

BASIC CONCEPTS AND PRINCIPLES IN MODERN MUSICAL ANALYSIS. A SCHENKERIAN APPROACH

A. PREDA-ULITA¹

Abstract: *This subject is fascinating through the interpretive possibilities that it opens. The accurate understanding and practice of Schenker's theories leads to a different perception of the music and to a natural way of performing. Therefore, we consider the schenkerian analysis not only a theory, but also a comprehensive way of understanding musical works. Schenkerian analysis provides a comprehensive view of music from the small to the large representing thus a great asset to hearing understanding and performance.*

Key words: *musical analysis, Schenker, background, middle ground, foreground, prolongation, structure*

1. Introduction

The schenkerian analyses are a method based on the theories of 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. He considered that the deep, long-range structure of a piece of music has no particular rhythm, so the musical reductions of Schenkerian analysis are usually arrhythmic. Schenkerian analysis

the long-range structure is defined **Background** (or fundamental structure, while the surface aspects of the music are the **Foreground**. One can state the idea that "the background of a musical composition is arrhythmic" or, "rhythm is a characteristic of the musical foreground."

In the most common way, the purpose of schenkerian analysis is to omit the unessential and to emphasize the important relations.

2. Basic concepts

There are many methods of approaching the schenkerian analyses. Schenker, followed by Jonas, began by describing the essential structure of music: the triad and its linear unfolding through arpeggiation

¹ Department of Music Performance, *Transilvania* University of Brasov.

and through passing and auxiliary notes, in its most abstract form. Next, they discuss the forms that these structures could have in any musical context. Schenker's approach relies on the fundamental principles of the harmony and counterpoint. Allen Forte and Steven E. Gilbert, 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 to use these in order 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.

2.1. Structural concepts

Fundamental structure (*Ursatz*) is the representative progression of which all tonal pieces are hypothetically an elaboration that Schenker believed to be (along with a number of variants) the most basic expression of tonal music. It consists of the descending progression from $\overset{\wedge}{3}$, $\overset{\wedge}{5}$ or $\overset{\wedge}{8}$ in the upper part (*Urlinie*) over a bass progression (*Bassbrechung*) that emerges in the background as part of the fundamental structure. This progression represents one of the simplest contrapuntal expressions of the I–V–I unit. Schenker described the fundamental structure as a tension span, as the tension introduced by the initial $\overset{\wedge}{3}$ is not resolved until the music reaches the final $\overset{\wedge}{1}$ over the tonic. For Schenker, this tension span was what tied complex and various pieces of music into a single coherent work of art.

Schenker considered that any piece of tonal music can be described as an elaboration of this pattern: tonal pieces generally start with I and the V – I epitomizes the final perfect cadence of the piece. Nevertheless, in a longer

piece, whole sections may prolong V (Schenker called this a “tonicization” of the dominant) and also, there may be other harmonic sections prolonged in between the initial I and the V of the final perfect cadence, the bass of the fundamental structure appearing in many different layers of a piece. The bass line is only a harmonic progression and Schenker's theory seeks to comprehend music in terms of a two-part contrapuntal structure.

Layer or level (*Schicht*) represents the fundamental idea of Schenkerian theory that music consists of a series of layers of elaboration. Schenker suggests that simpler layers underpin the complex ones in almost the way in which a variation on a theme supports the “surface” of the music.

Background (*Hintergrund*) refers only to the *Ursatz* form that covers a whole piece or movement. In some cases, one can use it to refer to the *Ursatz* and its immediate prolongations (like the initial ascent etc.) that are usually part of the first level of the middle ground. In theory, one simple progression that spans the entire piece is the foundation on which the composer created the entire piece.

First-level Middle ground refers to the immediate prolongations of the *Ursatz* that Schenker restricts to a small number of strictly defined forms. The background sometimes refers to this level of the structure as elaborations.

Middle ground (*Mittelgrund*) is the surface layer of a piece of music, the background being the deepest layer, of which the whole piece is understood to be an elaboration. The middle ground has a variable number of occurring layers that a Schenkerian analysis will identify between the foreground and background.

Foreground (*Vordergrund*) is the surface layer of the music. Schenker regards music in terms of layers of elaboration from the profound structure to the surface.

Prolongation refers to the elaboration of contrapuntal structures. Schenker considered that all tonal pieces are therefore, a prolongation of the *Ursatz*. The concept of prolongation lies at the foundation of Schenker's theory and is the most influential element of it. Using the basic principles of consonance and dissonance from species counterpoint, Schenker identifies a number of common linear units that he calls diminutions. Because diminutions must prolong a harmonic unit in Schenker's theory, only a note that is consonant with the prevailing harmony can generate a diminution.

Prolongation is an extension through time (by an arpeggio, for example) in a piece of music of a harmonic unit (a chord or a note from that chord). Schenker's analyses, at their simplest level, show how linear units prolong harmonic units.

Tonicization is the Schenkerian term for modulation. The use of this term highlights the fact that a tonal piece corresponds to a contrapuntal realization of the tonic.

2.2. Melodic concepts

Fundamental descent (*Urlinie*) is the top line of the two-part *Ursatz*, comprising a note by note descent from $\hat{3}$, $\hat{5}$ or $\hat{8}$ to $\hat{1}$. The term reflects Schenker's belief that this archetypal descending motion underlines all tonal pieces.

Primary tone (*Kopftone*) is the first note of the *Urlinie* (meaning the $\hat{3}$, $\hat{5}$ or $\hat{8}$). Finding the correct primary tone is an important aspect as it can make a considerable difference to the rest of an analysis. If the *Urlinie* appears is elaborated of an initial ascent, the *Kopftone* will not be found right at the beginning of the piece.

Bass Arpeggiation (*Bassbrechung*) literally translates as 'breaking of the bass', but is more often referred to as the bass arpeggiation. The *Bassbrechung* is the I-V-I that support the *Urlinie* as part of the

Ursatz, including all the elaborations of this pattern. The basic harmonic progression appears as contrapuntally elaborated, normally creating harmonic patterns such as I-III-V-I or I-II-V-I.

Diminution refers to the embellishment of simpler musical structures beneath the surface of the music and describes the process of linear units prolonging harmonic ones. The process of analysis is partly one of looking 'behind' the surface diminutions, but Schenker was more interested in a process of generation from background to foreground (composing-out). Schenker used the basic principles of consonance and dissonance from species counterpoint in order to identify a number of common linear units that he calls diminutions. His analyses, at their most simple level, show how these linear units prolong harmonic units. A theme and variations is a very good example of diminution, because in this genre, the theme supports increasingly complex figurations. Each variation is different but the presence of the theme beneath the surface of the music unifies the whole work.

Arpeggiation (*Brechung*) is a simple elaboration that consists of notes consonant with the prolonged harmony. It is a single movement through notes from a harmony, in the same direction, prolonging a harmonic unit by arpeggiating the notes of the triad. An arpeggiation can only prolong a triad with the exception of the dominant seventh chord. This chord is universal in tonal music that in many situations it makes sense to treat it as a consonant sonority like the triad. In Schenkerian analysis, diminutions usually prolong a harmonic unit and a particular note from that unit. In the arpeggiation (where all the notes belong to the triad), just context could enlighten the main note that is being prolonged, although diminutions are always a prolongation of

either their first or last note. The Schenkerian model is a dynamic one - the diminution is not static but moves either to or from a principal note.

Consonant Skip is a term used by Allen Forte and by some Schenkerian analysts to refer to simple two-note (or incomplete) arpeggiations, which usually constitute some sort of unfolding. The term refers to a particular diminution in which the voice leaps from one note of the harmonic unit to another note of the same harmonic unit. A consonant skip contains only notes from the harmonic unit that it is prolonging. In a Schenkerian analysis, diminutions generally prolong either a harmonic unit or a particular note from it. As in an arpeggiation, both notes from the consonant skip are belong to the triad of the harmonic unit, thus the prolonged note depends on the context.

Neighbour Note (*Nebennote*) is a diminution in which a note is ornamented by a figure that moves stepwise to a note above or below the original note before returning to it. In other words, it elaborates a note of a chord through stepwise motion to and/or from a dissonance. Neighbour notes may also be incomplete (move to a note a step away and not return to the original note). A complete neighbour note moves stepwise a dissonance and back again. An incomplete neighbour note can move from the dissonance to the consonance or the reverse.

Passing note (*Durchgang*) Some Schenkerian analysts recognize most passing note progressions as *Linear Progressions* (see separate entry). In order to be a true linear progression, however, the passing note must be the elaboration of a harmony. A passing note right at the foreground (surface) of a piece of music may not always fulfil this condition. Examples might be a chromatic passing note or a note that connects two surface harmonies.

Mixture (*Mischung*) is the flattening or sharpening of scale degrees, the most common of which being $\hat{3}$ to $\flat\hat{3}$, which in the first level middle ground can change the mode of the piece from major to minor. It is ornamentation rather than a diminution because it does not derive from the rules of strict counterpoint. It describes the flattening or sharpening of scale degrees and it usually appears in the first level middle ground in connection with $\hat{3}$ as shown below. It has the effect of changing the mode from major to minor and back again. Schenker most often uses the term mixture to refer to alternation between the major and minor third in a tonic triad.

Linear progression (*Zug*) is the Schenkerian term for a passing note intensification that elaborates a specific harmony in the middle ground or foreground. Its first and last notes must be a part of the harmony at the end of the progression. A linear progression can be either ascending or descending, therefore it moves only in one direction. Schenker appreciates that the linear progression is the *unfolding* of a two-note interval made up of its initial and final note. In other words, the interval between these notes (first and last) gives a linear progression its name. The simplest linear progression is the passing note, which is dissonant as it passes from one consonant note to another.

3. Basic principles

Heinrich Schenker's analytical approach of music engages looking beneath the surface of music in order to understand how it connects into larger spans. It is important for the performer to reflect on the direction and shape of the phrases, in a natural and logical way. At the basic level, one can understand Schenker's ideas as a formalization of his intuitive thinking that music should not be regarded as a series of

notes, but in terms of larger-scale shapes and patterns.

The basic method of Schenkerian analysis is to show how elaborations such as neighbour and passing notes, progressions and arpeggios group into forming music. These patterns do not appear only on the surface of the music but that they also span much larger fragments.

Schenker regarded music like a superposition of layers/levels, the surface layer being the elaboration of a simpler layer beneath that surface. The surface of the music defines as the foreground, the deepest layer the background and those layers of elaborations in between refer to as the middle ground. In addition, an important feature of Schenkerian analysis is showing how melodic figures are elaborations of harmonies.

The basic ideas stated by Schenker in his theory are quite simple, but the process of analysis is a complicated one, mostly because music itself is complex. Analysts that approached this kind of analysis found that it provides richly rewarding insights into the shape and structure of tonal music.

Schenker is probably most famous for his suggestion that musical works are elaborations of the basic model that he called the *Ursatz* – a two-voice reductive structure forming the basis for an analytical approach that emphasizes the essential simplicity of tonal music. It shows how pieces are contrapuntal elaborations of a tonic chord. Schenker stated that we could reduce a piece of music to the *Ursatz*, and we can explore the complexities of the piece by considering them in relation to this simple model.

Some theorists (like Steven Porter (2002)) that approached schenkerian analysis referred to grammar in order to explain the principles of Schenker's theories, taking into consideration that notes and chords that belong to a musical

phrase are like words into a sentence. One analyzes a word as a part of speech, having, in the same time, a function within the sentence.

Felix Salzer (1952) introduced a concept that describes very well the schenkerian analysis: *structural hearing*. He considered that the understanding of tonal music is a matter of hearing, and the ear has to be trained to hear not only a succession of tones (sounds), melodic lines and chord progressions, but also their coherence and structural signification.

Schenker's conceptions rely on an observation that represents the corner stone of his research: the distinction of the "chord grammar" and "chord signification" (Salzer, 1952). "Chord grammar" signifies the usual method of analysis, this being the most important feature of a harmonic analysis that has the purpose of status recognition of the chords in a musical piece. On the other hand, the study of "chord signification" shows his specific role in a phrase, or an entire piece. Schenker discovered that the roles that chords have are diverse. Two identical chords that appear in the same phrase can fulfill different functions. The signification and the function of a sound or of a chord depend on the direction of the movement and on the purpose, in other words on the context.

Schenker made a distinction between structure chords and prolongation chords, by means of chord grammar and signification, taking into consideration the direction of music – this being the main idea of his approach. Salzer considered that this method of understanding the movement of music represents the instinctive perception of a truly musical ear; this can be called "structural hearing". The structural outline and framework work signifies the main movement to its goal, showing the shortest way to it. Nevertheless, the tension of music consists

in modifications, expansions and elaborations – called prolongations of the structure, and the artistic coherence rises if one understands their basic direction.

The distinction between structure and prolongation led Schenker to a new conception of the functions of harmony and counterpoint in creating organic unity: *not all chords are of harmonic origin*, this statement having an effect on understanding the music.

Schenker's harmony explains the tonal system like a group of major triads derived from the harmonic series, like a vertical aspect of music. His theories of counterpoint show the way that simple progressions can be ornamented following simple rules based on the succession of consonant and dissonant intervals, like a horizontal aspect of the music. In *Free Composition* (1953), Schenker explains the way that harmony and counterpoint combine in tonal compositions. Using the basic principles of consonance and dissonance from the species counterpoint, Schenker identifies a number of common linear units that he named diminutions, showing, by means of concrete analyses, the way that these linear units prolong harmonic units. The concept of prolongation is the base of the schenkerian theories and because the diminutions have to prolong a harmonic unity, just a consonant tone with the harmony can give rise to a diminution.

Beside the structural and prolongation roles or the diverse functions that chords can have, they can have harmonic or contrapuntal importance. A chord performs a harmonic function in the context of a fundamental progression. Schenker considers that the term "harmony" should

only refer to members of a harmonic progression; these are "harmonies" in the true sense of the word, because they connect based on a harmonic association (Salzer, 1953). Chords not based on harmonic associations are products of motion, direction, and embellishment and have a horizontal tendency. Harmonic chords are also structural chords (they constitute the structural framework), and the contrapuntal ones are chords of prolongation (they prolong and elaborate the space between members of harmonic progressions).

References

1. Cadwallader, A., & Gagné, D.: *Analysis of Tonal Music: A Schenkerian Approach*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998
2. Cook, N.: *A Guide to Musical Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994
3. Forte, A., & Gilbert, S. E.: *Introduction to Schenkerian Analysis*. New York & London: Norton, 1982
4. Jonas, O.: *Introduction to the Theory of Heinrich Schenker*. New York & London: Longman, 1982
5. Salzer, F.: *Structural Hearing. Tonal Coherence in Music*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962
6. Schenker, H., Oster, E., & Jonas, O.: *Free composition: New Musical Theories and Fantasies*. Pendragon Press, 2001
7. *** *SchenkerGUIDE*. Available at: <http://www.schenkerguide.com>.