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Reader's Response

THE AMERICANIZATION OF SCHENKER PEDAGOGY?

Dear Editor:

It is always nice to be cited, and so I was pleased to see my essay "The Americanization of Heinrich Schenker" cited in the recent *JMTP* article by Gregory Proctor and H. Lee Riggins ("A Schenker Pedagogy," Spring 1989). If, in my essay, I had set out to satirize an analysis course of which I strongly disapproved, I might have written something very like the Proctor-Riggins article. I would only have left out their sensible remarks on undergraduate pedagogy: good sense makes bad satire. Much of the rest of their article, however, reads like a brave new world of Americanized Schenker.

To Americanize Schenker, in my view, means to focus purely on the rationalist side of Schenker's thought while jettisoning all ambiguities, all internal inconsistencies, all that arises from analysis rather than from theory, and all that is not narrowly technical; this is just what Proctor and Riggins have done. They would turn Schenkerian analysis into a streamlined technology—very much in the American spirit—in which fixed rules lead to readily predictable results, and in which subtler questions of judgment are irrelevant. In the interests of honesty, they should call theirs a Proctor-Riggins pedagogy and leave the name of Schenker out of it.

In Proctor-Riggins pedagogy, theory is king; musical sensibility is banished as "metaphysical" and as having no place in the academy. What matters to these authors is how well a given analysis conforms to a predetermined theory, not whether it does justice to a piece of music. The latter consideration, in fact, is dismissed as "the least interesting aspect of analysis altogether" and as pedagogically irrelevant. Further more, it is demonstrated that Mr. Schenker himself was a woefully poor student of "Schenkerian analysis"; we might give him an A for effort, but his analyses reveal one confusion after another.

It is true that Schenker's graphic analyses contain inconsistencies, even internal inconsistencies, and that they do not always obey the letter of *Free Composition*. In such cases it is by no means always to be assumed that the

analysis should be corrected in light of the theory; in some instances the theory should bend in order to accommodate the analysis. One of the most fortunate of Schenker's inconsistencies is that, in analyzing a composition, he was willing to override his own theoretical prescriptions if the music seemed to demand it. (The best-known situation of this sort is probably Schenker's prohibition on the prolongation of sevenths, which is contradicted by several of his most outstanding analyses.) It can be, and has been, argued that he should have gone further than he did in making such exceptions; the point is that he made them.

Many gifted Schenkerian analysts feel that certain analyses by Schenker are incorrect in some way. When their disagreement with Schenker rests on theoretical grounds, that is interesting. But what is even more interesting is when one feels that Schenker is wrong on *musical* grounds—that his analysis fails to do justice to the composition itself. But that is exactly the sort of thing that is ruled out of order by Proctor and Riggins—which is a good thing for them, because it protects their own analyses from question. And the one original analysis they present, of the first part of Bach's figured-bass chorale N. 47, is very questionable indeed (see their Figure 1a, reproduced below).

Although I have not analyzed the entire chorale in depth, it is clear to me that the authors' theoretical expectations have led them to misread the first part of it. They state that, because of the repeat sign and the cadence in bar 8, they expect to find "a first-level middleground descent from scale degree 2 over V." It comes as no surprise, given this assumption, that they find the middleground they are looking for. What is surprising is that they make the most elementary mistake in reading the foreground. Their "2 over V" is the E major chord immediately following the first fermata. But this chord is passing, not stable; it is so by virtue of 1) its weak metric position,

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and (2) its position within the melodic unfolding from C#5 (at the fermata) down to A4 and back to C#5. The 10-5-10, strong-weak-strong pattern of bars 4-5 is typical, and it virtually defines the middle event as passing. The foreground harmonic progression, therefore, is not from I to V in A major but from I to VI. The pivot of the modulation to the dominant is the F# minor harmony of m. 5 (VI of A = II of E), not the passing chord preceding it.

Consequently, the authors' reading of a linear descent from C#5 to B4 and thence down a fifth (B4-E4) is wrong, since the B4 in m.4 belongs merely to the foreground. One line descends from A4 (mm.2 and 5) to E4 (m.8); another leads from C#5 (mm.4-5) to G#4 (m.8); the two lines together form a series of unfolded thirds. If one is to read 2 over V, that tone can only be represented by the B4 of m. 6, not that of m.4, and it is a third-progression, not a fifth-progression, that descends from the 2. Which of the two lines is primary—and thus whether G#4 or E4 rules at the cadence—can only be determined by the subsequent course of the chorale. As can be seen, even the authors' statement that m.8 is a perfect authentic cadence is open to question.

My point in rehearsing this analytical disagreement is this: the authors' preconceived idea of what they will find easily blinds them to what *actually* occurs in the music. Theory wins, music loses. It is obvious, and depressing, that the same error will be transmitted to students of their pedagogy.

But ah, they say, there is no "right" analysis anyway! Any analysis which follows their rules is equally correct! Well, then, their analysis is one of an indeterminate number of "correct" analyses, all of them equally unconcerned with the music and hence equally uninteresting.

My own view of Schenkerian pedagogy is quite different. First—following the philosophy of my own teacher, Ernst Oster—I avoid stressing theoretical abstractions in the early stages of study. At the beginning of my Schenker course, "theory" consists of conventional disciplines that the student should already know: figured bass, harmony, species counterpoint, and some simple notions of embellishment. In my opinion, study of *Free Composition*, though important, is for advanced students only—students who have already studied Schenkerian analysis for at least one year. First analysis, then theory: the theory should be motivated by analysis, by music itself, as it was for Schenker. Schenker, after all, reached *Free Composition* only by studying music for a lifetime; understanding that book requires an understanding of Schenker's earlier writings, which aren't easy either. To begin with the end is, to say, the least, a questionable way to proceed.

When my approach works as intended—it does for some students and not for others—the student is led to *discover* the theory through hearing and reflecting upon music. In this way the analytical approach and the ear keep pace with each other, while both improve. Only after a good deal of analytical practice are theoretical generalizations stated in abstract form. Once the level of theoretical abstraction is reached, the student has a much deeper understanding of those abstractions than could have been gained by having him or her read *Free Composition* or memorize a set of “rules.” After that comes more analysis, and more, and more. It’s not nearly so tidy as the Proctor-Riggins method, but it’s exhilarating: many students find that what they’re learning corresponds to what they’ve dimly perceived in music; the gulf between the concepts “theory” and “music” disappears.

My approach (which is adapted from Oster’s) is practically opposite to that of Proctor and Riggins; they present an abstract theory into which pieces are subsequently “plugged in.” Why should the student be interested in doing that? What is its value? For me, and I hope for my students, the object of studying and doing analysis is to understand masterpieces better; the theory does not exist for its own sake. What I miss in their article is any hint of *why* a student should make the effort to master this complex theoretical apparatus—especially when he or she is told not to care whether any particular analysis is more illuminating (and not just theoretically better-formed) than any other! Musicians properly demand an aesthetic “payoff” from analysis, not just the satisfaction of solving a puzzle in musical notation. Analysis should lead to better hearing, better performing, and better thinking about music, not just to “correct” answers.

A side note. Like Oster’s teaching, mine is not graph-centered. My students do no graphing for about the first half-semester; nor do I present them with formal graphs during that time. When graphing begins, it is presented as *merely* a means of communicating relationships already intuited by the analyst (whether that is the student or me). I very much dislike making a fetish of graphs. And I spend lots of class time—as much as possible—debating the merits of alternate readings: not primarily their conformance with the theory, though that is discussed where appropriate, but their relative plausibility as models of the composition being analyzed.

I believe—and this is really the point of my “Americanization”—that my kind of Schenkerian pedagogy is in conflict with the American university system as it is currently structured; the “objective” type of approach represented by Proctor and Riggins is precisely the sort of thing the current system tends to encourage. This situation is more than unfortunate; students, professors, and ultimately the academy all lose by it. As has been

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pointed out by some literary critics, theory was the ticket by which criticism entered the academy, but excessive reliance on theory has perverted criticism. The same thing has happened to music analysis. The university demands theory and disdains "metaphysical sensibilities"; Proctor and Riggins are by no means alone in their prejudices. But to acquiesce in the perversion of music for the sake of theory is shameful.

Sincerely yours,

William Rothstein
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