

Christopher: “Hi Meg, I figured I would email you this response to your blog post titled, “Bach, Gould, Interpol: Magnetic Tonality”. It seemed more suited to an email rather than a posted comment, I hope it’s all the same to you. A fellow reader cited in the post that they had a feeling that Interpol’s music sometimes hovers in the “grey zone” between major and minor and I can’t help but agree. Furthermore, the reader mentions that it could have something to do with Carlos’ basslines and chromatic lines and such. You, of course eloquently expand on this, however I thought I would continue the discourse using just a piece of “Slow Hands” as another example. I’ll preface this with a disclaimer that I don’t have a degree in music. I’m nothing more than a simple music hobbyist and apartment dwelling guitar player so feel free to poke holes.

I have always felt that the song “Slow Hands” had this “grey zone” quality to it despite being in the upbeat key of G Major (well, kind of). It isn’t particularly joyful, but it isn’t particularly sad and depressing either. I think there are a number of things at play that create this melancholic feeling.

In the interest of time and brevity I just want to look at the very first part of the song from “Nobody searches...” to “...somehow.” Daniel begins with alternating between playing G and B. This pretty much establishes that the song is in G major right away, at least for most rock music, but let’s entertain another interpretation. I am a fan of 7th chords so this could be a G7 as well, but that would imply the song is in the key of C harmonic minor and starting out on the sixth degree of the scale, to me at least, would be weird.

Enter Paul and Carlos: When the vocals begin Paul and Daniel are chugging at the same rhythm and tempo, but playing different notes. At the very same time Carlos’ bassline is moving around. This is where Interpol excels in my opinion. Paul is playing a D, Daniel is playing a G, and Carlos begins on B. So what do we have here? D, G, B. This is most likely G Major once again (or still could be that weird G7).

Let’s look at what Paul is singing now: He’s pretty much sticking to singing B, and G, which agrees with what the strings are playing. Now Carlos changes from B to A for a moment. The new chord is D, G, A which could be a Dsus4 or more likely a Gsus2. It only stays here for a moment, but it is important to note that the suspended chords likely facilitate part of this “grey” zone due to the omission of the major or minor third. Even Paul’s vocals don’t really establish this. Eerie, very Badalamenti (who they admit to loving).

Carlos moves again to G making the chord D, G, G, which is essentially your rock n’ roll G5 power chord. At this point Paul moves to C, while Daniel and Carlos move to A, which in the key of G Major implies an A minor ii chord. Paul sings a B here, which while in the key of G Major is kind of weird to create a second, third, and fourth chord, which could play a part in the grey feeling once again. Carlos being the troublemaker that he is moves to D, making the chord C, A, D which could be a

D7. Paul is singing B here so the chord is very bizarre here, but makes up the second, third, fourth, and fifth in the G Major scale. It only holds here for a split second before Carlos moves again to D# creating a C, A, D# chord, Oooo! An A diminished triad very spooky! This is interesting because it doesn't really fit within G Major, but it does oddly fit as a vi chord in C melodic minor.

Paul, Daniel, and Carlos change again to B, E, and E respectively and form another rock n' roll E5 powerchord. In the key of G Major this would imply an E minor. Paul sings a G, which agrees with this.

So, the song is more or less established as G major, however the two guitars themselves don't really establish this without the bass and the vocal line. To make this more interesting Carlos moves his lines to explore the different interpretations of the two note chords being played by the guitar. This type of texture is very symphonic in nature and it is what gives their music the texture that it does. So while the song is in G Major a "happy" key Carlos' bass pokes at the edges of that creating some unique chords along the way that obscure the textbook quality of the key. If we look at exactly what Carlos plays in this section of the song we find something pretty cool: B, A, G, A, D, D#, E. These notes don't really fit into anything. Aside from the D#, which could be considered an accidental they all exist within the key of G Major and more specifically they are a part of the G Major pentatonic, and E minor pentatonic scales.

In my opinion another integral part of the "grey zone" exists not only in the movement of notes and the formation of chords, but also the range and tempo of the vocals. Paul doesn't sing very many notes at all in this song and in each section he remains in a tight grouping of notes. Also, his vocals are slow compared with the overall tempo of the instruments. This gives the song that quality that I can only describe as trying to run in water.

This is only my two cents on this song and I felt that "Slow Hands" was another great example of how the unison of all of the instruments helps to form the "grey zone" that we all love so much."

Meg: I don't have notation software on my work computer so I've sketched it out by hand (attached). I think our pitch interpretations are mostly the same, though I don't hear the D to D# in Carlos' bass (but that could just be because of the ambient noise in my office).

In my sketch, the treble staff represents a "reduction" of both guitar parts (i.e., I wasn't precise about octave register), and the bass staff represents bass and vocals - bass notes with downward stems, vocal stems with upward stems. I hear this passage as essentially a G major chord for several measures (I hear Carlos' A in the "nobody searches" measure as simply being a passing tone within a G major chord framework), followed by the ii chord (A minor), and the vi chord (E minor), assuming that we're thinking of the song as being in G major. That being said, I

completely agree about the "greyness" of the key. That is, and I really like how you put this, the "textbook quality of the key" is somehow eschewed in spite of the pitch collection being exactly what we'd expect for G major.

I also agree that Paul's vocals, as well as range/tempo, all contribute to this eschewal. Paul does this intriguing thing of introducing the leading tone on "but" (against a G major chord backdrop) and then, instead of resolving it, leaping back up to scale degree 3 (B). And again on "Nobody cares somehow" he seems to disregard the underlying chordal structure by singing G and B over an A minor backdrop, and F# over an E minor backdrop. He really pushes against the harmonic framework of the guitars/bass.

Another reason I think this song never really sounds solidly in G major has to do with range, which you mention, and also timbre. The second guitar (I never know which is Paul and which is Daniel, bad Meg!) is playing pretty low and has a crunchy sound, while the bass is playing pretty high and has a softer sound. Part of me thinks that if Carlos played an octave lower and the second guitar played an octave higher we would hear the harmonic framework in a much different way. And yeah, that urgent tempo works against the cheery, bright quality that G major often has in western art music.

Christopher: "It's interesting how you mentioned the harmonic structure being totally different if the bass was an octave lower and guitar an octave higher. That would be some incredible range and, I agree very different sounding. I think that range would be pretty common and natural sounding in an orchestra, but in rock music without strings would be difficult to achieve on the scale lengths of guitars and basses. Sometimes to my ear when two notes are very far apart by many octaves it is hard for me to hear the harmony present. They almost exist in two different realities unless there is something connecting them. Then again with stringed instruments I find that 3rds for whatever reason sound better far apart and tend to sound muddy within the same octave. I digress.

Recently I've been looking at the frequencies of different classical instruments and how that fits into an overall orchestra. I find it interesting that a guitar is smack dab in the middle despite a seemingly large range. The bass also, it's literally just one octave lower. A concert grand piano has a greater range!"