

## Conservatory Schenker vs. University Schenker<sup>1</sup>

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In a paper called "The Americanization of Heinrich Schenker," first delivered here at Mannes in 1985, I claimed that Schenkerian analysis is not entirely at home in the American university system, and I tried to indicate some reasons why I believe this to be so. I mentioned, in passing, that Schenker himself never held an academic appointment. In fact, it seems that Schenkerian study finds an even less natural home in the European university system than it does in the North American university. This is, I think, because in continental Europe the gulf between the university music department and the conservatory is wider than it is on this side of the Atlantic. Schenker's thinking combines elements of both educational traditions, the conservatory and the university, along with echoes of legal and even Judaic studies. For this very reason, it is fully at home in no single educational institution – no, not even Mannes. It is too 'artistic' to be fully integrated into a traditional musicology department, yet too 'intellectual' to fit entirely within a traditional conservatory. To the extent that this is a problem, I think we must admit it to be insoluble within our current educational system. We must live with the situation and adapt as best we can.

I outlined some adaptive behaviors in the article to which I have already referred. Today I would like to discuss a pragmatic aspect of this necessary adaptation. Paraphrasing the famous distinction by C.P. Snow, I will claim that two cultures of Schenkerian study have grown up in America, one adapted to the conservatory, the other to the university. Both cultures stem from Schenker himself; support for both can be found in Schenker's writings. But their pedigree is not what interests me today. What interests me, rather, is the co-existence of two significantly different approaches to teaching Schenkerian analysis. How does one, or should one, teach Schenker to students of performance in a conservatory? How does one, or should one, teach Schenker to intellectually advanced university students who are not accomplished performers? (For the sake of simplicity I leave student composers aside.)

To survey current pedagogical practices would take too long; in any case, I doubt that I possess the requisite knowledge. Instead I will describe conservatory and university Schenker as 'ideal types,' to use a concept well

known from the writings of Carl Dahlhaus. In practice, I think that most teachers blend elements of both types into their teaching; at least they try.

I myself studied Schenker twice from the ground up, first with Ernst Oster at New England Conservatory, then with Allen Forte at Yale. My 'Americanization' article grew out of my own experiences, and so do my remarks today. Forte's teaching represents what I am calling university Schenker in something reasonably close to its pure form. Oster actually combined both types, but, in the context in which I studied with him, with more emphasis on the conservatory side. (I don't know if this was true when Oster taught at Princeton, but he did that for only one year.)

What is 'conservatory Schenker'? It is a way of approaching the Schenkerian method that stresses the intuitive, the experiential, and the performative. Carl Schachter has written that Oster would tell his students to begin by asking 'Where is this phrase going?', not 'Where is the structural dominant?'<sup>2</sup> If a student replied that the phrase was going to that *sforzando* diminished seventh chord on the second half of the second beat of measure 3, that was a correct answer in its own way; he would work with it. And when a student, in class, would come up with a reading that Oster disagreed with, or that simply puzzled him, he would often point to the piano and ask the student to try to make the rest of us hear the music that way. Questions of relations between analysis and performance thus arose naturally, without the heavy breathing that so often accompanies them today.

For the first semester of the four in which I studied with Oster, I was not even aware that we were doing Schenkerian analysis. At least it was only toward the end of that semester, once we had begun not only to produce graphs but to reflect on what we were doing, that I realized this was a system of sorts. Until then we were just discussing music. *That* is conservatory Schenker.

Especially in the early stages of instruction, conservatory Schenker requires the teacher to overlook many theoretical niceties, to tolerate inelegant and imprecise graphs, even to look with some indulgence on confusions of levels and self-contradictory readings. The student can be led to make these discriminations gradually, to the limit of his or her ability and – not incidentally – his or her interest. As G.K. Chesterton wrote, 'If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.' The teacher of conservatory Schenker must tolerate a great deal of 'doing badly.'

1 This paper was delivered to a plenary session on pedagogy, Mannes Institute for Advanced Studies in Music Theory, The Mannes College of Music (New York City), June 30, 2002.

2 Carl Schachter, "Taking Care of the Sense: A Schenkerian Pedagogy for Performers," in *Tijdschrift voor Muziektheorie*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2001), pp. 159-70.

because the point in the early stages is getting the students to 'do it' at all: to try to hear horizontally, to differentiate between tonal pillars and the motions between them, to analyze melody into its linear components. I should say immediately that I find overlooking students' grammatical and syntactic errors to be very difficult, even painful. That's just the way I'm put together. But I know that Oster would let some things go in the work of students, especially beginners, that he would never have let pass in his own work. That showed a great deal of wisdom, and more forbearance than I generally have myself.

As a counterexample, let me cite Steve Larson's proposal for a 'strict use' of Schenkerian notation in the classroom.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the value of Steve's method – and in terms of clarity that value is considerable – it represents the opposite of conservatory Schenker, because Steve's emphasis is on absolutely clear thinking at every step of the analytical process. Conservatory Schenker isn't like that. It starts 'messy,' sometimes very messy indeed, and becomes theoretically 'cleaner' as it goes along. It is simply not necessary, for most performing musicians, that final theoretical clarity be attained. This is something the university theorist may find difficult to understand, even to countenance. Performance, like rhetoric, does not aim to prove but to convince, and to convince in a largely pre-conscious way. An analysis that helps, in some degree, to clarify the performer's perhaps inchoate impressions of a piece, and to shape an effective performance strategy, will generally serve the purpose. Greater theoretical neatness should be reserved for those few performers who are so inclined – because, beyond a certain point, the others just aren't interested. I repeat, and will continue to repeat, what David Neumeier has dubbed 'Rothstein's paradox': Full-strength Schenkerian analysis, with its complete panoply of levels and, even more important, its peculiar combination of the intellectual and the intuitive, is for the few and not for the many. The rare school that, like Mannes, requires Schenkerian training of all its students, has no alternative but to take Chesterton's advice to heart: If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.

For the few, however, conservatory Schenker easily leads to a real problem. The conservatory-trained Schenkerian who wishes to teach (and therefore needs a Ph.D.) may find it difficult to adjust, later, to the university setting, where, traditionally at least, theoretical rigor is more highly valued than many other things. I myself found the adjustment both difficult and disheartening, and I have ever since felt myself shuttling between the two cultures. I like to think this lack of disciplinary comfort has its

advantages – indeed, that it is one of the principal attractions of the Schenkerian way of thinking about music. But it does not make for an easy professional life.

University Schenker is better known to most of those in this room, because most of us are university professors. In its purest form, university Schenker flourished at Princeton in the far-off days when Milton [Babbitt] begat Godfrey [Winham], and the two between them begat Peter [Westergaard], Ben [Boretz], Jim [Randall], Arthur [Komar], Fred [Lerdahl], Gregory [Proctor], Joel [Lester], and the rest. Allen Forte's brand of Schenker is actually less pure than this; it already represents a certain compromise between Princeton and Mannes, with a dollop of historical theory added for good measure. Each university that admits Schenker creates a Schenker in its own image. That, as I first suggested here at Mannes, was the price of Schenker's admission to the American university.

University Schenker is, quite naturally, centrally concerned with methodology – not just method, but methodology. In this it can be seen to derive from the German program of systematic musicology, which, you will recall, was promulgated by Schenker's Viennese antagonist Guido Adler, the very model of the modern musicologist. University Schenker regards, or tries to regard, Schenkerian theory as a theory in the strong sense. Hence the constant attempts to tinker with the theory to make it more internally cohesive, or to invent a post-Schenkerian theory that will remedy the perceived theoretical defects of the original. In a modest way, I have participated in these attempts myself.

After 1960 the prestige of structural linguistics, and the evident parallels between Chomsky's theory and Schenker's, played a role in several well-known attempts to place Schenker's theory on a more systematic foundation. In a 1989 article, Kofi Agawu complained that to systematize Schenker is 'to push toward linguistic competence rather than to stimulate profound utterances'<sup>4</sup> – a fair assessment of, say, the theory of Lerdahl and Jackendoff. The university, however, is distrustful of profundity, and especially distrustful of the idea of profundity, never more so than now. In fact, despite the considerable insights it has led to, post-structuralism has actually deepened the gulf between the university and the conservatory, because it insists on relativizing that which the performer must believe in absolutely, at least at the moment of performance. The Old Musicology could at least be relied upon to publish some nice (if pricey) editions.

3 Steve Larson, "'Strict Use' of Analytic Notation," *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*, Vol. 10 (1996), pp. 31-71.

4 Kofi Agawu, "Schenkerian Notation in Theory and Practice," *Music Analysis*, Vol. 8 (1989), pp. 275-301.

To teach Schenker according to the tenets of the university – even if one avoids forays into neo-Schenkerian reconstructions, or post-modernist post-mortems – is to stress the systematic aspects of diminution, counterpoint, harmonic prolongation, voice-leading transformations, prolongational rhythms, and the rest of it. I myself find these things fascinating, but I do not expect every music student to share my fascination. I do, however, expect Ph.D. students in music theory to grapple with these issues, whether they do so enthusiastically or not. That is because we do not, in this country at least, give Ph.D.s in conservatory Schenker, or in conservatory theory generally. The standards of the theory profession – SMT, the major journals, and so forth – are university standards, and we do our students a disservice if we do not train them for the real world. I am not entirely happy with this situation, but I have learned to live with it. That it is the only possible system, or even the best possible system, I have reason to doubt. Both the conservatory and the university suffer from its disadvantages. That our profession admits of only one paradigm at a time, even today, I find more than a little sad.

To summarize briefly: The realities of the conservatory press teachers in the direction of conservatory Schenker; those of the university press in the opposite direction. Taken to its logical extreme, conservatory Schenker promotes solipsism and sloppy thinking. Taken to *its* logical extreme, university Schenker promotes 'correct' analyses over inspired ones and minimizes musical experience. Both extremes falsify Schenker's contribution.

Ideally, Schenkerian analysis should not be taught in the classroom at all. It should be taught one-on-one, or to groups of a few hand-picked students, the way one teaches piano, or conducting, to serious musicians. Try selling *that* idea to your dean when you get home.

Having two Schenkerian cultures makes it almost impossible to teach Schenkerian analysis comprehensively in a classroom setting, no matter where that classroom is located. Since, as teachers, we must nevertheless do our best with what we have, we must realize that to a considerable degree we are doomed to fail. But then, anything really worth doing is worth doing badly.

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