

Structure and voice-leading

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Abstract: *It is well-known that schenkerian analysis enables performers to understand at least one feature of the aesthetic response to good music, explaining why one passage sounds logical and another illogical. This allows them to establish some of the workings of musical syntax, achieving insights about style which one could not reach by other types of analysis. Simple reductions of the musical surface can reveal hidden motivic connections. Because the outlines at the deepest level of analysis are so generalised, and because the rules of counterpoint and diminution are general techniques of the time, the method cannot easily distinguish between the styles of different composers.*

Key-words: *voice-leading, linear movement, structure, musical analysis, reduction.*

1. Introduction

Although the basic concepts of voice leading have a long history, the system of analysis based on the emphasis on voice leading is relatively recent, having been developed over the last hundred years. It is often associated with the name of the person who developed many of its terms and methods, the Viennese composer, pianist and music editor Heinrich Schenker.

He is best known today for his radical and controversial theories of tonal structure, but the most known concepts of his theory – foreground, middleground and background – were not developed until late in his life, and were not published until after his death in 1935. Before this, his analytical ideas and observations began to develop through his work as an editor and critic.

Schenker started his analyses of music when he encountered difficulties in producing editions of musical works. A variety of sources may be used in preparing an edition, in particular the composer's original manuscript where that is available. Circumstances arise where there are two or more possible versions of a passage, and in these cases Schenker thought that, by analysing each of them, he could prove which was more logical and musical, and therefore identify the one the composer intended to use. Some of Schenker's editions are still in print today: for instance, the complete Beethoven Piano Sonatas (now published by Dover). In his work as a

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critic, Schenker was opposed to any sort of Modernism, and believed in the supremacy of the tonal system. He was also bitterly opposed to the traditional types of music analysis of the later nineteenth century, in particular, the idea of a stereotype for models such as sonata form. Instead, he was concerned with the unveiling of hidden processes and linear shapes in tonal music.

2. Biographical data

Heinrich Schenker was a music theorist, best known for his approach to musical analysis, called Schenkerian analysis. Beginning his career as pianist, composer and critic and being a pioneer in the study of manuscripts and their publication, Schenker led a musical life of notable variety.

Schenker was born in Wisniowczyki in Galicia in Austria-Hungary (now Ternopil Oblast, Ukraine). His musical talent was acknowledged early on, and in the late 1880s, he moved to Vienna where he studied music under Anton Bruckner and became known as a pianist, accompanying lieder singers and playing chamber music. He also earned a doctoral degree in jurisprudence at the University. He taught piano and music theory, some of his students being Wilhelm Furtwängler, Anthony van Hoboken and Felix Salzer.

Harmony (Harmonielehre, 1906) and *Counterpoint* (Kontrapunkt, 2 vols., 1910 and 1922), are the books where Schenker's ideas on analysis were first explored. These writings first appeared in the two journals he published, *Der Tonwille* (1921-1924) and *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik* (1925-1930), both of which included content exclusively by Schenker. He considered his analyses as tools to be used by performers for a deeper understanding of the works they were performing. *Five Graphic Music Analyses* (Fünf Urlinie-Tafeln) published in 1932, analyses five works, using the analytical technique of showing layers of greater and less significant musical detail. Following Schenker's death, his incomplete theoretical work *Free Composition* (Der freie Satz, 1935) was published (first translated into English by T. H. Kreuger in 1960 as a dissertation at the University of Iowa; a second, better translation, was published in 1979 by Ernst Oster).

Schenker's ideas have been extended, codified and debated, first by his friends and pupils, many of whom fled to America at the outbreak of the Second World War, and latterly by American, British and other scholars of music worldwide. Many articles in specialist journals such as *Music Analysis* in the UK and *Music Theory Spectrum* in the USA now assume an acquaintance with Schenker's ideas, methods and notations. His analytical method has been one of the most important topics in the theory of music since about 1970, and its applications within and beyond the field of tonal music are widely (and sometimes heatedly) discussed.

3. A universal analytical approach

Music analysis represents the most useful way of study and improvement of musical interpretations. Performers who use music analysis efficiently will find it a valuable means for finding the kind of musical richness they desire in their interpretations. The use of Schenkerian analysis in performance offers a rational basis and a unique way of interpreting music in performance.

Schenkerian analysis is probably the most spread approach in analyzing tonal music. In the last decades, there have been many attempts to apply Schenkerian analysis to other musical traditions than the one it was created for (tonal music). Schenker was not afraid to criticize what he saw as a general lack of theoretical and practical understanding amongst musicians. As a dedicated performer, composer, teacher and editor of music himself, he believed that the professional practice of all these activities suffered from serious misunderstandings of how tonal music works. He gradually developed his theory in order to remedy this situation, which he feared was causing the death of the Austro-German tradition that he loved (the music of Bach through Mozart to Beethoven and beyond).

As expressed in his late writings, such as *Free Composition*, published in 1935 shortly after his death, most of Schenker's theory is culturally and stylistically particular, therefore the availability of just a few forms of the fundamental structure, the voice-leading principles, and the emphasis on triads, among other constraints, make it applicable just to a very specific repertoire. Actually, Schenker only analyses German instrumental music of the 18th and 19th centuries, mainly by Händel, J. S. and C. P. E. Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms. The only exceptions are the foreign composers Chopin and Scarlatti and the vocal music by J. S. Bach (chorales) and Schubert and Schumann (lieder). In spite of this fact, Schenker assumed his theory to have universal validity. As based on nature, the harmonic series would be applicable to any good music. Therefore, Schenker believes that only the music above mentioned is good music. He did not consider non-classical music, considering music before 1700 to be just an early stage which would lead later to "true" music. He also rejected the composers of his own time and derided most European non-German music, especially Italian opera.

Those who practice Schenkerian analysis do not assume these aesthetic implications nowadays. They acknowledge Schenker's theory to be culturally specific and, as such, only applicable to a very limited repertoire. Attempts of application to other kinds of music are considered by theorists to require important adaptations in the theory.

Schenker believed that much of the responsibility for the general poor understanding of music lay with other theorists and critics, and the greater part of his early work was concerned with correcting the mistakes. His theory aimed to clarify and correct existing theories of harmony and counterpoint before bringing them together as a comprehensive theory of tonal music. Schenker's main purpose was to improve the understanding of music amongst musicians, but he also tried to develop an analytical system that would bear comparison with other traditionally more rigorous disciplines.

4. Inside music's details

Schenker's theory aims to explain the organic coherence of the "best" pieces of the so-called "common-practice" tonal music, though Schenker did not use this term. In short, this coherence is mainly achieved through directed tonal motion, where the relationship between dominant and tonic harmonies is the basic principle, as synthesized in the fundamental structure. Schenker considered that the deep, long-range structure of a piece of music has no specific rhythm, therefore the musical reductions of Schenkerian analysis are generally arrhythmic. The long-range structure is called Background (or fundamental structure), while the surface details of the music represent the Foreground. It could be stated that "the background of a musical composition is arrhythmic," or, "rhythm is a characteristic of the musical foreground".

One of the main assumption Schenker makes is the subordination of some sounds to others as their elaborations, and the correspondence of this phenomenon at different levels of musical structure. This assumption permits Schenker to represent music in a hierarchy of levels from foreground to background, or to generate music from background to foreground, as he does in his *Free Composition*.

The linear process, where the musical foreground can be seen as the elaboration of underlying lines moving contrapuntally in treble and bass, is what is generally acknowledged as "voice leading". The musical surface may proceed by leaps, but is controlled by linear, step-wise movements at a deeper level. The foreground, in analytical terms, means the consonant harmony that makes the actual notes of the musical surface make sense.

Other important assumptions concern: the nature of structural harmonies, which must be triadic and diatonic; the fundamental line, which must be a step-wise descent from the 8th, 5th or 3rd to the tonic and the application of the rules of counterpoint, such as the generation of dissonances from motions between consonances and the prohibition of parallel fifths and octaves, at all hierarchical levels. The passing notes generate the apparently deviant harmonies of the surface and without this large-scale linear process in the bass, the juxtaposition of the "unrelated" chords would sound abnormal and distinctly out of style.

In the language of tonality, some notes are more structurally significant than others: that tonal music operates within a sort of hierarchy in which the framework underpins the surface and gives it cohesion and order. The treble and bass parts can each be called a voice, and in this framework, each note leads by step to the next. In tonal music, dissonances only occur in specific, controlled contexts. These hold true for all music between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. This enables musicians to establish some rules for how dissonances are treated, which fall into three basic categories: passing notes, neighbour notes and suspensions.

Like any successful form of analysis, the schenkerian analysis should always be based on your aural perception of a particular passage. In other words, the analysis should be an extension of the musical hearing.

Some may find that analysing the foreground, or the musical surface, of the music according attention on microscopic detail rather different from approaches that analyse extended forms such as sonata form by looking at key-schemes and thematic groups.

The musicians that have come across techniques of analysing music before, these may well have been either what is termed “chord-function” analysis (for example, the progressions), or what is termed “motivic” analysis. While voice-leading analysis is theoretically no more difficult than the classic methods, it does tend to be relatively overwhelming to the novices. This is partly because voice-leading analysis carries with it the baggage of its own set of technical terms, and partly because it has its own unique system of notation. The results of a voice-leading analysis are presented as graphs which are made up of the symbols developed for this system of analysis. Many of these symbols look like conventional musical notation, but in a voice-leading graph they have specific meanings different from those they carry in an ordinary musical score. The result is that a voice-leading graph looks unusual, even incomprehensible to someone who has not learned the meaning of the individual symbols.

The first step towards a large-scale analysis is to be able to distinguish the notes that are structural (those that belong to the framework of the music) and those that belong only to the surface. The process of doing this is called reduction because it involves reducing the number of notes in the score to those which are most essential. Reduction in this sense is central to schenkerian analysis. However, one cannot choose which notes to keep in and which to leave out at random: we need clear rules by which we go about making a reduction of a passage.

The ways in which dissonant notes occur in music all share one notable feature. They make a note or a harmony extend over a longer period of time than just its bare statement. Two notes of a chord may be stretched out by having a passing note placed between them; a single note may move to a neighbour note, and then return; a harmony may be extended by a suspension, such as a ${}^6_4 - {}^5_3$ before a cadence. In all these cases, we say that the note or chord involved is being prolonged by the use of dissonance. The concept of prolongation is absolutely central to schenkerian analysis, especially when one comes to consider deeper levels of structure than the foreground.

5. Conclusions

Studying the theories of Schenker, one may wonder about the point of making reductions when the original music is so much more beautiful and satisfying than the simple structure with which the analyst or performer end up. But it makes sense that a performer is not interested in making reductions simply to make the harmony look simpler. Rather, the performer should try to find how the surface of music is generated by a series of elaborations of a deeper-level linear logic. The process is somewhat akin to grammatical analysis of a sentence.

Also, many may wonder if composers think of music as being composed of a series of levels in the way that schenkerian analysis reveals a piece of music. It is almost certain that composers would not literally have worked in this way, conceiving of the framework first and then elaborating on it in a series of steps. But it is probably that are familiar with the processes of elaboration and variation that underpin this type of analysis. A certain progression would have sounded satisfying to, just as it does to us, because the composers have internalised the principles of the underlying processes that give it coherence.

Style is rooted in a contrapuntal relationship between treble and bass, where surface gestures are controlled by large-scale linear movement at a deeper level. When this overall linear logic is absent, the music sounds unconvincing and out of style. Developing from the idea is the concept of a system of hierarchical levels, similar to the structures of grammar, where a simple deep-level line may be elaborated rather like a series of ‘variations’ to produce the musical surface. Each level is transformed into the next by a process of elaboration, using four main types of transformation: passing note, neighbour note, suspension and arpeggiation.

It is worth pointing out that this type of analysis has produced mixed reactions among writers on music. Some have embraced the system while, others have dismissed the entire theory as pointless or as unmusical. But it is certain that there are great insights into the workings of harmony that one can express only by using this kind of approach.

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