

## Fundamental structures of classical music

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**Abstract:** *It is known that a successful artistic performance depends not only on the number of hours that an instrumentalist dedicates to individual study. A thorough finishing of the interpreted repertoire is also determined by its approach from an analytical perspective. Reflected in the complexity level of the musicological research method, the qualitative aspect of the performance can reach the depth of the musical discourse, the success of interpretation thus bringing the composer's message closer to the performer and implicitly to the audience. Originating in the studies of pianist, composer and musical critic Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935), Schenkerian analysis represents an exhaustive and significant method of musical investigation, its comprehensiveness being able to easily decode and highlight stylistic-interpretative elements of the musical text. Establishing the fundamental bases of the harmonic and counterpoint dimensions in the musical works, the analysis emphasizes through specific techniques important particularities of the fundamental structures and offers the performer an objective image of the primordial harmonic-melodic components, even of those apparently insignificant in the musical context. Drawing on Heinrich Schenker's ideas and theories, the present article considers the functionality of the elements that are part of the fundamental structures, using fragments from the classical music literature as a study object.*

Key-words: *classical music, analysis, Schenker, structure, performance*

### 1. Introduction

It is remarkable how some instrumentalists manage to memorize and reproduce countless musical masterpieces in every detail, at an impressively qualitative level, with impeccable precision and technique, as if the performer were the composer himself. Besides the great talent of all these admirable artists, the limitless number

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of hours that they dedicate to individual study, their vast musical knowledge, and the analytical thinking through which they filter their repertoire assure them of a successful interpretation. Cerebral playing, contrary to the opinions that place talent at the top of success, will always be a primary condition of quality interpretation.

Among the most effective study methods, Schenkerian analysis offers through its complexity the theoretical basis on which instrumentalists can build a high-toned artistic performance. As stated by Allen Cadwallader and David Gagne in their book *"Analysis of tonal music"*, they can develop on the strength of this analysis the necessary abilities for recognizing the structure of a musical text from their very first contact with the score, which allows them to become more aware of the nature and interdependence of the constitutive units.

Studied and practiced ever since the last century by the great music academies, it deeply explores the universe of creations, presenting both aspects that belong to the harmonic and contrapuntal dimensions and essential melodic features. Relying on the tonal principles according to which the functionality of each step is related to a tonal centre, Schenkerian analysis introduces certain specific techniques through which the fundamental structures of the studied fragments were elaborated and particularized by composers. Bearing the name of critic, teacher, pianist, theorist and composer Heinrich Schenker, the analysis facilitates the understanding of the musical text, which he gives a complex and thorough examination. It is a significant analytical method, which, as Burstein remarks, presents voice leading and the tonal structure of a work that span a phrase, a section, and even the whole work.

"The Austrian music theorist Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935) developed a highly regarded method for representing voice leading and tonal structure by means of multilayered contrapuntal/ harmonic models. [...] In his analyses, Schenker depicted not only voice-leading motions that take place from one moment to the next, but also voice-leading motions that span an entire phrase, an entire section, or even an entire composition." (Burstein 2009, 61)

## **2. The fundamental structure – theoretical views**

Born in 1868, Heinrich Schenker was the most original theorist of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century musical thinking. He promoted new principles of practical-analytical interpretation of tonal music, giving it a new sense in melodic, harmonic and formal terms. Taking as a model some of the works of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century great masters like

Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven, Schenker materialized his analysis by focusing on their compositional particularities and by patenting a set of analytical, musically coherent and argued rules and templates.

He wrote his ideas on paper and published both analyses and various didactic treatises on harmony and counterpoint, thus lending his support to the instrumentalists willing to interpret their repertoire in a conscious and scientifically founded manner. To this effect, one can mention the treatise on harmony, "Harmonielehre", the one on counterpoint, "Kontrapunkt", and his work "Der freie Satz", also known as "Free composition", which presents for the first time the harmonically and contrapuntally reunited organization and functioning of a classical tonal composition, configuring in this way the concept of fundamental structure.

Just like the outcome of an X-ray examination, the fundamental structure defines the components of the work's melodic-harmonic pattern, which is finalized after several specific reductions that structurally phase the analysis. The progressive approach to research fathers several structural levels known as foreground, middle ground, and background. Through these processes, which musicological consist in the identification and cataloguing of diminutions according to their significance in the musical context, the melodic notes and the primary harmonic concatenations of the studied musical work are highlighted. As analytical elements that are essential for interpretation, these aspects and their importance are reflected in the objective and scientifically justified approach to the musical text. Their functionality is revealed in the coherence with which the musical discourse follows a natural course of rationally conducted events. By identifying the climaxes of the melodic discourses and the structural objectives of the harmonic support, Schenkerian analysis achieves the purpose of its own examination.

### **3. The essential components of the fundamental structure**

The fundamental structure, originally known as and termed *ursatz* by Heinrich Schenker, reflects the particularities of two structural planes belonging to the melodic and harmonic dimension of the musical text. Taken individually, their independence appears fairly convincing, although in reality mutual completion is required from a functional point of view. Consequently, the structural basis of the melodic plane resulting from the removal of the contrapuntal diminutions is supported by the fundamental tonal movement of the harmonic plane. Interacting dynamically, these planes can define the fundamental structure of a phrase, a

section, or even an entire musical work, the type of approach being in accordance with the depth of the elaborated structural level, the number of reductions increasing with the complexity of analysis. The present article will only refer to the fundamental structures that can be applied to musical phrases.

### **3.1. The fundamental line - *The Urlinie***

The composition of the fundamental structures involves the existence of a descendent melodic line that goes by the name of *Urlinie*. "The Urlinie thus abstractly represents the melodic dimension of tonal music [...] the Urlinie is the highest-level linear progression of an entire piece or movement." (Cadwallader, Gagne 1998, 118-119) As stated by musicologists Allen Cadwallader and David Gagne, Schenker employs the term *Urlinie* to express the melodic dimension of music, which, connected to a tonal center, is in fact a linear reflection of the harmonic plane. This fundamental line originates in the harmony of tonic, to which it introduces, through the passing tone, the component elements in melodic position. Practically, its content arises from the harmony of tonic and is based on the chord notes built on the first step, on the tonic, on the third or fifth of tonality, presented with the help of the middle tones, under the form of some linear, descendent progressions whose purpose is always achieved on the tonic. These tones are psychically perceived as a tension that finds its resolution on the stable and balanced sonority of the tonic. Interpretatively, they can be thought of as climaxes of the melody, even if they do not always occupy a high position in the construction of the phrase or respective fragment. Schenker pays special attention to the tone that initiates the fundamental line – called "*primary tone*", which is identified with the third or fifth of tonality, their psychic effect and gravitational force exerted on the tonal center being much more intense than the tonic, whose perception equates to stability. There are situations in which the fundamental line can be initiated from the very beginning of the phrase, the third or the fifth of the first step chord appearing from the first beat of the composition, the most eloquent examples being found in Bach's fugues, such as the one that can be seen in figure 1.



Fig. 1. Fugue BWV 853, in D sharp minor, bars 1-3

Figure 1 presents the subject of the fugue in three voices, in D# minor, in the Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1, by Johann Sebastian Bach. As can be seen, the first half of the subject is dominated by the sonority of a1, the *primary tone* of the fundamental line, which begins its discourse on the fifth of tonality. Graphically, the structural tones are represented with the stem pointing up, the dotted line that links the As being the passage in which the primary tone is prolonged. The mental support and the dynamics of this tone are mandatory during interpretation. Its structural position as the *primary tone* of the *Urlinie* gives it a main part in the melody as compared to the other notes.

The secondary priority of the tones, represented in the text with their stem pointing down, resides in the ornamental character of the diminution with which they identify themselves. Their function is to embellish and prolong the structural *primary tone*, thus bringing variety to the melody, and translates as: the neighboring high tone (b1) and the passing tone (g1) that links the fifth and the third of the first step triad (d-f-a). These are joined by two fifth leaps (d1-a1), classified as consonant due to their tonal affiliation, their musical context being the harmony of tonic.

Most of the times, “*melodic fluency*”, as Schenker characterizes the naturalness and ease of the fundamental line, is preceded by certain fragments whose particularity prepares the tension that initiates the *Urlinie*. Introductory melodic passages can prepare the appearance of the *primary tone* by means of an ascending linear progression, which usually starts with the first step. Simply called *Anstieg*-ascent by Schenker, this linear progression that precedes the appearance of the *primary tone*, thus enhancing the elaboration of the musical context, can be classified, paraphrasing Schachter, as “*initial ascent*”. “In *Free Composition* [Schenkerr 1979], Ernst Oster translates *Anstieg* as *initial ascent*. *Anstieg* in itself simply means *ascent*, but since these things always lead up to the first *Urlinie* tone, I think Oster’s change to *initial ascent* is a valid one. (Schachter 2016, 154)

### 3.2. The bass line-*Bassbrechung*

Harmonically supporting the musical text, the bass identifies itself with particular chord progressions that seem to observe certain patterns that are representative of the major and minor modes. Permanently accompanying the *Urlinie*, it develops the harmonic concatenations according to its specific melodic particularities, as noticeable from figure 2, and assures both the first and the last structural tone of the harmony of the first step. Known as *Bassbrechung*, it is a component part of the tonal movement, Schenker integrating it as a primary element into the fundamental structure.



Fig. 2. *Model of fundamental structure- major tonality*

*Bassbrechung*, in translation bass arpeggiation, monopolizes as shown in figure 2 the main steps of the tonal music, which are the basis of the primary harmonic progression I-V-I. The importance of concatenation consists in its interpretation as an elliptical arpeggiation of a third just like the graphic representation in figure 2. “The primary harmonic progression in tonal music is I-V-I; the bass linearizes the tonic triad through a disjunct arpeggiation, by moving from the root to the upper fifth and back again. Schenker referred to this motion as the bass arpeggiation (*Bassbrechung*).” (Cadwallader and Gagne 1998, 118)

The primary structural concatenation I-V-I is a common feature to the musical works conceived in major tonalities, the tonal template developed by these involving the use of the features of the dominant – its functionality in relation to the base tonality turning it into the occupant of step V. With regard to the minor mode, the concatenation undergoes a small change, its elaboration presupposing the existence of step III as harmony preceding the dominant. The explanation consists in the predominance specific to minor works, to the modulation to the major relative, whose tonal center identifies itself with the occupying sonority of step III in the major tonality.

Approaching musical phenomenon from a more complex perspective involves the widening of the primary structural frame, its elaboration being enriched with intermediary harmonies that prepare the appearance of the major relative or of the structural dominant. An important place among these is occupied by the subdominant, a tonality that intensifies the progression towards the dominant, thus fathering the I-IV-V-I type of concatenation. The subdominant is joined by the supertonic or the submediant, both functioning as an intermediary in the tonal structure, Schenker regarding them as harmonies subsidiary to the tonic or to the dominant.

#### 4. Conclusion

Challenging even for consecrated instrumentalists, a valuable interpretation of classical music requires, in addition to perfect practical skills, a thorough analytical knowledge of the musical works, a deep musicological insight into the musical text making message decoding easier. Understanding the tonal functionality of the sounds in context, the relationships that arise between them and the harmonic progression linearization as a sonorous outcome in a logical and natural structural system can help decipher the so craved mystery of music.

To avoid an inconclusive approach, analytical interpretation must match the complexity of the artistic creation, its profoundness being more appropriately measured through methods like Schenker's. The applicability of these precepts can guarantee the musical work, as stated by Schenker, the artistic image of a masterpiece. "The natural idea of the triad, the perfection achieved by transforming one sonority into many by means of voice-leading prolongations [...]; all this goes into a masterwork." (Schenker 1925 republic. 2014, 1)

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