Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy

Volume 11 Article 9

1-1-1997

Letter To The Editor

Michael Rogers

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

From Michael Rogers

A response to David Damschroder:

Professor Damschroder is right. My review does contain some inaccuracies, although not all the ones he claims, and I welcome this opportunity to set the record straight and to correct some misunderstandings he has about my criticisms.

1. My comment that "*maybe* [my emphasis] the students should be 'doing' more of the analytical work . . ." was not intended to "find fault" (as Damschroder puts it) with his book or approach. I was merely trying to step for a moment outside the confines of this specific review to identify—for teaching in general—at what point analytical hints offered by an instructor can start to impede the learning process rather than help it. Perhaps my error, if any, was that I did not make this larger issue sufficiently clear.

I don't know at what point the hints would become "too much" either for this book or in some other context, so I don't know if he had too many and I never said that he did. This can only be decided on a case-by-case basis by a seasoned teacher for individual students according to their needs of the moment. I think, though, it is a perfectly legitimate issue to raise within a review for any kind of teaching. I go on to say (in the review): "the analytical clues themselves are certainly exemplary models of the sort of thing that should be happening as part of the educational exchange in listening and singing environments. It will be up to individual teachers to decide how to maximize their effectiveness for each given setting—how and when to use them." In other words, I supported the value and quality of these cues in my original review (even as I

tangentially mused about their proper number). In fact, as Damschroder himself acknowledges, I went so far as to admit that, "these many wonderful pedagogical tips alone are worth the price of the book," so I am slightly mystified at his defensive posture.

My phrase "almost every" in describing the amount of hints was indeed excessive—mathematically speaking, that is. I was simply responding to my enthusiasm for seeing such hints at all, considering that most books include nothing like this. My comment, then, was intended to draw attention to this abundance of good things and was intended as high praise, not as a rebuke, but I can now see how it could be misconstrued. I certainly did not undertake the kind of precise statistical count of the percentage of analyzed melodies that Damschroder offers, and I defer to his figures as a corrective. Based on the information in Prof. Damschroder's letter, there appears to be no fundamental disagreement between us on both the value and limitations of verbal nudges.

2. Regarding whether or not I consulted the *Instructor's Manual* for my review, there is an interesting story to tell. In fact, I did *not* have this manual available at the time of the review for the simple reason that I was not even aware of such a manual. So far as I remember—and I am willing to admit to a faulty brain—in the packet I received or brochures that Schirmer Books initially sent, there was no information whatsoever about the existence of an *Instructor's Manual* and one is not automatically provided when a review copy of *Listen and Sing* is ordered, as Damschroder admits. Furthermore, nowhere in the main text (that I could find) is there any reference to this supplementary book. The accompanying cassette tapes are mentioned in the preface; I would expect the *Instructor's Manual* also to have been identified as part of the supporting package. If you were just looking at the text—as most people would be—you wouldn't even know there was an *Instructor's Manual*. Now I'm sure it's true, as Damschroder states, that an area representative could be helpful in obtaining a copy, but common sense suggests that you would first have to know that a book existed before you could ask for it.

I am now embarrassingly aware, then, that at least some of my impressions of the strengths and weaknesses of the book were based on ignorance of the larger picture—on ignorance of this supporting

manual, which as it turns out does contain much useful practice material that invalidates some of my original assessments about the full range of content and focus. For the resulting inadvertent inaccuracies, I apologize to the readers of this journal and especially to Prof. Damschroder for misrepresenting the subject matter of his text.

But there is still more to my adventure with this book. After my review was completed and submitted, I did discover, completely by accident one day while just browsing in the Schirmer catalog of music textbooks, a listing (with its own ISBN number) for a *Teacher's Manual* for *Listen and Sing*. I immediately contacted the headquarters of Schirmer Books in New York City to request a copy. I was told in clear terms that "the book was no longer available; it had gone out of print." After briefly experiencing my frustration, I decided to put the matter to rest. My review, after all, had already been sent.

When Prof. Damschroder's concerns were passed on to me after the review was published, I made a second inquiry (again from national headquarters) about the availability of the *Teacher's Manual* so I could properly respond to his comments. This time I was told that the manual had just been reprinted and was now back in stock (as of January 1998). I am not sure whether Prof. Damschroder is aware that apparently (if my information was accurate) there was a time period when the manual was not available. At any rate, I have since received a copy, have reviewed it, and can confirm that it does in fact include the kinds of practice material (for secondary dominants and modulation) that I initially had such trouble locating in just the main text alone, although I missed some there too. I am sorry that my convoluted experience with this review has resulted in such an unfair description of the content of this text. [I never said, by the way, as Damschroder claims, that the terms themselves for secondary dominants, modulation, and related issues were not mentioned or that they were not identified or defined or illustrated as important concepts, but only that I couldn't find the appropriate or adequate follow-up practice progressions once they had been introduced.]

3. As Prof. Damschroder surmises, the *amount* of practice exercises for harmonic modulations (even after revising my figures) is still

not sufficient, in my opinion, for a full course of study on this topic, but I am willing to admit that this is a personal judgment. My students, at least, would need a lot more practice for this demanding and important task than what is provided in this book.

Damschroder's progressions for secondary dominants are problematic, however, for another reason. The problem is that, although there seem to be enough harmonic patterns that include secondary-function symbols (and two kinds of systems are generously offered), the types of multiple-choice distinctions called for too often, in my opinion, involve discriminations not between a chord that is a secondary dominant and one that is not, but rather between two slightly different versions of the same secondary dominant. So this time it is the content of the progressions that falls short and not the amount of practice material.

For example, I am not as concerned about the relatively trivial difference between a V6/5 of V and a vii^{o7} of V as I am about the more crucial and substantial distinction between any kind of secondary dominant of V compared with, say, the very different musical and psychological effect of a simpler and less tension-provoking IV, or the slightly more rich ii6/5, or the distinctively dramatic N^6 chord, or any of the more forward-pushing augmented-sixth chords—all of which could fit into the same predominant slot.

The kinds of distinctions that Damschroder chooses to dwell on—and not all are of this type—are of a finer gradation and, while important too, could easily be practiced in other simpler contexts (e.g., V6/5 - I vs. vii^{o7} - I). Why waste the secondary-dominant progressions just to practice chord-quality distinctions? These don't even need progressions at all but could be practiced as individual chords. Secondary-dominant practice should involve sensitization to the different effects—or affects—of intensity, weight, and meaning that secondary-dominant chords can produce as compared with different categories of chords; it should not fuss over minute shades of color variation or inversion difference between or among chords that are all basically conveying the same musical message.

Many of Damschroder's secondary-dominant exercises, then, are not what they seem to be. I have not done the type of precise statistical counting that Damschroder would expect, but I estimate that over 75% of the secondary dominants in the multiple-choice

format call only for judging chord quality rather than detecting the presence or absence of a secondary dominant in the first place.

Similarly, I would consider it more important to be able to distinguish presence or absence of augmented-sixth chords than to be able to distinguish between the various geographical types within the augmented-sixth family. In short, the crucial features of chords to stress in harmonic dictation are those that differentiate *between* families and not *within* families. Uniqueness is more significant than variation—although both have their place.

4. Appropriate length of dictation melodies is another topic about which we apparently differ—although here there is some perception/cognition research to help identify the capacities of human processing.[1]

I am not about to start counting "data bits" in Damschroder's melodies to determine whether or not they fall outside the commonly accepted boundaries of human perception. It would be foolish, anyway, to compare my results with his because different teachers (or listeners) might use very different chunking procedures or pattern-identification methods. My general impression, however, remains that a fairly large number of his practice melodies for dictation would not easily meet the standards or requirements of short-term memory processing. An interesting debate could be designed about whether or not student practice melodies should follow these short-term guidelines in the first place. But that is, of course, another topic altogether.

---

[1]See George Miller, "The Magical Number Seven Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits On Our Capacity For Processing Information," *Psychological Review* 63 (1956): 81-97, which is the classic study on the limits of short-term memory and chunking. See also Hugo D. Marple, "Short Term Memory and Musical Stimuli," in *Psychology and Acoustics of Music: A Collection of Papers*, ed. by Edward P. Asmus, Jr. (Division of Continuing Education, University of Kansas, n.d.), 73-93. This study tested the "7, +/- 2" rule of thumb in musical contexts and found that most listeners operate within the expected limits of short-term memory as defined by Miller. Many additional more recent follow-up studies over the years have confirmed the validity of this framework.

5. My most fundamental difference with Damschroder involves his omission of scale-degree function. And after reading his above response to my review, I am even more convinced that he has not yet come to appreciate its importance. [I am not consoled (or surprised) to learn recently from Damschroder's *Instructor's Manual* that his own favored system for sight singing is to use letter names (p. x), which is at the opposite end of the spectrum from scale-degree function.] First of all, he confuses the issue (in his letter) by excessively focusing on the red herring of "hierarchy," a term I used (once) in my review and one that has many different applications in musical analysis. He assumes I am referring to some kind of Schenkerian orientation. I am a big fan of Schenkerian analysis (especially for sight singing and melodic dictation). I have argued for its benefits in my published writings, analysis articles, and conference papers and use it on a daily basis in my own teaching for both aural and written theory, although always in combination with complementary approaches, never exclusively. I appreciated (and fully recognized) the many wonderful applications of Schenkerian principles in Damschroder's book and, in fact, would not have minded if he had gone even further in this direction.

But in this case, I was talking about something different; I was using the term "hierarchy" to make a simple distinction between "active tones" and "rest tones."[2] The "flattened-out, nonhierarchical perspective" I was referring to in my review was Damschroder's lack of distinction between two different *levels* of melodic function: those pitches that "demand progression and resolution" (Wedge) and those that do not. Not recognizing such distinctions drains the lifeblood out of tonality and reduces melodic structure to a single static plane of existence. It is in this sense—not the Schenkerian one—that I feel his approach is "nonhierarchical."

The key term here is *melodic* function. Damschroder claims, for example, that his book does deal with pitch function in changing

[2]I am borrowing terms here from another Schirmer Books publication: George Wedge, *Ear Training and Sight-Singing* (1921), one of the earliest and best examples of the pedagogical application of scale-degree function; see especially chapter VI. A quick perusal of this book will reveal what is missing from the Damschroder text.

contexts and he quotes from page 18 that "a pitch may fulfill several different functions within a key." We are in agreement as far as this goes; all events in music, of course, are context sensitive. The example he is referring to, however (on the previous page), involves a simple C-major melody where the pitch G first appears as part of a tonic triad and then later as part of a dominant triad. He is talking about, in other words, *harmonic* function—the role a pitch plays in the underlying chord structure (the fifth of this chord vs. the root of that).

Now I am certainly not going to argue that melodic and harmonic function are unrelated, but when I use the term scale-degree function I am referring specifically to a "teeming inner world of tugs and magnetism"—it is ironic here that Damschroder quotes back to me my own words—created by powerful horizontal intervallic patterns of goal-directed motion inherently built into the structure of the major/minor scale (*not* chords); I am not referring here to the conventional labels for chords like the primary-triad functions, for example, that he cites. It is *melodic* patterns that activate the intricate network of relationships and attractions that we define as functional tonality.

The historical antecedent for the pedagogical position I am advocating is not Schenker, as is evidently true for Damschroder, but rather Fétis, the first theorist—in my opinion—to fully grasp the inner melodic workings of tonality, although as I have already made clear, Schenker has been an important influence on my thinking as well. My complaint, then, about Damschroder's book is not that it's not Schenkerian enough but that it's *only* Schenkerian. What pedagogical vigor and bounty his text would have had if only the additional, and presently missing, principles of scale-degree function could have been combined with the many fine Schenkerian features already present (and abundantly identified by Damschroder himself in his letter—changing context, stability/instability, prolongation, levels analysis, long-range vs. local associations, structural reductions, harmonic functions, subordination, etc.)! I like his book very much. I just thought it could have been even much better—more eclectic, comprehensive, multifaceted.

Let me illustrate, briefly, how my scale-degree approach and Damschroder's Schenkerian mind-set differ by picking just one item

from his list for comparison (the same one he also singled out for comment). Damschroder claims, correctly, that his book does illustrate the value of changing context (e.g., the quote he cites from p. 18 and the musical example on p. 17, which I have already briefly mentioned). In this example—and in others—the kind of changing context that is tacitly assumed is one where the meaning of a pitch changes according to its particular surroundings (as when a pitch belonging to one triad now belongs to another) but in Damschroder's universe the larger context is nearly always *within the same tonality* (except, of course, where tonicization or modulation occurs as in simple pivot-note or pivot-chord situations).

The kind of surroundings I am pleading for, however, is a richer one where the changing context itself, through a subtly altered disposition of half and whole steps, for example, might trigger *an entirely new tonal center*. Simply adding or subtracting an accidental from a pattern can do this in an instant. I am arguing, in other words, for more attending to how these minuscule adaptations reinterpret the meanings assigned to every pitch—how tonality itself as a force-field of gravitational pulls is roused, motivated, intensified, extended, embellished, impelled, mutated, undermined, and transformed purely through single-line patterning and re-distribution and re-grouping of melodic intervals.

Damschroder's view of tonality seems, by comparison inert, fixed, stationary. This criticism of the purely Schenkerian landscape *untempered by acknowledgment of internal melodic urgencies and proclivities* has been made by others too. This topic is a big can of worms to open so I'm just mentioning it as an aside. The degree to which teachers will wish to present tonality as a living impulse of varying kinds of surges, respites, oppositions, lures, and kinetic contractions and releases compared with presenting tonality as an invariable structure like a motionless mobile or a map viewed from above will differ according to the training, background, and temperament of the teacher and the needs and level of the students. It is not a question that can be settled once and for all in these few pages, but I remind everyone that it is a dilemma that needs to be hacked away at and returned to frequently. Is tonality more like a flowing river or a stable crystal? Is a musical composition more like an amusement-park fun house or a well-ordered supermarket?

Another way to get at our differences is to consider how a given interval changes meaning according to location within the key or scale. I see little of this kind of thinking in Damschroder's book, as I said in my initial review. Certainly intervals of various sizes are frequently mentioned and practiced on, but the subtly different effects of repositioning within the scale are rarely alluded to. It is in this realm that the values of scale-degree function really shine. For example, the "Twinkle, Twinkle" P5 from tonic up to dominant has one particular sensation, but the other five locations in the diatonic scale where P5s might occur each embody their own unique musical character. It is the recognition of these distinctive sensations that I miss so much in his book. In other words, Damschroder's approach is "flattened out" in the sense that the many individual flavors of each interval size are not properly recognized; each interval is squeezed into a single classification. There are many different kinds of M6s or of m3s in real music, but for Damschroder each size means just one thing. This, then, is how I am trying to explain "changing context," and not simply by taking a single pitch and pasting a new label on it as its membership in changing chords occurs.[3]

It might be interesting or profitable to have a more extended debate or comparison of views concerning these differing perspectives in the pages of this journal (like the "Houlihan/Tacka vs. Smith" discussions on *la*-based minor several years ago—see Footnote 3) or in some other kind of setting, but a precondition for meaningful interchange would consist of each of us stating at the outset, in our own paraphrase, a "pro-and-con" version of the other's position with such clarity that we could each certify the accuracy of

---

[3]See the comment on the P4 at the end of this response; and for a comprehensive description of dozens of other intervallic "changing-context" examples, see my article, "Beyond Intervals: The Teaching of Tonal Hearing," *Indiana Theory Review* 6/3 (Spring 1983): 18-34. Other relevant sources that help to illuminate my position include Steve Larson, "Scale-Degree Function: A Theory of Expressive Meaning and Its Application to Aural-Skills Pedagogy," *JMTP* 7 (1993): 69-84; David Butler, "Describing the Perception of Tonality in Music: A Critique of the Tonal Hierarchy Theory and a Proposal for a Theory of Intervallic Rivalry," *Music Perception* 6 (1989): 219-242; and the Tim Smith series on solfège systems in this journal (1991, 1992, and 1994).

the opposing statement. I don't mean to say that if such a thing were to happen, then Damschroder would immediately embrace my ideas in the next edition of his book, but only that such understanding of the contrasting view would be a necessary starting point for a real discussion to take place.

I'm not sure, in this case, we are at that point yet. I've seen no evidence in Damschroder's book—or now in his letter—that he has comprehended the fuller ramifications of the scale-degree function methodology. And I must confess, too, that I'm not sure I could fulfill this requirement either (i.e., to explain his view to his satisfaction). I am reasonably certain, though, that our views do not represent competing or incompatible pedagogical systems (which *was* true in the minor solfege controversy). So I would be interested in finding the common ground.

It is possible that I am not giving Damschroder enough credit and that he has, in fact, considered, in a deep and thorough-going manner, all of the benefits and goals of scale-degree pedagogy and then rejected this approach as not meeting his needs for some unspecified reason. Or maybe he thought, as I suspect, that he was using scale-degree function all along, and I just wasn't able to find it (like my mistake with modulation). But so far as I can tell, we just don't know (from the book or from the letter) what his thinking is on this issue, except for his evident confusion that a Schenkerian perspective and scale-degree function are the same thing.

Setting aside my inaccuracies regarding *content* (which I have already admitted to and explained), I don't think it is fair for Damschroder to continue to insist that I have also misrepresented his *methodology*. The mountain of evidence (at the end of his letter) that he thinks counters my criticism is really just a smoke screen—it is rebuttal for a criticism I never made.

Coincidentally, I have recently published a detailed explication of the most systematic and richest version of scale-degree pedagogy that I know of, so rather than attempting to explain my value system further, I simply refer Damschroder and all interested readers to my article on the Jersild Approach.[4] The selected bibliography

[4]Michael R. Rogers, "The Jersild Approach: A Sight Singing Method from Denmark," *College Music Symposium* 36 (1996): 149-161.

and related readings that I recommend, as well as careful study of Jersild's books, and particularly those of Wedge and Edlund, will go a long way toward making clear the differences between Damschroder's book and my view.

What would convince me that Damschroder has truly understood my view is for him to be able to restate the main points of the "Jersild" article in *his* words—that is, to make it his own—to my satisfaction. I would not ask for agreement, only for understanding and accuracy. And, of course, I would hope to be able to do the same in return—that is, state for him why he consciously chose *not* to use the kind of scale-degree function I am describing. But he has not even made that argument yet for himself.

I will only add in closing that the Jersild approach, among other things, identifies ten purely linear patterns (seven diatonic and three chromatic) as landmark key definers and scale-position locators each with a distinctive melodic personality; these are two-note contextual patterns and not merely individual pitches. For those reading the article I also direct special attention to the "Tonal Grid" chart on p. 155, which makes apparent the "teeming inner world of tugs and magnetism" mentioned above. [Damschroder will be pleased to see that it is constructed as a kind of structural reduction, but a throbbing one I hope, not quiescent.] And note, as well, the use of melodic tetrachords (p. 151) as a way of noting (and notating) how tiny intervallic adjustments in simple four-note patterns can re-orient one's ears back and forth between motion and arrival, turning beginnings into endings and vice versa, like rotating stones in a kaleidoscope. And finally, note the illustration of the changing nature of the P4 in a series of remarkable chameleon-like melodic examples (pp. 153-54) originally conceived by Robert Hurwitz. This one demonstration alone will pinpoint the essence of my argument.

My article—and now this response—concludes with the following summary:

> [With this system] the goal of sight singing is suddenly and palpably revealed not as 'how to sing the next note,' but as the learning of a large and intricate, yet beautifully simple, framework for hearing.
>
> We only know that we have done our jobs as sight-singing teachers if students can exhibit sensitivity to musical shadings. We can't really

tell if they have learned anything about how tonality itself operates simply by observing if they sing the right notes on some test because those 'right notes' may be performed in the most anti-musical way imaginable (e.g., as a series of flat, undifferentiated pitches unrelated—in their mind's ear—to any defining tonal grid and thus totally lacking any individuated meanings of 'tension and release' or of 'leanings and resolutions').

In fact, we have all witnessed such monochromatic performances that trudge stiffly and computer-like from note to note—either in the sight-singing class or on the concert stage. We often begrudgingly have to give credit for such a theory performance even though the invisible threads of connection between pitches are missing. We must find ways to distinguish between a performance that is correct (maybe even accidentally correct), yet mechanical, compared to one that is correct for the right reasons—and therefore *musical*.

A sight-singing teacher should be more than a burglar alarm for wrong notes.