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Modes of Expression in the Songs of Aimee Mann

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Senior Honors Thesis

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Macalester College, Music Department

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Abstract

Singer-songwriter Aimee Mann has been creating music, both as a solo artist and as a former member of the band 'Til Tuesday, for the past twenty years. In general, musicological and cultural-critical reception of her work has proceeded along traditional lines of inquiry applied to countless female artists, viewing her work in terms of the representation of gender issues. This study, however, aims to treat Mann's music from a more broadly aesthetic perspective, examining such details as text painting, instrumentation, and harmonic language in an effort to identify the unique elements of her artistry.

Introduction

"It's time for the notion that women (and their viewpoints) are some "specialty item" to be blown right out of the water, or at least have it acknowledged that that is what people are saying when they refer to things like "the women's perspective" or whatever. […] It is highly irritating to be told your ideas and words and stories have no global value, no human application, just this interesting novelty slant, as if a woman's sense of loss or anger or happiness was qualitatively different from a man's. [...] How is my perspective any different from anybody else's, male or female? Sure, I've been slighted, ignored, made to feel trapped by stereotypes and expectations, but who hasn't? There must be, oh, a zillion men who, from time to time, have felt like that…What do I experience that is unique only to women? Is loss, is dashed hopes, is feeling like you want to make out with the whole world? Are crushes? Is love? Is fear of being close?"

--Aimee Mann, March 26, 1995, in an email to Jonathan Van Meter

Current musicological reception of popular music made by women tends to emphasize the unique female experience as a lens through which to view these artists' music. In the past thirty years, women musicians and producers have risen to prominent positions in the music industry (Mercer-Taylor, 1998); as this thesis is written, six of the top ten singles as reported by Billboard are sung by female artists, compared with a third as many in 1978. (Billboard, 2008) Such increase in participation has led to several debates: Are women underprivileged in the creation of popular music? Does the reception of female artists' differ from that of males? (Whiteley, 2000; Scott and Harrassowitz, 2004; Marcic, 2002; McClary, 1991; Bayton, 1999).

This dialogue may be both necessary and veritable, but it maintains a dichotomy between the understandings of music of men and women. Popular belief maintains that female musicians are disadvantaged in their musical upbringings; onstage, they represent merely sexual objects, and their music is seen to contain only themes that make sense to women. Men, on the other hand, are "allowed to assume a neutrality, to wield on behalf of everybody" (Simon Reynolds in Kruse, 2002). Many female artists have found themselves in the uncomfortable position of being viewed as "just" a female artist whose music has no artistic merit to men. This approach to music created by women not only neglects to take into account the vast amount of emotional material shared in music by both men and women but also degrades the music of contemporary women composers and songwriters to the substandard level of acceptance and respect received by women composers of the last four hundred years.

One female artist who is exasperated with this limited view of her music is singer-songwriter Aimee Mann. Mann was born in Midlothian, Virginia in 1960. In 1983, after studying bass and voice at the Berklee School of Music in Boston, she formed the new-wave band 'Til Tuesday, which had a major breakthrough hit with "Voices Carry" in 1985, off of their album by the same name. 'Til Tuesday released two more albums without much success, partially due to publicity issues with their label Epic Records, and three years later, in 1990, the band broke up. Mann then tried for the next three years to change labels for her first solo album, eventually settling on Imago Records to release *Whatever* in the summer of 1993. However, Imago was reluctant to publicize an album with no obvious singles, and throughout the next seven years, Mann fought with first Imago and then Geffen Records about her lack of top 40 material and their attempts to interfere with her musical style. Eventually, in 2000, she bought back her master tapes and ended her contract with Geffen, on which she had released one other

album, *I'm With Stupid*, (1995), and self-released her new album *Bachelor No. 2 or the last remains of the dodo* (2000). Shortly prior to this, Mann contributed eight songs to the soundtrack for the movie *Magnolia,* (1999) which provided her with both Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations for best song as well as an overwhelming surge in popularity. In 2001, Universal Music Group released an unauthorized collection of Mann's songs in an attempt to take advantage of her considerable recent commercial success, further exacerbating problems between Mann and her former record labels. One year later, Mann released *Lost in Space*, (2002) and three years later she released *The Forgotten Arm*, (2005) a concept album about two lovers who meet in Virginia and run away together. In 2006, Mann released a full-length album of Christmas songs, *One More Drifter in the Snow*, and in June 2008, Mann will release *@#%&*! Smilers*.

This thesis will closely examine five songs by Aimee Mann. Rather than analyzing the gendered dimensions of her music, this thesis examines how she, as a person, develops her lyrical ideas into intelligent and articulate music. Mann's music is predominantly influenced by pop artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as the Beatles or Elton John, who use chord progressions colored by unique and arresting chords. Introductory unpublished analysis of harmonic structure, instrumentation and melodic lines of over fifty songs from 1983 to the present concluded that Mann uses primarily a combination of evocative chord progressions, suggestive text painting and revealing instrumentation to further the listener's understanding of her carefully crafted lyrics. The five songs chosen in this thesis provide excellent examples of how these three forms of musical expression enhance comprehension of the emotive ideas present in the lyrics.

The five songs examined in this thesis exemplify Mann's use of these three different musical elements to connect with her audiences. First, "How Am I Different," off of Mann's third album *Bachelor No. 2* (2000) and written collaboratively with 'Til Tuesday band mate and fellow independent musician Jon Brion, uses a step-wise descending bass line, and other indicative musical elements, to signify Mann's frustration with a partner and their relationship. Second, "That's How I Knew This Story Would Break My Heart," from her most recent standard album, *The Forgotten Arm* (2005), employs an increase in instrumental texture, creating a disappointing emotional build throughout the piece. The third song, "Choice in the Matter," off of *I'm With Stupid* (1995), uses a leaping bass line, as well as more typical elements of a rock song to signify emotional freedom.

Fourth is the slow and pensive song "Invisible Ink," from *Lost in Space* (2002), which applies all three musical devices to create two extremely distinctive sections of the song. Finally, the song "The Fall of the World's Own Optimist," off of *Bachelor No. 2,* offers what may be the best example of the use of all three musical devices, both on a large scale (the song as a whole) as well as on a small scale in the B section of the chorus, to expand the listener's understanding of the lyrics. For reference, the full text of the lyrics as well as the chordal analyses of these five songs are available in Appendix I. Chords mentioned in the analyses will be discussed in terms of their_____, for ease of analysis. However, because the range of vocal lines determines their tone color and hence is an instrumentation choice, the vocal line will be discussed in the original key of the song.

I. How Am I Different (*Bachelor No. 2*, 2000)

Mann's third album, *Bachelor No. 2,* was produced at the apex of Mann's popularity. Just the year before, her songs had been featured in the popular independent film *Magnolia*, and several of the songs from the movie soundtrack are also included on this album. In fact, the director of the film, Paul Thomas Anderson, acknowledges that Mann's music was a major contributor to the making of the film; he heard her music first in the summer of 1997, and it provided the impetus to create the film. In the liner notes to the film soundtrack, Anderson writes that Mann was able to "[articulate] feelings and ideas better than I ever could and I wanted to rip her off." (Anderson in Joyce, 2000) Like most of Mann's music, this film deals with the everlasting questions of what Anderson refers to as "the biggest things we think about": tortured love, unfulfilling relationships, loneliness and the question of "how can anyone love me?" (Anderson in Joyce, 2000) And while the song "How Am I Different" is not featured in the film soundtrack, it is clear by the lyrical content of this song, as well as the entire album, that these themes were present in Mann's consciousness while she was creating the film soundtrack as well as this album.

This song can be interpreted either as a response to a failing personal relationship or as Mann's answer to her problems with the record industry (Rodman, 2000). Regardless of the interpretation one chooses, it is impossible to deny the prominent sense of frustration present in the lyrics. This emotion is represented in the music by a repeating descending bass line, a motif that Mann uses in almost a third of her songs. Through the modulation of this bass line and its associated chord progression as well as the use of an ascending melodic line that corresponds with Mann's increase in anger, Mann conveys not only a simple sense of frustration but also the

rage associated with a failing relationship. This analysis examines Mann's text painting and this descending bass line as a representation of her dissatisfaction, as well as the emotional ramifications of the modification of these two elements.

This frustration is firstly illustrated by the step-wise descending bass line that is present in the entire song, excepting the bridge. In the doctrine of affections, a baroque theory of aesthetics that associated musical elements with various emotions, a step-wise descending bass line carries connotations of grieving as well as impending sadness. In this song, Mann has decided before the actual song has begun to undergo a course of action (breaking off the relationship) that is emotionally taxing, and the song serves as an explanation for her decision. Hearing the same line, over and over, informs the listener that Mann's mind has been made up and that there are simply no other solutions, despite how painful and wearisome the current one may be. Through the modification of this line, during the chorus and bridge, Mann is able to convey even deeper emotions than this simple sense of frustration that things have ended in this manner.

Mann's treatment of the melodic line during the first verse illustrates the dissatisfaction present in the lyrics. The first verse is made up of two identical phrases, both of which are accompanied by the same G (capo 3), D/f#, em, C chord progression and descending bass line. The melody starts out high in Mann's register, on an F (scale degree 5) that quickly ascends to a G (a dissonant sixth above the chord tonic) on the word "can't." The same action occurs again in the next line, once again on the word "can't." This repetition of an ascending non-chord tone on the single word that defines the song (her inability to make things right and to go back to how they used to be) connotes that Mann is striving, but is unable to change the relationship. In the next line, Mann continues this same emotion by quickly descending to over an octave below

where the line began, over the words "you're everything you try to make me believe." This downward motion implies, in the same manner as the descending bass line, that her decision will always be the same despite the dissatisfactions associated with it.

Through the manipulation of this repeated chord progression as well as an increase in orchestral texture, Mann creates a chorus that is bursting with emotional energy. The first phrase repeats the same chord progression as has been used in the verse, a repetition that creates a sedated feeling, as though Mann is defeated and resigned. However, she has not acquiesced, and the next line is much more full of range and anger, demonstrated by a modulation up a minor third, to Bb major. This contortion to such a distant key signals a new rise of emotions, which is complemented by further manipulation of the standard chord progression.

The second phrase begins in the same manner as the default chord progression, with a descending step motion in the bass accompanied by the iii chord, but quickly changes to match the increase in passion. In this phrase, instead of going to vi directly after iii, as the standard progression does, Mann goes to ii after the iii. She follows this with an exotic Ab major chord, which has no relation to either Bb major, which she has temporarily tonicized, or G major, to which she will return. These atypical chords complement the surge in new emotions, giving Mann tonal space to express heightened feelings. Her increase in emotional ferocity is supplemented by an increase in instrumental rhythmic activity: the addition of three-part harmony and louder guitar to the ensemble in the second line. Furthermore, Mann's tone in this second phrase, partly because of the raise of the minor third, becomes much more intense and accusatory. These three elements combine to create within the second phrase a rich outpouring

of anger; it is as though Mann cannot keep these accusations and emotions tied up in a structured bass line any longer, and she simply has to break free.

In the final phrase of the chorus, it becomes evident that Mann is not able to disregard her recent rise in emotions. Although it begins as the first phrase, it is instantly evident from the melody and chord progressions that that Mann is still angry and perturbed. The melodic line rises to accompany these heightened emotions, and Mann repeats the word "how" in a high register to emphasize the nature of her question. Later in the phrase, the chord structure also changes to accommodate her outburst of emotions. After the original progression, Mann tacks on a quick Eb major to D major addendum, accompanied by the word "different," that allows her to cool down from this outburst, and get back on course for the next verse. However, because Eb is not in the key of G and is mildly shocking, this afterthought can also be seen more as a taunt, or a remembering of what has happened before, instead of a moment for regaining composure.

The other section of the song that departs from the standard chord progression is the bridge. Through both its lyrical content as well as its harmonic language, this section embodies the extent of Mann's frustrations. It begins on Bb, the same chord as the second line of the chorus, but instead of descending by a half step, as has occurred in every other phrase, Mann ascends a major third to d minor, creating an entirely new chord progression. Employing new chords allows Mann harmonic space to intensify her emotions, which is further reinforced by the vocal line's ascent to the highest note in this song. She continues this passion harmonically through the use of a chord progression that is not all in one key. For example, the bridge uses the chords Bb major, C major, d minor and e minor, chords that do not share the same mode, due to the presence of an A, Bb, B-natural and a C. Her use of chromatic chords creates discord that adds to the anger present in the accusation "When you fuck it up later, do I get my money back?"

Additionally, the guitar aids in conveying Mann's frustration and anger. In this section, the guitar acts as a complementary second voice that supplements Mann's vocal lines. After she says "Just one question before I pack," the guitar fills in the space in between phrases with an interrelating line made up of triplets, which are rare in Mann's music. While triplets usually connote a sense of fluidity and balance, these triplets mock this sense of calm due to their heavily distorted tone.

After the efflux of emotions in the bridge, the rest of the song is modified to accommodate the evident passion. In the next chorus, the guitar rises from mid-range to a high tessitura and carries Mann's feelings of frustrations through the parts where she does not sing. The guitar helps to lead the song into the final bridge section, the chords of which are repeated for the rest of the song. Mann's decision to end the song with the bridge material is significant in the interpretation of the song. Through this choice, the listener is aware that Mann has not, and will not, calm down-- she is still in the aggravated high that has been achieved in the bridge and cannot go back to the simple dissatisfaction apparent in the verses. She has, in the words of Mike Joyce, the former drummer for The Smiths, "dismissed outright the notion of happy endings." (Joyce, 2000)

II. That's How I Knew This Story Would Break My Heart (*The Forgotten Arm,* 2005)

For her most recent album, *The Forgotten Arm* (2005), Mann composed a song cycle based around the story of two lovers, John and Caroline, who fall in love and go on a road trip across America together. From there, the story gets more interesting. "The guy's a Vietnam vet and a boxer, but he's also a drug addict, and she's trying to get away from the dead end world where she lives in the South. They run off together and wind up in casino town, like Reno or Vegas, and their relationship falls apart." (Mann, 2008) This album continues a theme that is present in much of Mann's music: drug addiction. While in this album it is meant in most ways literally—the album is set in the 70s, in the whirlwind of country fairs and free love—in other albums it can be seen more as an allusion to the feeling of being dependent on another person, such as in her song "High on Sunday 51" (2002) where she pleads her partner to "let [her] be your heroin." And, in fact, Mann acknowledges her fixation with addiction metaphors, saying that this metaphor is a "helpful stand in" for describing an abstract and subtle state of mind. (Mann, 2008)

The song "That's How I Knew This Story Would Break My Heart" (2005) describes the looming feeling of failure in a relationship, a close parallel to the feeling a person experiences when addicted to a drug of which they will, eventually, have to get off, for the good of their personal health. While there is no literal drug imagery in the lyrics of this song, these ideas of dependence are visible in both the lyrics as well as the musical structure of the piece. There are only closeted addiction metaphors in the lyrics, because the song is not about the actual

dependence, it is about knowing that the addiction has to end. Mann describes drawing a picture of her partner and realizing that he is shameful, as well as him drawing a picture of a bird, ready to take flight, but the bird is too fearful to go out of its cage. These lyrics indicate that the man, much like a drug, is offering a disgraceful and unadvisable way to live her life. Later on in the song, she realizes that it is time to go, saying she has to leave now instead of fighting, since he is not in the mood "for the gloves and the canvas floor," a line that refers to his boxing career.

The structure of this song seduces the listener into a sedated state, much like that of a drug-induced high; one knows what to expect--absolute vanquishment--but has no way to avoid what is about to occur. While this song is harmonically monotonous, using only diatonic chords in common progressions, the interest in this song comes from the accumulation of instruments that tricks the listener into thinking that it will end in a remarkable exaltation. Instead, just as the climax is reached, the song dissolves into oblivion, and ends, reassuringly but insipidly on the tonic. Through an instrumental build that ends in ruination, Mann creates a song that allows the listener to experience the feelings associated with an addiction, whether it be to a person or to a drug.

The song begins, in the first half of the first verse, with just piano and voice. In the second half, a cello is added, reinforcing the bass line of the chord progressions, which leads into a full string section entering at the chorus. Before the chorus begins, a single male voice enters on the line "That the cage couldn't tame" in harmony a third lower. This voice drops out for the first half of the chorus, but comes back again in the second half, and continues for the rest of the song, singing the last line of both halves of the verse as well as the entirety of the final two choruses. In the second half of the second verse, from "and though the exit is crude," the cello returns and an electric guitar enters with faster melodic interest, which forces and propels us into

the second chorus, where drums finally enter. These drums, through their heavy emphasis on the ends of the phrases into the beginning of the next phrase, along with the ever escalating guitar solos that begin as simply filler at the end of the phrase but rise to prominent status as the song drives us along, continue the momentum until the very end of the song, not allowing the listener a chance to second-guess the addictive experience of the song. Through this build in instrumentation as well as rhythmic intensity, the listener is forced to go through an inexorable experience that, like an addiction, bars the person involved from stopping to assess the situation.

Furthermore, the song ends in a manner much like that of addiction—a complete unfulfillment of anything that might have been promised from the experience. This song builds and builds for almost four minutes, and then in the final twenty seconds of the song, allows space for all of the energy that has been accumulating to finally rise to fruition in the form of an electric guitar solo. However, this guitar solo only lasts for about five seconds, causing what could have been absolute fulfillment of this addiction to fizzle out and not gratify the listener's expectations. There is no climactic resolution of all the momentum that has been building throughout the song. The song, like a drug, takes the listener on an emotive experience but does not provide, also like a drug, any sense of fulfillment in the end.

III. Choice in the Matter (*I'm With Stupid*, 1995)

The song "Choice in the Matter," off of Mann's second album *I'm With Stupid* (1995), is about the process of ending a relationship that has been full of suspicions and misgivings. Mann's music has often been accused of being depressing and despondent; she mostly sings about the discouraging theme of relationships that ultimately end in separation. However, this song in particular is not melancholy. As Mann puts it,

> The first step to solving any problem is when you define it, and writing the song to me is like defining the problem. To the person in it, none of these songs are hopeless. Take 'Choice in the Matter' -- someone realizing almost immediately that the person they're contemplating becoming involved with is not to be trusted. You say to yourself, 'There is no choice, I can't get involved.'' Problem solved. There is no possibility that you'll be involved in a horrible nightmare relationship. (Mann, 1996)

Mann transforms what should be, based on the depressing lyrics, a dispirited song about how she will never be able to move on into an upbeat song indicating that she will get past this relationship. She does this primarily by not using a bass line that indicates incipient unhappiness as she did in "How Am I Different," but instead uses a bass line that leaps around signifying her freedom of emotions. Furthermore, she sets the lyrics to an upbeat instrumentation that includes a prominent lead guitar and uses an ironic quotation of a happy folk melody to further this lack of emotional restrictions.

Most of Mann's songs rely heavily on the vi or the iii chord, chords that create tonal instability since they have two notes in common with the tonic chord and do no have any leading tones. This song is no exception; all but one line of the song is made up of the chord progression I-iii-vi, first in B major in the verse and then in E major in the chorus. However, this chord progression, while being predictable in the same manner as the descending bass line in "How Am I Different," does not have a depressing bass line; the bass jumps around to the roots of the

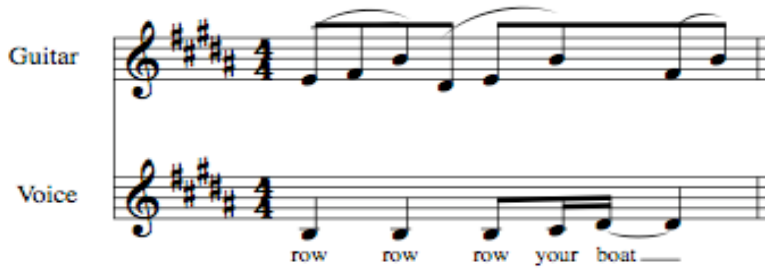
various chords, indicating that Mann is not stuck in an increasingly dismal world. Instead, she has the freedom to move, allowing her consciousness to be liberated. In the chorus of this song, the same chord progression is continued but is taken up a fourth to E major. This tonicization is approached in the same manner as each phrase in the verse is approached: by a descending guitar riff in thirds. By using this common melodic line, Mann deceives the listener into believing that they are simply hearing another phrase of the verse, a ruse that makes the key change into the chorus sudden and unexpected. An unexpected harmonic jump such as this indicates that Mann's emotions are similarly flitting and are able to progress past depression.

While the harmonic rhythm of the song is slow, both the rhythm guitar and the drums drive the song forward, not allowing it to become mournful or hopeless. In the verses, the rhythm guitar plays syncopations in the second half of each bar, starting a chain of rhythmic momentum that is continued by the guitar line played between each phrase. The guitar melody consists of an entire measure of thirds descending by half steps grounded by a V pedal in the bass, and has a clear target of the resolution to the I chord that is expected on the first beat of the next bar. In the chorus, because of the modulation, this is not the harmonic space anticipated from the perpetually forward-leading line; this unmet expectation makes the harmonic leap prominent, displaying even more arrestingly the lack of descending despair and dysphoria in this song. Furthermore, the inclusion of a typical rock guitar helps to make the song less mournful than the lyrics might indicate. The lead guitar is heavily distorted and plays much higher, especially during the two solo sections, than either Mann sings or the rhythm guitar plays. The use of this guitar, both through its tone color and its range, evokes the standard male-coded stoic emotion that is present in typical rock songs, an emotion that is the antithesis of pathetic mourning. By using this evocative instrument, Mann signals that she is not depressed and desolate. Finally, her

use of the tambourine, an instrument rarely used in her songs, also increases the energy and explicitly shows the lack of hopelessness present in this song.

Probably the most interesting aspect of this song is the placement of the popular children's round "Row Row Row Your Boat," slightly modified, in the middle of the song, in between the bridge section and the final chorus. While Mann often utilizes spoken quotations in the beginnings of her songs, such as in three of the songs from this album, she rarely uses musical allusions such as the one in this song. The bridge sets up this quotation by introducing the image of a boat sinking in choppy water (the relationship) and says how lucky she is that she knows how to row her way out of this sticky situation. She then sings the first line of "Row Row Row Your Boat."

However, a number of things have changed from the original folk melody. First, the rhythm has been altered; the original song is written in a compound meter, and she sings it here accompanied by a very strong duple meter. However, in order to get a triplet feel, the guitar plays a hemiola under her singing, playing two three-eighth-note phrases followed by a two-eighth-note phrase. (See below)



The other modification is that the chord changes under this simple tune, which is usually accompanied by only tonic chords, are the same ones used in the chorus (and the first part of the bridge.) So instead of this quotation evoking peaceful happy waters, as it might were it used in

its original form, it has a much edgier feel to it, due to both the minor chords accompanying it and the alternative rhythm.

The next line adds to this sense of distortion. Instead of saying the original song lyrics "Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily," Mann sings: "I hope you drown and never come back." At this point, the rage that is implicit throughout the entire song spumes to the surface. However, because it is almost ironically set to a children's tune that signifies innocence and happiness, it is not as enraged and fervent as these lyrics might have been in another context. Playing with the melody of the children's song allows Mann to express anger without seeming zealous and impassioned. Through the contorted use of this children's song, as well as by using a driving rhythm section, typical rock instrumentation and a leaping chord progression, Mann signifies that she is quite rational and realistic about what has occurred in her relationship, and that she is not going to grieve overabundantly about it.

IV. Invisible Ink (*Lost in Space*, 2002)

Mann's song "Invisible Ink," off of the album *Lost in Space* (2002), begins by her declaring the failure of her relationship due to inadequate communication. During the first verse, she is both depressed at the results of her relationship as well as hopeful that things will get better, indicating that she has mixed emotions about this problem. The song continues in this muddled vein, as she exclaims that she is unable to make a difference in her partner's life, until the chorus, in which she angrily realizes that these problems are common to many people and that most people don't want a detailed list of someone else's issues. After the chorus, she switches back into the more sedated verse section, and then she ends the piece on another angry chorus. In essence, the piece's lyrical content switches between the more gentle first section, which is about the confusion of how best to communicate with a loved one, and the second part, which is an impassioned section about whether anyone wants to listen to songs about other people's problems. This lyrical shift from one emotional extreme to the other is reinforced by chord progressions that match the lyrical content as well as text painting that brings color and further understanding to the poetry of the lyrics.

This song begins where hardly any other tonal piece in a major key begins—on the III chord. While it is used in a standard V/vi to vi progression, this chord uses the sharp fifth scale degree, which is entirely outside of the key structure of G major (with the guitar detuned 1/2 step). Furthermore, because the song begins with a chord progression that tonicizes vi, it creates an instantaneous question of what mode the song is in. Throughout the rest of the verse, the major mode is established as the primary tonality of this song. Each time the V/vi chord is played throughout the song, however, it causes a moment of tonal ambiguity. This modal

instability displays to the listener that Mann herself is not sure how she feels about her relationship, because she cannot chose what her primary mode of understanding should be.

To add to this sense of bewilderment, the text painting of the lyrics in the verse constantly changes between hope and resignation. Mann begins this verse in the middle part of her range, on an F# (actual recorded pitch) and quickly rises to an G on the word "time." This rise in melodic line seems almost hopeful, especially when it is accompanied by the resolution of the exotic V/vi chord to its tonic vi (e minor). However, after this hopeful rise, the words "swim or sink" are accompanied by a complete sinking of melody, to almost an octave below where melody began. This falling of melody shows that Mann, and the relationship, are quite literally unable to stay afloat due to the lack of communication. In the next phrase, the line falls again when the speaker has "jumped in the drink," expressing dismay at what this problem has caused her to do. In the final line of this stanza, the mood changes from being downtrodden to encouraging, due to the occurrence of the suspended major V chord at the end of the phrase. The inclusion of the fourth scale degree in this chord gives it a happy and hopeful quality which, accompanied by the lyrics, indicates that the speaker hopes that she and her partner will be able to make themselves clear. However, with the reoccurrence of the V/vi chord in the beginning of the next line, this hope is dashed because the chord indicates that the same things will occur in the next verse; so while there is hope at the end, the contemplation of her problems never leads to a real solution.

After this verse, the song turns to the bridge, which continues the emotional battle between hope and despair. The first phrase stays mostly in Mann's lower register, and ends in an inactive alternation between an a minor chord (ii) and a D major (V) chord. The next phrase follows the same chord progression and melody for the first half, but then rises higher

melodically and ends the phrase with a standard V-IV-I resolution. The melody of the second phrase demonstrates the inner complexity of the speaker's emotions. She starts out low in range and dejected, but quickly rises in anger as she expresses her frustration at her inability to ameliorate the situation. She then speaks of hoping to make her partner understand her better; the word "hope" is accompanied by a V chord which displays this wish that things will be resolved. However, they will not be solved immediately, as it moves onto the IV chord which finally resolves to I. This resolution is accompanied by a falling melodic line, which illustrates that this is not a contented resolution—instead it is one of conciliation. And while this piece is almost singularly in a major mode, this mode seems not to be one of happiness or hope but more about a resigned lack of communications. So by ending the bridge in this major key, it does not imply that anything has been worked out or solved, but instead that the same old problems will continue.

The contrasting section of this piece, both lyrically as well as musically, is the rollicking chorus that announces the worthless nature of even singing about such a subject. This section grows from acoustic guitar and strings to electric guitar, bass, drums and quick moving strings, and the voice moves into a higher register, announcing that Mann is tired of singing passive songs. In response to Mann's increasing frustration, the first phrase climbs melodically, but is countered by the strings' descending sigh at the end of the singer's phrase. So while she, represented by the vocal line, wants to continue talking about her relationship issues, no one wants to hear it, and will, as the strings do, denounce her for it. This battle of wills continues for the next phrase, but is resolved in the third line, as the song reaches a climax of both chord structure and melodic phrase. The first two phrases contain the same chord structure that is

present in the end of the first phrase of the bridge, a stagnant alternation between a minor and D major. However this last phrase of the chorus rises to an apex, hitting a C major chord that is accompanied by a Bb in the voice, which resolves down a fourth to an G major chord and finally down another fourth to a D major chord, where it rests until the bridge structure is repeated again. This final line of the chorus is accompanied by the lyrics "we've all heard it all before" and, in the second time through, "in details of love I can't sell anymore." As the speaker, in these final lines, comes to terms with the truth of what the violins have been expressing, the musical language quickly becomes mobile and rises to a climax. The chord progression of descending fourths, because it forms a series of tonal resolutions, indicates finality and that Mann has reached a conclusion, both lyrically and musically.

Mann further distinguishes these two sections of the song—the strident chorus and the melodic verses—by their phrase length. In the verse and bridge of the song, the phrases alternate between being eleven and thirteen bars long. This alternation is unusual in two ways: the phrase lengths are uneven, and they contain an odd number of phrases. Most typical phrases, in contrast, are some multiple of four, or even two, bars long. In the chorus, the phrases even out and become a rounded twelve each. The even number of phrases shows the resolution of Mann's emotional instability. Whereas before, she was unable to express herself through common practice phrase lengths, now she has resolved her dilemma. She has transformed instability into a feeling of unwavering anger. Through use of even phrase lengths, Mann has resolved, albeit through anger, her doubts about the relationship.

The song ends with the second, angrier, section, with a modified chorus that contains the identical instrumentation and chord progressions, but with no lyrics above it, only Mann singing "ooh." This lack of words indicates that the decision reached in the chorus, that no one wants to

hear about her problems of love, is correct. With this conclusion, it only seems logical that she will have no more words to say, only frustrations.

V. The Fall of the World's Own Optimist (*Bachelor No. 2*, 2000)

The final song to be discussed is "The Fall of the World's Own Optimist," off of Mann's third solo album, *Bachelor No. 2* (2000). This song provided the impetus for this thesis; the spontaneous discovery of how its use of melodic, chordal and instrumental elements accentuates the two major important phrases of the song instigated the more intensive investigation of how Mann attaches musical importance to her lyrics throughout all of her music. This song uses practically all of the elements talked about in the other songs, except for the minor absence of a popular children's tune as was present in "Choice in the Matter." In that sense, it will serve both as a case study as well as more of a summary of what has been discovered in the previous analyses.

"The Fall of the World's Own Optimist" was co-written with singer/songwriter Elvis Costello, in an evenly balanced creative process. In an interview in *The Performing Songwriter*, Mann says that, while she came up with the original framework for the song, she was lacking words for the verses. Costello "came along and wrote this whole B-section to the chorus, which was really great, it takes the song in this whole other direction. And then he added in the verse lyrics, which I then had to tailor to get back to the original topic." (Mann, 1999) This song describes the process of losing one's optimistic innocence through a difficult personal relationship. The two most important lyrics in this song, "Hey kids—look at this/It's the fall of the world's own optimist" and "I know I had it coming" are both in the chorus, with the first of these lyrics repeated at the beginning and end of the chorus. A dramatic buildup that finds

conclusion in both of these lines is accomplished musically first by creating a series of chord progressions that finally resolves at these points; second, by composing instrumentation that builds, grows, and blossoms at these points; and third, by making a melodic line that builds suspense before these points and allows release after them.

This song contains many more dominant seventh chords than is common in the rest of Mann's music. Most of Mann's music relies on using chords closer to the tonic (such as the subdominant, mediant and submediant), with a sprinkling of dominant chords, usually without the seventh present, to create harmonic interest. However, in this song, she uses a series of dominant sevenths, creating momentum that finds release at the two important phrases. The song, in the key of D (employing scordatura of 1/2 step), begins, like many of Mann's songs (including "How Am I Different"), with a descending bass line. Through its walk-down, the bass line creates a dominant seventh out of the tonic chord. This seventh is improperly resolved as the bass line continues to descend to the vi chord, and even further, creating a half-diminished ii chord in second inversion. The next phrase uses a V/vi to get to the vi and then rocks back and forth between this vi chord and a V (V/I) chord, creating a deceptive cadence as well as leaving the V unresolved.

In the last moment of the verse, Mann uses V^7/V to get, just in time for the imperative words "Hey kids…" at the very beginning of the chorus, back to I. While Mann uses many dominant chords in this verse, the only one with a seventh, besides the first which can be seen as a passing tone, is this distant V^7/V chord. While all dominant chords have harmonic proclivities, the addition of the seventh in this final chord tugs the listener toward the relative tonic, which would be V. However, instead of going there, Mann skips over this chord and goes straight to the tonic. This harmonic excitement is perfectly timed to fit with the most important words in

the song, the description of losing her optimism. This same chord progression is repeated at the end of the first line of the chorus; however, it loses its potency the second time around and the listener almost expects it to go straight to the tonic.

Mann uses this chord progression, transposed into the subdominant, one additional time in the chorus, directly before the words "I know I had it coming." This time, the chord progression signals once again an important idea not only because it has been transposed into a different key, but also, and more importantly, because the harmonies before it create confusion and this memorable chord progression is a signal that the listener can recognize. The harmonies leading up to this V^7/V (in IV) are a sequence of dominants resolving to their respective tonics, a progression that has no defined end. Thus when the listener hears a progression that is different and has previously signified important moments, he or she is able to recognize that the sequence is ending and that significant lyrics are forthcoming. Finally, it is important to note that, up to this point, the only dominant chords that have been correctly resolved are those leading to the relative minor, and there have been no dominant seventh chords resolved properly. So in order to create a sense of stability and closure in the final moments of the chorus, Mann, right before her repeat of "Hey kids…," properly resolves a dominant seventh chord to the tonic. This allows one final emphasis of these lyrics, because at last the listener's tonal expectations have been met.

The orchestration in this piece also contributes to heightening these important places. The song begins with bass, drums and an organ; an acoustic guitar is not added until the middle of the second phrase, and the electric guitar does not come in until the very end of the verse. When it does come in, it climbs an arpeggio that comes to a conclusion on the first word of the phrase "Hey kids…" From here, vocal harmonies are added and the guitar changes to be much more prominent, playing sustained chords on beats two and four. This increase in texture and

excitement places special emphasis on this phrase. After this, the accompaniment backs off to minimal guitar, and the rhythm changes from accenting beats two and four to accenting lightly every eighth note, during the B section of the chorus. But when Mann decides emphasize an important moment, at "I Know I Had it Coming," the rhythm changes back to accenting beats two and four and the guitar has a long, extended line over the vocals, which have also been augmented with harmonies. The texture stays the same through the repeat of "Hey Kids..," after which it backs off to signify that what was said previously was the significant message. By creating fuller textures where Mann wants to emphasize the lyrics, she allows the listener to distinguish what the principal themes are.

Mann also emphasizes the important lyrics by creating a melodic line that stresses these points. The song begins in the bottom of Mann's range, on a G# below middle C, and then rises to flesh out the middle part of her range. The second phrase, in response to the words "I guess I thought..." rises higher, as if to show Mann's frustration at being led astray by her emotions. However, the melodies of these two lines do not indicate that they contain crucial information, as they do not place special emphasis on any of the words nor show any proclivity to foreshadow the next phrase, as is the case with the final phrase of the verse. Mann ends this phrase by alternating between D# and C#, reinforcing the seventh of the V^7/V chord. This causes the listener to feel a genuine pull towards the relative tonic of this V^7 chord, which heightens the surprise when she does not arrive at that chord, but instead at the tonic of the piece. The alternation between these two notes also acts as a signal that something consequential, more specifically the first line of the chorus, is approaching.

The chorus begins with a melody whose high register emphasizes the first line of the chorus. From there, it descends on and after the word "fall." The next two lines serve as a build-

up to the line of greatest importance, “And I know I had it coming.” After the melodic descent on the word “fall,” the melody stays in the middle register until the line “Cause these eggshells.” On this line, the melody starts on an F below middle C and then climbs to an A above middle C, spanning more than an octave in six words. The next line rises from middle C to a full octave above that, and the next line, the one with the greatest importance (“And I know I had it coming”), goes up to a C#, hitting it twice at the beginning of the phrase and then descending. In this melodic climb towards the important phrase, Mann allows the audience to anticipate that something significant is approaching. Once this point is reached, on “Hey kids”, it can be distinguished due to the stability and even higher pitch of the melodic line.

While these musical devices throughout the song help differentiate which lyrics are important, there is one other extraordinary moment that has not been discussed because it is not one of the high points of the song: the B section of the chorus, “Cause these eggshells.” The song follows standard chords, until the word “politely,” where Mann uses what could be seen as either a bVII or the IV/IV, both of which make little sense in this context. In order to get to the next chord, which is a V/vi, Mann must go a complete tritone away. This change in harmonic language, as in all of Mann’s carefully crafted music, is also accompanied by a change in orchestration as well as melodic line. This next phrase speaks of walking on eggshells, and the instrumentation clearly matches that idea; it changes from long vocal harmonic lines with guitar and drums clearly accenting beats two and four to cautious vocals with drum accentuated eighth notes and a celesta carefully walking on top. To add to this, Mann changes her vocal line—before this change in texture, Mann had been singing up and down within a five-note range. In the contrasting section, Mann sings only ascending arpeggios which measure over an

octave. This tiny section inside the larger whole of the piece illustrates what care Mann takes in making her music a complete and unified whole. No element of her musical language is out of place or is creating a sound that is not contributing to the essence of the lyrics. This singular moment contains and utilizes every element of Mann's musical language: the intriguing and evocative chord progressions, the sumptuous text painting and the exquisite choice of instrumentation, and can be seen as a consummate example of Mann's musical language.

Conclusion

A long–held assumption about most popular music is that it is harmonically monotonous, with a few formulaic progressions repeated in most songs (Adorno, 1941 in Moore, 1992). Thus to an intelligent listener, "popular music should be uninteresting: it is only its psycho-economic dimension which makes it worthy of study." (Moore, 1992) Yet the music of Aimee Mann contradicts this assertion. Each of the five songs examined in this thesis contained inventive and thoughtful chord progressions, from the step-wise descending bass line inspired progression in "How Am I Different" (2000) to the exotic use of the V/vi chord in "Invisible Ink." (2002) Furthermore, the initial study of fifty of her songs showed a vast repertoire of harmonic techniques. While Mann has a typical harmonic style that is present in a majority of her works that includes step-wise descending bass lines and the heavy use of tonic-replacement chords such as the iii and vi, she goes beyond traditional characterizations of pop music. Beyond these standard methods, her musical language extends to bass lines unaccompanied by chords (in the verse of "Voices Carry" (1985)) to employing different tonalities for the verse and chorus sections (seen here in "Choice in the Matter," (1993)) and used extensively in the album *Lost in Space* (2002)). And this expansive range of harmonic techniques is exactly what was found in Allan Moore's 1992 analysis of over 200 pop, soul and rock songs. Moore concluded that there is a range of harmonic patterns in popular music "at least as wide as that found in the foregrounds of common-practice tonality, although there they are not subject to the same tendency to continual repetition." (Moore, 1992)

Furthermore, if we are to examine Mann's music as a continuation of the harmonic style of her musical influences, chiefly Elton John, the Beatles and the Byrds, (Mann, 2008, Pareles,

1996 and Morse, 1993) it is evident that she is continuing in a line of artists whose harmonic practices are extremely varied and, at times, extend outside of the range of common-practice tonality. The Beatles are a prime example of this; many of their later works are:

> Simply not tonal, at least not in the common-practice sense. Consecutive octaves and fifths are not only allowed, but encouraged, large melodic leaps are not necessarily followed but stepwise motion within the ambit of the leap; dissonances are not necessarily prepared or resolved, and so on. (Kennett, 2000)

Such creative treatments of tonality are also present, along with more conventional practices, in songs by Elton John, such as "Blue Eyes" as well in songs by the Byrds, such as "Please Let Me Love You." Mann, as is evident in this thesis, has continued these musicians' interest in tonal manipulations, an interest that in her music is rooted in the search to find inventive ways of elucidating and interpreting lyrics.

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Appendix I: Chordal analyses and lyrics of songs

I. How Am I Different (*Bachelor No. 2*, 2000)

capo 3

G bm/f#
I can't do it, I can't conceive
em C G bm/f# em C
You're everything you're trying to make me believe
G bm/f#
Cause this show is too well designed
em C G bm/f# em C
Too well to be held with only me in mind

G bm/f# em C
And how am I different?
Bb dm/a cm Ab
How am I different?
G bm/f# em C Eb D
How am I different?

I can't do it
So move along
Do you really want to wait until I prove you wrong?
And don't tell me—
Let me guess
I could change it all around if I would just say yes

But how am I different?
How am I different?
How am I different?

Bb dm C em
And just one question before I pack—
Bb dm
When you fuck it up later,
C em7
Do I get my money back?
Bb dm C

I can't do it
And as for you—
Can you in good conscience even ask me to
Cause what do you care
About the great divide
As long as you come down
On the winners side

And how am I different?
How am I different?
How am I different?
Eb D Eb D Eb D
different

Just one question before I pack—
When you fuck it up later,
Do I get my money back?

II. That's How I Knew This Story Would Break My Heart (*The Forgotten Arm,* 2005)

D em G
I drew a picture of you
D bm G
You and your anchor tattoo
D bm G
And saw the face that I knew
D bm G
Covered in shame

You drew a bird that was here
A kind of sweet chanticleer
But with a terrible fear
That the cage couldn't tame

A G D
That's how I knew this story would break my heart
A
When you wrote it
A G D em G
That's how I knew this story would break my heart

So, like a ghost in the snow
I'm getting ready to go
'Cause baby, that's all I know –
How to open the door
And though the exit is crude

It saves me coming unglued
For when you're not in the mood
For the gloves and the canvas floor

That's how I knew this story would break my heart
When you wrote it
That's how I knew this story would break my heart
That's how I knew this story would break my heart
When you wrote it
That's how I knew this story would break my heart

II. Choice in the Matter (*I'm With Stupid*, 1995)

upper voices: g#/e f#/d# f/d e/c#

F#----------

B d#m g#m

Skip the cloak and dagger bit

B d#m g#m

Don't you know we're sick of it?

upper voices: g#/e f#/d# f/d e/c#

F#----------

B d#m g#m

As much as I would like to stay

B d#m g#m

The message light just blinks away

B d#m g#m

And while I'm here you won't push play

upper voices: g#/e f#/d# f/d e/c#

F#----------

E g#m c#m

So you leave me no choice in the matter

E g#m c#m

You leave me no choice in the matter

E g#m c#m c#m / c#, c, b, a#

You leave me no choice in the matter

A c#m

You leave me no

B d#m g#m

Option to indulge in this
Exercise in cowardice
Ignorance without the bliss

upper voices: g#/e f#/d# f/d e/c#
F#----------

'Cause you leave me no choice in the matter
You leave me no choice in the matter
You leave me no choice in the matter
You leave me no

upper voices: g#/e f#/d# f/d e/c#
F#----------

E g#m c#m
'Cause I know where this boat will go
Pulled down by the undertow
E g#m c#m c#m / c#, c, b, a#
It's lucky I know
A c#m
how to row

E g#m c#m
So row, row, row your boat gently down the stream
E g#m c#m c#m / c#, c, b, a#
I hope you drown and never come back
A c#m

'Cause you leave me no choice in the matter
You leave me no choice in the matter
You leave me no choice in the matter
You leave me no

IV. Invisible Ink (*Lost in Space*, 2002)

detuned 1/2 step

B em C G
There comes a time when you swim or sink
C G
So I jumped in the drink
C G Dsus4
Cause I couldn't make myself clear
B em C G
Maybe I wrote in invisible ink
C G
Oh I've tried to think
C G Dsus4
How I could have made it appear

C D em D G G/f
But another illustration is wasted
G/e G/d am D am D
Cause the results are the same
C D em D G G/f G/e
I feel like a ghost who's trying to move your hands
G/d am D C G
over some Ouija board in the hopes I can spell out my name

What some take for magic at first glance
Is just sleight of hand depending on what you believe
Something gets lost when you translate
It's hard to keep straight
Perspective is everything

And I know now which is which and what angle I oughta look at it from

I suppose I should be happy to be misread-
Better be that than some of the other things I have become

D am
But nobody wants to hear this tale
D am
The plot is clichéd, the jokes are stale
C G D
And baby we've all heard it all before
D am
Oh I could get specific but
D am
Nobody needs a catalog
C G D
With details of love I can't sell anymore

And aside from that, this chain of reaction,
baby, is losing a link
Though I'd hope you'd know what I tried to tell you
And if you don't I could draw you a picture in invisible ink

But nobody wants to hear this tale
The plot is clichéd, the jokes are stale
And baby we've all heard it all before
Oh I could get specific but
Nobody needs a catalog
With details of love I can't sell anymore

V. The Fall of the World's Own Optimist (*Bachelor No.2*, 2000)

detuned 1/2 step

D D/c bm
There's no charity in you
$e^{\varnothing 43}$
And that surprises me
D bm F#
I guess I thought you were a golden idol
bm
'Cause I called you majesty
A
On the balustrade
bm E
You watched me hunt for tips
E^7
I was obliged to pick up

From the passing trade

D G
Hey, kids - look at this
bm bm/a E^7
It's the fall of the world's own optimist
D G
I could get back up if you insist
bm bm/a C
But you'll have to ask politely
F# bm F#
'Cause the eggshells I've been treading
D A^7
Couldn't spare me a beheading

G bm em
And I know I had it coming
G bm A A7
From a Caesar who was only slumming
D D/c G
Hey, kids - look at this
bm E/g# G D
It's the fall of the world's own optimist

Well I could have objections
Which you could override
But what's the point - we're only flogging the horse
When the horseman has up and died
Once I testified and swore I'd never leave a stone unturned
I bet you're really glad that I lied

Hey, kids - look at this
It's the fall of the world's own optimist
I could get back up if you insist
But you'll have to ask politely
'Cause the eggshells I've been treading
Couldn't spare me a beheading
And I know I had it coming
From a Caesar who was only slumming
Hey, kids - look at this
It's the fall of the world's own optimist

Hey, kids - look at this
It's the fall of the world's own optimist
I could get back up if you insist
But you'll have to ask politely
bm A C
But you'll have to ask politely
But you'll have to ask

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