



The Founding of the Society for Music Theory

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[1] To President Elizabeth Marvin, Vice President William Caplin, Past President Thomas Christensen, President-Elect Joel Lester, Secretary Gretchen Horlacher, Treasurer Candace Brower, Members-At-Large of the Executive Board, and last, but not least, members of the Society for Music Theory, wherever you may be—to all of you I offer warm congratulations on this twenty-fifth anniversary of the Society. I am very pleased to be with you tonight in order to say a few words about the founding of the Society, its significance, and its achievements. But before I begin I should like to pay homage to the eminent past presidents so elegantly deployed at the head table. You can imagine how I feel, standing here, looking at you all with admiration, from a personal perspective now a quarter of a century old.

[2] Now to the genesis of the Society, in the telling of which after twenty-five years assumes mythic proportions, replete as it is with a giant (in the shape of the American Musicological Society), heroic figures (the courageous founders of our organization), and the various entities that formed the Greek chorus for the dramatic events that led to the establishment of the organization we now know as the Society for Music Theory.

[3] Picture, if you will, Evanston, Illinois (the home of Northwestern University) in the fall of 1977. It is beautiful autumn weather, warm and sunny. A spectacular location, alongside one of nature's wonders, the stupendous and sometimes unpredictable Lake Michigan. What a wonderful setting for what became a tumultuous and auspicious occasion: the annual meeting of the College Music Society, at which a session had been arranged for the discussion of the possible formation of a new society, a society to be dedicated to the study and furtherance of the field of music theory.

[4] The very idea of an autonomous “field” of music theory was of course anathema to many in the AMS, even though American musicology itself had achieved recognition only in the relatively recent past—forty-three years earlier, to be precise—as a reputable field of scholarship worthy of sustaining its own identity under the umbrella of an organized learned society. Thus, when the proposal to form a new theory society was broached at the Evanston meeting—in a large lecture hall, with, as I recall, a very out-of-tune piano that corresponded nicely to the situation!—the responses and counter-responses spanned a broad range of emotions, from the plaintively supplicative—as when the then Editor of the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* promised that if a new society were not formed, articles on music theory would be published in that periodical on a regular basis in the future—from that touching appeal to the fiery rhetoric of a major scholar, who urged that the concept of a new theory society, created by splitting off from the AMS, be abandoned forthwith.

[5] What that eminent person—and others who objected to the formation of a new society—did not take into account was that many of those deeply interested in the possibility of a new society were not only not members of the AMS but were also uninterested in the kinds of activities AMS fostered. In a number of instances, those individuals had a deep involvement in

contemporary musical composition, as scholars or as practitioners. Their primary theoretical interests lay in formulations relevant to contemporary music, not in the *tonoi* or in the subtleties of the *anadiplosis*, although I am sure they could have said a great deal about the latter—if, that is, someone had told them its meaning!

[6] What is particularly striking and even ironic about this circumstance is that as soon as our journal, *Music Theory Spectrum*, began publication, its contributors energetically trampled upon territories traditionally occupied by musicologists, as is evident in the Index to the first ten volumes of our journal, which contains references to such treatises as Gaffurio's *Practicae musicae* and Kirnberger's *Grundsätze des Generalbasses*. History of music theory was becoming part of music theory—or at least a field to be shared with musicology, representing a tradition that began in the United States with Paul Hindemith, who also, and of course, included in his virtuosic curriculum vitae the basic role of composer.

[7] But, to return to my dramatic narrative, the controversy raged on in that Northwestern University auditorium on that fateful autumn day, with individuals leaping to their feet, and with alternating cries of anguish and exuberance emanating from the chorus. And meanwhile, the waves of the nearby placid lake continued to lap the shore, quite oblivious of the antics of the energetic little fish who were leaping from its surface in an impatient effort to escape the comforting depths of their aquatic mother. (I pause to savor the metaphor.)

[8] Like those little fish, the members of the National Advisory Committee, the group that comprised the founders of our society, ultimately became impatient with the debate in the large auditorium, having already discussed in prior public meetings some of the basic issues involved in forming a new society, and in that way having sufficiently “tested the waters,” to know that there was a substantial group out there that would support such a move. As I look around me tonight I see incontrovertible proof of that conviction, a tribute to the foresight of the founders.

[9] But, as I reflect upon that fateful day in 1977, it seems clear that the National Committee—the members of which I listed in my 1987 talk—was really quite unconcerned about the objections of the conservative musicology contingent—not really, as it turned out, a substantially negative factor—so that after short meetings of the Committee (in the room of the building where the big public meeting had taken place—all this occurred within a very short time) a consensus was reached that we should proceed to the formation of a new organization. At that moment, and to elevate this lengthy description to an appropriately cinematic level, Wallace Berry, perhaps the major figure in this entire script, then approached me privately and asked: “Would you be willing to serve as President?” I replied: . . . “Well? . . .” And Wallace said: “Ok, let’s go.”

[10] So, that’s how we started. No elections—since there was no formal constituency, hence no rules of procedure, and no one looking over our shoulders. The moment had arrived, and the time for decisive action was ripe. Wallace was to be Vice-President, Richmond Browne Secretary, and Mary Wennerstrom Treasurer. Selected somewhat later were the Members At Large of what would become the Executive Board: Elaine Barkin, Douglass Green, Arthur Jannery, Leo Kraft, Lewis Rowell, and Peter Westergaard. And remember, at this stage we did not even have a name for the new organization!

[11] Subsequently of course we formalized everything, and after serious deliberation, we settled on a name for the infant organization, discarding the most obvious possibilities, such as the American Music-Theoretical Society and the American Society for Music Theory. In both those cases, it was felt that it was less important to designate the national origin and primary location of the society than to specify its field of major interest. Even more important than naming the society was the decision to inaugurate a journal of the society—and that was one of the most extraordinary achievements of the nascent period. With amazing speed, the first issue of our journal appeared in 1979, a mere two years after the historic Evanston confrontation, with Bryan Simms as Editor, and with nine excellent scholarly articles, representing the spread of interests that has come to characterize the activities of the members of our organization.

[12] Deciding upon a name for the journal proved to be both difficult and time-consuming. As I recall, Lewis Rowell suggested something in Sanscrit, Richmond Browne wanted an esoteric title, incorporating, as I recall, the term “diastematic,” and Peter Westergaard thought that the name Princeton should appear somewhere on the cover. In a desperate effort to negotiate this diversity, I suggested *Music Theory Spectrum*, which was accepted after only a little grumbling.

[13] We also had to obtain legal status for the society as a not-for-profit organization, and this was done with non-profit assistance, since we obviously had no money. Indeed, money for the operation of the society was a persistent problem for some time, as Mary Wennerstrom will confirm. Then came the issue of the proper selection of elected officers and executive board members, soon to be specified in our charter and rules. On the practical side, I was to serve for three years as president, to provide a degree of stability—and Richmond and Mary would continue, for the same reason, as secretary and

treasurer, respectively.

[14] In 1980 the first election of officers and board members took place, and I was elected president—in a close race with Leo Kraft—for a term of two years, at the same time establishing the pattern we now have of an overlapping of terms of officers, and restriction of the presidential term to two years, a wise decision in view of the total of five years during which I had occupied that office. So, in 1980 we were underway, in approximately the happy circumstances we now enjoy. But there is more.

[15] All these important and historical activities took place against the background of the aims of the founders, which were—as I now realize—both implicit and explicit. As far as individuals are concerned, it would be inappropriate for me to say what goals the founders had in mind—especially since some of them are no longer active in the society, and indeed some are no longer with us. But, retrospectively, it seems clear that the main goal of the society, upon its formation in 1977, can be seen as the establishment of a communal home dedicated to the recognition of a diversified group of individuals engaged in music-theoretic endeavors, a group whose efforts before that time had been supported to a certain extent by our elder sister society, the American Musicological Society, as well as by the College Music Society and other fine organizations that engaged some of the interests of our potential membership, and still do.

[16] What was lacking of course was a distinct identity, the fulfillment of which was a very strong motivation in that hectic time in Evanston in 1977. Here I should say that our relation to the AMS, although somewhat problematic during those days, has become a fruitful and friendly alliance in the intervening years—as evident in our frequent joint meetings. And many of us enjoy joint membership. Indeed, I am a case in point, having been a member of AMS for longer than I care to remember, having served on the Editorial Board of *JAMS*, actually with an article published in that eminent periodical, and serving as a member of the AMS 50 committee. Although I do not regard myself as a musicologist, I have been hanging out with real musicologists for so long that I am sure something of their excellent scholarly work must have influenced my own. Indeed, I feel quite comfortable in musicological circles unless the conversation turns to, say, the music of Eustache du Caurroy.

[17] The activities of the Society for Music Theory from 1982 onward, under the superb leadership so strikingly represented by the roster of presidents at the head table, have produced truly remarkable results. Among these I would point out the increased acceptance of our field in academic environments—that is, the role of music theorists in undergraduate and graduate curriculums, the establishment of new graduate programs in music theory, and the evident increase in academic positions requiring expertise in music-theoretic topics, such as Schenkerian analysis. There are now two endowed full professorships at Yale that include in their titles the term music theory, although one of these, the Battell Professorship predates the contemporary period by many years. Professors at Harvard, University of Chicago, State University of New York at Buffalo, University of Texas, New England Conservatory of Music, among other eminent institutions, are graduates of the earliest American program devoted to post-graduate studies in music-theoretical topics, including history of music theory and advanced analysis. And, as I mentioned in my 1987 talk in Rochester, I am continually surprised at the number of truly excellent persons in the field who lack the Yale connection. Preeminent among these of course is my dear friend David Lewin. But let us remember that David was a Yale Professor for a substantial time before succumbing to the lure of Cambridge.

[18] With respect to graduate programs in music theory, I would like to take this opportunity to express my disappointment over the lack of support I have received for the comprehensive proposal I put forth in 1987 concerning benefits for graduate students—in particular, the retirement plan for those who have successfully completed twenty years of post-graduate work.

[19] This egregious gap, however, has been balanced by the intervening achievements of the society, for example, by the innovative technological facilities initiated by Lee Rothfarb, the publication program, the professional development presentations at annual meetings, the work of the Diversity Committee, as well as that of the Committee on the Professional Status of Women, and other activities still in the planning stage.

[20] All of these, which have become integral parts of the Society for Music Theory—require support from the membership, and I take this opportunity to urge everyone to contribute to the fund-raising campaign to be chaired by Past President Thomas Christensen. As I have indicated in the course of my talk, SMT has done a great deal for the professional field in which we are all engaged, beginning with those early, very tentative and difficult days and months I attempted to recapture earlier this evening. It is time for all of us to assist the visionary effort about to be set in motion. I should add that in this endeavor, I expect to play a special role: Thomas Christensen has invited me to serve as Honorary Chair, stipulating at the same time that I am expected to do nothing—which of course I am prepared to do, energetically.

[21] In closing, I would like to propose a toast to a person whose gracious professionalism, exemplary intellect, and wonderful musical talents are well known to all of us. To the President of the Society for Music Theory, Elizabeth West Marvin.

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