



The Deep Background of our Society

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A revised version of an ad hoc speech by Richmond Browne at the banquet celebrating the 25th anniversary of the SMT. Browne was a founding member of SMT and served as secretary of the Board from 1977 to 1992. He was also the founding editor of the SMT Newsletter and served on numerous SMT task forces during his tenure, while helping several regional theory societies organize. His remarks are about the coalescence that preceded the 1977 formation of the Society.

[1] It is a pleasure, in more ways than most of you can know, to be here tonight and talk about the founding of our Society. I am pleased to see so many old friends, former students now distinguished professors, and new members of our Society. My remarks tonight are unabashedly personal and, while I don't apologize for using the first person singular, I do regret that I cannot mention everyone else who played a significant part in the activities that led to the founding of the SMT. When we founded the SMT, it was in some ways a controversial and confrontational act.

[2] We were frustrated. We had a vision. Our goal was to create a profession. We hoped that there would be theorists 25 years later who knew and respected each other and who had achieved academic respect by virtue of the efforts of SMT. That clearly has happened. Those of us who started out many years before the founding of SMT in 1977 were inspired only by a vision of things to come. We are now vindicated (at least in part). That is to say, we may continue to be vindicated if the current SMT develops along clear and pragmatic lines. Otherwise, I think the whole theory enterprise may yet founder. I will say more about that, but first let me describe the situation as it existed before 1977.

[3] At first (I'm talking about the 1930's) there were only a few people who thought about theory as more than just the teaching of rudiments. That is all "theory" was at that time (and so it remained for many more years). Norman Cazden (a great theorist: look up his Harvard dissertation to understand why I say that); Tom Turner at Iowa; Bill Poland a bit later at Ohio State were lonely pioneers. In the 50's, the musicologists consolidated their position (based on the founding of the AMS in around 1934). Academic music itself came together as a generality in the CMS around 1954. In the late 60's, some composers became organized with the founding of the ASUC. Yet theory teaching remained something just "anyone" could do, and there were only hybrid jobs--with the theory portion presumed within the competence of any good performer, music historian, or composer. There was no way to be just a theorist. I will explain later what I think the core competence of a theorist is. It rests on mastery of analytic technique of core repertoires. That was, and is, our central claim.

[4] As a personal note: when I graduated from Yale in 1958, having been trained as a composer, but given a vision of generic theory by David Kraehenbuehl (founder of the JMT), I knew that I wanted to spend my academic life as a theorist—speculating, explaining, modeling the musical process as it can be studied on paper and in real time. When I taught at Yale

from 1960 to 1968, I found a new breed, almost a new creed around me in the persons of Allen Forte, Don Martino, James Drew and Jim Tenney. Yale was creating a model for theorists and analysts and teachers who were not hybrids—though the need for demonstrable musicianship of a high order has always been a subtext. On leaving Yale in 1968, I chose to go to the University of Michigan because it had a free-standing department of theory and seemed promising as a base for creating more Ph.D. programs in theory and eventually for starting a national theory society. While I was teaching at Yale, very fine people were at Princeton (calling themselves composers but in fact becoming masterful theorists), and very good musicians were teaching theory in various other places and beginning to ask for a more systematic approach to the explanation of musical process.

[5] Let me take up the situation as I found it in 1968. There were only about 20 doctoral degrees in theory or theory/something in the U.S. and only about 175 masters programs that even mentioned theory. Within 4 years, the University of Michigan had a Ph.D. in music theory—and others followed. By that time numerous discussion sessions had been mounted by me and others at ASUC, CMS, even at AMS. The other societies were lukewarm about theory. Composers remained solipsistic: “I am a composer; I only teach theory because I have to.” Musicologists claimed they were already theorists (a claim they maintain to this day). But other individuals had been thinking about a theory grouping: the invaluable Carlton Gamer, wily Gregory Proctor, the veteran and wise Bill Poland. The Music Theory Society of New York State (MTSNYS) invented itself in the early 70’s and their leaders helped greatly in the formation of the SMT.

[6] At Iowa in 1974, a rump meeting onstage after an Andrew Mead lecture included John Rahn, John Hanson and others (again forgive me for not remembering everyone) and decided spontaneously to go for it—in some vague way. Two things were decided then and there: NOT to try to do it fast and pre-emptively (that had been ASUC’s great mistake) but instead to plan ad hoc meetings for a while and see if we could build demand for a national theory society. The motto was: plan the next thing and have no members or apparatus for now. The result was the first National Conference on Music Theory (based on similarly titled Michigan meetings I had built) which was piggy-backed onto the next ASUC meeting in Boston with the help of Ben Boretz and Elaine Barkin. You can see how much depended on convergence: a consilience of inductions.

[7] At that meeting, Cazden actually showed up, as did Tom Turner and other experienced people. The debate raised the usual questions: do we know what theory is? why leave (or seem to oppose) the societies that now exist? can we find enough people? It seemed obvious that we needed to know about the demographics and raise the ante on our motives. The result was, at first, a panel at the next CMS meeting called “Music Theory: the Art, the Profession, and the Future.” As its organizer, I titled my own remarks “If We Are All Theorists, Why Aren’t We All Theorists?” Papers by Allen Forte, Vernon Klierer, Peter Westergaard, Carl Schachter, and Carlton Gamer were so compelling that CMS president William Reynolds stopped the next issue of CMS Symposium until I could edit them for publication. On the basis of that session, Wallace Berry (then University of Michigan and CMS Board member for theory) arranged for a second National Conference on Music Theory (sponsored by CMS) at Evanston—and the outcome you know.

[8] But there was still a lot of work to be done. An informal group, mostly of people I have mentioned above, was kept together and enlarged. We began to plan Evanston. I grabbed the (then new) CMS Directory of Music Faculties and built (by hand in my Ann Arbor living room, using hand-written lists and IBM punch cards!) a list of individuals which included all known theorists plus at least one known faculty member in every college or university that had a masters or doctoral program that mentioned theory. My mailing list brought over 300 people to Evanston and resulted in nearly 500 members of SMT after Evanston. I call this the Big Bang—from about fifteen people to 500 members in a virtual instant!

[9] There was debate at Evanston—but the result was a motion to establish our Society. (Please see my report in the first volume of *Music Theory Spectrum*, and, for the curious, my report the day after Evanston in the 1977 NASM journal. Some deans were not amused.) Our first executive board was elected at the assembly by ballot to represent ten geographic regions. It met immediately and elected Allen Forte president, Wallace Berry vice president, Richmond Browne secretary, and Mary Wennerstrom treasurer. It is my personal opinion that if Allen Forte had not been persuaded by Wallace Berry to become a leader in our movement, we would not be here tonight. Mary and I stayed in our roles for many years to provide institutional memory as the SMT evolved.

[10] As a new board, we had to set priorities: building membership, deciding to have a Journal, asking Jim Harrison to write us some Bylaws, and setting our first meeting as a Society (which turned out to be Minneapolis 1978)—and, most importantly, planning when to meet again soon. We did that in January 1978 in my IBM living room in Ann Arbor amidst a total Michigan blizzard—and again that Spring in New Haven, where we incorporated the Society (in New York State) and chose Bryan Simms to edit the first issues of *Music Theory Spectrum*. (The title Spectrum was an inspired suggestion from

Allen Forte.) The history from then on is contained in our archives (kept by me until 1992 and now at the University of Maryland). However, I have one more topic tonight—perhaps the most important, in my mind.

Why did we do it? Who did we think we were? What should the Society do now?

[11] My answer is that we were no longer satisfied with purely historical answers to questions of analysis. We felt that theorists should be able to explain the structure of a piece, or a phrase, on some basis other than the taxonomical descriptions so long handed down. The work of Schenker and of Babbitt (plus Forte) pointed to heuristics for analysis that needed to become central to our thinking and our teaching. The only way to get the academic stature needed for future theorists was to create the only apparatus academia respects: a society, a journal, more Ph.D. programs, a supply of young theorists who could actually teach theory as such. That has all happened, at least in part.

[12] However, it has not been a total success, in my view. Many prominent institutions have never signed on. Many schools have ignored us, ignored Schenker, ignored Babbitt, and continue to present music theory the way it was presented when I first saw it in the 50's. But the enormous gift to the musical community we have provided with our intellectual and speculative vision cannot be denied. We have every reason to be proud as we celebrate our 25th anniversary as a learned society in music. So that's why we did it.

But who did we think we were?

[13] My answer is that theory rests on analysis based on intellectual power, not just description. A theorist is a master analyst—certainly of tonal music, preferably also of 20th century music, and preferably of some other historical or contemporary genre. The proliferation of worthy topics like jazz, feminism, world music or cognition is welcome and adds to the value of music education in itself—but the rock of theory is analytic mastery. To the extent that the SMT as a group, or individuals who call themselves theorists, walk away from the analytic agenda, so much do they and we risk marginalizing ourselves. Diversity cannot be a cover for the SMT becoming an orphanage.

[14] My advice may seem harsh, but it is given out of love for all who preceded us, for everyone here tonight, and for all who will continue to work in the name of theory.

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