has acknowledged that Wagner’s materials are ‘all over *Asyla*’ and that the end of *Ecstasio* is related to the end of Act 2 of Wagner’s final music drama, *Parsifal* (1882). See ‘Harmonic Overview’ for a discussion of the harmonic relationships between *Ecstasio* and *Parsifal* and *Thomas Adès: Full of Noises*, pp. 15–19 for a more detailed discussion of Adès’s views on Wagner. Adès has not discussed what the relationship is between *Parsifal* and *Asyla*. A parallel might be drawn between the way in which, in the coda of *Ecstasio*, the gestures of dance music seem to be abandoned and fall apart. A comparison might be made with the drama at the end of Act 2 of *Parsifal* where Klingsor’s Castle disintegrates: in both cases, a vision or fantasy quickly fades away.

## Set Work:

# Thomas Adès: *Asyla*, Movement 3: *Ecstasio*

Peter Reynolds

## Resources

**CD:** City of Birmingham City Orchestra / Simon Rattle. EMI Classics 7243 5 56818 2 9

**Book:** Tom Service, Thomas Adès, *Thomas Adès: Full of Noises*. Faber & Faber

**Article:** Edward Venn: 'Narrativity in Thomas Adès's *Ecstasio*,' *Res facta nova: Teksty o muzyce współczesnej*, No.20, Vol.10, pp. 61–70. 2010. Available at [www.academia.edu/14362633/Narrativity\\_in\\_Thomas\\_Ad%C3%A8ss\\_Ecstasio](http://www.academia.edu/14362633/Narrativity_in_Thomas_Ad%C3%A8ss_Ecstasio)

**Article:** Edward Venn: 'Asylum Gained'? Aspects of Meaning in Thomas Adès's *Asyla*. *Music Analysis*, Vol.25, nos.1–2, March–July 2006, pp. 89–120

**Programme note:** Matias Tarnopolsky: Original programme note for First Performance <http://brahms.ircam.fr/works/work/21709/>