

Web Feature 11.2

Another look at “Für Elise” (textural reduction)

From the discussion of various non-chord tones in chapter 11, you might come to the conclusion that one could make a “reduction” of a piece of music by simply accounting for and then removing any tones that are not part of the harmony at a given moment. Actually, this only reveals part of the picture of musical structure; different *chords* also have different degrees of structural significance. Tonal music may be interpreted as a vastly elaborated variation on the principle of departure and return—from the tonic to the dominant and back to the tonic. Melodic lines, meanwhile, often follow a structural pattern of descent—for example, from the dominant scale degree to the tonic (5-4-3-2-1 or *sol-fa-mi-re-do*) or from the mediant scale degree to the tonic (3-2-1 or *mi-re-do*).

It is in considering this linear viewpoint that we can return to the excerpt from Beethoven’s “Für Elise” that we examined at the beginning of the chapter. Pulling back to take a “wider view” of the music, we see that the melodic line is made up of two similar passages (measures 1–3 and measures 5–7), which end differently in measures 4 and 8. Because the melodic line in measure 8 ends on the tonic, it sounds more conclusive than measure 4. Thus, at a higher level of reduction, we can trace a descending scale line from the dominant scale degree (elaborated in measure 1) down to the tonic scale degree in measure 8, shown in Web Example 11.9. Such underlying scale descents, ending on the tonic, are common to tonal music, sometimes occurring over vast spans of musical time and with many layers of elaboration; in this case, the overarching 5-4-3-2-1 descent encompasses both of the similar melodic ideas found in the passage.

Web Example 11.9. Beethoven, “Für Elise,” melodic/textural reduction.

Thus, reducing the melody in this way, the C in measure 4, not measure 1, would be the structural third scale degree in this descent, because of its agogic and metric prominence. The C in measure 1, coming after the structural fourth scale degree D and before the A on the downbeat of measure 2, is thus an example of an incomplete neighbor. Note, however, that we have still not accounted for the B in measure 1. It is clearly a decorative tone, but its function in the passage is unclear, because without an accompaniment, it is difficult to determine whether the structural E in the measure is intended to be heard as part of a tonic harmony or part of a dominant harmony. The similar passage in measure 4 makes it clear that there, at least, a tonic harmony is intended; if so, the B clearly does not “belong.” Some writers use the not-very-satisfying term **free tone** for these “none-of-the-above” decorative tones. Another interpretation, since the B and D seem to encircle the C before moving to it, would be to describe both embellishing tones as an **incomplete neighbor group**, because they function as (and are resolved like) a neighbor group even though they are not approached in that fashion.

The point of these various interpretations is that music is often rich and messy, and at times there may be more than one supportable analysis for a passage, as we saw in our Chopin example (Web Example 11.7) in Web Feature 11.1. How one “reads” the structure of a line will also affect one’s performance. As you prepare your own musical performances, try to keep these issues in mind. What parts of the melodic line seem to help move the phrase along? Where does the line seem to digress or be held back?