

46. Barrington Pheloung Morse on the Case (for Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Barrington Pheloung was born in Australia in 1954, but has been based in the United Kingdom since the early 1970s. Although he has composed ballet music, incidental music for the theatre, and concert music (including concertos), he is most widely known for his music for television, in particular for the detective drama series of *Inspector Morse*, *Lewis* and *Endeavour*. *Inspector Morse* has been a highly successful British television detective series set in Oxford and based on the novels of Colin Dexter and although the series has come to an end it is frequently repeated on ITV3. *Endeavour* is the prequel to *Inspector Morse* and *Lewis* the sequel. Some of the *Morse* music is available on CD – *Inspector Morse, Volume 1 (Virgin, VTCDX2)* includes 'Morse on the Case' as track 9.

Our set work was recorded live on acoustic instruments and served as incidental music in the *Morse* episode 'Second Time Around' (1991, from Series Five). It was therefore not originally designed to be listened to independently; when included on the Virgin CD referred to above, the final chord was extended to provide a more settled ending.

Study of the relationship between 'Morse on the Case' and its context in 'Second Time Around' is not necessary for A level study purposes. In any case, it is difficult to find close matches between musical content and dramatic content (although it *may* be significant that the first mention of Dawson, who originally arrested Redpath, coincides with the disturbing entry of the piano on the note A flat in bar 92).

For general interest, however, it is worth knowing that the music begins 48 minutes 13 seconds into the film and ends at 51 minutes 52 seconds. It starts as Redpath's daughter weeps to see her father lying ill in hospital after his attempted suicide; it accompanies the subsequent conversation between Morse and Redpath's daughter, and ends just as Morse meets with Chief Superintendent Strange.

Performing forces and their handling

'Morse on the Case' is for strings, oboe, four horns in F (notated at concert pitch), harp and piano – a limited and unusual combination of instruments.

- *Violins I and II and viola* play most of the time (the only substantial break is in bars 53–65); *cello and double bass* (in octaves) enter only at bar 99 (of 112) to give additional weight to the ending. Strings are muted (*con sord.*) to give a subdued effect.
- The *solo oboe* first enters in bar 49, and is heard for most of the rest of the piece. It is supported by piano only in bars 53–58 and then is unaccompanied for several bars.
- One or two *horns* play in two passages between bars 12 and 35; four horns play in unison from bar 98 almost to the end.
- The *piano* part is sparsely textured (often one or two notes at a time and only occasionally in three or more) and much is concentrated on the treble stave. There are some rests lasting for several bars, but no really extended silences as for oboe and horns.
- The *harp* is present almost continuously from bar 101 to the end, and like cello and double bass provides additional sonority here.

In conclusion, the writing is often very sparse, and all forces are never used together. There are many changes of scoring. The dynamic range is from *pp* to *mf* (except for an isolated *f* in the harp from bar 107). Extremes of pitch range within each part are avoided – in fact violin I never goes above its final C an octave above middle C. The oboe's top A (bars 88–92) and A flat (93–97) are effective high points for that instrument.

Texture

Standard descriptions of texture (homophony, imitation, etc.) are of limited value in 'Morse on the Case' – although there is *monophony* (mainly in bars 59–64⁴). For most of the time sustained notes in the strings have projected against them melodic passages in piano, wind and/or harp, and even these are often slow-moving or almost static. The string parts sometimes involve doubling (notably with both violins and viola in unison up to bar 14).

Changes of *density* are important, notably:

- the texture is thinned down from several parts to just two at bar 53.

- monophony at 59–64⁴.
- the sustained octave in oboe and violins (66–68), above which the piano has a melody with alternating single notes and harmonic intervals.

Structure

There is no immediately clear overall structure in 'Morse on the Case': for example, no evidence can be found of traditional forms such as sonata form and rondo. It is possible to claim that no real structure exists (after all, Pheloung was writing incidental music rather than concert music), or that the piece is through-composed to reflect the on-screen action.

One possible way of describing what happens – largely in terms of instrumental timbre – is as follows:

- Section A (bars 1–c50: features horn(s); oboe and harp not yet heard. This is dovetailed with...
- Section B (ending at bar 97): with oboe, but no horn(s) or harp, and at first without violas. Sections A and B are broadly similar in length.
- Section C (bar 98–112) is a much shorter closing section which features for the first time all four horns, harp, and lower strings – plus oboe, piano, violins and viola.

We might instead think of two sections of fairly similar length:

- Section I* (bars 1–60)
- Section II (bars 61–112): begins after the only complete silence in the movement, and with the oboe playing the rising 4th A–D first heard on the piano in bars 1–3.

**Roman numerals are used here to avoid possible confusion with the lettered sections of the first interpretation. As always, the significance of letters or numbers used in formal analyses should be made clear in an examination answer, in terms of bar numbers, function, or character.*

Any of the views given above would be acceptable in examination terms and all represent a through-composed structure.

Tonality

The music ends with a chord of C major, and could be said to be in that key at that time. But the whole piece is not in C major.

The music seems

- sometimes poised between A minor and C major, or
- verging on *bitonality* – two keys at once, or
- at least sometimes in the Aeolian mode, given the prominence of A and of ‘unraised’ leading notes (G naturals not G sharps). There is also a suggestion of the Lydian mode with F#’s at bar 100 and 105.

Harmony

The harmony is non-functional, because there is no systematic use of primary chords (especially I and V) to establish clear major and minor tonalities, either by perfect cadences or by other conventional harmonic methods.

Most of the harmony is created by the combining of two or more ‘melodic’ strands. Complete major and minor triads are avoided, with instead a mixture of consonant intervals and milder dissonant intervals (perfect 4ths, major 2nds and minor 7ths) within a generally quiet dynamic.

The three principal uses of slightly stronger dissonance are in

- bar 52 (possibly to signal the beginning of a new section?): there is a compound major 7th (G–F sharp) between oboe and piano, but at *mp*. However, with almost two octaves between the notes, the effect is far from harsh.
- bar 67: the piano’s minor 9th (E–F), heard against Ds in oboe and violins, is too high and too quiet to be as intensely dissonant as this interval often is.
- bars 92–95: the insistent A flats in piano and oboe sounding against A naturals in violas have more impact, and may again have structural significance (section C begins soon afterwards). The piano enters *mf* with accents, but the gentler dynamics that follow, and the monophonic texture in bars 96–97, soon dissipate the dissonant effect.

It is misleading to call the long sustained notes pedals, because the changes of harmony that are normally associated with pedals are often absent (e.g. in bars 40–42 where nothing at all happens either melodically or harmonically until the very last semiquaver). It is more useful to speak of *drones* (which may be defined as extended

held notes with which changes of harmony are not necessarily associated). Folk music often has drones on tonic and dominant, but Pheloung's tonality is more elusive, and it is sometimes difficult to account for the choice of drones in conventional terms – although in the closing bars the sustained C and G imply C major harmony and tonality.

Pheloung's harmonic method is further demonstrated below, along with some references to tonality – it is unusually difficult with this movement to separate references to these two related areas. Note the tendency to concentrate on particular small sets of pitch classes* rather than rely on complete major and minor triads.

**The twelve pitch classes of the chromatic scale are its twelve separate notes (C, C sharp, D, etc.) regardless of what octave they are in. The enharmonic equivalents C sharp and D flat, belong to the same pitch class; the same is true for D sharp and E flat, E natural and F flat, etc.*

Bars	Pitch classes	Comments
1–7	A B D E	Some feeling that the tonal centre is A, because of the initial prominence of A (tonic) and E (dominant). No Cs or C sharps here, so no impression of A major or A minor specifically.
8–12 ²	A + C E F G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A is sustained by strings; piano has phrase based on the four-note set C E F G, its harmonic intervals corresponding with elements from C major chords I and V⁷. Some impression therefore of A (minor) underlying C (major) until... ...11⁴–12², with just an open 5th C–G (compare end of piece)
12 ³ –31 ²	C D E G A (pentatonic set)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strings play only C, G and D (suggestive of C major or G major?) Piano has D E and A (possibly subdominant, dominant and tonic of A minor?)
31 ³ –35	C D E F G A	At the end of 33 and beginning of 34 a C major chord in the piano is heard together with an F major chord in the strings (the piano's C being the lowest note).
36–52 ²	D E F G A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No simultaneous use of all notes; and E and F are never used together. Above the long D and G drones in the strings (from 43), there are all or some of the notes F G A – the overall effect is tonally ambiguous.
52 ³ –60	mainly D E F sharp A	Two-part writing, with successively from 53 ⁴ A–F sharp, A–E, A–F sharp, A–D and D–D pairings –

		hinting at D major chords I and V, without making either of them explicit.
61–70	A alone, then C D E F (natural) G B	After the oboe's unaccompanied A, D is heard almost continuously. It finally fades away in the oboe as part of a G major 6/3 chord.
71–81	C D E G A (pentatonic set)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C, then G C, then G D in strings. • Piano and oboe emphasise D E A until oboe cadences onto C at 79, the resulting harmony G D C suggesting G V with suspended (and never resolved) 4th.
82–90	G F, A F, A E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violins' F above viola's G implies (especially after what has just been heard) C V⁷. • The mildly dissonant minor 7th 'resolves' to a minor 6th with A under a continuing F (this is not of course the traditional manner of resolution, which would involve a dissonant note's <i>falling</i> by step). • Then the F falls by step on to E, giving a bare-5th (thirdless) chord of A. Together with the added top A in the oboe, there is feeling of resolution and cadencing here (with <i>pp</i> dynamics).
91–97	A B A flat (the latter persisting after the other two pitches have ceased)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sudden renewal of tension (<i>mf</i> and accents in piano, and sounding of A flat against A). • Is the A flat in effect a G sharp, with the resulting harmony suggesting A (minor?) chord V (G sharp and B) over chord I (A)? Perhaps the main point of the passage is simply the pungent A–A flat clash after the preceding consonance. • The lingering A flat in 96–97 sounds, in retrospect at least, like G sharp – given the E (then D and B) in bar 98.
98–112	at first A B D E; later F sharp G and C are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The A B D E set parallels what happened at the start of the movement – but if any recapitulatory effect is intended, it is so subtle as to be easily missed. • F sharp G and C are added from bar 100, so the music is more 'busy' harmonically, and the texture more dense: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ A succession of short As from 102 (in violins, then piano) <i>might</i> be heard as some kind of pedal (tonic in A?), but... ○ ...from 110 we hear a C major chord that reduces to a bare-5th C–G. ○ The F <i>sharps</i> near the end (especially in bars 108–109) may perhaps impart a slight Lydian-mode flavour to the closing C major.

Melody

A first reaction might be to say that there is no melody in 'Morse on the Case'! Certainly there are no 'tunes', but the word melody has a broader implication, extending to any succession of pitches perceived by the ear to constitute a single line.

In 'Morse on the Case' melodies are of two main types:

- Successions of sustained notes, as in
 - piano, bars 1–6: A–D–B–top A
 - unison strings, bars 1–11: E–B–D–A*
- More rapid melodic events, such as
 - piano, bars 8–12 (Example 1, below)
 - piano, bars 26–27 – a version in semiquavers of the D–E–A motif heard in bars 17–20 in much longer values. Compare bars 98–99.

**Note the inversion (where the rising perfect 4th and falling minor 3rd in the piano appear as a falling perfect 4th and a rising minor 3rd in the strings). Because the piano starts on A and the strings on E, the minor 3rds both involve the same pitch classes (D–B becomes B–D).*

Example 1

Most melodic passages referred to above feature intervals that are also important harmonically, notably major 2nds and perfect 4ths. Larger intervals are used from time to time, however (chiefly in piano, bars 8–10 and 65–67). A piano melody may include some harmonic intervals (e.g. in bars 8–12, and in bars 64–69 with the D–B and E–F).

Motifs are transformed through the use of devices such as inversion and also rhythmic diminution comparing bar 26 to bars 18–20.

The major 2nds and perfect 4ths help to maintain some semblance of melodic unity in the absence of the extensive repetition, sequence and symmetrical phrase structures characteristic of much Classical and Romantic music.

On the other hand:

- Several figures span a 5th or include two intervals that together make a 5th, notably
 - the D–E–A figure (piano, bars 17–20, and the two other contexts listed above as ‘more rapid melodic events’)
 - in harp: E–A–B (101), D–G–A (104–105), and C–F–G(–A) (107–111)
 - in piano: D–A–G (twice, in bars 73–78).
- The piano phrase in bars 8–12 has a threefold statement of the notes E–F–G (with the E in a higher octave than the F and G).

Rhythm and Metre

‘Morse on the Case’ has the time signature 4/4 quadruple time throughout, but this is not obvious to the listener. There is rarely, if ever, a clearly audible pulse or beat.

- Much of the music is very static, with many extremely long notes – in particular violin I’s open G (bars 39–52).
- Many notes start on a weak semiquaver (the second or fourth of a crotchet).
- Many notes have ‘irregular’ values (notably where, in bars 8–10, the piano has notes lasting for 5, 5, 5, 5, 1, 5, 5, 5 and 6 semiquavers).
- A silent bar (bars 61–62) creates a sense of suspense.

Some notes which are of special importance structurally, tonally or harmonically owe something of their status to their starting *on the beat*. For example:

- In bars 8–12 the intervals in the piano that imply C major I V I at bars 9¹, 10¹ and 11¹ (see Example 1, above).
- The D in the oboe at bar 58 (which completes an A–D implied perfect cadence at the end of Section A).
- The last note in the horns (the E in bar 110), which completes a C major chord – the only explicit use of a root position chord.