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Theoretical and Compositional Analysis of Select Metal Works

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Abstract

This paper is a comprehensive essay on the history, form, and compositional techniques of Extreme Metal music. Within Extreme Metal this paper will cover three sub-genres using compositions by Burzum, Death, and Gojira. This paper is meant to show a link between the compositional techniques used in Western Classical music and Extreme Metal through analysis of form, harmony, and tonality/modality. The scope of this paper primarily focuses on the popular music form verse/chorus which is compared to a variety of Western Classical music forms. The goal is to promote future research into the Extreme Metal style and other popular music forms.
Extreme Metal

Extreme Metal music is an overarching term that contains many hyper-descriptive genres and subgenres of metal within it. The evolution of Extreme Metal stems from rock and roll musicians constantly pushing their music into faster, aggressive, and transgressive directions. Extreme Metal started with Rock music in the late 60s and early 70s, then headed in a more aggressive and louder direction, bands like Deep Purple (1968), Led Zeppelin (1968) and Black Sabbath (1968) are perfect examples of this style. Building off of this style in the mid to late 70s another wave of English Metal Bands were beginning to grow in popularity, doubling down on the characteristic sounds of distorted guitars, riff based writing, and fantastical and dark lyrical themes (Walser). This was dubbed the New Wave of British Heavy Metal. From this some bands like Iron Maiden and Motorhead rose to stardom while other bands, like Venom (1978), stayed in the "underground" due to their more aggressive sound and darker and controversial imagery referencing Satanism.

In the early 80s these Bands influenced a new generation of musicians who once again pushed the music further in a more abrasive and extreme direction, and these various genres were collectively called Extreme Metal. While they all share notable differences, they also all share things like high levels of distortion, similar instrumentation (two guitars, singer, bass, drum kit), faster tempos, and darker musical themes (satan, murder, suicide, destruction and despair and war). This was also the time when the band Venom came out with two highly influential albums, Welcome to Hell (1981) and Black Metal (1982). On these two albums Venom explored sonic concepts that would be adopted later by many Extreme Metal bands. Venom’s rough and non-technical approach to speed and aggression had a heavy influence on thrash metal bands like
Metallica, as well as Black and Death Metal bands who would take Venom’s dark Satanic imagery and push it farther (Monger).

Extreme Metal music spiraled in a few different directions with core distinctions. Thrash metal was aggressive and fast but had cleaner vocals, either sung or semi shouted and very technical guitar playing, examples of this are Metallica and Megadeth. Black Metal found its roots in the Scandinavian countries and was characterized by very distorted guitars and a shriek based style of vocals, lo-fi recordings, and a focus on ambience. Death Metal was characterized by its muddy low tuned guitars and its signature growling vocals. This was more of a rumble and low throated sound compared to “screaming/shrieking.” Many bands do not perfectly fall into these definitions and many bands mix the different styles leading to mixed genres like blackened Death Metal, Deathrash, and other distinct subgenres of Extreme Metal like doom metal.

Thesis

This project will be an analysis of songs from these genres, Burzum’s “Dunkelheit,” Death’s “Spirit Crusher,” and Gojira’s “The Cell.” The first two are Black Metal and Death Metal respectively, while Gojira is a band formed in 1996 that really came into their own in the aughts and is technically considered tech death or progressive metal. The paper will first go over each band's history, overall style, and impact briefly to give context. Then divide into sections by musical aspects and how each band’s music utilizes them. These musical aspects will be form, harmony, and rhythm, other aspects will be somewhat addressed within these sections as supporting information, but will not have a dedicated section.
Black Metal

History

Black Metal Originally emerged in the early 80s and has continued to stay relevant into the present (Wiederhorn and Turnman 505). Historically Black Metal has been separated into two different waves, the first wave along with Extreme Metal in general is credited to Venom in the early 80s and helped spawn thrash and Death Metal (Wiederhorn and Turnman 515). The modern sound and idea of Black Metal distinguished itself about a decade later in Norway and other Scandinavian countries (Wiederhorn and Turnman 515). Similar to Death Metal, Black Metal carries strong ideologies of antiauthoritarian and antireligious views. But unlike Death Metal’s slasher movie style and mentality, Black Metal has more Nihilism and Misanthropy. This, in some cases, was taken to extreme right-wing political areas where some bands began associating themselves with Nazisism, Fascism, and Nationalism (Buesnel).

Burzum History and Controversy

Burzum is a Black Metal project by Varg Vikernes, a Norwegian musician that played a large role in the early development of the second wave of Black Metal, which was based in Norway and other Scandinavian countries. While I would not normally justify a reason to analyze music, there is a heated—and in my opinion justified—debate on the morality of promoting or engaging with some of these artists. Vikernes was involved in the most notorious aspects of the second wave Black Metal scene. He participated in church burnings (including the very famous burning of the Holmenkollen Chapel cultural heritage site, and the murder of a fellow bandmate).
Vikernes was a member of various important Norwegian Black/Death Metal bands. He originally performed guitar in the band Old Funeral, a Norwegian Black/Death Metal-band from 1990 to 1991. Around this time he started his solo project Burzum and recorded four Black Metal albums between 1992 and 1993. These were not all released during these years. Vikernes joined the influential Norwegian Black Metal band Mayhem on the bass guitar and performed on their debut album *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas* (About The Mysteries of the Lord Satan). Before the release of the album in May of 1994, Vikernes murdered his fellow bandmate and guitarist Øystein Aarseth, stagename Euronymous. Vikernes was arrested, convicted of murder, and sentenced to twenty-one years in prison, which is Norway’s maximum sentence. Due to being arrested the fourth album by Burzum, Filosofem the Norwegian word for philosopheme meaning a philosophical statement, was released in January of 1996 while Vikernes was in prison. This album became quite successful and even saw some mainstream success, “Dunkelheit” was played on both MTV and VH1. The album pushed the ambient and minimal aspects of Black Metal further while featuring an extreme lo-fi sound, which is quite common in early Black Metal. This paper will focus primarily on Burzum’s song “Dunkelheit” from the 1996 release Filosofem.

The early Black Metal scene in general featured a lot of transgressive behavior for the sake of shock value; some of the members were satanists for the aesthetic look, cultivating a dark and evil image, while others were actual satanists. Along with satanism there were many facist and Nazi influenced bands, Vikernes even launched a Neo-Nazi organization while in prison. Vikernes claims that his music is apolitical and merely about European myths and that his music shouldn't be associated with his other outputs like his blog or books (Stosuy). The lyrics and titles of Burzum records tend to be tied to Norwegian myths and J.R.R. Tolkien's the *Lord of the
The name Burzum actually means "darkness" in the "black speech of Mordor," one of the many languages that Tolkien invented.

Death Metal

History

Death Metal is a subgenre of extreme heavy metal music that was prominent in the 80s and 90s, similar to other Extreme Metal genres, Death Metal features dark and aggressive music with a focus on guitar and drum playing. It employs distorted vocal techniques with the low pitched “growling” style in particular. Blast beats, low tunings, abrupt key, tempo, and time signature changes are just some of the extended techniques used. This genre also has a heavy focus on minor keys and chromaticism. Lyrically and thematically Death Metal can be about anything, but the common topics have focused on the evil aspects of fantasy elements (monsters and dark wizards) and extremely violent descriptive lyrics.
Death the Band

The Death Metal genre is widely and largely credited to the American Death Metal band, Death. They came from Tampa Florida, which would produce many other mainstay “Death Metal” bands. The Founding Member, Guitarist, Vocalist, and Writer Chuck Schuldiner was so influential that his tragic death in 2001 was the end of Death Metal's mainstream era. The sound was created when Chuck Schuldiner started working on a heavier sound with inspiration from the American band Possessed, and European bands like Demon Eyes, Sortilège, and H-Bomb, along with early German Thrash bands like: Sodom, Kreator, and Destruction (Wiederhorn and Turman 462). Jeff Becerra and his band Possessed are considered to also be possible father’s of the genre, because it was their band in San Francisco that first allowed Death Metal to actually take off around the US instead of just Florida (Wiederhorn and Turman 460). Jeff Decerra actually coined the term “Death Metal” attempting to distance his sound from speed and Black Metal (Wiederhorn and Turman 461).

Modern Metal

Modern metal genres, like many popular music genres and the Classical idiom, are currently in an era of open creativity and exploration. The increase in easy and accessible recording technology has led to more artists than ever releasing music that can be accessed worldwide. It has become common for bands to be a mix of multiple metal genres as well as be heavily inspired by outside influences. A lot of metal fans are very nitpicky about genre specifications and there are about thirty different subgenre, fusion, and derivative genres listed on the Extreme Metal wikipedia page. The labeling of these microgenres can be somewhat
tedious and there is some difficulty in the categorization given how similar some of them can be. The takeaway from modern metal is that it can do just about anything.

**Where Gojira Fits**

Gojira, formally known as Godzilla, is a French Metal band formed in 1996. They have had a long career starting as a small obscure band and rising to one of absolute super stardom. The band originally was known for their Tech/Death/Progressive metal, these were genres primarily associated with bringing virtuosic skill and complex songwriting to the violent sound of Death Metal. In the last decade the band has been exploring a more widely accessible sound. Gojira has done this by cleaning up the vocals, simplifying their songwriting, and creating a more welcoming sound. This has paid off and led to the band's last two albums performing at career highs in regards to awards and chart performance. The band has done this with considerable skill and has maintained its credibility in the underground metal community as a “real” metal band and not having sold out.

**Form**

**Musical Forms in Popular Music**

Musical form has evolved in many ways over the centuries, running the gamut from constant repetition (strophic) to no repetition at all (through-composed). Metal music falls into the umbrella-category of “popular music” which refers to western modern music of all genres that grew in popularity with technological innovations such as the radio and recordings. Metal music of all kinds has a strong classical influence, which is evident in popular subgenres such as
NeoClassical Heavy Metal. This genre is defined by its embrace of such classical music traits as development, virtuosity, and compositional techniques. These compositional techniques include fugue, counterpoint, and common era harmonic progressions. Aside from NeoClassical, Western Art Music has had a profound influence on other styles of metal such as Progressive, New Wave of British Heavy Metal, Black Metal, and more. It is because of this influence that analyzing metal music in classical forms can be useful in addition to the popular forms.

For the popular forms of analysis, I will be using the generalized terms as defined in Ralf von Appen and Markus Frei-Hauenschild’s “AABA, Refrain, Chorus, Bridge, Prechorus — Song Forms and their Historical Development”. There are three basic forms that occur in popular music of the west. The first is verse/chorus form, which consists of two recurring sections, the verse, which changes subtly each time, and the chorus, which stays exactly the same. Usually this change in the verse is reflected primarily in the lyrics. This form may also consist of intros, solos, and outros (codas). The second is strophic form, which is a repetition of A section after A section until the song is over, though these A sections can be prime versions. Lastly there is American Popular Song Form, which is an AABA structure. All of these forms may be varied or expanded on but these are their most basic definitions. As for the scope of this paper, the main focus will be on the verse/chorus form (3).

Over time the verse/chorus form has become more elaborate. This form may now include a variety of verses and choruses. Within these varied verses and choruses they may also have their own individual repetitions. The form has also begun to include sections like a pre-chorus, which is meant to build to the chorus as well as a bridge, this comes after the chorus to provide a break between chorus repetitions.
Form in Burzum (Black Metal)

The first analysis will be over Burzum’s “Dunkelheit.” Burzum begins with a two-bar pickup with two guitars playing the tonic chord, then launches into its first main motive, an eight-bar phrase of arpeggios over block chords. This phrase, or A section, is built out of a two-bar motive that repeats four times. The A section then repeats with the addition of a more active drum part. Next is an A prime section which is more subdued, this section contains a sparser drum part in comparison to the previous section alongside changes in harmony and harmonic rhythm. The A prime section, which lasts about ten-bars, functions as a bridge to the B section. The B section, in contrast, has a tonic centered harmony and is a bit longer than the A prime section. These differences are what makes the B section more active, exciting, and impactful for the listener.

The B section is the bulk of the song and has a strophic form within itself. This section repeats the same eight-bar structure eleven times with a few variations. One of the reasons that Black Metal is frequently thought of as ambient or atmospheric is that it is common to have large sections with minimal material that focus on painting a mood and building a sense of location rather than moving forward with a story. The main eight-bar phrase of B builds intensity by adding an active rhythm and having both guitars playing the same part. The B prime is essentially the same as the B section with the exception of the incorporation of a melodic synth line over top of the wall of noise. The B double-prime contains the entrance of Varg Vikernes’ screamed vocals. The next phrase B triple-prime is the first change in the main motive since the beginning of the large scale B section. It is almost the same as it was before but the second bar of the phrase is now mainly the IV chord (e.g. see mu. ex. 1). This is a significant change within this piece since this is the first time this harmony has been used. This adds more predominant
harmony to this section and creates a sense of momentum amidst the stagnation. To further this point, this phrase is also the first phrase of the overall large scale B section, and the whole piece, that can be viewed as a four-bar motive instead of two. A large portion of this harmony is directly repeated through the B prime, the B double-prime, and the B triple-prime sections, the only difference being a new set of lyrics during the B double-prime (Vocal Variant).

*(musical example no. 1 "Dunkelheit" Predominant Harmony)*

There is a brief four-bar link of two breve chords and then the B section returns. The return of the B section is marked by more change, B quadruple-prime has guitar one switch from the main power chord motive to a melody that is heterophonic in style with the synth line. This synth line is slightly more rhythmically active and now contains new notes, such as an A in bar 4. This coincides with a rearrangement of the harmony, B triple-prime was originally a bar of f-sharp minor, A major, f-sharp minor, e minor. Presumably, all of these chords are power chords but since there has been a consistent c-sharp note throughout the B section and the A power
chord is directly preceded by the f-sharp power chord the ear hears it as an A major triad. This progression has been changed to e minor, f-sharp minor, e minor, then ending on A major. This rearrangement not only features the tonic (e minor) more prominently but makes the overall section sound more open. Previously in B triple-prime there were three bars of predominant harmony then tonic and repeat. This made the eight-bar motive and collective B sections close-ended. Now, with the tonic moving to the predominant, this section has a more open sound that pushes the listener forward to the next section. The following section, B quintuple-prime starting in this measure, is similar to B prime (which is the main motive plus synth) but the texture changes and flipping of the two main harmonies, e minor and f-sharp minor, are enough to classify it as a different section. The piece repeats the two new variations one time and then concludes the large middle section.

The return of the A section in measure 121 is a new variation, A double-prime, this time fleshing out the harmony with a full triad, instead of a power chord, along with an erasure of the other harmonies. The f-natural on the downbeat of every other measure starting on measure 122 is a chromatic neighbor tone based on the E to F motive on downbeats. It could be argued that measure 129 is the start of a new section, but I believe that this is an A triple-prime. The A triple-prime marks a shift in the harmonic focus from e minor to a new two-bar motive with a B power chord with an added sixth. Another difference in this section was a one note change to make a C major seventh chord with a fourth in place of the third (e.g. see mu. ex. 2 and 3). Similar to other sections, the omission of the third keeps the harmony more open. This keeps the piece from pulling in any specific direction, making it easier to vamp over. The vocals at this point are no longer screamed but spoken word. This change allows the vocals to move at a much faster pace covering both sets of lyrics in one eight-bar phrase instead of two. The drums and
overall rhythm have stayed mostly the same, and the arpeggios in this section are repurposing and combining previous material. This can be heard in the the B major arpeggio in measure 145 which is similar to the one in measure 4 (the original A section), the minor second relationship between the two harmonies in this section, and the e to f-natural that stood out in the previous section. Interestingly, this is the first time that one hears the dominant harmony since the original opening section (A) of the piece. This along with the faster semi-melodic content of the vocals and the push and pull between A double-prime and A triple-prime create another step up in the push of the progression. Focusing on the large scale form the predominant harmony in the B section and the current focus on dominant harmony in this A prime section create a very large scale tonic-predominant-dominant progression.

*(musical example no. 2 "Dunkelheit" A Section Comparison)*
Measure 153 presents an interesting challenge: this section is essentially an outro to the song that repeats until the final three double whole note chords. The difficulty stems from deciphering whether this measure is a part of A prime or a return to B. This section contains the synth line, harmony, and harmonic rhythm of the B section, but the guitars are playing these harmonies in arpeggios with the same contour as the previous A sections. The phrasing structure and the repetition are similar to that of previous A sections, but the return of screaming vocals are another sign that it could be a version of B. The overall structure of the piece could be viewed as a binary form with a variation repeat, with A measure 1, B measure 29, A-prime measure 121, and B-prime measure 153. Though I chose to view it as a continuation of A-prime
making the piece ternary form with a large middle section. While both are valid interpretations, I hear the piece in ternary form.

Musical form in Death’s "Spirit Crusher"

“Spirit Crusher” by Death is another long metal song with many different sections. Unlike Burzum’s “Dunkelheit,” “Spirit Crusher” follows traditional tendencies of Death Metal. The sections are more obvious and contrasting. Most of these sections are marked by clear tempo changes, meter changes, and contrasting motivic material. Overall there are eleven distinct sections, A-K, but I believe this piece makes more sense as a verse/chorus form with a lot of additions.

The opening section A (intro) starts off with a quintal bass guitar riff with some chromaticism in 7/8 that repeats in 9/8 with an extra two beats a step higher. Measure 9 is where the first main riff, or verse, starts. This is marked by a switch to 6/8, a tempo change, new harmonies, and the addition of vocals and guitars to create a stark difference in the section. The motive is one bar long but is grouped in fours. This is also supported in a clear broad four-bar phrasing in the drums. After four bars, the first guitar is transposed up a perfect fifth. This thickens the harmony and texture. Then the larger phrase of eight bars is repeated.

Measure 25 starts with a new galloping rhythmic motif (e.g. see mu. ex. 4), another tempo change, and a return to the d minor tonality of the opening riff. The continuation of the meter, similarity in rhythms, and lack of repeated vocal lyrics in this section support the idea that this is a second part of the verse. There is a slight bit of singing at the end of this section that will repeat, but it is really a pickup into the next section.
The next section, D, is different from the previous sections. When it returns the vocals are exactly the same lyrically. This section also changes to 4/4 and picks up the pulse, and small scale rhythms become faster. The pedal point in the string instruments switches from tonic to dominant. Overall making this section’s function is that of a traditional pre-chorus, which is used to build tension and drive towards the chorus.

The chorus comes in at measure 51, even though the changes actually start two measures before, in a short two-bar linking section that draws in the suspense. The chorus features a massive slowdown in tempo and broader half-note power chords that give it a more expansive sound. Death forgos the A major dominant expectation and uses G and C power chords instead. Besides the texture and slower more anthemic sound, this section is obviously the chorus since it returns later exactly as is, including the lyrics.
Next there is a bridge, or transitioning section, of chromatic quartal riffs that are a variation on the introductory theme. This section changes the altering 7/8 and 9/8 to a 5/8 with two bars of 6/8, making it feel even more asymmetric than the intro. After similar thematic development, the piece then shifts back into 4/4 with a short eight-bar phrase, this is the second part of the bridge and is changing to 4/4 in anticipation of the oncoming chorus II, that is also in 4/4. Alongside this, there is a key change from d minor to g minor that is maintained through chorus II. Solidifying the change from a tonic dominant relationship to a tonic predominant or i to iv relationship.

Chorus II differs from chorus I with faster rhythms and a clearer triadic harmony. This section has a root to third relationship compared to the root to dominant focus in chorus I. Chorus II unifies itself with chorus I creating a larger chorus structure, that includes the pre-chorus, since they are the only parts of the song in 4/4. This section is the only section besides chorus I and the pre-chorus that repeats the same vocal line, including the lyrics.

After the choruses, it is typical in metal to have a guitar solo section. The solo section begins at measure 108 with the 3/4 time change and a tempo change. This section remains in g minor and repurposes much of chorus II’s guitar part to be the foundation for the other guitar’s solo. This section continues the asymmetric meter changes seen earlier in the bridge with two bars of 3/4 then one of 2/4. Two new guitars, solo guitars one and two play a blazingly fast solo of triplets in parallel fifths that, like most metal solos, move back and forth between chordal and non-chord tones. This style of lead playing is less focused on vertical alignment and harmony and the original two rhythm guitars are there primarily to pad out the sound and lay a foundation. The main focus here is on solo guitars one and two and their shredding riffs. After twenty-four measures of virtuosic soloing, the piece shifts back to 4/4 at measure 132 for a second, more
harmony focused, melodic closing solo. This second solo has the main guitars go back to whole note power chords and shifts keys again, this time to e minor. This section stands out since it is one of the few sections where Death purposely wrote the power chord’s missing harmony, the thirds, into the other parts to make this section feel more lush, full, and less aggressive. It ends with a sweeping fast ascent back to d based tonality and seamlessly transitions into a new bridge. Bridge II, is the link back towards the beginning of the song, the verse. To accomplish this, the piece returns to d, just like the intro it's replacing, and uses a simple triple-meter that will shift into the compound triple-meter of the verse 6/8.

From here the entire song from the verse to the end of chorus II repeats. The verses and choruses in these sections function how you would expect them to, with a different set of lyrics in the verse and an exact repeat in the choruses. In the end, the form of this piece is an intricate version of the verse/chorus form (e.g. see chart 1).

(chart 1 “Spirit Crusher” Detailed Form)

- Intro - 1 phrase (Each phrase being 8 bars)
- Verse - 2 phrases
- Verse part II- 2 phases plus a 2 bar link
- Pre-chorus- 1 phrase plus 2 bar link
- Chorus - 2 phrases
- Bridge - 2 phrases truncated due to time signature
- Bridge I part II- 1 phrase
- Chorus II- 2 phrases
- Solo- 3 phrases
- Solo II- 1 truncated phrase
- Bridge II - 2 phrases and 2 bar link
- Verse - 2 phrases
- Verse part II- 2 phases plus a 2 bar link
- Pre-chorus- 1 phrase plus 2 bar link
- Chorus - 2 phrases
- Bridge - 2 phrases truncated due to time signature
- Bridge I part II- 1 phrase
- Chorus II- 2 phrases

As indicated by chart one, this form may be somewhat complicated. But, by grouping them together one may see the more simplified structure that Burzum broke down into more complicated parts. Using the chart below, a complicated structure looks more like a basic popular song and all of the time changes and different lengthened sections start to become clear (e.g. see chart 2).

(chart 2 “Spirit Crusher” Simplified Form)

- Intro - Phrase
- Verse - 4 Phrase
- All Choruses - 8 phrase
- Solos - 4 Phrases
- Bridge - 2 Phrase
- Verse - 4
- All Choruses - 8
Gojira’s “The Cell”

In comparison to the last two songs “The Cell” helps to showcase modern metal’s post and sometimes progressive status with the breaking down and combining of genres. Not as long as either of the other songs, which is typical in modern music, and not as many different parts or variations, “The Cell” is complex in its own ways. “Dunkelheit” had a few ideas which varied many times, “Spirit Crusher” had many contrasting ideas, but “The Cell” is somewhere in the middle. There are distinct sections and ideas but, they are not quite as abrupt with their modality/tonality, time, or tempo changes. Gojira also uses a different style of extremely metal vocals that are more akin to thrash metal’s chants and yells than either of death’s growls and black’s shrieks. They also use cleanly sung vocals in the choruses which is a popular idiom from Metalcore.

The structure of “The Cell” is deceptively simple. The piece opens up with a tremolo riff in f minor and stays on this thematic material for twenty-five measures. I will not justify the section breaks as much as I did in the previous songs and will address their material later in other sections due to the simpler and clearer song structure. The structure is clearly A B C, but what to label them could be up for debate. Musical terms such as verses, choruses, and pre-choruses have been historically used in different ways. Most of the time the verse is the section of music that repeats with the same melody, but different lyrics. In the case of this piece that label works for section B, but does not fit with section A. One could make the assumption that section A is an introduction section, but that does not account for it being the largest section of the piece. There are justifications for both; in keeping with the classification of each piece in both popular music forms and classical I will classify this piece as verse/chorus. In this case though, I believe that the classical way of labeling forms provides better clarity.
The twenty-five measure opening tremolo section in, in the confines of this paper, will be classified as the verse. Thinking about the prominence of instrumental music and the importance of instrumental playing in metal music, it makes sense to not just use the vocals and lyrics as a way of determining song structure. The internal structure of the phrases in this section is interesting and more complicated than most of the small scale phrasing discussed in the previous songs. The piece opens up with two bars of f minor, one bar of Eb major, and ends with a bar of g minor without the third. This four-bar phrase repeats, with an extension. The g minor bar is now four bars long creating a rather odd phrase structure of four plus seven. Both of these phrases are repeated, but the second one is extended again by another three bars of g minor. This repetition has added a third guitar fleshing out harmony. The asymmetrical phrases and extra bars of predominant feel like the piece is trying to speed up, almost like it is running down a hill and tripping over itself.

The g minor chord is in its second inversion and this heavily emphasizes the note D which is the lowest pitch in the song. They maintain this idea across sections into the pre-chorus at measure twenty-six, with its main riff being a D with syncopated half-step bends. This heavy focus on the submediant makes a pitch center shift and some might hear it as the relative major D. This section also marks the entrance of the yelling/screaming vocals. The pre-chorus itself is chorus-like on its own with its heavy, slower and anthemic style of chanting. These sections also have their own internal structure that is simpler than the verse, usually a quality of the chorus. The internal structure is an X Y X Y- prime, shown mostly in the vocal’s rhythm pattern since the guitars and bass are all the same measure to measure.

The change to the chorus is executed remarkably well with the chorus reusing the same material as the verse, but now as eighth notes instead of sixteenth notes and the singer, Joe
Duplantier, switching to cleaner clearly pitched vocals. All of these sections, A-C or verse - pre-chorus - chorus repeat as they are with only the pre-chorus lyrics changing. The only other addition is another repetition of the pre-chorus at the end of the piece, this time it is slightly longer and has a few adjustments. An alternative way of viewing the form could be labeling the chorus as A prime, since it is so similar to A, instead of C. That would then make this a ternary form, A B A prime, repeat and coda.

**Harmony and Tonality/Modality**

With a clear sense of what the form is for all of these pieces, it is evident that macro patterns occur especially in how each of these songs use harmony. One of the more interesting facets that was prevalent in all of them was their lack of dominant harmonies or overall sense of classical harmonic progressions. “Dunkelheit” has the most dominant harmony of the three, with a prominent V chord including the leading-tone at measure four in the opening A section. This leading-tone, or the third of V chord, was not actually present in the V chord arpeggio pattern of the last two beats but was directly before it in the previous chord. There was also another V chord at measure 130 during the A prime section, but it did not have the leading-tone or third of the chord. “Spirit Crusher,” on the other hand, would use the leading-tone note occasionally but only in a chromatic sense and not as a part of a dominant harmony. “The Cell” had the least amount of dominant harmonies with no leading-tone notes, as it was in f dorian, or even C based power chords.

All three songs heavily utilize predominant harmonies, such as the supertonic and subtonic chords. Sometimes this would be a vamping section where one could just move back
and forth without going anywhere, such as in the main harmonies of “Dunkelheit”’s B section, repetitions of e minor and f-sharp minor power chords. Other times these harmonies were more like substitutions for the dominant traditional function giving a lot of the progressions a plagal sound, such as in the A sections of Gojira with the progression ending on a ii to i cadence. The chorus of “Spirit Crusher” has a similar progression that features a plagal cadence at the halfway point of the phrase. This plagal function is reinforced later when the main key change is also g minor instead of A major.

Guitar players frequently rely on power chords and parallel fifths in metal music, this technique does change the sound of many of these chords from a chord that would normally be diminished into a minor chord. Sometimes this seems to be an intentional decision to be modal, while other times it is fleeting enough to constitute chromaticism. It is odd that genres well known for their harsh and dissonant sound, actually featured very few cases of outright dissonant harmony. I only noticed one brief spot with a diminished harmony, the chorus (C/A prime) of "The Cell", it is also very brief (e.g. see mu. ex. 5). All the usual suspects, such as the vii diminished or ii diminished in minor, were turned into power chords negating any diminished harmony.
The subtonic, or major seventh chord, that occurs most commonly in natural minor as well as the dorian and phrygian modes was common, and was a prominent harmony during the choruses of these songs. These harmonic progressions are less focused on traditional common era and popular music progressions. This can be seen by their lack of the extremely popular i-iv-V progression that one has come to expect from most popular western music.

In general these chords are either power chords or some other chord that omits the third, like what rock musicians typically refer to as sus-chords, not to be confused with classical suspensions. One that particularly stands out is Gojira, who actually omitted the fifth and used the root and third as the basis of their diad for most of “The Cell.” The extremely low register helps muddy the sound and helps it keep its edge, fully voiced triads tend to have a soft and rich sound that does not work well often in metal. Another way of pulling this off is to use an absurd
amount of distortion, as in “Dunkelheit.” There are a few moments where there are full triads like the C major chord and arpeggio at measure 23 but the distortion and lo-fi recording techniques make this sound so dirty that it does not have the same impact on the mood.

The tonality and modality are usually being constructed by the harmonies and not the other way around. With the root of each chord usually fitting in with the diatonic scale chosen, the perfect fifth above it, would often be outside of this scale. Usually this would be the only appearance of that non diatonic note letter and would be easily seen as a brief section of chromaticism. All three of these pieces stayed within some minor mode or alteration. Usually that was natural minor, dorian, and harmonic minor but, there were some other interesting ones like phrygian in bridge part II directly after the solo section in “Spirit Crusher” and in the A prime section of “Dunkelheit.” There was also an appearance of the double harmonic minor scale (harmonic minor with a sharp fourth, making it have both e harmonic minor’s last four notes along with b harmonic minor’s last four notes) in the opening of “Dunkelheit” at measure 4 with its leading tone power chord. The rest of “Dunkelheit” was basically in e dorian and all of “The Cell” was f dorian. “Spirit Crusher,” which is typical of Death Metal, was the most drastic with its changes of keys and modality. It was also the only piece to fully change tonality, in this case to g minor for its bridge part II and chorus II. There was also a very clear switch to e harmonic minor in solo II.
Rhythm

Meter in “Spirit Crusher”

“Dunkelheit” and “The Cell” both stay in 4/4 the entire time, these are not really the interesting aspects to these pieces. “Spirit Crusher” on the other hand frequently changes meter and has a different meter and pulse in almost every section (e.g. see chart 3).

(chart 3 “Spirit Crusher” Meter Changes)

- Intro 7/8 + 9/8
- Verse parts I and II 6/8
- Pre-chorus, chorus 4/4
- Bridge I ⅆ/8 +6/8 +6/8
- Bridge I part II 4/4
- Chorus II 4/4
- Solo ¾ +⅜ +2/4
- Solo II and bridge II 4/4
- Return to verse and repeat till the end of chorus II.

As previously stated in the form section, “Spirit Crusher”’s main structure of the meters are a nice contrast of compound duple meter in the verses and a simple duple meter in the choruses, lending itself to more rhythmically exciting and fast lines in the verses that push forward to larger and louder choruses. Most of the interesting metrical ideas are in the side parts that bridge the main verses and choruses together. There is an interesting pattern here between odd and even time signatures and how those add up together. First, there is 7/8 and 9/8, which alone are both odd numbers but, when added up as they are paired together, equal sixteen beats,
which fits with the pattern set up by the core section’s eight bar phrasing. Bridge I, on the other hand, is an odd 5/8 and an even 12/8, two bars of six, that when added together are seventeen beats, making this section asymmetric in a large scale. There is also the multimeter section in the solo I, 6/4 notated as two measures of 3/4 added to 2/4, which again, equals eight, forming a larger phrasing of sixteen. All together it's interesting to look at these three main transitions, and how they defy expectations and break patterns. In order, the meter combination pattern is odd + odd, odd + even, and even + even and is used as a transformational idea of change. This, alongside the sixteen, seventeen, back to sixteen grouping is far too deliberate to be a coincidence. Especially when looking at the lyrics of a transfiguring and shapeshifting humanesque creature that is trying to trick the narrator.

Small Scale Rhythms

“Spirit Crusher”

The 7/8 + 9/8 intro is interesting on its own, while its larger scale grouping of sixteen is a clever way of hiding and foreshadowing the next meter’s more predictable groove and flow, what makes this part even more interesting is that the drums are playing a different rhythmic grouping than one would expect in these time signatures (e.g. see mu. ex. 6). The 7/8 bar forgoes the bassline’s rhythmic pattern of 3+2+2 and instead employs a pattern of 2+2+2+1, that is if one is looking at cymbal patterns. The entrance of the bass drum on beat four and six imply the same beat grouping as the bass line. Multiple meter interpretations countering each other and can be viewed thematically as 5+2 in the bass while the drums are 6+1. Death uses a similar rhythmic effect in the following 9/8 bar by copying the first seven notes and add one more repetition of the two beat Perfect Fifth motive, creating a bass line pattern of 3+2+2+2,
subverting the expected and more conventional grouping of 3+3+3. The drums, on the other hand, are grouped in a pattern of 5+4 in the cymbals while outlining the bassline’s groove in the bass drum like before.

*(musical example no. 6 Polyrhythms in Death’s Intro)*

The verse that follows sets up a more steady groove than the previous section, with its straight eighth notes in a 6/8 pattern in the guitars alongside the standard kick/bass on the downbeat and snare on the offbeat pattern. The second phrase of the verse has an interesting drum part, measure 13, where the drums are now playing fills that emphasize the lack of snare beat accents and switches the four-bar phrasing of A B B A to A B A B. Coupled with the guitar’s triplets on the downbeats, the harmonic changes, and the addition of another quartal voice, the second phrase is propelled forward, creating a sense of unease and unsteadiness that makes the listener feel like the solid foundation was just pulled out from under them. This coincides perfectly with the room given in the vocal line, which comes back in full force with the repeat of phrase one. This style of subtle alterations in the guitars and bass, with larger changes occurring in the drums, is utilized throughout the piece and effectively creates a sense of propulsion and unity.
Burzum

The rhythm of “Dunkelheit” is rather simple in comparison to “Spirit Crusher.” The piece stays in 4/4 the entire time and is almost entirely eight-bar phrases built out of two-bar motives which repeat four times. The rhythms within these measures are simpler as well. A good example of this is the phrase starting at measure 11 (e.g. see mu. ex. 2), which contains straight eighth notes in guitar one and whole and half notes in guitar two, while the bass plays breves. The drum set pattern is an extremely common one of: kick on beat one, snare on three, and hi-hat eighth notes riding throughout. The only other contrasting rhythmic section is the main motive for Section B starting at measure 29. The drums and bass are the same, but the guitar part now has more character. The real addition to the guitar parts here are triplet grace notes that lead into beat two, these build a momentum and rhythmic interest compared to the quarter note and two eighth note motif.

Gojira

This song is almost entirely made out of sixteenth note tremolos and straight eighth notes, aside from those examples, the most contrasting section is the B section which features longer notes coupled with syncopation. The most interesting rhythmic aspect of this piece is the A section’s drum part, where Gojira forgoes the typical kick downbeat and snare offbeat pattern (e.g. see mu. ex. 4). In this section the bass drum plays sixteenth notes with the snare added to every fourth sixteenth of each beat. To add to this rhythmic interest Gojira has a polymeter section in the drums starting at measure 3. The bass drum and hi-hat are playing every beat to help anchor the song in 4/4, while this is taking place there is a pattern of three sixteenth notes that goes kick, kick, and snare. This new three note pattern makes it so the accent is constantly
shifting and making the pattern extend past one measure. This motive now takes three measures for it to come back around, with a total of sixteen repetitions of the three note motive. This makes an interesting contrast between the four bar phrases in the guitars that play alongside the three bar phrases in the drums. The three note motive phrasing happens mid-way through, when the other 4/4 phrasing is ending and then restarting. This change is subtle but helps keep motion in the music, an important part of the speed aspect of metal (e.g. see *mu. ex. 7*).

*(musical example no. 7 Drum Patterns in "The Cell")*

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**Final Thoughts**

There are different forms presented in this paper to show how diverse and intricate metal music can be in its structure. Even songs with the same form can be radically different when comparing subsections. “The Cell” and “Dunkelheit” are both A B A prime, or ternary form, but
the amount of distinct subsections, diversity of variations, length of subsections all differ. To see a full overview of these forms view appendix A.

There are many different attributes one can look into which are outside the scope of this paper; these include— but not limited to— timbre, lyrics, and melody. Those aspects were left out to focus on what I viewed to be the core components of these pieces. because this paper is for musicians, songwriters and composers. The intention of this paper was to provide a basic overview of each song and their compositional fundamentals, with the purpose of acquiring a greater understanding of the Metal genre and making this accessible to musicians, songwriters and composers. This will hopefully prompt future research, playing, and music creating. It is my hope as well to build and contribute to a larger body of work in the theory community and music academia with a focus on metal music and other popular music styles.
Appendix A
Band: Burzum

Song: Dunkelheit

Chord Progressions:

1 ii vii V - A
III ii III i - B
III ii III IV - B
V add13 VI7 sus4 - A

B(56m)

A (26m)

[Chord Progressions]

B (32m)

A' (72m) or (32m)

B'/A' continued (40m)

m.89

m.121

m.153

- - - - - - e phrygian and natural minor - e dorian - - - - - -
**Band: Death**

**Song: Spirit Crusher**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A(8m)</th>
<th>B(16m)</th>
<th>C(18m)</th>
<th>D(8m)</th>
<th>E(18m)</th>
<th>F(15m)</th>
<th>G(8m)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intro</td>
<td>Verse</td>
<td>Verse part. II</td>
<td>PreChorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Bridge I</td>
<td>Bridge II</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Chord</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7/8 + 9/8</td>
<td>6/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m.9</td>
<td>m.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dm(Harmonc). f#m</td>
<td>d dorian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chord Progressions:**

1. bVI III iv i bVII i bVII - Chorus

V i v9 bVII V i - Solo II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>H(16m)</th>
<th>I(24m)</th>
<th>J(7m)</th>
<th>K(18m)</th>
<th>B - H Repeat(98m)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chorus II</td>
<td>Solo II</td>
<td>Solo II</td>
<td>Bridge II</td>
<td>Verse - Chorus II</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Chord</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4/4</td>
<td>3/1 + 3/1 + 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m.92</td>
<td>m.108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(natural)</td>
<td>g Phrygian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exact repeat</td>
<td>m.255</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Band: Gojra

Song: The Cell

A (25m) Verse  B (16m)  C (15m) Chorus

4/4

m.1  f dorion  m.26  D pitch center  m.42  f dorion  m.57

Chord Progressions:

(7) VII ii6 - Verse and Chorus

A (25m) Verse  B (16m)  C (15m) Chorus  B (23m) Outro

m.58  m.83  m.99  m.115  m.138

D pitch center  f dorion  D pitch center
Appendix B
Dunkelheit

F

Syn.

V

Gtr.

Gtr.

B. Gtr.

D.S.
Dunkelheit

Syn.

V

Gtr.

Gtr.

B. Gtr.

D.S.

J

Syn.

V

Gtr.

Gtr.

B. Gtr.

D.S.
When night falls she cloaks the world in impenetrable darkness a chill

Dunkelheit
comes from the depths of a place unknown to the
keeper of dreams if it
could then it would steal the sun and the moon from the sky be ware
V: monster at heart

E.Gtr.

Bass

D.S.

V: Don't let it inside it could

E.Gtr.

Bass

D.S.
full No guilt it feeds in plain sight

Spirit Crusher
Stay strong and hold on tight Spirit
Spirit Crusher

Speaking in killing words
The vicious kind that crush and kill
No mercy it's
pleasure to taste
To the blood

that it bled
consume

a breath some will rise standing

tall Breath out all the breath from the

Spirit Crusher
voice of a soul
No guilt it feeds in plain sight Spirit
Speaking in killing words

The vicious kind that crush and
No mercy its pleasure to taste

To the blood that it bled
The Cell

Over crowded in your brain

You'll find a way out or you will fall
Get me out of here
I've been lost in the dark
The Cell
have to let it go now

Get me out of here I've been lost in the dar-
The Cell

V

E.Gtr. 1

E.Gtr. 2

E.Gtr. 3

Bass

D. S.

V

E.Gtr. 1

E.Gtr. 2

E.Gtr. 3

Bass

D. S.
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