Western Michigan University
MUS 565: Seminar in Music Theory
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Outline: Introduction to Schenkerian Analysis
(based on the article by Allen Forte)

I. Goals of this introductory unit on Schenkerian analysis:
   a. To familiarize the student with Schenker’s basic ideas about tonal music and analysis of it, the basic concepts of his system, and what he wanted his analytical system to achieve
   b. To be able to look at a Schenker graph (or sketch, as Forte calls them) for a piece of music and be able to identify the parts of the graph and what they represent
   c. It takes a long time and considerable study to be able to apply Schenker’s ideas in graphing pieces on your own; that is not our goal here, but simply to be able to identify the parts of and interpret existing graphs
   d. Forte’s goals in writing his article:
      1. to inform musicians about the basic tenets and significance of Schenker’s theory
      2. to correct misunderstandings about Schenker’s theory and its significance
      3. to familiarize musicians with the “unfamiliar language and representational means” of Schenker’s system

II. Why is Schenker so important?
   a. Forte laments the lack of understanding of Schenker’s work; the reasons for this are many, but many revolutionary theories take awhile to catch on (e.g., Galileo, ulcers caused by bacteria and not stress, etc.); Schenker’s occupation as a private teacher, his boastfulness, and lack of a university position were also probably contributing factors
   b. The situation is quite different now than what Forte described in 1959; Schenker is revered by many and his ideas are now not only accepted, but his system is the predominant system for analyzing tonal music, and appears in at least some form in probably close to half the literature on tonal music
   c. Forte describes Schenker’s achievements:
      1. His theory fundamentally changed the way music is thought about, in much the same way as a scientific discovery: “discovery or development of a fundamental principle which then opens the way for the disclosure of further new relationships, new meanings” (p. 7); importance of his work can be compared to Freud’s
      2. Schenker’s principle of structural levels deepened musical understanding
      3. Schenker’s theory allowed analysis to be used as a tool for performance, in which the composer’s intentions are revealed to the analyst in the score
      4. Schenker’s contributions as an editor and his pioneering work in the field of autograph study

III. The basics of Schenker’s analytical system:
   a. The “concept of structural levels”
      1. basis or origin of this concept is Schenker’s study of the music itself (his “data”), much of which is presented as 550 analytical illustrations in *Der freie Satz* (Free Composition)
      2. Schenker also related the concept as being based on the metaphysical nature of
sound (and this was one of the reasons Schenker abhorred modern non-tonal music—it violated nature because it didn’t preserve the primacy of the tonic triad, which was a natural system based on the overtone series; see Schenker’s citation of the overtone series on p. 30)

3. The genesis of the theory leads to a sort of chicken-and-the-egg question: which is more likely, the metaphysical nature of sound results in the superiority of the tonal system, or the tonal system’s superiority is merely supported by the metaphysical nature of sound? And, how much does Schenker (and others) force analytic readings to fit the system (esp. at the background level) in order to support the theory?

4. In an analysis, the work is regarded and presented as an interacting composite of three main levels: the background, middleground, and foreground levels (in my opinion, the use of the term “background” is a bit unfortunate because that usually implies to us something insignificant or not deserving of our attention, and our tendency is to think of the background as the least important level)

5. The creation of the graphs involves the technique of analytic reduction, in which details are progressively reduced from foreground to middleground to background

6. The principles of contrapuntal voice leading are critically important to Schenker and very much reflected in the graphs (“the principles of strict counterpoint . . . underlay the intricate works of the major composers,” pp. 26–27)

7. Schenker’s analytical graphs use analytic notation, rather than rhythmic notation, in which the value of a note depends on its relative melodic and harmonic importance rather than its actual rhythmic value—“the greater the durational value, the closer the element to the background” (p. 14); another common musical symbol appropriated for Schenker’s system is the slur, which is used to show various kinds of connections in Schenker’s graphs; the use of slurs is probably the most difficult and idiomatic part of Schenker’s system to learn to use

b. The background

1. Schenker viewed every well-composed tonal composition as being reducible to one of essentially three patterns, all based on the tonic scale and triad; through this structure, every good tonal piece is a “temporal projection of the tonic triad” (p. 12)

2. Fundamental structure (the Ursatz!) consists of two parts: a stepwise descending fundamental line (the Uurlinie) and the Bassbrechung, an arpeggiated bass outlining I–III–V–I; Forte identifies the Ursatz as “where the fundamental line represents the contrapuntal-melodic dimension and the bass arpeggiation represents the harmonic” (p. 19)

3. The Uurlinie proper begins with a primary tone (the Kopfton), which is either the third, fifth, or eighth degree of the scale; the Kopfton may be preceded by an Anstieg (initial ascent) (see pp. 20–22)

4. Notation used to indicate the Ursatz is half notes connected by a beam along with numerals and carets indicating the scale degrees of the Uurlinie; slurs and stemless

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I recognize that there is a lot of new terminology in this unit, and that furthermore much of it is in German. The most important terminology in this outline will be indicated in **bold print**—this is the terminology that I would most like you to know.
noteheads may also appear at this level
5. The background may contain other structural events besides the Ursatz (e.g., prolongations or interruptions)

c. The middleground
1. Greater detail added about “contrapuntal-melodic events” that do not belong to the background but are most fundamentally significant (i.e., the most important details in addition to the Ursatz are added here)
2. May include additional prolongations, passing and neighbor (adjacent) tones, interior contrapuntal lines

d. The foreground
1. “contains the major surface events, those elements that are usually most immediately perceptible” (p. 10)
2. Most important structural notes indicated with beamed half notes, next in importance are beamed quarter notes, then non-beamed quarter notes, followed by stemless quarter notes and flagged eighth notes (which Schenker uses for emphasis); may contain some Roman numerals
3. Some metrical organization of the piece may be shown at this level (note the upbeat shown in the example from “Dichterliebe”), as well as formal details
4. Contrapuntal details continue to be explored here, including linear intervallic patterns (see p. 17)

IV. Other important terminology of Schenker’s system
a. Diminution: “the process by which an interval formed by notes of longer value is expressed in notes of smaller value; the various kinds of musical events involved in this ‘diminishing’ process are known collectively as diminutions, and they comprise the passing note (P), the neighboring note (N), the consonant skip (CS) and the arpeggiation (Arp)” (ISA,2 p. 7)

b. Prolongation: “In Schenkerian analysis the concept of prolongation is basic. Prolongation refers to the ways in which a musical component—a note (melodic prolongation) or a chord (harmonic prolongation)—remains in effect without being literally represented at every moment.” (ISA, p. 142)

V. Final thoughts
a. Forte cautions (in note 13) that “Schenker’s major concept is not that of the Ursatz, as is sometimes maintained, but that of structural levels, a far more inclusive idea”
   b. Forte notes that the system was not complete when Schenker died, nor had he done enough to interpret the system for others; and, as Forte’s Exs. 1-6 and 1-7 (p. 23) show, there is room for disagreement in any given piece about such basic details as the primary tone and form (and note that Forte accuses Schenker of “forcing his reading”)

b. Some questions to consider:
   1. As you think about Schenker’s ideas of structural levels, and particularly the Ursatz, being applied to tonal works that you know, do you “buy” it?
   2. If a particular piece of tonal music does not adhere to Schenker’s structural ideas per the Ursatz, what possible conclusions can you draw?

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