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"ONE STEP UP": A LESSON FROM POP MUSIC

JUSTIN LONDON

Every so often the theory teacher is blessed with a good pedagogical example from popular music. These examples are useful in many ways. They are usually simple and straightforward, and thus give a good demonstration of a particular analytic point. These examples also tend to be familiar to the student (especially if we are dealing with a theory class not just for music majors), and as such they provide a means of connecting what is taught in class with the students' "real-world" musical experiences. The only problem is that popular music is, by nature, ephemeral. Today's hot hit is next year's golden oldie. So a lesson that is *au courant* one year (and perhaps even one semester) may seem out of date the next. Thus it is with some trepidation that I present the following discussion of the song "One Step Up" from Bruce Springsteen's 1987 album "Tunnel of Love."¹

But I feel it is worthwhile for at least two reasons. One, even though this material is three years old, I believe there are still a few lessons left in "One Step Up." For one thing, many of our students will have a recording of it in their collections, so it is part of their musical experience and background. So even if not "on the charts," it is still familiar material. The other reason for considering "One Step Up" is that it provides an excellent example of the ways in which we can use popular song in the theory classroom. Lessons learned from Mr. Springsteen's ballad can be applied to other selections from the popular repertoire, both current and future.

"One Step Up" is a melancholy ballad that portrays a character (the narrator of the text) habitually out of sorts with his lover.² The text depicts a drifter, sitting in a bar ruminating over his current girl, his relationship to her, his relationship to women in general, and his own sense of self and character. The cliché "one step up and two steps back" is used as a refrain at the end of each verse to underscore the narrator's romantic aimlessness. However, in a clever turn of text, in the last verse the man dreams that he is dancing with his lover, and the cliché becomes a description of their dance step, one step up and two steps back.

Just as Mr. Springsteen plays upon a linguistic cliché, he also makes a play on a harmonic convention, namely a standard I⁶-IV-V cadential progression. The strophic text is set as a series of repeating verses, and the music is similarly repetitive. In fact, most of the text is set over an ostinato-

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like chord pattern: IV-I⁶-ii⁷-I⁶ (and then back to IV again) in F-major.³ At the end of each verse, where we have the refrain "one step up and two steps back," the harmonic rhythm slows somewhat and the chord progression moves to I⁶ to IV, and at last to V⁷ (but without a third). Under these harmonies the electric bass plays a prominent 3-4-5 ascending line, which adds to the feeling of cadential motion. Instead of resolving to tonic, however, the dominant harmony falls back to IV, and then into the ostinato for the next verse. The chord progression itself may be described as moving one step up (IV to V) and then two steps back (V to IV to I⁶, etc.). One can thus show the student how the "aimless ostinato" and the non-resolving dominant are a harmonic portrayal of the text.

Now it might well be said that popular music has its own set of harmonic conventions, and that we commit an analytic error in construing pop harmony in terms of common-practice chord grammar. After all, the V-IV retrogression is itself a cliché in popular music. Is it really fair to say that the harmonies move "backward" at the end of each verse, in light of the tendency toward V-VI motion in pop music? I think it is. The crucial point is that while V-IV motions are a harmonic option in pop chord progressions, they are not the only option. After all, V-I motion is a cadential archetype in classical music, but of course not every motion from dominant to tonic creates a cadence. In "One Step Up" the presence of a progression moving toward tonic resolution is indicated by other tonal and rhythmic cues. The electric bass part at the end of each verse plays an ascending 3-4-5 line, which sounds strongly like the bass line of a classical cadential progression. Furthermore, the rhythmic shape also leans toward an authentic cadence: the harmonic pacing picks up for the motion from I⁶ to IV, but then holds on V. In the case of most retrogressions, the harmonic motion is constant, usually one chord per bar going up and going down, as in a | I | IV | V | IV | pattern. In "One Step Up" the harmonic pacing at the end of each verse is unlike the standard retrogression. As a result of these features we may properly consider the I⁶-IV-V motion in cadential terms, and thus speak accurately of a harmonic motion "one step up and two steps back."

From the analysis of this song class discussion(s) can continue in several different ways. First, one can point out the ambiguity of the opening IV-I⁶ progression. Indeed, if used as an ear-training exercise many of the students may construe the first two chords as I-V⁶. One may also attend to the sonorities of the opening harmonies: the IV has no third, nor does the V⁷, which gives these chords a hollow sound. Furthermore, the lack of a leading tone weakens the sense of dominant function, and allows for a smoother return to the ostinato.

It is interesting to note that the choice of harmonies in this song is strongly linked to the fact that Mr. Springsteen is a guitarist, and probably

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composed this ballad with guitar in hand. For this song a *capo* is used, at the third fret of the guitar.⁴ The guitarist then plays a characteristic fingering pattern associated with the key of G (now up three semitones to B-flat)—the chords “feel” like a progression pattern characteristic of the sub-dominant key.⁵

In fact, many of the harmonic particulars of this song are a by-product of the way a guitarist will finger these chords. Specifically, the highest string (here sounding G4) is left open and ringing in all of the harmonies. Likewise, the third or fourth finger of the left hand is planted on F4 (played on the second string) and it never moves, but serves as a pivot for the other fingers.⁶ It is this static F4, which never resolves to a leading tone E4 (as an unresolved 4-3 suspension in conventional terms), that adds to the tension and ambiguity of the harmonic setting of this ballad—for the F4 serves as a tonic pedal, so on the one hand the tonic pitch is palpably present throughout the song. Yet on the other hand, there is never any definitive resolution to the tonic, but only an aborted cadential progression. There is a bit of harmonic irony here, what with an ever-present tonic, and a lack of dominant resolution, which again is appropriate for the text and its subject.

Once one has discussed the use of harmonic progression (ostinato and retrogression) and sonority (lack of third/leading tone) to create an appropriate setting for this text, broader musical issues may then be raised. One can introduce the notion of criticism, in terms of the questions “do these harmonic features make ‘One Step Up’ a good song?” and “how can harmonic analysis help our assessment of the musical setting of this particular text?”⁷ This can lead to a more general discussion of the relationship between theory, analysis, and criticism. One can also pursue the notion of convention(s) in popular music, such as the role of the bass guitar in marking harmonic function, and originality versus formula in writing both lyrics and music in popular song.⁸ But perhaps the most important lesson for the teacher of theory is that the settings of popular song lyrics often contain examples of harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic structures which play upon the conventions of musical syntax. As fits the nature of their texts (as well as contexts) such settings are usually simple and straightforward, which make them pedagogically valuable.

One of the most difficult tasks theory teachers face is getting students to use some of the analytical tools they have acquired through their studies. Even those students who are quite competent at harmonic analysis and species counterpoint often fail to apply what we teach to their own listening and performance. The failure of our students to connect theory to their other musical experiences is perhaps our fault, for often (*mea culpa*) our lessons consist of abstract rules for harmonic progressions, of analysis of Bach Chorales that lie outside most students’ musical life. And of course this is

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doubly true when we are teaching a course for non-majors. We must take the initiative to show our students how theory plays an important role in critical listening, and how a knowledge of music theory can enhance their musical understanding and experience.

NOTES

¹*Tunnel of Love* reached the number two spot on *Billboard* magazine's album chart during the week of November 21st, 1987.

²*Tunnel of Love* is generally regarded as a confessional work that is a response to Mr. Springsteen's separation from his wife.

³Unfortunately due to fear of expensive copyright fees I cannot provide the reader with any written musical examples. The song, however, is simple enough so that one can easily notate the music by ear. It may, in fact, provide a good example of "applied ear-training," and the students themselves may be able to discern the harmonic progression in class.

⁴The *capo* or *capostato* is a clamp-like device that is used to shorten the string length of the guitar, and thus allow the player to use first-position fingerings (and characteristic open-string progressions) in other keys.

⁵Several guitarists, in fact, I have spoken with who play this song (but not all) have considered this song to be in B-flat, but with a "funny set of changes."

⁶Thus to be perfectly accurate the chord progression is: IV (-3, +6) to I⁶(+9, +11) to ii⁷; the V chord is a V⁷(+11).

⁷One can point out some problems with this text setting as well. Since there is little harmonic shape, and it is a strophic text/strophic setting, the only way Mr. Springsteen can (and does) give the song a sense of rising drama and climax is to simply get louder (and sing in higher registers) with each verse. This is, of course, the classic difficulty with a strophic song, and this piece may even be compared to strophic (and non-strophic) songs from the art-song repertoire.

⁸I had one student ask, after noting the ambiguous use of IV at the beginning of "One Step Up" to what extent Mr. Springsteen was conscious of his choice of harmonies. This provocative question sparked a good discussion. Some skeptics maintained that Mr. Springsteen composed the harmonic setting wholly by instinct (which does not, however, preclude choice in some sense), while others thought the V-IV retrogression (i.e., not ever resolving to tonic) was very likely a deliberate compositional choice on the part of Mr. Springsteen.