

The Place of Schenkerian Analysis in Undergraduate and Graduate Curricula

David Gagné

Introduction

Since Schenker's death some sixty years ago, many principles and ways of thinking that he first introduced have become an integral part of musical discourse. Concepts such as prolongation and the notion of structural levels are now frequently taught to music students, and analytical graphs are commonplace in theory journals.

At the same time, the field of Schenkerian analysis has expanded and diversified in the last three decades. Studies of pre-Baroque and twentieth-century works have explored structure from a Schenkerian perspective in repertoires that Schenker himself did not address. Current research is expanding the consideration of rhythm, texture, orchestration, form, and other compositional features in relation to structure.¹

¹See for example Allen Cadwallader, ed., *Trends in Schenkerian Research* (New York: Schirmer, 1990); William Rothstein, *Phrase Rhythm in Tonal Music* (New York: Schirmer, 1989); Janet Schmalfeldt, "Towards a Reconciliation of Schenkerian Concepts

As new ideas are being developed in teaching and research, a re-examination of established paradigms is also taking place. How can we maintain what is best in existing ways of studying and teaching music, yet also integrate repertoire and ways of thinking that reflect current interests, and the needs and concerns of students today? And, how can training in Schenkerian principles and procedures best serve the needs of students in this new, larger context?

In addressing these questions, it is useful to distinguish between undergraduate and graduate curricula. Undergraduate theory and analysis classes are primarily intended to develop fundamental musical literacy and musicianship skills; graduate programs have a more specific professional focus, requiring a different orientation in subject matter and course work. Since a student is first introduced to musical analysis on the undergraduate level, it seems appropriate to begin here.

Undergraduate Curricula

Any discussion of the place of Schenkerian analysis in undergraduate curricula should begin by considering the broader context of such curricula, and some of the purposes which they may be intended to serve. I shall first address these general concerns, and then explore more specific curricular issues.

A typical undergraduate theory curriculum seeks to develop knowledge of functional harmony, and the ability to write and to comprehend exercises and pieces in different styles. Frequently the study of counterpoint is also included—either species counterpoint, Baroque counterpoint, or both—though not necessarily as a requirement for all music students. Yet in the process of offering such theory courses, institutions do not always consider what they ultimately wish

with Traditional and Recent Concepts of Form,” *Music Analysis* 10/3 (October 1991): 233-87; David Gagné, “Performance Medium as a Compositional Determinant,” Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1988. Several recent studies of pre-Baroque and twentieth-century works are listed in David Beach, “Bibliography of Schenkerian Theory,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 11/1 (Spring 1989): 3-14.

the students to learn. What does musical literacy ideally mean, and to what extent can it realistically be achieved? What kinds of musical skills are the students gaining, and how proficient are they expected to be?

Such questions are also being addressed in a new light because of the ongoing discussion of relevant cultural, social, and economic concerns. In many institutions, music theory and music history curricula are focal points of vigorous discussion among faculty members, part of a larger debate about similar issues that is taking place in society today.

However, music differs from many other humanistic disciplines in that it requires such a specific and complex combination of skills and abilities. Most music majors are expected to achieve proficiency on at least one instrument, entailing a combination of physical, mental, and aural training. A well conceived ear-training and musicianship program can substantially improve general musical proficiency. Thus some aspects of an education in music are not necessarily associated with a particular culture or musical style, but serve to provide students with the skills necessary to pursue any interests or orientation which they might have.

Similarly, training in functional harmony and voice leading establishes a basis for understanding music that can serve as a foundation for the study of virtually any musical style, western or non-western. The emphasis here is primarily on the teaching of skills, rather than on the specific pieces chosen for study. Thus, the structure of the program and the repertoire studied can be varied in accordance with the interests and priorities of the faculty and the needs of the students.²

While many institutions offer solid training in basic theory and musicianship, problems often arise with regard to more advanced courses. Such courses may not be offered at all; or, if they are, they

²For example, a number of institutions have found it valuable to integrate counterpoint and harmony in the beginning stages of study. John Rothgeb advocates beginning theory training with counterpoint, followed by figured bass, and finally harmonic theory as an introduction to analysis, in "Schenkerian Theory: Its Implications for the Undergraduate Curriculum," *Music Theory Spectrum* 3 (1981): 142-49.

may be highly specialized in one repertoire or another. Yet it is difficult for many students to apply what they have learned to the analysis of a specific work. Harmonic principles and progressions are easily forgotten. The students may not have learned to hear the theory exercises they write; or, if they have, they may not have developed their inner ear any further. Music history may seem tangential to their other work in music. Musical form may have received only limited coverage in their courses, and the students' notions of form may be rudimentary.

A student who is not able to analyze music of different styles is less than fully prepared for a career in music, whether as performer, composer, scholar, or teacher. Because of the limited time available in courses, faculty must choose an appropriate variety of styles to be taught. The essential point, however, is that students need one or more courses that integrate their previous studies, and show them how to employ the skills and knowledge which they have acquired to understand the music that they will perform or teach.

Many institutions offer a course in form and analysis to fulfill this need. The study of different types of musical forms, combined with a survey of musical styles, can provide the students with a good general orientation. In all probability, however, the review and development of the students' skills in understanding and hearing musical structures of different kinds will not be emphasized. Students will gain in knowledge and breadth, but their musicianship may not develop commensurately.

Recent discussion about Schenker and his approach to analysis has focused primarily on the more theoretical aspects of his work, and on his cultural milieu and orientation. Consequently it is often forgotten that Schenkerian analysis is fundamentally practical in its orientation, and is less a "theory" (understood in the present-day, formalistic sense of the term) than an *approach* that enhances our ability to hear and to comprehend music.³ As Edward Laufer has stated, "analysis becomes not an end in itself, but a means to a richer and clearer understanding

³Pianist Murray Perahia recently noted that "for Schenker it's the ear, not the mind, that's the guiding principle." *New York Times*, 3 April 1994, sec. 2: 25.

of the music, essential for performance.”⁴ Because it integrates harmony and voice leading in an overall conception of musical structure, it provides a comprehensive and profound grasp of a musical work. Considerations such as rhythm, texture, expression, and lyric impetus are not excluded; rather, the analysis and its graphic expression may serve as a basis for comprehensive discussion of the form, style, and meaning of the composition.⁵

Schenkerian analysis can thus serve as an effective basis for an advanced undergraduate course. Most undergraduate students have limited interest in the more sophisticated aspects of theory; normally, therefore, the emphasis should be on the music studied rather than on theoretical or analytical principles in general. The preparation of analytical graphs should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a way in which students can learn to focus and represent their understanding of the structure of a piece. (Since the graph is concerned primarily with structure, other aspects of the music including style, design, etc. may be discussed in class, and in tests and assignments as a written essay.) The more technical aspects of graphing need not be emphasized unduly at this level of study; rather, the focus should be on learning to communicate what the students hear and understand.

The interpretation of higher levels of structure, including the *Ursatz*, is generally less important for undergraduate students than learning to perceive aspects of structure and style in the foreground.⁶ Laufer, paraphrasing several passages from *Free Composition*, notes

⁴Edward Laufer, review of *Free Composition*, by Heinrich Schenker, in *Music Theory Spectrum* 3 (1981): 159.

⁵For an outstanding example of the use of Schenkerian analytical techniques in a comprehensive study of style and structure, see Roger C. Graybill, “Brahms’s Three-Key Expositions: Their Place Within the Classical Tradition,” Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1983. Lawrence Kramer advocates the integration of postmodernist music criticism with structural analysis in “Haydn’s Chaos, Schenker’s Order, or Hermeneutics and Musical Analysis: Can They Mix?,” *19th-Century Music* 16/1 (Summer 1992): 3-17.

⁶Higher levels of structure will, however, inevitably and naturally be introduced in the context of complete phrases and sections of a piece; these may receive greater or lesser emphasis according to the nature of the class and the preference of the instructor.

that “it is not necessary for the performer to have a precise technical knowledge of [Schenker’s] theories; a general understanding of the foreground and correct hearing of linear progressions will be of the greatest benefit.”⁷ Study of structural analysis will refine and develop the student’s ability to comprehend events as a piece unfolds, and ways in which these events are related in a larger musical context.

The syllabus and structure of such an undergraduate analysis course would vary depending upon its relation with the rest of the curriculum and the repertoire to be studied. If training in structural analysis itself is to be the central focus, the approach suggested below for graduate-level instruction could be adapted for undergraduate students, with primary emphasis on structure and style in the foreground (and middleground levels close to the foreground). If the course is to be more general in nature, a text in structural analysis could be made available to the students as an adjunct to the course, and graphing assignments could be interspersed with essays, preparation of form diagrams, etc.⁸

In either case each piece studied should be presented in its cultural and historical context. Regardless of the structure and repertoire of the course, students should be introduced to a variety of genres, examples of text-music relations in vocal music, relations between style and structure, and different modes of musical expression. Alternative analytical perspectives might also be introduced.

If class size and time permit, students may be invited to present an analysis of a work which they will also perform for the class. (This might require one or two meetings with the instructor, as needed, in advance of the class presentation.) The kind of analysis presented could vary according to the interests and abilities of the student and the nature of the piece itself. Each presentation should include discussion of the history and context of the work and its composer, and any

⁷Laufer, review of *Free Composition*, 159.

⁸Several such texts are currently available; in addition, Heinrich Schenker’s *Five Graphic Analyses* (1933; New York: Dover, 1969) provides illuminating examples of graphs on several levels of structure, as well as an introduction and glossary by Felix Salzer.

relevant considerations such as text, program, etc. Preparing and presenting a work from the student's own repertoire is inspiring not only for the individual student (who is almost invariably astonished and delighted that there is so much to discover in the piece), but also for the entire class. Above all, it demonstrates that analysis is fundamentally practical, and that the students' studies in music will benefit them throughout their professional lives.

Because Schenker's approach developed in relation to a particular repertoire, its applicability to other styles and periods has frequently been questioned. It is likely that some of the general features of the background and the first level of middleground presented in *Free Composition* appear most characteristically in Western music of the Baroque, Classic, and Romantic periods. Yet many of the techniques discussed—such as registral transformations and couplings, motions between voices, and different forms of embellishment and composing out—are fundamental in music from diverse periods and cultures. Learning to recognize such procedures greatly enhances and refines a student's overall musicality.

Finally, the issue of perception should be mentioned. However we may hear and recognize musical tones and patterns, our understanding of music is inherently subjective. Like literary comprehension, the appreciation of music is a culturally-grounded form of behavior that represents the sum of an individual's experience, training, and preferences. Thus perception is a complex, multifaceted process: it includes the physical acts of hearing and cerebral processing of sound, but also mental recognition and interpretation. These are among the skills that a music curriculum is intended to develop, and that cause trained musicians to hear music differently than untrained listeners.⁹ The study of structural analysis enhances a student's ability to recognize musical structure and design on the foreground level, and to become more aware of the nature and interrelationships of larger structural units. In an undergraduate class structured along the lines that

⁹For a discussion of this subject see Rita Aiello, "Can Listening to Music Be Experimentally Studied?" in *Musical Perceptions*, ed. Rita Aiello with John A. Sloboda (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 273-82.

have been suggested, therefore, the practical benefit of structural analysis in improving perception is considerable. (Higher levels of structure may not be perceptible in an experiential sense; like deeper structures in language and literature, they serve rather to guide and shape the music as heard.)

Graduate Curricula

Whether for the theory or the theory and composition major, or for prospective scholars in other disciplines of music, competence in analytical skills is essential for graduate-level education and research. Naturally a program will tend to stress those areas of study that correspond to the specialties and interests of its faculty; nevertheless students should acquire at least basic proficiency in recognized analytical techniques in order to be well prepared for their careers.

Schenkerian analysis is commonly accepted as one approach to the understanding of tonal music. Frequently it is taught as part of an introductory course in analytical techniques, which may incorporate a variety of approaches to diverse repertoires. While this may give the students a general impression of the subject, it is not sufficient to develop competency in structural analysis. Schenker's ideas are subtle and complex, and require time to absorb. Because the approach is fundamentally heuristic rather than formal, students can acquire skill in its application only through analyses of numerous works on increasing levels of difficulty. If possible, selected readings from *Free Composition* and discussion of the conceptual and cultural framework of Schenker's thought should also be included. (In any case, bibliographies of Schenker's writings and of more recent studies in the field should be distributed.)¹⁰ To achieve these goals would require a minimum of one semester; students wishing to acquire an advanced

¹⁰In addition to the 1989 bibliography by David Beach cited above, see David Beach, "A Schenker Bibliography," *Readings in Schenker Analysis and Other Approaches*, ed. Maury Yeston (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), which contains a chronological listing of Schenker's works.

level of knowledge and competence would need substantially more training.

In order to teach structural analysis effectively, the background and level of preparation of the students must be considered. Typically, a group of students who have done their undergraduate work at various institutions will differ significantly in the type and extent of theory training that they have had. And, in any case, the need for review should be assumed.

A course in Schenkerian analysis can effectively address these concerns if it is structured appropriately. The presentation of fundamental principles of voice leading can incorporate discussion of relevant contrapuntal principles.¹¹ Initial considerations of the nature of harmony, and of harmonic prolongations and motions, can include review of essential harmonic progressions and cadence types. At each stage students should be encouraged to work independently with suitable harmony and counterpoint texts to fill in any gaps in their basic knowledge and skills. (In some cases students might also benefit from auditing undergraduate theory classes.)¹²

In accordance with the heuristic spirit of Schenkerian analysis, concepts and procedures are generally best taught *from* a selected group of pieces (rather than using a musical example to illustrate a point that has already been presented). In this way, students will absorb the analytical orientation and process together with the subject matter. Finally, Oster's recommendation that study of *Free Composition* should begin with the sections on diminution and the foreground is equally

¹¹See Chapters 6 and 7 from Felix Salzer and Carl Schachter, *Counterpoint in Composition* (1969; New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) for an invaluable discussion of relations between excerpts in various compositional styles and the principles of strict counterpoint.

¹²Valuable reviews of several current texts in counterpoint and harmony have recently appeared: Mary H. Wennerstrom, "Reviews of Recent Textbooks in Theory and Musicianship 2: Counterpoint," *Music Theory Spectrum* 15/2 (Fall 1993): 235-40; Roger Graybill, "Reviews of Recent Textbooks in Theory and Musicianship 4: Harmony," *Music Theory Spectrum* 15/2 (Fall 1993): 257-66. Though less recent than the texts listed in Professor Wennerstrom's review, Salzer and Schachter's *Counterpoint in Composition* can also be highly recommended.

appropriate for an introductory course.¹³

A possible sequence of topics, incorporating these recommendations, is given below:¹⁴

- A. *Melody and Polyphony*: Melodic contour and polyphonic melody; review of relative motions of voices, principles of figuration, and characteristic types of dissonance, especially as exemplified in species counterpoint.¹⁵
- B. *Bass Line and Harmonic Structure*: The nature of the bass as both melody line and harmonic support; contrapuntal chords (neighbor, passing, etc.); harmonic prolongation; study of representative harmonic progressions and techniques (cadence types, tonicization, modulation, etc.) from a Schenkerian perspective.
- C. *Linear Techniques*: Linear progressions; characteristic linear patterns such as 5-6, 10-10, 10-6, etc.
- D. *Phrase Structure*: The harmonically and melodically closed phrase as the smallest complete structure; foreground *Urfinie* and *Ursatz* formations, including interruption; harmonic and melodic expansion within the phrase.
- E. *Smaller Forms*: To include one-part and short two-part (binary) forms; survey of characteristic compositional techniques such as reaching over, unfolding, etc. (many of which will have already been informally introduced).
- F. *Larger Forms*: To include ternary form; nineteenth-century character pieces; sonata form (if time permits).

¹³Ernst Oster, Preface, *Free Composition (Der freie Satz)*: Volume III of *New Musical Theories and Fantasies*, by Heinrich Schenker, trans. and ed. Ernst Oster (New York: Longman, 1979), xiii.

¹⁴This outline is based on a forthcoming text: Allen Cadwallader and David Gagné, *A Schenkerian Approach to the Analysis of Tonal Music*, to be published by Schirmer Books.

¹⁵See Salzer and Schachter, *Counterpoint in Composition*, Chapters 6 and 7.

Since the *Ursatz* framework may be replicated on various structural levels, this concept is best introduced in the context of a single phrase (such as Mozart's Piano Sonata in G major, K. 283, I, mm. 1-16) where it may be readily heard and understood. Having begun with study of the foreground, the students can thus gradually learn to interpret higher levels of structure. Specific terminology and concepts may be introduced informally at first, then systematically discussed later in the semester in conjunction with appropriate passages in *Free Composition*. As mentioned above in the section on undergraduate instruction, the preparation of a graph is not an end in itself: aspects of rhythm, design, style, expression, and context, as well as issues relevant to performance, should be incorporated into the discussion of each work.

On an introductory level, the interpretation of higher levels of structure helps the student learn to recognize that musical coherence can be created in a multiplicity of ways over various spans of musical time and space. (This concept is important in many current approaches to musical analysis.) It is important for students to realize that levels of structure may overlap, and cannot always be logically and systematically determined. In his commentary on *Free Composition*, Carl Schachter discusses this issue:

Schenker's middleground levels, like the fundamental structure, show a combination of principal and subordinate elements... As a result, Schenker's levels tend to depict coherent tonal structures—complete linear progressions, arpeggiations, couplings, unfoldings, etc.—rather than the fragmentary 'reductions' of some later analysts. The advantage of coherence that accrues to Schenker's method more than compensates for any loss of rigor, especially since one can usually reconstruct without much trouble the stages omitted from his presentation of a given prolongation. The fact that fewer levels are required is also an advantage when one is dealing with long and

complicated works.¹⁶

Elusive though the process may sometimes be, learning to interpret the middleground (and background) levels is essential for the understanding and appreciation of large-scale motivic relationships, of variation and transformation procedures, and of the multiplicity of ways in which large-scale coherence may be established.

In an introductory course, it is probably best to choose pieces from the repertoire that Schenker studied, and for which his ideas are most clearly relevant. Students may also be introduced to studies of pre-Baroque and post-Romantic music from a Schenkerian perspective, perhaps with some indication of differing viewpoints. More advanced courses might consider the extent to which Schenkerian (and other) methods can be helpful in relation to other repertoires.

Some recent studies have explored the origins of Schenker's philosophical perspective by examining the cultural and intellectual world in which he lived.¹⁷ Schenker's beliefs and preferences, which are obvious in his writings, may at times seem odd and even troubling from a contemporary perspective. Yet the value and importance of Schenker's approach clearly transcends such limitations. And the more metaphysical aspects of Schenker's thought may be of value for some: for example, the philosophical foundation of the *Ursatz* may seem irrelevant or even outlandish to some students, but will engage the imagination of others. It is important to understand Schenker's ideas in the context of his cultural milieu; however the fact that he was opinionated (like many in his era) does not diminish the importance of his analytical insights for our own time.

As we have seen, the study of Schenkerian analysis offers a great

¹⁶Carl Schachter, "A Commentary on Schenker's *Free Composition*," *Journal of Music Theory* 25/1 (Spring 1981): 118-19.

¹⁷See for example Kevin Korsyn, "Schenker and Kantian Epistemology," *Theoria* 3 (1988): 1-58; William Pastille, "Music and Morphology: Goethe's Influence on Schenker's Thought," *Schenker Studies*, ed. Heidi Siegel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 29-44.

deal both to undergraduate-level and to graduate-level students. Schenker's approach is based upon an integration of harmony and counterpoint, and therefore helps students to synthesize what they have learned in previous theory studies. In the process of learning to interpret both the musical surface and higher levels of structure, students learn to understand and to hear music more perceptively. Students gain analytical skills that establish a foundation for future research and study, and that help to prepare them for careers in music as performers, scholars, or teachers.

Faculty in many institutions are currently engaged in a dialogue about what students should learn, and why. Established ways of thinking are being questioned, and new, more inclusive curricula are being developed. Yet in this process we must not lose sight of the most essential aspects of musical training, and the skills that music students will need in the competitive professional environment that they will face. The importance of Schenkerian analysis for research has long been recognized; it can also be of great value as an integral part of education in theory and analysis both on the undergraduate and on the graduate levels.

