

ADAPTATIONS OF THE SCHENKERIAN ANALYSIS TO POST-TONAL MUSIC

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Abstract: *Heinrich Schenker restricted his analytical application to the baroque to romantic German repertoire. As a result, a series of theorists attempted to apply his approaches beyond this range. In view of that, one has to consider the extent to which Schenkerian analysis may provide information regarding post-tonal music. Therefore, analysts have to begin with Schenker's own ideas about analysis to show how they are not abandoned in the analysis of post-tonal music and then examine the literature that offers insight into this theoretical issue.*

Key words: *Schenkerian analysis, post-tonal music, Semper idem sed non eodem modo*

1. Introduction

Schenkerian principles of prolongation and linear progressions give us an understanding of music from a larger perspective of the general architecture, as an organic scheme of the whole. Such an understanding of music helps performers to avoid considering every note as having the same importance in a musical phrase and discovering the organic coherence of a composition taken as whole.

2. Schenkerian analysis – general aspects

The Schenkerian analyses represent a method of musical analysis based on the theories elaborated by Heinrich Schenker whose purpose is to disclose the structure of a tonal piece, through musical notations. The basic principle in the structure of a piece for the Schenkerian analysis is showing hierarchical relationships amongst

the notes of the passage through making reductions of the music and through a specialized symbolic musical notation that Schenker developed to demonstrate various techniques of prolongation.

Because he considered that harmony and counterpoint were not properly understood by his contemporaries and predecessors, Schenker wanted to clarify and correct what he considered to be wrong in musical theory. While his harmony writings are, generally, theoretical, his study of voice leading approaches the principles of the severe counterpoint, a method used for centuries. His final purpose was to combine the two disciplines in *Free Composition* [1], also conceiving the most controversial part of his theory: the fundamental structure. In the most common way, the purpose of schenkerian analysis is to omit the unessential and to emphasize the important relations.

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2.1. Approaches

There are many methods of approaching the schenkerian analyses. Schenker, followed by Jonas, one of the leading first-generation Schenkerian scholars and advocates of Schenker's theory, began by describing what was considered the essential structure of music: the triad and its linear unfolding through arpeggiation and through passing and auxiliary notes, in the most abstract form. Next, they talk about the forms that these structures could have in any musical context. Schenker's approach is based on the fundamental principles of the harmony and counterpoint.

A. Forte and S. Gilbert [2], on the other hand, began by showing different apparitions of the arpeggiation, passing tones, etc. at the note-to-note level before showing the way that these can be used theoretically to create musical forms of greater proportions. Other music theorists, for example Felix Salzer and Carl Schachter, added to and spread Schenker's ideas. By the 1960s, Schenkerian analysis had begun to attract renewed interest, and by the 1980s, it had become one of the main analytical methods used by many music theorists.

Schenkerian analysis is a subjective method of analysis that reflects the musical intuitions of the analyst, because there is no mechanical procedure of analysis. Many of the analysts and performers consider that the analysis represents a way of hearing a piece of music. Schenker himself was certain that a tonal masterpiece contains an inner truth-content, while few are sufficiently gifted to appreciate it. Although it is a subject of debate among music theorists whether there is a single correct hearing and analysis of a piece of tonal music, even those who hold that, agree that the analysis can only be arrived at and evaluated subjectively by a professional listener.

3. Adapting Schenkerian analysis to post-tonal music

By looking closely at Schenker's *Neue musikalische Theorien und Phantasien* [3], one can discover ways of adapting his theories without being far of his original conceptual framework that considered the two fundamental principles of harmony and voice leading (the law of consonance and the postulate of melodic fluency), the basic harmonic concepts and voice-leading archetypes or the concepts of free composition and essential counterpoint. The latter are ontologically distinct from each other and from strict counterpoint. All these elements operate under his motto: "Semper idem sed non eodem modo."

3.1. Context

Considering a series of post-tonal works, one can notice that many of the surface dissonant sonorities, as well as unusual middle grounds and foregrounds, arise from the extended use of voice leading models, like the passing tones, displacements, or mixtures. The parallels that may be encountered are non-essential doublings, the essential parallels being either eliminated through foreground means or mitigated according to Schenker's inter-level justification. Many musical examples show that the fundamental principles are never violated. The post-tonal language is presented as an analogous, but not equivalent to the tonal language of the common-practice period.

Although Schenker restricted his analytical works to the repertoire of German music some theorists have attempted to apply his approaches beyond the tonal music [4], [5]. Their purpose was to consider the extent to which Schenkerian analysis may provide information regarding post-tonal music, trough prolongation and musical

stratification. The corner stone of this journey is represented by Schenker's own theories about analysis that show how those ideas are not abandoned in his method of analysis of post-tonal music. Also, the musical literature offers insights into the theoretical issues of applying Schenkerian analysis to post-tonal music and graphic examples.

In order to establish the methodology in the process of adapting Schenkerian analysis to post-tonal music, one has to examine the conceptual underpinnings of his theories through Schenker's own writings and then to consider various analytical problems to which the analysis has been already applied, taking into account the possibility of a flexible use of the *Ursatz* in both tonal and non-tonal contexts. Then, the prolongation comes into discussion as it is the central issue in deciding whether a composition can be represented through Schenkerian graphs. Also, studying the publications and articles that offers insights of Schenkerian analysis of the modern music is necessary.

3.2. Schenker's analytical ideas

Schenker's analysis principles and the concept of *Ursatz* may have implications for its extended use in post-tonal music, because Schenker viewed his analytical method as a means and not an end. In his writings, he refers to the responsibilities of the analyst towards the composer and the performer and also towards his readers that has to receive new information.

In one of his most important writing, *Tonwille*, Schenker offers a further example of the value of his analysis during his explication of the *Ursatz*: "If this sort of *Ursatz* is the long-distance hearing of the composer, then it may be of use to the reader, the performer, or the listener whose hearing is only near-at-hand, like a pair of mental spectacles that bring distant things

closer to him." [6, p. 39]

Schenker was always trying to find the natural beauty of every piece and he viewed analysis as a way to show others that which they are incapable of discovering on their own – the description of tonality as a composing out of the tonic triad, emphasizing on the interaction between a two-voice contrapuntal paradigm (*Ursatz*) and a final composition. One of Schenker's students, Carl Schachter, discusses the difference between the theoretical and practical approach regarding the starting point of the analytical process: the foreground (*Vorgrund*) or the background (*Hintergrund*).

A foreground to background approach begins with the completed piece and reduces it to the *Ursatz*. Contrary, the background to foreground approach begins with the *Ursatz* and traces a generative path towards the completed piece. It seems that Schenker favoured the latter, because he viewed tonal pieces as different realizations of the two-voice *Ursatz*, "the horizontal path of tonality."

The possibility of not identifying an authentic *Ursatz*, but a two voice contextual contrapuntal background after a reduction of a post-tonal piece allows analysts a great range of flexibility. Such distinctions have allowed many analysts to use Schenkerian analysis for various purposes outside of those that Schenker intended. This contrapuntal structure represents a piece much in the same way that an *Ursatz* represents a piece. However, such structures are contextual, not universal. This flexibility is one of the most important distinctions between it and the *Ursatz*.

Much like in the analytical process of post-tonal music, one can discover that the *Ursatz* is incorporated in a flexible way even in traditional tonal contexts, emphasizing the value of its stability. This

has important implications for the analysis of post-tonal music which often requires elasticity when connecting clear structural points. Schenkerian analysis has been exploited for its capacity to establish a formal and structural necessity of a coda or of a greater section through a formula that finds a central point, a closing chord that defines a musical structure. Due to the sophistication of Schenkerian analysis, theorists should not disregard its potential to elucidate non-tonal music.

Taking into account the fact that the *Ursatz* is intractable and that the voice leading reductions may vary, comparing such results to the *Ursatz* can provide a heightened understanding of form, voice leading procedure, or contrapuntal structure in a non-tonal context. In post-tonal music, these aspects are very important. Also, giving the fact that there are more options in the process of analysis, it is best to consider that a piece is related to the *Ursatz* than seeing the *Ursatz* as being the purpose. Therefore, when analysing post-tonal music from a schenkerian perspective, one has to look for the tonal aspects, without being necessary to identify the classical background structure – the traditional *Ursatz*.

One must develop a system of criteria for accomplishing such analyses based on the schenkerian model, considering the fact that the repertoire under consideration moves farther from the tonality for which Schenker's theories were developed, the philosophical acceptance of extending Schenker's methods becomes insufficient. At the forefront of this subject is the extent to which post-tonal music can exhibit prolongation.

4. Prolongation in post-tonal music

The theorists that approached and debated the application of Schenkerian

analysis to post-tonal music have met two major concerns. The first – an issue that is common to Schenkerian analysis but is amplified when considered in the context of post-tonal music – is the problem of adherence to a strict background model and the second is the ability to determine whether a particular note is inherently or contextually consonant or dissonant.

The theorist that studied and applied Schenkerian analysis for both tonal and post-tonal music concluded that adherence to a strict background model proves to be an issue. In tonal analysis, the potential problem is at the same time practical and conceptual, because of the risk of arbitrary note-picking in order to fulfil the necessary background requirement. However, Nicholas Cook [7, p.2] discusses the conceptual priority of analysis in music theory, for the reason that when one loses sight of this, “the analyst has come to believe that the purpose of a piece of music is to prove the validity of his analytical method, rather than the purpose of the analytical method being to illuminate the music...” Hence such issues exist in tonal music, in which Schenkerian analysis is generally accepted, they are only amplified when applied to post-tonal music.

Regarding the matter of prolongation, Schenker states in his *Tonwille* that “the life of the tone thrives in consonance and dissonance” (8) explaining how a tone is prolonged and how it is placed in a musical context in order to determine the difference between consonance and dissonance. In order to correctly distinguish the prolongation in a particular piece, one has to come to a conclusion whether a sufficient syntax has been established to make prolongation claims.

Some theorists claim that the prolongation is somehow similar to embellishment, requiring certain conditions - contextual or inherent - for tonal stability. The ears perception is that

less stable notes require resolution to more stable notes. In the case of contextual stability of a less stable note, the ear hears "a more stable pitch to which it tends to move and a path that would take it there..." Inherent stability, as defined by Larson, is the consonance.

In his book, *Structural Hearing*, Salzer, one of Schenker's students and who approached post-tonal music analysis did not try to alter or argue the prolongation theories of his teacher in order to include them. Describing the opening of Ravel's *Jeux d'Eau*, he mentions that one of the outstanding revolutionary achievements of contemporary music is „the contrapuntal prolongation of dissonant chords, especially polychords... The whole [opening section of *Jeux d'Eau*] is typical of French impressionistic style insofar as the triad, as an architectonic factor of structure as well as of prolongation, is replaced by seventh chords and altered chords." Also, Salzer claims that the connection with a "clearly directed voice leading" is sufficient to establish a prolongation without emphasis on chord functions – generally essential to schenkerian theory.

5. Applications

Considering Schenker's unique intentions regarding the analysis and also some previous applications of his method, and prolongation issues, it is appropriate to establish benefits and limitations of applying it to post-tonal music. Thus, reconsidering the *Ursatz* as an indication of tonality, one should determine if it is beneficial to determine a contrapuntal structure for that piece. Whether reducing the piece to such a structure to represent the essence of the whole is helpful, has been an issue debated by analysts who approached the extensions of Schenkerian analysis.

Some believe that the analyst should consider a piece as a whole and focus on how schenkerian analysis can be helpful in the process of comprehend it, concluding that it can be beneficial even for post-tonal works, despite the tonal ambiguity and the fact that they cannot be reduced to a traditional *Ursatz*.

However, given the fact that Schenker's unmodified theories can be only applied to tonal music, the debate seems to surround the question of whether an altered form of the theory can still be considered Schenkerian. While it is well known that the concept of *Ursatz* is central to Schenker's theory, no one claims that post-tonal music contains an *Ursatz*, therefore the analyst has to adapt to the context of a predominantly tonal but extremely complex musical language of post-tonal music.

6. Conclusions

Regarding post-tonal music, a Schenker influenced reduction generated through the secondary elements may show tonal features in the context of the piece, without necessarily reaching an abstract background structure. Basically this reduction compared to the *Ursatz* that is particular for tonal music could reveal major differences that could indicate the lack of tonality, allowing in the same time the finding of traditional tonal elements in terms of the piece itself and not necessarily in comparison to an abstract background structure.

Consequently, an approach that does not treat this highly sophisticated musical language as either a deformation of the classical style or as a primitive version of a future one is to be avoided. However, the existing tonal movements or cues are not to be overlooked, nor the non-traditional sonorities within tonal syntax.

Thus, referring to Schenker's motto, *semper idem sed non eodem modo*, one can consider adaptations of his theories to the analysis of post-tonal music. These theories have been formulated strictly for tonal repertoire but, without setting limits based on the nature of the methodology described by Schenker, the Ursatz can be considered to be a basic framework within which their artistry flourishes. Furthermore searching for its equivalent – a basic untraditional scheme or, in other words, a contrapuntal structure with tonal elements, as revealed in the context of the analysed piece, becomes necessary. And because Schenkerian analysis is reliant upon oppositions, the creation of a hierarchy of pitches based upon the criteria regarding contrapuntal and harmonic elements can be achieved through the tonic and dominant, consonance and dissonance, tension and resolution, salient and less salient. Also, links between pitches and characteristic movements showing voice leading can be observed even outside a tonal context.

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