**Modal Fluidity in Yes’ “Gates of Delirium”**

The music of *Yes*, a progressive rock band from the 1970s, is considered a staple in the mental diet of the progressive rock connoisseur. Both musically and lyrically intriguing, *Yes* not only delves into deep issues such as spirituality and morality—often using archaic imagery and allusions to fictional epics—but also creates colossal tapestries of music through intertwining rhythms, melodies, and unexpected (yet pleasing) modulations. As with many *Yes* songs, the lyrics of the twenty-two minute long work “Gates of Delirium” contains allusions to spiritual warfare and the end of the world, and references a massive battle against demons and forces of evil (reflected strongly in the music of the work). This paper will explore passages of “Gates of Delirium,” and use several examples to examine how *Yes* uses closely related modalities and Neo-Riemannian techniques to smooth over transitions between sections and to reflect the tone of the lyrics.

*Yes* favors modes centered on the pitches D, E, G, and A in “Gates of Delirium”, and the relationship between these pitches can be seen both in the beginning of the piece as well as the end. These pitches are all a part of the “guitar pentatonic collection” which Brett Clement (author of the article “Scale systems and large-scale form in the music of Yes”) notes that *Yes* is particularly fond of using in their pieces.[[1]](#footnote-1) The introduction of the work centers on D Ionian, with heavy use of the second scale degree throughout the melody; in fact, Clement argues that the introduction employs E Dorian, resolving to D Ionian at 2:12 (the section I’ve labeled section B in Table 1 below). In section B, while we are still in D Ionian, the lyrics enter for the first time with the words “Stand and fight, we do consider, reminded of an inner pact between us, that’s seen as we go.” The first two stanzas contain similar content, implying that the character (or author) and his comrades have not yet entered the figurative battle, but are rather considering it and perhaps even debating it. Throughout section B, *Yes* makes heavy use of the G major chord, introducing the section with it and using instances of C major to imply G Ionian until we get our D major chord at 2:37 (on the word “go” of the first stanza). Section C (beginning at 3:00 and following the first two stanzas) is where we first get our A Aeolian modality, as well as where the lyrics begin to reflect conviction and action instead of deliberation with the words “Choose and renounce, throwing chains to the floor.” The lines following suggest an imminent and graphic struggle; with the words “Kill or be killing,” we are being told that it is not merely a matter of choosing and renouncing, but also a matter of sacrifice and turmoil to defend what is good against evil.

Using Neo-Riemannian theory, we find that the quickest way to reach A Aeolian from D Ionian is to perform a PRL transformation, which takes us from D major to D minor, to F major, to A minor. However, at this point in the song, the guitar and bass are playing single-note melodic lines in counterpoint, almost like a 5-second fugue. Thus, with only two notes being played at any given time, we do not get the full chords necessary to define triads; nevertheless, *Yes* implies certain chords used these melodic lines, as seen on the slide. The ascending pattern in the electric guitar contains a minor third that implies D minor, the result of a P transformation. Coupled with an A in the bass as a passing note, the C in the electric guitar and the F in the bass (which swap instruments in the following measures) imply the F major chord, the result of the R transformation. Finally, the L transformation is implied as we resolve to A minor on the word “Choose.” In addition to using the PRL transformation, *Yes* takes it one step further; rather than giving us an A minor chord right after the F major section, *Yes* implies the V7 chord of A minor (E major) between the two instruments, and uses the F in the bass as the sol fege syllable “Le” in order to get to “Sol,” or E. Given the change in mode at this point in relation to the lyrical content, we may conclude that A Aeolian is a signifier of action while D Ionian is a signifier of mental debate and irresolution. This idea of modal appropriation returns in several sections throughout the piece, and is foreshadowed in Section A even before the lyrics enter.

In Section A, a minute-and-a-half into the piece, we hear an almost peaceful vocal melody in D Ionian, consisting only of the notes D and E and sung on the syllable “La.” This melody, coupled with a rhythmic undercurrent that hints at future musical chaos, provides a thoughtful lull in the original 4/4 meter of the opening, and provides a bit of foreshadowing. This “La La” melody appears once more within “Gates of Delirium,” right before a significant transition. In contrast to the lyrical content before and after this melody’s return, the lyrics (listed in Figure 2) call the listener to step back from the mayhem of the battle and question if it is worth the fight in the first place. This momentary lull is reminiscent of the first instance the melody presents itself in Section A, and draws the listener in with a contrastingly soft dynamic and rich vocal texture. However, in the second stanza, we hear the rhythmic undercurrent present in the original “La la” section; this addition, coupled with the dark lyrics of the second stanza, implies that this lull was only temporary; following the second stanza, we get the link to the C section and are subsequently launched into the final lyrical stanza before a colossal nine-minute instrumental barrage. (6:30)

The idea of D, A, and G being favored comes to light at the end of the work as well; in the “Soon” section of the piece (beginning at 16:08), we see the return of A Aeolian with a calm melody very unlike that of the C section (which is also in A Aeolian). Following two verses of lyrics on that same melody, we get an instrumental section that modulates by fourth from A Aeolian to D Aeolian to G Aeolian and restates the melody in those modes. As we can see on the slide, the original melody is fairly straightforward; in fact, the melody does not change between each key—the melody is merely transposed and not altered beyond that. However, there is the matter of achieving the modulation. Instead of resolving up by half-step for the final two notes of the melodic line, the melody leaps up a sixth to the tonic of the new key. We see this here in this example. Though unexpected, the leap of a consonant sixth as a way to reach the tonic of the new mode is a useful technique. This strengthens the thematic relationship between these tonalities that is evident throughout the piece.

Three quick examples of musical prowess and theoretical techniques by no means define this massive piece—they only exemplify the creativity and cleverness of the band members in terms of musical continuity and thought. Throughout the work, we see the constant return of the modal centers D, E, A, and G; we see Neo-Riemannian transformations being used to link themes and passages together; we see various examples of modal appropriation in relation to the lyrical content—D Ionian used for calm sections as one of those examples—and finally, we see the closely-related modal centers return at the end of the piece to tie everything together. All-in-all an intriguing piece, “Gates of Delirium” captures the essence of the band *Yes*, and stimulates not only the brain, but the soul as well.

Supplemental Materials

Bibliography

Clement, Brett. "Scale systems and large-scale form in the music of Yes." *Music Theory Online* 21, no. 1 (2015): 1-16.

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Figure 1: The “La la” Melody at 0:40

*A:*

*Listen, should we fight forever?*

*Knowing as we do know, fear destroys?*

*Listen, should we leave our children?*

*Listen, our lives stare in silence,*

*Help us now.*

*A’:*

*Listen, your friends have been broken,*

*They tell us of your poison, now we know,*

*Kill them, give them as they give us,*

*Slay them, burn their children’s laughter*

*On to Hell.*

Figure 2: Lyrics to the “La la” melody at 5:44-6:45

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| A: Intro  (0:00-2:12) | B:  Enter Lyrics  (2:12-3:00) | Link to C  (2:48-3:00) | C:  (3:00-3:20) | Link back to B  (3:20-3:41) | B:  (3:41-4:02) | Link to C  (4:02-4:09) | C:  (4:09-4:30) | Link to C  (4:30-5:44) | D:  (5:44-6:45) | Link to C  (6:45-7:30) | C:  (7:30-8:02) | E:  (8:02) |
| D Ionian or E Dorian | D Ionian | D Dorian—A Mixolydian | A Mixo. | D Ionian or E Dorian | D Ionian | D Dorian—A Mixolydian | A Mixolydian | Extended and modulated between A dorian and D | “La la” section from intro; with lyrics  (“Listen”) | Introduction  of Bb and Eb notes | D  Mixolydian | Melody 1  B C#E,  B C# E, B C# B A E,  B C# A B low E |
| “La la” portion to appear later (emphasizes E and D, Re-Do relationship)  Introduced at 0:40, Reintroduced at 1:11 | Vocals enter on ‘Sol’  (“Stand and fight…”) |  | Vocals enter on ‘Sol’ | D Ionian | Vocals enter on ‘Sol’  (“Wars that shout…”) |  | Vocals enter on ‘Sol’ |  |  |  |  | Melody  2  C# F# C# E,  C# F# C# E C# F# C# F# C# E |
|  |  |  | A minor to A minor 1st inv. | Sequential pattern |  |  | A minor to A minor 1st inv. |  |  |  |  | Melody 3  Db Bb:| |

Table 1.1: Diagram of the first 8 minutes of “Gates of Delirium”

1. Clement, Brett. "Scale systems and large-scale form in the music of Yes." *Music Theory Online* 21, no. 1 (2015): 1-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)