



MEE 2.0: ICLT2022
International Virtual Colloquium on Multi-Disciplinary Research Impact (3rd Series)
International Conference of Logistics and Transportation
Best Western i-City Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia, 05-06 Oct2022



Imagery Conjured through Melodic Developments in “15 Step” by Radiohead

Norish Dhaniah Afiah Mohamed¹, Raja Mohamad Alif Raja Mohamad Adnan²

¹ Prodigy Studio Music Academy, Kajang, Malaysia

² College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Malaysia

norishdhaniah1412@gmail.com, rajaalif7259@uitm.edu.my
Tel: +01265514436

Abstract

This paper investigates the melodic development of Radiohead's composition titled 15 Step and how it conjures imagery for the listeners. While the band has website performances, there is a lack of compositional analysis of the group's work. The results of this study are that melodic developments such as melodic contour, melodic motion, and melodic rhythm results in conjured imagery. This paper contributes knowledge to other composers who might be interested in composing music using innovative melody developments to conjure imagery. This research further explains these techniques and gives insight into how Radiohead composes its music.

Keywords: Melodic development; Conjuring imagery; Music Composition; Radiohead

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/ebpj.v7iS19.4265>*

1.0 Introduction

Melodic developments in a musical composition can enchant a listener to visualize imagery. Melodic developments can determine a specific piece's mood and atmosphere. What is fascinating about it is that it can also trigger the listener's mind to visualize imagery. Radiohead is one of the numerous musicians that utilize melodic developments for visual representation in many of their works. One of their significant works that use this technique would be '15 Step'. The synthetic experience of the combination of melodic developments and imagery is fascinating for various reasons. Musicians that possess the ability to use this approach will generate a connection with their listeners.

It is usual for composers to develop their melody to produce an impactful composition. Still, there needs to be a good understanding of the utilization of those developments to construct a melody that conjures imagery. If one cannot grasp enough knowledge of melodic development techniques, it will be hard for them to achieve remarkable melodies to trigger imagery. This research investigates Radiohead's uncommon use of melodic developments and the lack of compositional analysis of the group's work. Hence, it is vital to understand further the construction of the melody and how it conjures imagery. The research objectives underlying this study are:

1. To identify the melodic developments in '15 Step' by Radiohead
2. To determine the imagery conjured through the melodic developments in '15 Step' by Radiohead.

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2.0 Literature Review

2.1 '15 Step' by Radiohead

Radiohead is an English rock band formed in 1985 in Abingdon, Oxfordshire. Audiences, critics, and scholars alike have hailed them as one of the most influential bands in popular music today. They are known for breaking free from guitar-based rock's standard and predictable dimensions. The band consists of Thome Yorke, the vocalist, guitarist, and pianist; Colin Greenwood, the bassist; Ed O'Brien, the guitarist; Phil Selway, the drummer; and Jonny Greenwood, who is a multi-instrumentalist (Hoskyns, 2021). The music of Radiohead spans several genres, primarily alternative rock, electronica, and experimental music. Radiohead uses synths and traditional instruments to create unusual sounds and time signatures (Marzorati, 2000). Thom Yorke's particular range, poetry with double meanings, and passion for every aspect of his track combine to make well-made music that defines Radiohead's color (Wood, 2019).

In 1992, Radiohead released their debut single, 'Creep,' after contracting with EMI, a British international business. For its intricate production and themes of modern alienation, the band's third album, 'OK Computer,' released in 1997, catapulted them to international recognition. Green (2020) regarded it as one of the greatest ever made (Greene, 2020). 'Kid A' released in 2000 marked a significant stylistic shift, incorporating elements of electronic music, jazz, krautrock, and classical music. They recorded it in the same sessions as 'Amnesiac,' released in 2001. After finishing its six-album contract with the EMI Group in 2003, the band broke away from major label distribution and released its seventh album, 'In Rainbows,' with '15 Step' featured prominently. Within the first week of its release, an estimated 1.2 million fans downloaded the album for any desired price (NME, 2007).

Radiohead's discography is challenging to deconstruct because they are one of the most complex artists working today. Their album 'In Rainbows' takes the listener on a daring voyage that focuses primarily on the themes of transience. The song '15 Step,' written in the unique time signature of 5/4, is the album's beat-heavy opening. It has one of the unusual time signatures, but it is the most familiar of the odd ones (Betuw, 2016). Most popular songs are written in 4/4 or less frequently 3/4, and it would require 12 or 16 steps to stay in time when dancing. The title '15 Step' refers to the dance a person would do while staying in time to a song with a 5/4 time signature.

Radiohead's use of processed drums in '15 Step' is another interesting factor in the song. It is an effective and elegant way for them to draw attention to the underlying anomaly of this song's meter through timbre. Timbre is an element of music that most people have a much better understanding of and can express explicitly (Eamnarangkool, 2017).

2.2 Conjuring Imagery In Music

Listening to the radio can help listeners create images in their minds (Rodero, 2010). Because of its alleged power to inspire listeners to create mental images, radio has earned the moniker "theatre of the mind" in popular culture (Bolls, 2002). When used with audio, the term "mental imaging" refers to a sensory process that comes from a sound stimulus without the actual stimulus being present and contains the encoding, processing, and evocation of an experience in the listener's memory (Babins & Burns, 1998). As a result, to process any communication using the sense of hearing, the listener must employ a variety of sensory and perceptual abilities (Kraus & Banai, 2007).

The two most frequently cited theories in the literature on mental imagery are Paivio's (1986) dual coding theory, DCT, and Kieras's (1978) propositional-representations theory, PRT. These two theories have different ideas about the type of mental representation triggered by a stimulus and how it is processed. The messages picked up by the listener during auditory processing will be divided into two distinct mental systems, or codes, according to this theory: one is designed specifically for representing and processing language, which is the verbal code, and the other is designed specifically for processing non-linguistic objects and events, the non-verbal code. (Sadoski & Paivio, 2004).

A study by Taruffi and Kusner (2019) found that visual imagery is discussed in the context of the cognitive sciences. A conceptual organization of music-evoked visual imagery is proposed, specifically its relationship with spontaneous, intrusive, and goal-directed cognition. Besides that, visual imagery is one of several mechanisms by which music induces emotional responses in the listener. It has added a new perspective to the vast discourse on music and emotion to which psychologists, cognitive neuroscientists, and philosophers have recently made significant contributions, as well as historians, educators, and clinicians (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008).

As a result, the listener creates auditory representations for speech in the verbal code and surrounding sounds in the nonverbal code. The most relevant stimuli to these two systems are thought to activate them individually, making them autonomous systems. They should evoke more mental images and be better recalled since they have the advantage of being dual coded in the memory (Rodero, 2010). The structure of the melody of Radiohead's '15 Step' has a unique development whereby it enchants the listeners to conjure a visual imagery

2.3 Melodic Developments

One of the most closely analyzed aspects of songwriting is melody writing, particularly when it comes to how melody interacts with other song elements like harmony, rhythm, and shape (Tuzcu, 2020). Musical compositions can be collections of several melodies woven together with other components to make the piece more complex. Melodies are also unique, though some can sound similar (Cabral, 2022). The melodic analysis investigates a note's stylistic characteristics from a contrapuntal standpoint, whereas tonal and harmonic analyses investigate chord roles in specific musical pieces. Melodic motivic analysis has been used to investigate the composition process by studying a composer's sketches (Gingerich, 1986).

With the idea of a motive, a melodic development can be obtained. The basic musical shape is the motive. The minor sequence of notes serves as a distinguishing unit in the generation of melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic activity, or any combination of these, in any given work (Levy, 1969). A complete melodic motivic analysis consists of several interdependent stages: first, identifying the melodic motives within the musical work; second, describing how the motives are varied or developed throughout the work; and finally, determining the function of motivic development within the overall structure of the work (Gingerich, 1986). Through Radiohead's '15 Steps' composition,

plenty of melodic developments can be determined, from the melodic contour, rhythmic phrasing, unstable and stable tones, and so many more.

3.0 Methodology

To better understand this study, observations are made, such as analyzing the music score and the audio-visuals. Information about conjured imagery through melodic developments from Radiohead's composition '15 Step' was obtained from various sources, including journals, articles, and e-books. After that, music scores were analyzed to understand better the melodic developments conjuring in Radiohead's '15 Step.' The score analysis was limited to the specified sections. Additionally, there is an audio-visual observation of the '15 Step' to analyze the conjured imagery through melodic developments. This observation was made using audio-visual content obtained from YouTube channels.

4.0 Findings and Analysis

This study aims to investigate the melodic developments in '15 Steps' by Radiohead to conjure imagery. There are plenty of melodic developments used in this composition as an example to conjure imagery. It is to be informed that the focus of this research is to point out the melodic development techniques used and how it is innovatively applied in this music to conjure imagery. Apart from that, it could be considered through other aspects of music, such as the lyrics and chord progression. The findings will be presented through highlighted segments of the score analysis, which have been transcribed. Fig. 1 below shows a part of the transcribed score of the song, '15 Step' by Radiohead by the first author.

The image shows a transcribed musical score for the song '15 Step' by Radiohead. The score is written in G# Dorian mode and 5/4 time. It includes a chorus and two verses. The lyrics are: 'How come I end up where I start out... How come I end up where I want to go... Won't take my eyes off the ball a - gain... you real me out then you cut the string... Did you re-el me out and then you cut the string... I used to be al - ri - gh... 2. Used to be al - ri - gh... what hap-pened? Did the car get your wege... what hap-pened? It is - te - ta at cu - r - la - ta... Did you - ur string come untan... Fade for what-a - vor... by... me... a... comes... to... all... it's... off'. The score includes chord progressions and a tempo marking of 184 BPM.

Fig. 1: Transcribed Score of '15 Step' by Radiohead

'15 Step' by Radiohead uses a G# Dorian mode. A half step reduces the third note of the Dorian scale. The tempo for this composition is 184 beats per minute; depending on Radiohead's excitement, it might go faster when played live. The piece is in a 5/4 meter, an irregular time signature that is more complex than the standard 4/4 or 3/4 time signatures. The piece is divided into three sections which are Chorus, Verse 1, and Verse 2. The smallest musical unit with a distinct thematic or structural identity is known as a motive (Kratus, 1985). The passage from Radiohead's '15 Steps' is shown in the illustration. Concentrating on the illustration of the passage that contains the motives at the beginning of the composition.



Fig. 2: Repeated Motives of '15 Step' by Radiohead

In Fig. 2 above, we can see two motives in the first two bars, which are in bars 1 and 2. The motives are then developed using the technique of repetition. Motive A is repeated on bar 3 and bar 5, where the pitches of the melody and rhythm mirror each other. Motive B is also repeated on bars 4 and 6 with slight changes in pitch and rhythm to create variation.

The pattern of rises and falls in pitch, known as melodic contour, is an essential part of melodic structure and significantly influences how listeners perceive and remember music (Schmuckler, 2010). The melody in the first section of the composition is independent as chords do not accompany it. It shows that the melodic contour makes the melody feel less dull to the listeners. In Fig. 3 below, it can be determined that bar 5 and bar 6 have a descending contour while bar 7 and bar 8 use the arch.



Fig. 3: Melodic Contour of Phrase

Fig. 4 below shows the stable and unstable tones in the intro's melody. The unstable tones, meaning ones that have a distant relationship with the tonic, are highlighted. As mentioned, the intro's melody is an independent melody whereby it is sung without the accompaniment of chords. The usage of unstable tones creates dissonance, creating an exciting melody.



Fig. 4: Unstable Tones of Intro and Chorus

The phrasing of the melody from the intro is symmetrical in terms of the number of bars. In Fig. 5 below, it is shown that bar 1 and bar 2 are one phrase, bars 3 and 4 are another, and it reflects bar 5-6, bar 7-8, and bar 9-10. These phrases create a symmetrical phrasing as they all share the same number of bars which is 2, thus having the intro sound more balanced.



Fig. 5: Phrases of Intro

Moving on to the verses, verses 1 and 2 share the same melody. Therefore, it shares the same motives. In this illustration, we will focus on the first half of the verse. Fig. 6 below shows the motives found in verses: Motive A, bar 13-14, and Motive B, bar 15-16. The motive in verse is also developed by repetition, as shown in bars 16-18. It is a repetition of Motive A but with a slight pitch variation to create contrast.

The image shows a musical score for the first half of a verse. It consists of two systems of music. The first system covers bars 13-16, and the second system covers bars 17-18. Each system has a vocal line and a guitar accompaniment line. The vocal line has two parts: '1. Used to be al-ri-ght' and '2. Used to be al-ri-ght'. The guitar accompaniment includes chords such as G#m, C#, C#(9#b2), D#m, D#(9#b2), and C#(9#b2). Motive A is highlighted in red in bars 13-14, and Motive B is highlighted in blue in bars 15-16. A dashed red line indicates a continuation of Motive A in bars 16-18.

Fig. 6: Repeated Motives on Verse

The melodic contour in the first half of the verse is mainly stationary. As this section of the composition begins, the accompaniment of chords starts too. Hence, the melody is no longer independent. In Fig. 7 below, we can see that in bar 15 as well as bars 19-20 that melodic motion is stationary.

This image shows a musical score for the first half of a verse, focusing on the melodic contour. It consists of two systems of music. The first system covers bars 13-16, and the second system covers bars 17-18. Each system has a vocal line and a guitar accompaniment line. The vocal line has two parts: '1. Used to be al-ri-ght' and '2. Used to be al-ri-ght'. The guitar accompaniment includes chords such as G#m, C#, C#(9#b2), D#m, D#(9#b2), and C#(9#b2). The melodic contour is shown with a single line of music.

Fig. 7: Melodic Contour in First Half of Verse

There is lesser use of unstable tones in the first half of the verse, as shown in Fig. 8 below. The melody is built chiefly on stable tones, which makes it sound more consonant. It is also evident that it is rhythmically active in the melody.

This image shows a musical score for the first half of a verse, focusing on unstable tones. It consists of two systems of music. The first system covers bars 13-16, and the second system covers bars 17-18. Each system has a vocal line and a guitar accompaniment line. The vocal line has two parts: '1. Used to be al-ri-ght' and '2. Used to be al-ri-ght'. The guitar accompaniment includes chords such as G#m, C#, C#(9#b2), D#m, D#(9#b2), and C#(9#b2). Unstable tones are highlighted with red boxes in the vocal line.

Fig. 8: Unstable Tones In First Half

In Fig. 9, there are two phrases with different qualities. The phrase in bars 13-14 ends with a stable tone, while the phrase in bars 15-16 ends with an unstable tone. This makes the phrase from bars 13-14 a tonally closed phrase and from bars 15-16 a tonally open phrase.

This image shows a musical score for the first half of a verse, focusing on tonally open and closed phrases. It consists of two systems of music. The first system covers bars 13-16, and the second system covers bars 17-18. Each system has a vocal line and a guitar accompaniment line. The vocal line has two parts: '1. Used to be al-ri-ght' and '2. Used to be al-ri-ght'. The guitar accompaniment includes chords such as G#m, C#, C#(9#b2), D#m, D#(9#b2), and C#(9#b2). The phrases are highlighted with blue and red boxes.

Fig. 9: Tonally Open and Closed Phrases

In the second part of the verse, it is found that repetitive motives are used. The same melodic development technique is used, which is repetition. This can be seen in Fig. 10, where the original motive is in bars 22-25 and the repeated motive in bars 26-29.



Fig. 10: Motivic Development of Repetition

The unstable tones found in the melody of the second half of the verse are highlighted as shown in Fig. 11. From this finding, in this section, most of the notes used are built from unstable tones. This makes the melody sound dissonant.



Fig. 11: Unstable Tones In Second Half

Figure 12 shows that the melody has an unusual usage of stable tones where the number of unstable tones is higher. From Figure 13, the stable tones were highlighted.



Fig. 12: Stable Tones In Second Half

Fig. 16: Second Chord Progression

The composition's melody and lyrics play a significant role in conjuring imagery for the listeners. It can be observed from Fig. 17 whereby in bar 2, there is a leap between the last two notes, which are from D to G#, automatically making it disjunct. The combination of the melodic disjunct along with the lyrics gives the imagery of uncertainty which reflects on the choice of words used.

Fig. 17: First Imagery Conjured

Fig. 18 shows the melody of bars 7 and 8. The melodic motion of this phrase is an arch. It is evident that it ascends and descends. Combined with the lyrics, "you reel me out then you cut the string," imagery of winding out a string according to the motion can be obtained.

Fig. 18: Second Imagery Conjured

The phrase in bar 15 can be seen in Fig. 19. The lyrics used in this phrase are a question. We can observe from the illustration that the last note is an unstable note, which makes it a tonally open phrase. The imagery of doubt can be found as it is supported by the tonally open phrase with the lyrics.

Fig. 19: Third Imagery Conjured

From Fig. 20, we can see from bar 22 that the lyric says the word "One". Rhythmically, the melody is less active, and it is made up of 5 full beats. The lack of rhythm in this part alongside the lyric shows the imagery of singularity

Fig. 20: Fourth Imagery Conjured

The lyrics in bar 40 from Fig. 21 are "then a sheer drop." The last note from the phrase, G#, is stretched out with a step down to F# before resolving back to G#. With that, the imagery of exactly a sheer drop can be conjured.



Fig. 21: Fifth Imagery Conjured

5.0 Discussion

The finalization of the score analysis successfully conveyed Research Objectives 1 and 2 and determined the answers to both Research Questions. In the song "15 Step," Radiohead heavily relies on melodic developments to conjure imagery. We might also see how these methods show how valuable the piece is. These two research objectives' analyses have successfully demonstrated how this composition positively affects both the performer and the listener.

The performance interpretation observed from a Youtube video of Radiohead performing their composition '15 Step' from 'In Rainbows - From the Basement' was recorded at the Hospital Club in London in 2008. David Bernard served as the live recorded performance's director, and Nigel Godrich, Dilly Gent, James Chad, and John Woolcombe served as the show's producers. Jerry Chater edited the video production, which Brett Turnbull directed. Fred Jackson and Martin Dineley are credited for installing and setting up the sounds. Richard Woodcraft assisted Nigel Godrich in producing and mixing the entire audio library.

All five members of the band, Thom Yorke on lead vocals, Jonny Greenwood on electric guitar, Colin Greenwood on electric bass, Ed O'Brien on electric drum machines and sequencer, and Phil Selway on acoustic drums—were featured in this video of Radiohead performing "15 Step" live from the basement.

Through this performance, we can observe how Radiohead interprets the melody of the composition and the lyrics to conjure imagery. This can be seen through facial expressions and body movements. Thom Yorke delivers the melody expressively to achieve the conjured imagery to the listeners.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This paper has answered the research question of what the melodic developments are found in '15 Steps' by Radiohead and what the imagery conjured by melodic developments in the composition. Based on the data analysis and findings, '15 Step' employs melodic development techniques that can conjure imagery, creating a higher level of excitement and causing listeners to be more intrigued and interested. They created a mixture of various developed melodies to conjure imagery to the listeners. This study found that musical elements used throughout history can be renewed and transformed into a new sound while retaining their original characteristics. Radiohead, on the other hand, as an alternative and art-rock genre band, has its own unique and creative way of presenting its music to the world. It is free and uncommon, yet each person has their way of composing their piece. This influences most musicians and composers to stay true to themselves while striving to improve.

The authors advise composers who enjoy complex compositions to use various melodic developments in their compositions to conjure imagery. This would add to the excitement of their composition. When every note is stationary and static, it creates a dull and straight sound. The exciting use of melodic developments would also draw attention because it defies a listener's familiarity and expectations about melodic developments. With excellent use of melodic developments, imagery can be conjured to the listeners, thus, making the composition unique and amusing to listen to. In addition, further research can be carried out to obtain input from listeners to obtain the conjured imagery from the composition.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, Malaysia, for the support and ReNeU UiTM, for the publication incentive provided through Program MEE 2.0.

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