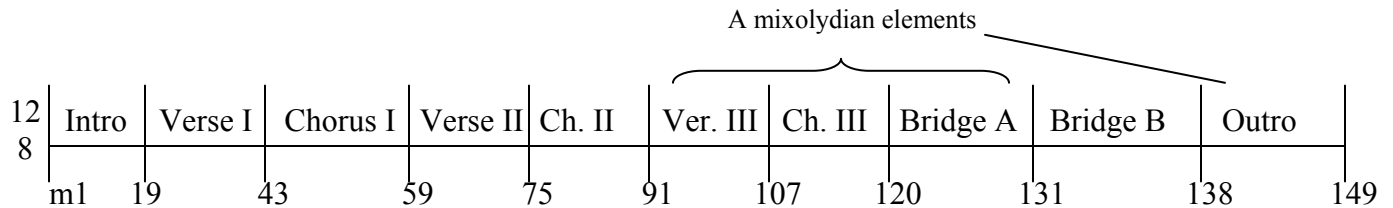


David Etlinger
How to Disappear Completely

Form:



Instrumentation

- Vocals
- Strings
- Synthesizer/Keyboard
- Acoustic Guitar
- Electric Bass
- Percussion (drum kit)

Basic Harmonic Structure

The piece is predominantly in F# Aeolian (natural minor). The acoustic guitar sets up the basic chord progressions, which remain largely unchanged throughout the piece. Chord changes are slow (usually each chord is given four measures), but include some variants to keep things interesting. The basic changes are: Dmaj (Dadd2) – F#min (F#min6) during the verses, and A (Aadd4) – F#min (F#min6) during the choruses. The few exceptions to this (during what I've called the bridges) are discussed below. The bass plays virtually exclusively from the F# minor pentatonic scale. Vocals, strings and synths play from this mode as well. During the third verse and chorus, and bridge A, the vocals and strings seem to indicate A Mixolydian (through G naturals and melodic emphasis), but the guitar and bass continue as before, although they play no G#s so there is no direct contradiction. In summary, the harmonic material is somewhat limited, from scales typical for the rock genre.

Basic Large-Scale Structure

The song exhibits a large-scale build in tension from the beginning through the outro (or possibly only through bridge A, depending on your interpretation). This is accomplished by

1. Long-term dynamic increases (constant within sections, louder from section to section)
2. Addition of instruments/mix layers from section to section

3. Increased use of electronic pitch manipulation from section to section
4. Increasing tessitura in the vocals and strings

Section-by-section Analysis

Intro

The song starts with a very quiet string background, and then acoustic guitar, playing the verse chords. At measure 10, the bass sets up the riff it will play for most of the song. The intro is very quiet, relaxed, and simple.

Verse I

This verse is essentially the same mix as the intro, with of course the addition of vocals. The vocal melodic motion is very slow. The mix is, as above, very simple and clear.

Chorus I

Similar to above. The bass plays its other main riff during the chorus, which adds some additional motion into the next verse.

Verse II

This is where additional tension begins to develop. Percussion enters here, giving it a more driving feel. Additionally, the strings begin to exhibit some motion. The strings in general are swelling and dramatic, with fairly slow motion. Bass and guitar continue as before.

Chorus II

Chorus begins with the same mix as the last verse. A short bit in, one of the two most processed sections of the song takes place. This is a subtle background of manipulated strings and synthesizers (using a sound highly reminiscent of a trumpet on a very low-quality keyboard; here of course it's not supposed to sound like a trumpet but is used for its intrinsic sound quality). The pitch material is taken from the F# Aeolian scale, often emphasizing s.d. 5 and 6. Much more interesting is the rhythmic contour. The strings and synths will often trade statements of a two- or three-note phrase several times during a measure, usually in different octaves. While this is happening, the duration of their notes is varied in an analog manner. Often it approximates duples, contrasting the triple meter of the other parts. But since they are varied in a highly continuous manner, there is no easy way to notate their lengths traditionally (I've done my best, however). Also, the strings and synths will often be distorted at different rates, leading to some overlap between their parts. The musical effect of this is both contrastive with and amplifying of the mood of the other parts. Its deliberately abstract, artificial sound is unlike the dreamlike vocals and consonant instrumentation. However, the surreal sense it creates is right in keeping with the overall mood of unreality the piece projects. Structurally, this

event serves two purposes. First, it continues the large-scale increase in tension and complexity described above, and adds additional forward motion to this chorus (especially due to its almost contrapuntal feel). Secondly, it sets the first two verse-choruses off from the third, which is different in several respects, most prominently its major-mode melody.

Verse III

At this point, both the tension and the rate-of-increase-of-tension increase (“velocity and acceleration”). The most noticeable change is that the vocals and accompanying strings seem to have at least partially switched to A Mixolydian, as heralded by the introduction of G naturals. The switch is by no means definitive, as the accompaniment does not alter, and it is of course a closely related scale. Also, the vocal line is different from the other two verses, emphasizing A over F#, reaching a new high note of E, and adding more motion. The dynamics increase significantly, especially in the vocals and strings, the latter of which reaches new prominence with dramatic gestures, glissandos (probably processed in), and sweeping long tones. The bass, while largely similar, adds increasingly complex variations at increasingly frequent intervals.

Chorus III

This chorus begins with a new height in intensity, with *forte* vocals and strings, the latter of which hit a high C# on the downbeat. The major qualities of the melody, while still evident, are less obvious than the verse, especially since the accompaniment (in minor) gains relative strength (the transition back to minor is around mm. 110). The intensity drops slightly from the opening peak, but stays high into the bridge (but see discussion of Bridge B).

Bridge A

This begins as an extension to the previous chorus, but the technical details are significantly different. Most evident is that the vocals abandon words and sing a very high repeated “ah-ah” phrase – the A-F# motive I discuss below. As is usually the case with this motive, the strings accompany in unison. The opening is in minor, as was the close of the last chorus. At measure 127, there is an element of extended mixture implying A major. The vocals are on a held G#, and the overall chord is E major – the only time in the piece this chord appears. The bass appears to be playing “sol-la-ti-do” (the only time the bass strays out of the pentatonic). This appears to be a big dominant chord, which would be a high point of the piece. However, in a seamlessly executed transition, measure 130 sees the vocal line fall to F# and the bass fall to E, forcing us to return to minor and hear the E chord as a VII. The subjective sense is that the brief bit of optimism has burned itself out and leaves the music darker than before. The following section more than confirms this.

Bridge B

This seven-measure section is by far the most processed section of the piece. The transition between Bridges A and B is fairly abrupt, with only a very brief fade-in. The vocals continue their A-(G#)-F# riff, but with far more irregular rhythmic values. The guitar, if it exists, is inaudible, as is (largely) the bass. The majority of the sound in this section is created by strings, synths, and/or physical tape effects. There is a wall of stretched, pitch-shifted, and distorted wailing/string sounds that is difficult to describe musically. The manipulations are highly continuous (analog) rhythmically, dynamically, and pitch-wise. The tessitura of the strings is quite high, making the overall sound one of screeching or whining. There is also a good bit of echo/reverb/chorus on the sound, further adding to the dissonance. Structurally, this is one of two possible high points of the piece (the other was the third chorus). Whereas that climax was of the traditional musical forces (dynamics, melodic contour, harmony, etc.), this is the climax of the increasing sonic manipulations. Until the third chorus, there was obvious agreement between the two. When the energy drops (after the two “I’m not here”s), the sonic manipulation stays high and leads into this section (it is true that Bridge A maintains some level of musical tension, but it is nonetheless lower than the chorus, and results from this bimodal climax/conclusion structure). The effect of all this is two-fold. One, as stated above, it serves to spread out the conclusion, making it more gradual and structurally complex. Two, the alternating of “musical” and “manipulative” tension highlights the thematic contrast between flowing dreaminess and abstract, cold inhumanism.

Outro

The transition out of Bridge B is even more abrupt than the transition into it. The outro begins with a return to the mix of Verse/Chorus III, with a brief reference to major before settling back into F# minor. Actually, the strings are quite distorted here too, but only in the very upper registers. The effect is such that the string melody lines sound clearly, but on top of a constant background whine. The guitar plays the chorus progression, with the last six measures plus fadeout sounding an F# chord. The volume, complexity of the mix, and forward motion are all rapidly brought down to conclude the song.

A-F# Motive

At many points during the song, an A-F# motive is played. The canonical form of this motive is: half-note duration for each note, starting on beat 3. It is played in an upper octave by the strings, which are modified with added reverb/chorus and synth doubling, and often vocals as well. The first statement of the theme is in the intro, beginning in the first measure of F#min chords. It happens again at the words “Float down the Liffey” in the same harmonic location. It happens again during the first chorus, second verse, second chorus, and third chorus, always over F#min and often during the first measure of that chord. Once we get to Bridge A, the melody line basically repeats this motive over and over, sometimes with a passing tone G#, still supported by the strings and synths. Bridge B also repeats this motive, this time highly distorted and rhythmically displaced,

like everything else here. Finally, the outro repeats it a few more times in both vocals and synths before concluding. Globally, the motive serves a few different functions. Coming as it usually does in F#min harmonies, it outlines s.d. 3-1, emphasizing the minor scale and leading to the tonic. In the beginning of the piece, it is used somewhat sparingly, at points of textual or musical relaxation. Thematically, it emphasizes the return to minor (i.e., hopelessness or lack of humanity) after a brief excursion to a major chord. At the bridge, when it becomes the primary motive, it fits in with the marked increase in complexity and tension. Especially notable are those occasions where a G# occurs. As noted above, this sometimes seems to indicate major qualities, but usually reverts back to minor when the F# is reached. The (sometimes multi-measured) G#s can be seen as caught between the A and the F#, the fact that they always resolve downward indicates that the overall mood of the piece is pessimistic or at least neutral.

Summary of Studio Techniques

1. Increasing layers as song progresses increase tension
2. Events involving high degrees of manipulation serve as structural boundaries or climaxes
3. Chorus II: synthesizers, tape speed manipulation
4. Verse III: Processed strings (probably analog tape manipulation)
5. Bridge B: Severe distortion, echo/reverb/chorus, pitch and speed manipulation
6. A-F# motive: chorus/echo

The Two Points I Am Trying To Make

1. Analog/studio manipulation of musical variables allows for expressive statements that are hard to describe with traditional musical notation/syntax
2. Manipulation can become more than just “tone color” – it can become a structural feature of the piece, on par with or even surpassing harmony, etc.