Nick Drake and the Baroque Characteristics of His Music
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Born in the British Colony of Burma in 1948 and brought up in the English countryside of Warwickshire, Nick Drake has become one of the most influential and celebrated folk artists of the twentieth century. Strangely enough, the popularity of his music enjoyed now was not gained until thirty years after his death in 1974. In his music we find the use of extremely unusual guitar tunings, pastoral and simplistic lyrics, beautiful melodies, and an extraordinary high emotional level that has evoked responses from many who have written about his work. He is now known as one of the most important folk singer/songwriters to have ever lived, though much of his music sets him apart from the contemporary folk artists of the 20th century.

Nick Drake has influenced countless musicians and songwriters since his early passing, and the reason for his influence may well lie in the characteristics and influences of his songs that make them so different from other folk artists of era. Trevor Dann discusses his influences as “avant-garde jazz, classical music, especially choral music, what we'd now call ‘world music’, and the blues” (p.13). Many articles and reviews describe his music as having a baroque quality or influence. Whether it is referring to the string arrangements in several of his songs or the sweeping orchestral quality of his guitar, most commentators never fail to observe a Baroque tinge.

Nick Drake’s first album Five Leaves Left introduced listeners to his ornate guitar accompaniments and baroque orchestrations that are now synonymous with his work. The album mainly consists of straightforward arrangements for guitar, drums, bass, and piano embellished by lush strings. Interestingly though, the song Way to Blue completely discards the traditional arrangement and leaves only Drake’s voice backed by a string quartet. This choice might have been a conscious effort to bring the album’s baroque qualities to the forefront. His second release, Bryter Later, utilizes more contemporary instruments to carry out the much more jazz influenced arrangements. Kathleen C. Fennesy says of the album, “Bryter Later was a small step backward...yet is nonetheless Drake at his most upbeat and accessible. It is also the least cohesive, most uncharacteristic and controversial of his three original albums” (p.1). His final album is the most intimate and lasting of the three. Recorded in two nights with only his engineer present, Pink Moon contains eleven tracks of just Drake's hushed vocals and his guitar (Hogan, 53). Although these songs lack the arrangements of the two previous albums, his guitar playing shows Baroque musical values in the intricate chord structures and meticulous counterpoint used throughout the album. It is largely considered to be his masterpiece and a strangely sparse account of regret, longing, and ultimately the sadness that claimed his life.

Though the baroque influences on his music are almost a unanimous observation among reviewers, none are ever specific about the musical details of this important characteristic in his overall sound. So to fully understand the Baroque qualities of Nick Drake's music, one must understand the basic qualities of Baroque music itself.

The origins of the term “baroque music” are questionable to say the least, but there is a general sense of its beginnings. Unlike Romantic, Impressionist, and Modern Music, it was not derived from the names of the other art forms of its time, but rather its title was uniquely applied to the music. The French philosopher Noel-Antoine Pluche is cited the first use of term “baroque” music in 1746 while describing the playing and performance styles of two very different violinists. According to Pluche, one preferred to be flashy and charismatic in his surprising and impressive performances, while the other played in a more lyrical style centered around melodic lines intending to mimic the human voice. Pluche stated of the charismatic player,

He disdained pure display, which for him is to wrest laboriously from the bottom of the sea some baroque pearls, when diamonds can be found on the surface of the earth.” He also categorized the music common to France and Italy into two styles: Musique chantante which was “in a singing style, rich in melodies that are natural to the voice, effortless, artless, and without grimace”, and “Musique baroque that sought to amaze by the boldness of its sounds and turns, and to surpass the native capacities of the singer with its rapidity and noise. (Palisca, p.2)

Many people would probably still describe baroque music as busy and ornate, and this why I think we hear Nick Drake’s playing style as being somewhat baroque. It is very busy and ornate, but without the ill connotation mentioned by Pluche above.

Though Baroque music can be endlessly fascinating and daunting in its complexity, it can also be easily defined by several characteristics. At the time of its creation it was considered highly emotional music and to many it still is. The intention of its very creation was to “move the affections” or emotions. It was believed that certain spirits or “humors” existed in the body and that music had ability to adjust the balance among them, creating better physical and psychological health (Burkholder, 296-97). Along with this philosophical characteristic there are other technical aspects that are used to define the genre. Baroque music places more of an emphasis on the prominent relationship between the individual bass and treble line than the Renaissance music that preceded it. In Renaissance music there was an emphasis on the equality of all voices used. This distinctive “polarity” of the treble and bass lines is what gives Baroque music its unique structure. At the time the inner voices were either written out or improvised, which produced the harmonic structure. This type of improvised harmony was based around a bass line commonly know as a “basso continuo” or “through bass,” a technique that allowed the composer to write a melody and bass then allow the players to form the harmony, which was implied by the bass. This part was normally played by a harpsichord, organ, lute, or theorbo (a larger lute with extended bass range).
Many standard practices put into place during the Baroque period have influenced current musical composition and comprehension and definitely those of Nick Drake. One of these practices was the musicians’ perspective on musical consonance, which was then recognized as chords as opposed to a set of intervals placed on top of a bass note. As a result, their perspective of dissonance also changed. Instead of seeing dissonance as an interval between two notes, it was seen as a note that did not belong within a particular chord. By this time more dissonance was allowed, and its use was dictated by musical statutes that determined how dissonances could be “introduced and resolved” within a piece of music. This brings back the point of baroque harmony. The counterpoint used during this period was driven by the harmony created based on the treble-bass polarity, the most important of the two being the bass. The harmony used was described as chord progressions that were again, implied by the bass line. The importance of the two outer voices is felt within Nick Drake’s music. His bass lines are clear while his melodies seem to be in the forefront, and everything in the middle feels as if it has just fallen into place naturally almost as if it had been improvised.

Although the bass-treble polarity is fairly recognizable in Nick Drake’s music, it is the string arrangements that quickly indicate a Baroque quality to most listeners. These arrangements for the most part echo Bach and Handel’s music. For instance, Richie Unterberger states in his article on Drake for All Music Guide “Drake created a vaguely mysterious, haunting atmosphere, occasionally embellished by tasteful Baroque strings.” He is referring to Drake’s first album Five Leaves Left. During the recording of this album Robert Kirby, a friend and fellow student of Cambridge University, was brought in to compose the arrangements for several of the tracks. It is probably these orchestral arrangements that cause most listeners to hear an immediate connection with Baroque music, though many more subtle ones are apparent as well (p.1).

Gerard Fannon in his review of Five Leaves Left discusses how Kirby designed a Baroque orchestral sound that would reinforce and accentuate Drake’s voice, not overpower it. He also goes on to notice that Kirby found ideas from other classical composers such as Ravel and Delius. The evidence is readily heard in these great arrangements, especially in the use of countermelodies, which in his opinion was the reason behind the success of the album (p.1).

The idea that the outer voices would dictate the development of the music’s harmony pervades Nick Drake’s songs. Basso continuo frequently appear in Nick Drake’s music. In fact it is probably one of the strongest characteristics that defines his playing and compositional styles. In most of his songs you can hear him “thumbing” out the bass line while playing the melody and inner voices built from it. Like Baroque music his bass lines usually determine the harmonic direction of the song. Drakewas able to make this effect possible through the use of his strange yet carefully developed guitar tunings.

Usually simultaneously playing the parts of bass, melody, and harmony would be extremely difficult to accomplish on the guitar, but by using alternate tunings he found a way to level out the intervallical structure of the instrument making it much easier to play difficult polyphonic passages. For instance playing such passages in standard guitar tuning would require the player’s fingers to stretch several frets while quickly shifting to finger the next chord. This approach would be very taxing on the left hand. By creating his own tunings he was able to play large and harmonically rich chords by only holding down two or three fingers.

Logically his use of a set bass line and melody would be connected to his use of harmonic variations. It is clear that Nick Drake obviously had a harmonic structure in mind. He played unchanging bass lines with set melodies. Without this technique, his ornate playing style and arrangements would not have been possible. “Day is Done” is a clear example of the technique. The song starts with only Drake’s guitar playing, and we hear a chord progression that is defined by its bass line. This particular song begins in what seems to be the key of D minor (there are a few unusual major shifts throughout the song). The bass moves chromatically down from D to A then arpeggiates a B-flat major chord and resolves the progression with a Vsus.(3-2)-I cadence. This chromatic walk down is what gives the song its harmonic character yet still remains subtle. It is really just supporting the progression of the following inverted chords: Dmin(i)-A7(V6)-Amin(v6)-G(Iv6)-Gmin(iv6)-Dmin(i6/4)-B-flat(VI)-Asus(Vsus3-2)-Dmin(i). This “ground bass” movement is also typical of a chaconne or passacaglia, a popular compositional style of the baroque period, which consisted of a short harmonic progression, often accompanied by a short repetitive bass line. These types of compositions used harmonic repetition to create a “set of variations” (Harvard 155). “Cello Song”, “Know”, and “Fruit Tree” are all Nick Drake songs using a similar ground bass structure.

Another baroque trait of Nick Drake’s music is his use of shading through harmonic changes. As mentioned before, the ideal behind baroque music was to move the affections, and probably one of the most effective ways to incite someone’s emotions is through the strategic use of harmony. Iain Cameron describes Drake’s use of shading in his analysis of “River Man,” the second track on Five Leaves Left. He states that the chord progression played throughout the song is sort of hinged on its movement from minor to major. Each line of the verses are played over a progression of four chords: Cmin—E-flat cluster(E-flat, B-flat, F, A-flat)—A-flat maj, 7—Cmaj.

The lyrics progress over each line along with the chords, and the harmonic change from minor to major creates a slight shift in mood. Cameron states someone could argue that “overall the atmosphere of the song (and indeed the orchestration) is brooding and dark - the characteristics we associate with minor modality” (3). While he believes that the song is actually in C major, due to the facts that the progression resolves to C major, and the end of the song is played in this major key, he goes on to say that the second chord, the E-flat cluster, is what is used to create the song’s moments of tension. Cameron also included an interesting “mood” analysis of the chord progression’s interaction with the lyrics:
In his analysis of “River Man” he also connects the Eb cluster chord with the second chord used in “Way to Blue” where he claims “it uses the same chord but seems to be working rather differently, and that “it is yet another of Nick’s songs which swings around from major to minor” (p. 1-2). While “River Man” is not overtly Baroque sounding, it takes advantage of the idea of “moving the affections” or emotions by strategically executing changes within the harmony.

“Way to Blue” also uses harmonies to create its powerful emotional atmosphere. This song tends move between the keys of E minor and E major, and as mentioned before, is unique to his catalogue in that it is the only song to feature just his voice accompanied by a string quartet. At first hearing, “Way to Blue” is strikingly Baroque, due mainly to Robert Kirby’s string arrangement. If the vocals were stripped away it would probably sound as if it were actually from the period. Kirby made sure to support Nick Drake’s melody and lyrics with an appropriate and beneficial harmonic structure, featuring baroque part writing and long pedal points. The piece begins in E minor and travels through a i-iv-V7-i-iv-V7-I chord progression, pointing out to the modulation to E major. These types of chord progressions are very common in Baroque music.

Tonality as we understand it today only became a universal concept during the Baroque period. Ideas and explorations of tonality were much more open-ended. “Way to Blue” remains in E major during the brief choruses and bridge and continues with the previously mentioned progression. Moving quickly between keys and major/minor cadences are both practices found throughout baroque music. Interestingly, this song shares a strong resemblance to the Overture of Handel’s Messiah, maintaining a similar grave tempo, harmonic changes, and its orchestration for strings. They are both even written in the same key. Now in no way was Kirby exactly quoting Handel, but there is clearly a connection between the two, surely he was familiar with Messiah.

While it is easy to argue that Nick Drake’s songs have many Baroque characteristics, the songs are not considered to be fully Baroque or some form of NeoBaroque music. The influence that Baroque composers such as J.S. Bach and Handel had on Nick Drake is not easily ignored, but he was not imitating their style. The combination of the Baroque characteristics and others styles Drake incorporated into his songs created a distinct sound, unique to his music. From the orchestral arrangements, to the intricate counterpoint and basso continuo effects of his guitar writing, to the emotional persuasions of his harmonic decisions, these qualities are all quite baroque. Why then does his music still not sound completely baroque? Of course the baroque characteristics have a role in the effect his music has had on listeners throughout the past thirty years, however he was a musician who allowed entrance to many influences. He not only made use of baroque styles but synthesized jazz, folk, and classical music into a compositional style that is completely original and authentically his own. It is the subtle nuances found in his music that make it more fascinating and “new” to his growing audience even many years after his death.