



Music Theory and Historical Awareness

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ABSTRACT: After clearly defining their respective turfs about twenty-five years ago, American music theory and musicology have more recently drawn somewhat more closely together. The paper seeks to place this trend in a historical context by showing how, in much recent work, the two disciplines share both a repertoire of interest to both and a number of critical methodologies. It then takes the opening measures of the first movement of Shostakovich's First String Quartet as an example of how analytical and historical approaches might interact.

[1] Something funny happened to contemporary American music theory on its way to the new millenium. That something was a collision with history, in the form of the so-called New Musicology, cultural theory, or what Lawrence Kramer has called postmodern hermeneutics. The collision was unexpected, and was neither universally welcomed nor universally considered funny. For what has always distinguished us as theorists, what has enabled us to separate ourselves from musicology and to institute music theory as a discipline in its own right in conservatories, colleges, and universities, was precisely our ability to do without history: to deal with music synchronically rather than diachronically, to deal with it as structure rather than style, to approach it more as an object of an analysis than one of criticism. The music-theoretical enterprise has been driven by analysis based on theory: Schenkerian theory, pitch-class set theory, twelve-tone theory, and later contour theory, transformational theory, network theory, neo-Riemannian theory, even theories of music cognition. The payoffs have been impressive indeed: the theoretical models adopted, invented, and developed in American theory have provided an extraordinary array of tools, unavailable and unimaginable just thirty years ago, for gaining a musical understanding of a broad range of repertoires, across all historical periods and across the Western/non-Western and art-music/popular-music divides. Many would argue as well that American theory has made possible an intelligent and musical pedagogy of both tonal and post-tonal music that was lacking in previous generations. Yet there have been drawbacks to the new theoretical regime. It is easy to get into the habit of hearing—and *seeing*, for many of our analytical methodologies, however much they preach about hearing, rely heavily on seeing—music only as system and structure. To thus limit our discourse about music leaves us, as theorists, open to the charge, as recent historians have been all too happy to point out, of ignoring the historical, social, and cultural contexts of music, of being oblivious to all musical meaning but structural meaning, or in the memorable words of Leo Treitler, of “. . . drawing the blinds before music’s expressive force.”⁽¹⁾

[2] Now it may seem, speaking of collisions, that I am on a collision course with an all too obvious moral trope, one that you already see coming: that theorists should get their heads out of their structures and systems and consider works in their historical and cultural contexts, as a number of our theorists have done—and here I might mention, out of many admirable examples, the work of Kofi Agawu, Robert Hatten, and Gregory Karl.⁽²⁾ If you expect to hear that tired trope from me, you are right; I really do think that theorists should be attentive to musical meaning, and also that they should be historically aware and should keep abreast of how the best historians, musical or otherwise, are doing history. So far, so good. But surely

this moral injunction is not all I have to say; if it is, my paper is over now. No, what I propose to do here is not to preach, but to take a step back and look at the disciplines of music theory and musicology, and to show that, despite their divergence twenty-five years ago or so in the American academy, they have recently become more closely linked together, even though they remain, and will surely continue to remain, separate disciplines.

[3] What originally separated music theory and music history is both a matter of repertoire and a matter of approach. With respect to the former, in the early days of American music theory, theorists competed with musicologists primarily for the music of the twelve Schenker-approved tonal composers, plus the twentieth-century music of the Second Viennese School, Stravinsky and Bartók, and perhaps a few others. Theorists were generally happy to cede to the historians the music before that of Bach and Handel, that of innumerable Kleinmeister that the musicologists had unearthed, the music of Liszt and Wagner (which even the musicologists were not all that interested in), all French music before and after Debussy and all music in the twentieth century that Benjamin Boretz, in his “Metavariations,” widely read by theorists at the time, didn’t “care about.” But until the 1980s radical differences in approach between the two disciplines regulated competition for repertoire and militated against turf wars. Theorists mined the great tonal and post-tonal works as fodder for their favored theories, and musicologists mined the same works for style history, composer biography, work reception, and manuscript study. To be sure, there were crossovers: some theorists maintained an interest in style, work reception, and manuscript study, and some musicologists appropriated the methods of theory and analysis. But for the most part, it was the case that theorists and historical musicologists shared only a relatively small repertoire, and within that shared repertoire, differences in approach kept the disciplines separate.

[4] This disciplinary stability, however, was short-lived. Like an isotope that can maintain its existence only when a number of independent conditions are exactly right, the disciplinary configuration of the late 1970s and the early 1980s remained in a steady state only so long as theorists were content to do theory, and historians to do history, and for neither to bother the other. Yet in the mid- to late 1980s, on both sides of the theory/musicology divide, scholars began to grow restless with the intellectual limitations that were imposed, or that seemed to be imposed, upon them by their respective disciplines: positivistic history on the musicology side, Schenkerian and post-tonal theories on the theory side. Thus was born the so-called New Musicology, which, driven by a post-structuralist, postmodern critical spirit, soon launched an attack on American music theory. But at the same time, some theorists were already expanding their own discipline’s horizons and were trying to come to grips with critical theory and to develop a sense of interpretive and historical perspective in their work. The ensuing disciplinary shakedown has seen an extraordinary expansion of the repertoires in which both disciplines have an interest: virtually all polyphonic Western art music, and much popular and vernacular music as well, are now fair game for both theorists and musicologists. The past decade and a half or so has also witnessed an explosion of methodologies, to the point that there is now considerable overlap; both those who call themselves theorists and those who call themselves musicologists have appropriated semiotics, rhetoric, narrative theory, deconstruction, feminist theory, postcolonial theory and a variety of other critical approaches to music. Accordingly, although the old disciplinary lines are still strong, there is more and more work being produced that cuts across these lines and is more difficult to classify as either music theory or musicology.

[5] Now where is it that the two disciplines most clearly merge? Surely there are firm disciplinary boundaries still in place. No one is going to mistake a study of repertory in a sixteenth-century chapel as music theory, nor will anyone be tempted to classify an essay on neo-Riemannian theory or diatonic scale theory as musicology. But the disciplines do often meet, and where they meet is in repertoires of interest to both, at the joint where analysis shades into interpretation, where structure shades into hermeneutics. This is where the disciplines cross, simply because, at the site that is the musical work, a plurality of methodologies naturally leads to a merging of analytical, critical, and historical thinking. It is in fact at this juncture of analysis and interpretation that historical awareness can best deepen and enrich the analyses that we do as theorists, and that analysis can best deepen and enrich the critical interpretations that we do as historians.

[6] I shall offer one example of how the two can interact: the opening theme and transitional area of the first movement of Shostakovich’s First String Quartet (see **Example 1**). Of the many relationships that one could point out, what interests me most are the interrelations among the melodic phrase-initiating figure of the repeated C’s in the first violin, the ascending scale figure starting on C in the cello, and the phrase rhythm of the entire excerpt. The repeated-C melodic figure occurs three times: once at the beginning of the antecedent phrase, once at the beginning of the consequent phrase (2 measures before R. 1), and once at R. 1/5–6, a pair of measures that articulates an elision which functions both as the cadence of the opening period and the beginning of the transition. The ascending scale in the cello occurs four times: once at the beginning, in conjunction with the melodic repeated figure; once at R. 1/2, where the cello’s scale is not coordinated with the melodic

C's; once at R. 1/5, where the two are again coordinated as the transition begins; and once at R. 3, at a slower and more measured pace, at the final approach to the dominant.

[7] What is most striking about the violin figure and cello figure involves less the figures themselves than the ways in which they are or are not coordinated rhythmically. At the beginning we associate both the repeated-note melodic figure and the ascending scale with the initiation of a hypermeasure. In the consequent phrase, however, the repeated-note figure begins the hypermeasure (at 2 measures before R. 1), but the cello goes its own way, now generating a sharp dissonance underneath the repeated C's, and delaying its ascending scale a few measures. Now the ascending scale occurs later in the hypermeasure, in straight quarter notes, which give the effect of its trying to catch up with the melody. At R. 1/4 the end of the cello's scale is swept together with ascending motion in the other instruments to bring blatant parallel motion into R. 1/5–6—the measures that constitute the elision, noted above, in which the last two measures of the consequent phrase of the opening period are simultaneously the opening measures of the transition. The strength of the new beginning is articulated by the coordination once more of the first violin's repeated-note figure and the cello's ascending scale; but almost humorously, the cello, having just finished the scale, has to do a double-take and begin it again at the onset of the new hypermeasure. The energy of the beginning of the transition now generates an almost two-octave ascending scale in the cello, as well as two irregular hypermeasures, of nine and five measures, respectively. Only at R. 3, where the cello for the first time asserts its lowest register and begins its slow scalar ascent from C and G in parallel fifths, does hypermetric regularity return, as the music leads to a half cadence in preparation for the second theme. As at the beginning, the cello's ascending scale and the repeated-note figure begin a hypermeasure, but this time the repeated-note figure is not on C, but on A, as the first violin descends from its high point at two measures before R. 3, thus lending a tonal instability to the hypermetric downbeat that contrasts it with the opening downbeats of the opening theme and of the transition.

[8] Now all the above is for the most part straightforward analysis, although I resorted briefly to personification and the attribution of agency to the music toward the end. But suppose we move beyond analysis and see if our historical sense—or at least, my historical sense—can elucidate the passage even further. I believe that it can, although my historical interpretation can never assume the level of intersubjectivity that my analysis has. The relevant historical context of the passage is that the First Quartet, composed in 1938, was the first instrumental work that Shostakovich wrote after the devastating experience of the condemnation of his opera *Lady Macbeth* in early 1936 and his subsequent return to favor with the Fifth Symphony of 1937. I have always heard the opening measures of the quartet as both placid and yet, in a word, blanched—outwardly optimistic, perhaps, but pale and a bit tentative. Shostakovich himself wrote of the quartet, before its premiere, “Don't expect to find any special depth in this, my first quartet opus. In mood it is joyful, merry, lyrical. I would call it 'spring-like.’” And years later he wrote, “I tried to convey in it images of childhood, somewhat naïve, springlike moods.”⁽³⁾

[9] Yet it seems to me that the grim context of the composition of the First Quartet is at least hinted at obliquely in its opening measures, peaceful though they be. The nature of the musical materials, I think, supports my hearing: the choice of C major, as pale a key as one can get; the choice of only repeated notes and scale figures for melodic content—nothing with any sharply etched character at all; and the fact that the inner voices have no courage to do anything but to move together almost exclusively in parallel thirds throughout the whole passage, 36 measures in all. Hearing thus with historical ears, I hear Shostakovich beginning his cycle of quartets—works that involve no text, and that avoid the public rhetoric of the symphony—pleasantly enough, to be sure, but also in as cautious a fashion as possible: in C, with nothing to rock the boat. The only assertiveness is in the cleverness of the rhythmic structure, which might be heard as a claim of strength that hardly anyone, perhaps only the composer himself, would understand.

[10] You may or may not agree with my hearing of the passage: your historical ears may not be the same as mine, you may consider my historical ears irrelevant, or you may fault my hearing for not being intersubjective. You might also suggest that such an exercise is more viable—perhaps all too tempting, you might claim—with the music of Shostakovich than, say, with that of Bach or Brahms. Such reservations are well taken, and the analysis does indeed stand on its own, without any further interpretation. But it is precisely this kind of hearing, this kind of willingness to step beyond structure, beyond what is rigorously demonstrable, that characterizes the space in which theorists and historians are meeting these days. It is my contention that, whatever one's disciplinary allegiances, we should both encourage this sort of historical hearing, since it ties our listening more closely, and more imaginatively, to human experience, and that we should at the same time insist even more vigorously on the highest standards of structural hearing and close analysis, since such hearing and such analysis ground us in the music, and curb the willfulness of our historical speculations. In this way we as theorists can take advantage of our analytical skills and yet show that we can be historically insightful and sensitive; and we as historians can show that we

understand the cultural context of music while simultaneously demonstrating that we understand in rich detail, and with the backing of theory, how the music goes, as music.

[Allen Forte's response](#)

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

In the selective bibliography given below, I have endeavored to include some important recent writings about historiography, as well as essays and books in music theory and musicology, both recent and not-so-recent, that deal significantly with historical and interpretive issues, both philosophically and analytically. My thanks to my colleague James Hepokoski for some of the historiographical references.

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Footnotes

1. Leo Treitler, "'To Worship That Celestial Sound': Motives for Analysis," *Journal of Musicology* 1/2 (1982), 153.

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2. Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991; Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Gregory Karl, "Structuralism and Musical Plot," *Music Theory Spectrum* 19/1 (1997): 13–34.

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3. Both quotations cited in Laurel Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 112.

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