

2×2: Thematic Construction in Åke Hermanson’s *In Sono*

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Abstract

The surface of Åke Hermanson’s *In Sono*, op. 12, is made of a small number of motives and abstract types of figures, such as oscillations or repetitions of single pitches. However, these statements are not (and are not intended to be perceived as) random outbursts. A close reading of the work reveals that Hermanson elucidates his motivic boundaries and his patterns of motivic presentations by presenting motives and combinations of motives in pairs, through which he articulates longer thematic units. The largest structure is a rotational form, as defined by Hepokoski and Darcy). To make the structure clear, Hermanson presents two contrasting ideas in Rotation 1, then uses those ideas to frame new material added in each of the two following rotations.

Keywords: Åke Hermanson, *In Sono*, motivic analysis, rotational form

Åke Hermanson occupies a unique place in Swedish modernist music. As music critic Alf Thoor wrote after the 1961 premiere of *Stadier*, op. 5, “Åke Hermanson is an eccentric. He doesn’t represent any tendency. He cannot be placed in any group of composers” (quoted in translation after Bergendal, 2007, p. 56). Rolf Haglund makes a similar point by characterising Hermanson as “working in isolation” (Haglund, 1980, p. 510).

Writers invariably comment on the starkness of Hermanson’s work, especially in his earlier pieces. Göran Bergendal (2007) has collected numerous examples: Lennart Hedwall refers to the “stern ... lines” of the *Prelude and Fugue*, op. 1 (p. 50), while Per-Anders Hellqvist says concerning *A Due Voce*, op. 3: “Its barrenness was really brutal ...” (p. 52). Folke Hähnel refers to the “dark, rugged tones, [and] grinding anxiety” of *Invoco* (p. 54), and Leif Aare comments on *In Nuce*: the piece “has no glitz but instead much of a sternly unromantic, roaring autumn sea” (p. 60). Runar Mangs writes on Symphony No. 1, op. 9: “the same battering-ram that in four assaults of accelerated greatness tries to shatter the same imaginary wall” (p. 62). Haglund comments, in a more general vein: “His compositions seem to have retained something of the harshness, the rough, rocky landscape of his native Bohuslän” (1980, p. 510).

This “harshness” is related to two fundamental aspects of Hermanson’s work. First, he often uses small bits of material. As Steven A. Harper points out with respect to *Alarme*, even a single note can have motivic significance (2007). Thus, there is an intensity and concentration of meaning that is not conventionally sensuous. The second aspect is that in most of Hermanson’s works, he generally maintains a unity of affect and a consistency

of harmonic language. Although Hermansson deals with short surface elements, he treats these elements as a *modernist* would, not as a *postmodernist* would. As Jonathan D. Kramer points out, for a modernist, “unity is a prerequisite for musical sense,” whereas many postmodernist pieces exhibit “extraordinary discontinuities that go beyond contrast, variety, consistency, and unity” (1999, pp. 8–9). A postmodern composer might juxtapose fragmentary materials of different styles and genres to create a collage effect of intentional discontinuity, but Hermansson’s fragments are intended to reinforce one another by creating a thicket of associations that strengthen the work’s unity. Part of the unique challenge of understanding his smaller works, in particular, is to hear *through* the breaks to recognise longer patterns of presentation.

In this article, I will do a close reading of his quartet, *In Sono*, op. 12, a piece that falls between what are arguably his most famous works, *Alarme*, op. 11, and *Ultima*, op. 13. *In Sono* utilises many of the same kinds of techniques we find in *Alarme*, but with a softer affect than that found in that horn piece. It is profitable to look at Hermansson’s motivic techniques in *Alarme* first, as the solo texture and obvious “siren” calls make the motivic boundaries clear, before delving into *In Sono*.

1. Hermansson’s Approach to Motives and Thematic Construction

In *Alarme*, Hermansson utilises three kinds of motives: (1) “characteristic” motives (what we generally think of when we think of a motive: a short, recognisable passage with a distinctive shape that is used as a building block for a piece)¹, (2) oscillations, and (3) single-note statements. These three categories are represented in the opening measures of *Alarme* (Example 1).² All three of these are recognisable “alarms,” with the oscillation and single-pitch versions being “siren-like.”

Example 1: *Alarme*, mm. 1–6

Because Hermansson’s aesthetic is not built solely on appreciation of the sound moment in isolation (where a patchwork is used to deliberately isolate those moments in

¹ Arnold Schoenberg describes a motive as “intervals and rhythms, combined to produce a memorable shape or contour (1967, p. 8).

² For a discussion of motivic usage in *Alarme*, see Harper, 2007.

perception), a significant aspect of his compositional process involves combining these elements into longer, meaningful strands. While the abstractness of Hermanson's materials allows him to create an intricate network of connections, the listener must work to disentangle those connections enough to perceive the continuity of the musical logic.

In *In Sono*, Hermanson takes these elements and still retains some of their alarm-like character, but with a softer, less fearful quality. Of particular interest is his treatment of the single-pitch motive, which does not have the same alarm-like quality as it does in *Alarne*. Hermanson uses the single-pitch idea in two principal ways in *In Sono*. First, he uses the single pitches to establish a background space. This is what the viola's F4 accomplishes at the beginning of the work; the extended F4 acts as a representation of emptiness, such as deep space or a frozen expanse. Here, the single pitch is not being used "motivically." Second, he, at other times, does use the single pitch as a motive; we will see this below in discussing (especially) the first theme of the work.

In creating his themes from these abstract fragments, Hermanson relies heavily on paired statements (hence the "two-by-two" of the title of this article) to give clarity to his structures. This is particularly important with respect to single-pitch motives. In this article, I will examine the various thematic statements in *In Sono*, showing how paired statements of motive patterns create groupings and group boundaries, so that the result is music that is unified and logically comprehensible.

2. Hermanson's Approach to Form

It is helpful to have a sense of the big picture of *In Sono* before examining details. As illustrated in Figure 1, the piece follows a rotational form comprising three rotations and their constituent sections.

Rotation:	1		2		Inter.	3	
Section:	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	Coda
Measure:	1	26	61	78	106	132	142

Figure 1: Form of *In Sono*

Rotational form is described by Warren Darcy as a

cyclical, repetitive process that begins by unfolding a series of differentiated motives or themes as a referential statement or "first rotation;" subsequent rotations recycle and re-work all or most of the referential statement, normally retaining the sequential ordering of the selected musical ideas (2001, p. 52).

In *Elements of Sonata Theory*, James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy identify rotational form as an "archetypal principle of musical structure", citing strophic songs, theme-and-variations, rondos, and the like as individual forms related to the principle, while being more immediately concerned with the idea as it relates to sonata form (2006, p. 612). In *In Sono*, we find a structure that is rotational in origin and, though having certain features of conventional forms (sonata and rondo, for example), is not *in* a conventional form.

Each rotation begins with a pedal point followed by a characteristic motive that I have labelled “Warning” (see Example 2).³ In Rotation 1, this is followed by another idea that I have labelled “Mourning” (see Example 5) that also appears in all three rotations, and then a developmental section (Section III). Rotation 2 introduces new material between “Warning” and “Mourning” and, again, concludes by developing the material introduced. Like Rotation 2, Rotation 3 again inserts new material between “Warning” and “Mourning,” but here the development comes before the “Mourning” statement, which is found in the Coda.

Darcy also points out that many rotational forms include what he calls “teleological genesis,” a process in which

a brief motivic gesture or hint planted in an early rotation grows larger in later rotations and is ultimately unfurled as the telos, or tonal structural goal, in the last rotation. Thus the successive rotations become a sort of generative matrix within which this telos is engendered, processed, nurtured, and brought to full presence (p. 52).⁴

In Sono reflects Hermanson’s interest in teleologically-conceived rotational forms, in which later ideas are foreshadowed in earlier rotations. Furthermore, the rotations themselves involve progressively more complex processes. In *In Sono*, the first rotation is quite clear, with clear sonata analogies. The second rotation is a (mostly) large-scale contrast framed with the two ideas from Rotation 1. Rotation 3 is an intensification, with the most emphatic alarm (mm. 157–61) and a frenetic section (mm. 171–182) before a melancholy calm is restored and the established space is left empty once again.



Example 2: Fl., m. 13 (Warning)

3. *In Sono*

3a. Rotation 1 (mm. 1–77)

The first rotation encompasses three sections: (I) mm. 1–25; (II) mm. 26–60; and III) mm. 61–77. Sections I and II are largely expository, presenting a kind of small, rounded binary form between them. The work opens with an extended F4 in the viola. As noted above, this pitch is not behaving motivically; its function is to articulate a space, in this case a space characterised by expansiveness and emptiness, like a frozen forest landscape.⁵ In

³ Notice the odd way Hermanson slurs this figure, taking the slur through the final note to the following rest.

⁴ The idea of teleological genesis features prominently in Hepokoski’s discussion of rotational procedures in Sibelius’s Fifth Symphony (1993).

⁵ According to Bergendal (2007, p. 67), “The framework for the piece is what Hermanson calls ‘a frozen forest.’”. The frozen forest image suggests that most of the main thematic material can be related to (and heard as) bird calls and conversations.

mm. 4–6, the viola is joined by the flute on F4 and in mm. 8–10, the viola is joined by the English horn. It is tempting to see these wind statements as color adjustments to the background, but they should be viewed as single-pitch motive statements. They are of the same length (17 eighth notes), and in mm. 10–15, the English horn has two similar statements of F#4 (of 17 and 18 eighth notes length, respectively; see Example 3).⁶

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff is for the Flute (Fl.) and the bottom staff is for the English Horn (E.H.). The score is in G clef, common time. Measures 4-6 show the Flute playing a single pitch (F4) over a sustained note. Measures 8-10 show the English Horn playing a single pitch (F4) over a sustained note. Measures 11-15 show the English Horn playing a single pitch (F#4) over a sustained note.

Example 3: Flute and English horn, mm. 4–15 (concert pitch)

In m. 13, a recognisably thematic passage begins, lasting until m. 24. The theme consists of two segments. The first is built from two statements of the Warning motive (same pitch level) and two statements of a single-pitch motive (F#6; see Example 4a). The second segment consists of two statements of the Warning motive and an oscillation motive, in which each of the two pitches is presented twice (see Example 4b). The oscillation is, thus, an elaboration of the single-pitch motive in mm. 15–18 (see Example 4c). Crucial to understanding the passage is the recognition that Hermanson is presenting material in paired statements.

The second thematic idea is presented in mm. 26–32 (that is, in Section II). This theme is built on a kind of oscillation, but its distinctive rhythmic pattern (and typical presentation with associated imitation) makes it more characteristic than a simple oscillation, which prototypically involves consistent durations (as we saw in the example from the beginning of *Alarne*). The second theme also has two segments, mm. 26–29 and mm. 29–32 (see Example 5). Paired statements are found within the first segment, while the second segment is a “wind-up/arrival” that seems more directional than the closed first theme.

⁶ I am asserting that the F4 in the viola is not motivic. However, an argument can be made that it actually is. The F4 is broken at m. 10. Thus, we have a statement in mm. 1–10 (8.75 full measures) and a second statement in mm. 10–17 (7.25 measures). Analogously, the cello has two F4 tremolo statements (mm. 10–14 and mm. 17–20, lasting 4.0 measures and 3.125 measures, respectively).

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a) Warning

F#6

b)

c) mm. 13-18 mm. 18-24

Example 4 (a-c)

E.h. (concert pitch)

segment 1

26 27 28 29

p mp

segment 2

30 31 32 ten. 33

p mp 3 mf

Example 5

At m. 32, a restatement of Theme 1 is given. The English horn opens with two statements of C5. In mm. 34-35, the flute gives the Warning motive (two statements), then a high F6 (analogous to the F#6 in mm. 15-18). This time, the second F6 is harmonized and the chord itself is presented twice. In mm. 40-41, the flute has a two-note idea (Bb5-B6), the same interval 13 found in the oscillation that closes the first statement of Theme 1, though here it is presented only once.

The two statements of the Warning motive in mm. 41-42 represent the beginning of a dialogue of sorts between the flute and oboe. The flute presents a modified version of the

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Warning motive in mm. 43-45 (see Example 6a).⁷ This use of the rising major 2nd as an ending gesture is also found frequently in *Alarme* (see Example 6b). The oboe then has a slow oscillating wind-up beginning in m. 45 and punctuated at the downbeat of m. 53 with the flute presenting a modified restatement of mm. 18-24. The section ends with the oboe presenting the Warning motive twice, a more emphatic version of mm. 41-42. Figure 2 shows how the restatement of Theme 1 in mm. 32-60 is structured and how it relates to the initial statement in mm. 4-24. Note that Hermanson retains the opening and closing patterns but expands in the center. This is similar to his treatment of the large rotations of the piece.

a)

b) *Alarme*

Example 6

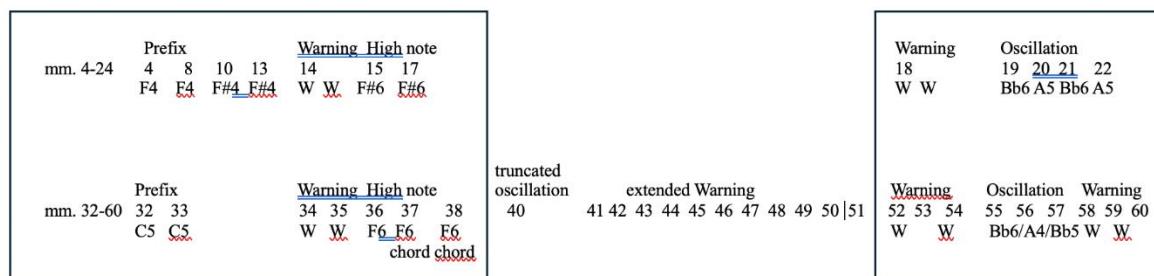


Figure 2

Section III encompasses mm. 61-77. This section has the characteristics of development. It begins with a retrograde version of the Warning motive in which the long note represents the indeterminate-lengthened landing note in the original motive (see Example

⁷ In the recording of *In Sono* by Marosensemblen (2007), the flute actually plays this:

It is an interesting figure, but the notated version seems more likely to be correct.

7).⁸ The use of imitation is a reference to both the imitation in the Mournful theme and the dialogic aspects of Section II. Measures 61–64 in the flute are not actually three statements of this Warning derivation, which we can see through Hermanson's slurs. In the statement in mm. 61–63, Hermanson slurs across the sixteenth-note rest, but in m. 64 he does not. He is asking us to hear the single long pitch and two-note "chirp" as fragments of the long-short-short idea. Hermanson is foreshadowing a new theme to be introduced in Rotation 3 (see Example 8). The oboe joins the flute for F4 in m. 64 highlights the separation of the two segments of the idea.

a) Fl., m. 13 b) Fl., mm. 61-62

S S L L TT S S M2

Example 7

a) Fl., mm. 64-65

mp > mf mf

b) Ob., mm. 158-59

sff > f f

Example 8

As the flute is presenting chirps, Hermanson develops Theme 2 in mm. 65–71, splitting the first statement between viola and oboe, then allowing the viola to take the imitation. Measure 69 combines elements from earlier in the section, with the Mournful theme being presented at a new pitch level for the first (and only) time. Measures 71–74 feature three articulations of C5 in the oboe, foreshadowing the theme to be introduced in the second rotation (see Example 9). The section ends with the oboe presenting a variation of mm. 45–49.

⁸This indeterminacy is what Hermanson is indicating through the unusual slurring mentioned earlier.

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a) Ob. mm. 71-74



b) Vla., mm. 96-98



Example 9

The developmental character of Section III makes the beginning of the second rotation at m. 78 seem odd – or vice versa. If Hermanson had been setting up a sonata form, the development of Section III would have been disproportionately small – at least psychologically. Instead, we have to think of Section III as having a hidden expository function, foreshadowing new themes that will emerge in Rotations 2 and 3.

3b. Rotation 2 (mm. 78-32)

The new theme that is presented in Rotation 2 is presented in two similar segments (like the first theme), first in a protean form in mm. 90–96, then in a more honed form in mm. 96–100. Around the central theme, there are complementary figures that seem either instrumental to the theme or counter-motives that complement the theme. Example 10 shows the full essential theme (mm. 90–100), which is characterised by a reiterated G4, an F4, and a short B4 followed by F4 again.

So much of the piece is centred around F4 (with B4 as its companion) that G4 has the harmonic effect of a distant spatial location. This theme is, in its essence, an embellished oscillation between F4 and G4. The major 2nd is in some ways connected to the Warning motive (which features the major 2nd), but it is more closely related to the C#5–B4 motion within the Mournful theme. However, that major 2nd does not give the impression of two harmonic areas the way this major 2nd does.

a)

Vla.



Example 10

Section V (mm. 106–131) serves the same kind of developmental function as Section III. In mm. 106–113, we hear the flute present the short-long (B4–F4), with C6 acting as the same kind of harmonic pole that G4 does with respect to F4 in the strings' theme of mm. 90–100 (Example 11). In mm. 115–118, we get the oscillations that signalled the end of Theme 1, but without the concluding A5 (Example 12). Instead, there is more development, the section ending on a statement of the Warning motive in the English horn in mm. 131–132.

a) Fl., mm. 106–113

b)

Example 11

Example 12

3c. Rotation 3 (mm. 142–201)

Measures 132–142 are an interpolation, much like the passage that begins at m. 106 and features the flute. The third rotation proper begins at m. 145 when the cello articulates F4 *con sordino*. Like Rotation 2, it features an active viola part that circles F4 before the

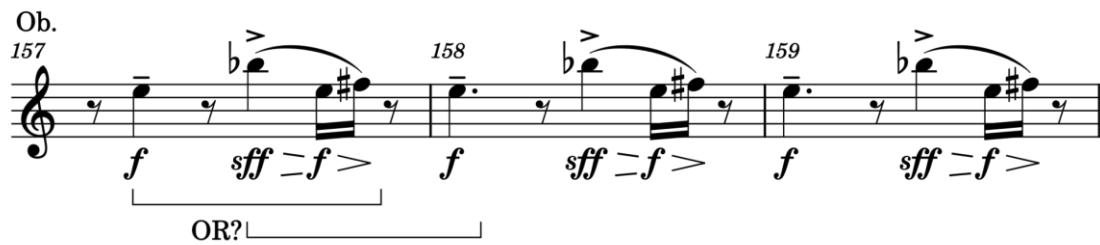
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Warning motive is presented twice in its original form and twice (once in the oboe, once in the flute) with suffix embellishments (see Example 13). The first of two new melodies presented in Rotation 3 begins in the flute in m. 156 in rough form, then is presented in the oboe, mm. 157–158 (see Examples 14, 15). Hermanson's presentation of this idea is somewhat ambiguous. It can be segmented as either beginning with the isolated E5 (in which case the dynamic profile is a swell: *f–ff–f* or as beginning with *sff* (in which case the dynamic profile is *ff–f*, with the F#5 slightly deemphasised). The latter seems intended. But the full theme is a composite of all four instruments, with the two statements (again, two statements to clarify the theme) overlapping, as illustrated in Example 16. The oboe is the *Hauptstimme*, its three statements of the primary motive set against the two long-short statements in the flute, while the strings provide support. We are not supposed to hear a single melody distributed among the four instruments, but rather a contrapuntal complex as thematic. However, we do see Hermanson's characteristic separation of registers, evident throughout *In Sono* and *Alarme* and the solo wind music; see Example 17).⁹

Example 13

Example 14

⁹ For a discussion of registral streams and separation, see Harper, 2007 and 2009.



Example 15

Example 16

The viola has a solo passage (a quasi-cadenza) in mm. 163–167, analogous to the flute's highlighted passage in mm. 106–109. Measures 168–170 present two statements of a chord, evoking mm. 38–39.

The pick-up to m. 171 initiates the second new idea of Rotation 3, which (again) is presented in a pair of statements (see Example 18). There are two (again, two) full statements of a distributed idea, with other activity surrounding, and an abortive third statement. The surrounding material creates a pattern that is presented in varied repetition. The kinds of gestures are loose imitation at a short rhythmic interval and chirps presented in sequence. Much of the remainder of the segment again reflects Hermansson's registral separation, with intervals 11/13 in non-adjacent registers, intervals 5/6/7 connecting those two, and major 2nds as motions within a register. The piece ends with reflections of the Mourning motive in the flute and viola before an unambiguous statement in mm. 188–91, after which the work returns to F4.



Example 17

Example 18

4. Conclusion

By studying *In Sono* closely, we gain insight into two of the most important aspects of Hermanson's chamber music: first, the way in which he creates continuity and coherence despite the fragmentary nature of his musical materials. The abstractness of the small units and the surface discontinuity create demands on the listener. Recognising that Hermanson wants us to hear through the breaks and recognize patterns of presentation helps us understand how he intends us to process his music. In *In Sono*, he clarifies his structure through immediate repetition, by presenting his motives in paired statements, so that we can follow the musical logic with greater confidence. Through patterns of presentation, Hermanson mitigates the difficulty of processing the fragmented surface so that we can perceive and appreciate his carefully built structure. Second, we see Hermanson's interest in pressing this notion of patterns of presentation to higher levels of structure through rotational forms. Rotational forms are structured around patterns but can also be enhanced through additions and development within statements. In *In Sono*, the first rotation has obvious sonata elements (two themes and a development), while the second and third rotations (by each introducing new ideas) are more analogous to what Hepokoski and Darcy call a "chain rondo" (AB-AC-AD-A), a form which they discuss in leading up to their explanation of what is often called the "sonata-rondo" but they call "Type 4 sonata" (2006, pp. 401–402). *In Sono* reflects, thus, a kind of sonata/rondo hybrid that is unlike any textbook form. Further investigation may reveal other works that have this kind of structure or, perhaps, other sonata/rondo combinations that also have not yet been codified.

The unity of surface affect and continuity of procedure across different levels of structure are fundamental features of *In Sono*. Hermanson's consistent use of paired

statements in his thematic construction creates thematic coherence from his fragmented materials. The thematic coherence then allows larger patterns of structure to be perceived and appreciated.

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Biography

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