Approaching Carl Ruggles

Sean Tartaglia

Carl Ruggles' music is an enigma for standard musical analysis. His forms are easily identifiable as ABA in most situations, so there is very little work to do in formal analysis. His melodo-harmonic language is made apparent by his working methods, never repeating until at least eight notes are exhausted, so standard thematic analysis is not really applicable. His music is freely written, i.e. he is not bound to any true systematic methodology, so there is little that can be done in structural analysis to really explain his decision making.

So how can we, if we are to use analysis properly—to better understand and further enjoy the music—come to understand Ruggles' musical world so that it becomes coherent? An essential aspect of enjoying his music is the raw emotional power of it, but there actually is more to it than it first seems.

To begin, two things are important to understand:

He is a late romantic cum modernist. His harmonic language is the result of the breakdown of tonality. Because his practice was to never repeat until 8 unique pitches were exhausted, it doesn't create as ambiguous of a tonal center as twelve tone procedures do, and he makes use of the fog of chromaticism to heighten certain moments of consonance for dramatic effect. This is highly dramatic, expressive, very, very, late romantic music, with highly fluid tempi and dynamics

He is focused on the horizontal as opposed to the vertical, which means he is a polyphonic composer. He thinks intervallically and his lines are, despite their knottiness, often made up of stepwise motion and leaps of thirds, fourths, fifths, sixths, though when perverted by the principles of "dissonant counterpoint" these are often diminished or augmented leaps.

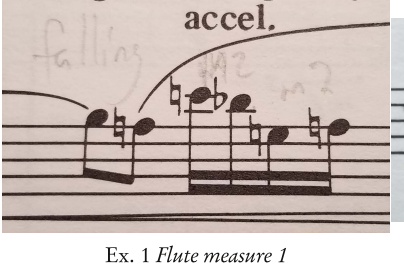
These two aspects of his compositional language mean that, in order to create music that is formally tight internally, he works with

intervallic, not melodic, movement that retains similarity in the intervallic motion as opposed to thematic similarity; i.e. the music is athematic, but it is propelled by, and constituted of, intervallic relationships.

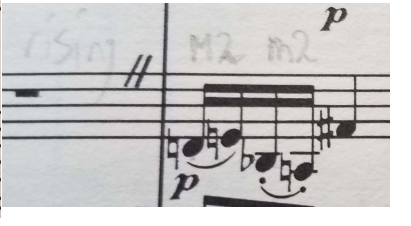
James Tenney wrote an excellent study in *Perspectives of New Music*[1] on how Ruggles used intervals throughout his body of work, and what he noticed in the resulting graphing of the intervallic frequency was that in the first period of Ruggles' output, the frequency of the major second gradually shrunk and more and more the minor second was given priority, followed by the minor third, over the major second; essentially, he began working much more diatonically and slowly began to increase the instances of chromatic movement.

With this in mind, I want to take a quick look at some notes I made in my score of "A Clear Midnight" from *Vox Clamans in Deserto*, because it is filled with examples of how he sets up certain intervallic motives in the first few bars and then weaves them throughout the lines he writes over the course of the piece. I believe understanding this will better allow the listener to approach the totality of Ruggles' work.

As far as I am concerned, there are two main motivic cells, "falling" and "rising" (Ex. 1-2). There is also a counter motive in the flutes and horns, a descending minor second-perfect fifth (Ex. 3). There are a few more patterns that appear to occur at lower frequency, but here I want to focus on these three, as they appear all over the score.



Ex. 1 *Flute measure 1*

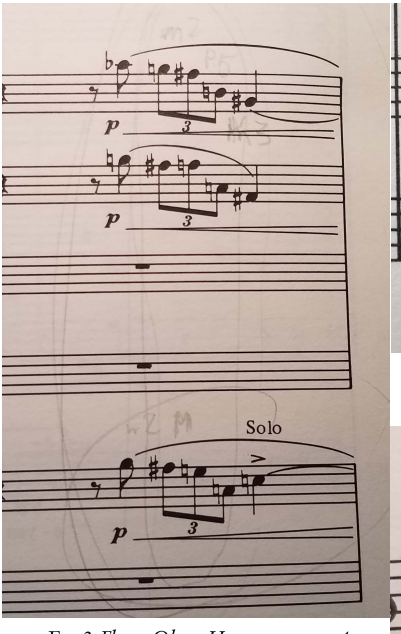


Ex. 2 *Celli (div II) measure 3*

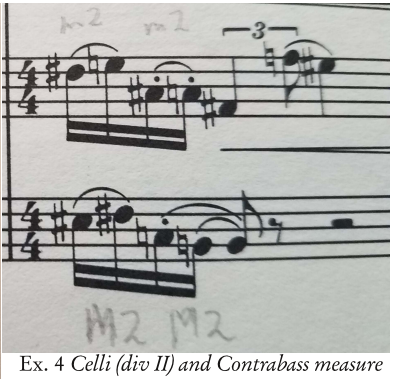
Falling is a descending major second followed by an ascending minor second, rising is an ascending major second followed by a descending minor second. Both are connected by a tritone. Since these examples are from their first instances, their intervallic content is going to be considered the "root" intervals, as permutations of this pattern exist

Immediately following the first instance of the rising are a minor

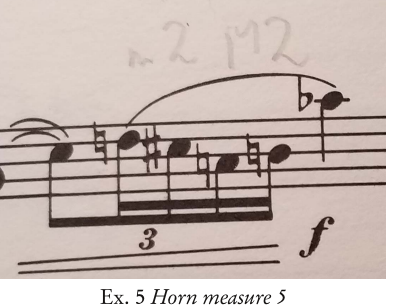
[1] Tenney, James. "The Chronological Development of Carl Ruggles' Melodic Style." Perspectives of New Music 16, no. 1 (1977): 36–69. https://doi.org/10.2307/832848.



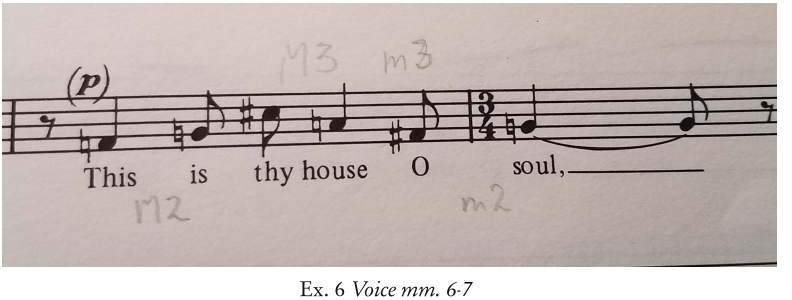
Ex. 3 *Flute, Oboe, Horns measure 4*



Ex. 4 *Celli (div II) and Contrabass measure 4*



Ex. 5 *Horn measure 5*

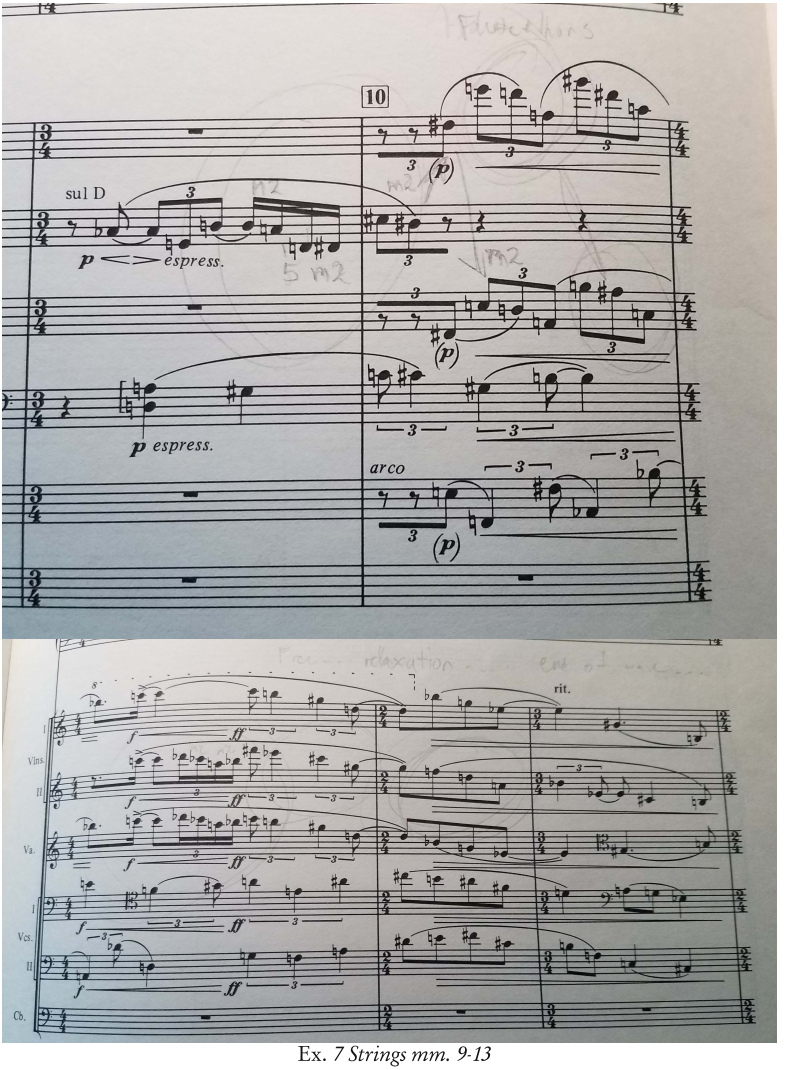


Ex. 6 *Voice mm. 6-7*

second-tritone-minor second, and a major second-tritone-major second (Ex. 4). Other variations may be reversed, minor second major second (Ex. 5), or have consonant leaps of a major third or perfect fourth/fifth (Ex. 6).

These intervallic motives, in their various permutations, serve as the fundamental backbone of the line. As you expand your scope you will see each line appears as a series of intervallic sequences either related or unrelated to these root motives; therefore, when you look at how a line is written, you can see how the "waves" in Ruggle's music function. Take a note of this section in the strings at mm. 9-13

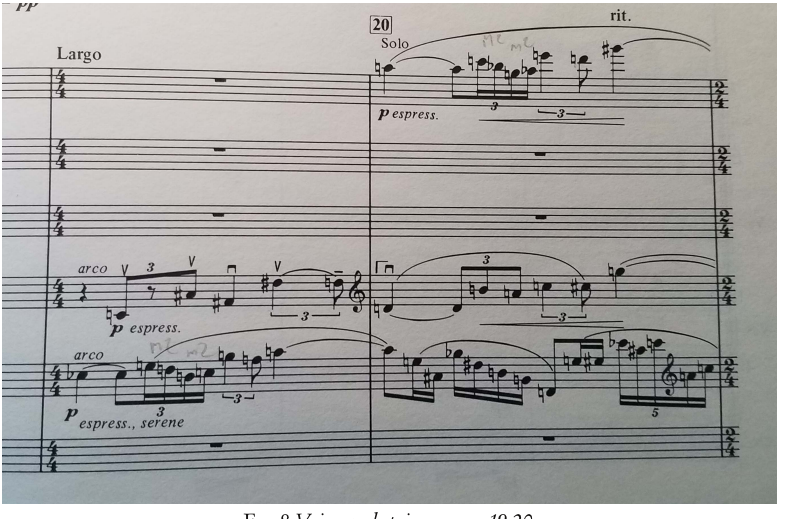
(Ex. 7).



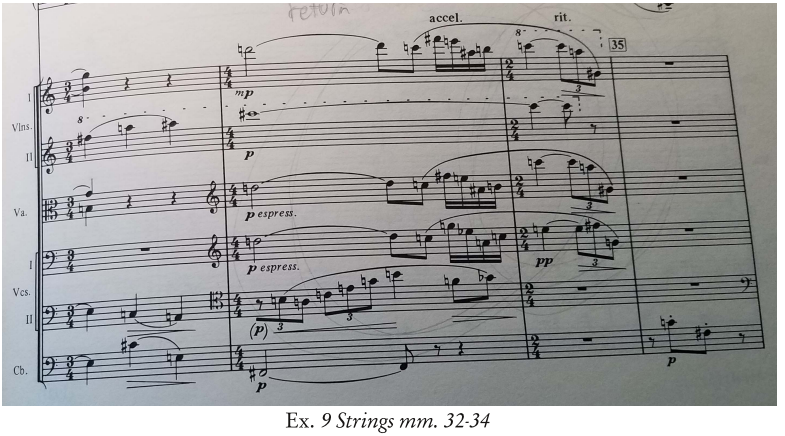
Ex. *7 Strings mm. 9-13*

The wave begins and the motivic statement appears, answered by a frenzy in the strings, the counter motive occurs twice, being passed around, and it builds up into a unison falling motive in the 2nd violins and the violas, then slowly beginning to relax out of "freely composed" material.

This kind of wave shape is consistent in most of Ruggles music, the line will begin slowly and then accumulate other voices into a massive crest, from which the aural complexity will exhaust itself and



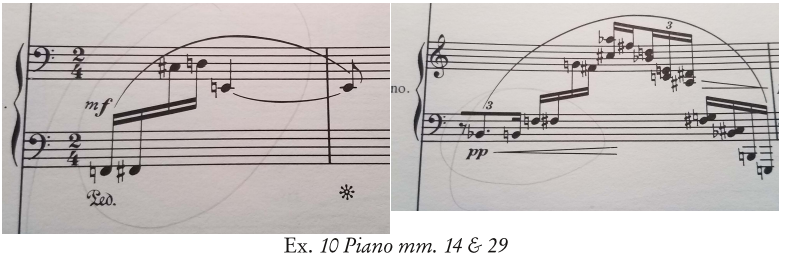
Ex. *8 Voice and strings mm. 19-20*



Ex. *9 Strings mm. 32-34*

slowly relax, pulling back into a softer, sometimes more lyrical, section that gradually begins to pick up into another wave. I once described Ruggles' music to someone as "fighting music" in the sense that, as in a sparring match there are moments of building tension, explosive action, and a recovery or gradual repose that reinstates the tension.

Waves like this form at various sections of the score, for example, mm. 19-20 (Ex. 8), and in this astounding section in mm. 32-34 (Ex. 9). The music is full of situations like this, even the piano part contains certain interval motives that are set up at some point and then recalled later (Ex. 10). Because we are adrift in an extremely late-romantic landscape, tonality cannot offer formal signposts, so making



Ex. *10 Piano mm. 14 & 29*

use of intervallic movement as the source of formal and motivic cohesion is important because when listening most listeners will not necessarily catch the exact qualities of the music, but rather the contour. The actual pitch context of the line does not matter as much as the integrity of the intervallic contour, because when the listener approaches the music, they will be able to identify the shape of the line, regardless of the actual transformation.

This is an important trend in the development of modernist dissonance in American music. Looking to counterpoint as a tool to escape the problems of late 19th century tonality falling apart was found in the two "schools of thought" in 20th century American music. Both Roy Harris and Charles Seeger turned back to pure counterpoint, and while their aims and ends differed quite drastically, their intention was to return to the most basic compositional techniques to find an "American" music. Their connections to various composers, William Schuman in the case of Harris, and the original modernists Henry Cowell, Charles Ives, Dane Rudhyar, Carl Ruggles and Ruth Crawford Seeger, means that these two approaches to polyphony played an important role in the development of "serious" music in America.

Ruggles, however, is one of the most important American composers of this era with Ives because his musical style played an important role in Tenney's early musical life and was part of the examples he offered in *Meta|Hodos* in discussing the problems of trying to approach 20th century music with 18th and 19th century frameworks, as well as his proposals for how we should come to identify and understand this music.

The essential intervallic unit can be expressed as Tenney's notion of a *clang*, "A sound or sound-configuration which is perceived as a primary musical unit or aural gestalt. The clang-concept constitutes the nucleus and the core"[2].

An entire piece of post tonal music is essentially built up of *clangs*

[2] James Tenney, META|HODOS and META Meta|Hodos (Oakland: Frogpeak 1988), 87.

that form like or dislike *sequences*, and the way we perceive these *sequences* in relationship to one another creates a sense of *structure* in a piece of music. Composers manipulate various parameters of music expression, pitch dynamics, timbre, duration, etc. in order to create distinct clangs and sequences, thus creating a piece of music that, despite lacking the structural scaffolding of tonality, possesses an equivalent self similarity that produces the experience of structural unity.

The question of whether or not the listener recognizes this structural consistency then comes down to questions of perception and psychology, as well as a certain willingness to suspend disbelief. Approaching Ruggles with some expectation of 18th and 19th century tonality will lead to bewilderment, but arguably in the same way the chromaticism of Scipione Lacorcia baffles everyone who took their theory classes in school to be an ever constant truth. When we lack the tools and ability to approach music exterior to our systems, we find it impossible to really rectify what we even constitute as "good music." Much of Tenney's work was initially brought upon by the inability to properly analyze post-tonal music with the analytical tools first made available to analyze music of the classical and romantic eras. Schenkerian analysis only exists for one period and region of European music. Theory is drafted in reaction to what we enjoy in order to promote it. Go enjoy Carl Ruggles.