



## Theorists and “The Music Itself”

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[1] Everyone in this room has probably either heard or performed the piano classic popularly known as “Chopsticks.” Here’s a question for you then: Why is Chopsticks so fun to play? And here are a few answers. Let’s start with one that does not involve a close reading of “the music itself”. For instance, let’s start with the title and its implications. Guess what: the fun we have with Chopsticks is not as innocent as we might have imagined. The title perhaps implies that the piece could be played with chopsticks, that its blankly primitive repetitions are to be associated with what a Westerner might ethnocentrically think of as blankly primitive tableware. And thus a seemingly innocuous bit of piano play could be interpreted as invoking anti-Asian prejudices so thoroughly ingrained in our American culture that they are imbibed in the very first organized polyphony we generally learn to produce on the piano. An investigation of Chopsticks in this vein would reveal sinister forces pulling at our fingers, making sure we in fact *enjoy* the work of stereotype and subjugation, such that it becomes a form of play. . . We could then broaden the context of this interpretation by playing figuratively on the fundamental black-and-whiteness of the keyboard, invoking the degraded histories of ivory and slavery, latent horrors waiting to be uncovered in the family piano. Remember, for instance, that Chopsticks stays on the white keys and celebrates (enforces?) Western diatonic tonality, while that old pentatonic ditty—rival to Chopsticks among the piano’s young proteges—is primitively played with a rolling fist on the black keys. (And this is all in a day’s work at the old piano, sounding board of upper middle class American family values. . .)

[2] But this sort of a reading, which in more capable hands than my own might indeed become a soaringly imaginative reading of Chopsticks and the cultural matrix that sustains it (I’m imagining something like a Friedrich Kittler treatment of this. . . ), will probably not satisfy a “music theorist,” however much it might engage a “Theorist” with a capital T (i.e a critical Theorist). It has been said of music theorists that when given the cue to dance to this newer, headier capital-T theory, they will more than likely beg off. If we are going to understand these “wallflowers” and how they too might be understood as dancers, we need to try on another answer to our question about Chopsticks.

[3] So here’s another kind of answer. Why is it so fun to play Chopsticks? Because we get to perform a fundamentally satisfying procedure of tonal music: we get to produce a dissonant sound and then resolve it to a consonant sound. More specifically, we perform an unprepared version of the 2–3 suspension, the so-called bass suspension, so called, in fact, because the bass itself is compelled to resolve. This is a particularly vivid suspension, and at the keyboard we itch to resolve it, to feel it. In the same way, many musicians’ hands will twitch at an imaginary keyboard when they are thinking about

musical processes. There is a distinctly tangible mind-body connection here—I would go so far as to claim that it can be a source of pleasure to demonstrate theoretical prototypes such as suspensions. (Think of the zeal with which many theorists bang out examples on the piano—and I have even heard [and used] the dismissive phrase “He plays like a theorist.”)

[4] Such are the pleasures of the theory pedagogue—but just who are these characters who indulge themselves so oddly? Many of us probably think of music theorists as those impossible upstarts who actually enjoyed freshman and sophomore theory classes, classes generally agreed to be the bane of most students of music performance and history. Amid the general distress before a dreaded dictation exam, future theorists could be seen practically sharpening their pencils with their teeth in their eagerness to get started. Much could be made of the anxiety this would engender among the rest of the classmates; it may in fact be at the root of a good deal of what continues to make us uncomfortable in this field. Part of our general anxiety is surely caught up in a notion of music as an invisible art whose traces can perhaps be sensed with precision only by a certain few—by those with “good ears.” Many were shamed by these “good ears” in freshman theory and are now spending the rest of their careers convincing themselves that the “chosen few” aren’t really hearing the music after all, but are just transcribing it, like so many court stenographers. . .

[5] Now most of us, theorists or not, have received such training at one point or another. Quite a few musicologists I know are as adept as any theorist in the aural gymnastics we often honor with the term “musicianship.” But on the other, more fruitful, side of such compulsory exertions stands the enhanced ability to create normative musical utterances in various styles, to sharpen one’s ears in such a way as to be able first to parrot a style and then to express oneself in it.

[6] In fact, I would argue that our training as musicians encourages us to treat music as something like a language with its own claims: an “as if” notion of autonomy is an indispensable corollary to the act of learning to use this language. For the study of music often takes on the self-sufficiency and absorbing intensity of a game: we learn rules, protocols, calculated risks—all of which can be negotiated with a limited intervention of verbal language. Thus music is treated as a language that needs to be learned, a language that prosecutes its own claims—and we learn to deal with those claims. They become an inescapable part of the way we think in and through music.

[7] Let’s return to the joys of the 2–3 suspension, in order to develop a concrete instance of the way theorists (and the rest of us) tend to generalize about music’s materiality. How is the 2–3 suspension generally used? We might think of it as something like a figure of speech, a special device with rhetorical possibilities, one that invokes a sense of urgency, a distinct need to progress. It is in fact a great way to get a harmonic progression off the ground, i.e. off of the opening tonic—for the bass itself is compelled to move, and when bass lines move, things happen.

    Taped ex.: Bach Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1, C-major Prelude, bars 1–4

Or, more dramatically:

    Taped ex.: Haydn, Symphony No. 45, “Farewell,” 1st movement, bars 1–8

More dramatic still is the use of an unprepared second in the bass (as in Chopsticks); starting a piece in this manner is very striking indeed:

    Taped ex.: Beethoven, Overture to Creatures of Prometheus, opening

Or think of the culminating moments of the sixth movement of the Brahms Requiem, where the words “Death” and “Hell” are given harmonies featuring an unprepared 2nd over the bass:

    Taped ex.: Brahms Requiem, VI, bars 178–186

This passage leads to what is undoubtedly the denouement of the entire piece: after one of the most stunning enharmonic moments in all of Western music, in which an A-flat from the minor side of C is transmuted to a G-sharp that leads, via an applied dominant (a V7/vi magically eliding to a ii7), to C major (on the words “Wo [wo, wo] ist dein Sieg”), those unsettling dissonant seconds over the bass on “Death” and “Hell” are assimilated and normalized as chord sevenths and/or

suspensions over the bass in the four-square cadential progression that follows:

Taped ex.: Brahms Requiem, VI, bars 178–208

Brahms' use of dissonance here perfectly mirrors a complex psychological state, as terror and fear in the face of death give way to a surge of resilient faith, a breakthrough moment that is awful and awesome in its unforgettable merger of paralyzing horror and the empowering presence of the sublime, sounding the paradox of how we are sometimes at our highest when at our lowest.

[8] —So—to come way back down to earth: this business of making the bass unsteady and imperiled can be very vividly dramatic; metaphorically speaking, the very ground beneath us seems to move, and *we are compelled to react*. This is something Chopsticks can be said to share with the Brahms Requiem.

[9] Of course, despite our appropriation of examples like these, in music as in counterpoint studies the 2–3 suspension is not simply a device—we don't just grab a 2–3 off the shelf like a fan belt; it is rather a result of complex contextual considerations. But it does retain an identity apart from its multifarious contexts, a generalizable identity. As theorists, we are admittedly interested in this class of phenomena, in which the prototypical utterance is also a concrete example of the class. This is a point worth elaborating.

[10] Allan Keiler's work repeatedly and brilliantly addresses the very interesting problem of the metalinguistic properties of music. What this means, in a nutshell, is that music can act, viably, as a description of itself. This is as true in the case of Rameau's fundamental bass as it is in that of Schenker's voice-leading graphs. In the work of both of these theorists, abstract prototypes also behave as actual musical utterances. Now this is true, to an extent, with language as well. Any descriptive statement about sentence structure, if performed in the verbal medium, is a metalinguistic act that uses language to speak about itself. This kind of reflexivity has been around for quite some time with us humans—it is in fact as old as consciousness itself.

[11] But there is a crucial difference that obtains between music and language in this regard. In verbal metalanguage, descriptive prose is distanced from the thing described. In musical metalanguage, a prototype such as the 2–3 is not only a general descriptive model, it functions itself as an exemplification of the class. The thing doing the describing is also the thing described. As such, this “abstract” prototype is at the same time palpable and concrete. Our recourse to such a palpable prototype facilitates the type of thinking that we have characterized as invoking the “music itself.” It encourages the notion that music is about itself.

[12] This is to say that we understand a 2–3 suspension in some tangible yet internalized way *before* we enlist it as evidence in an interpretive or analytical act. All interpretive work surrounding music relies on clichés about its materiality, clichés that are effective and unquestioned precisely because of this process of internalization. As Charles Rosen recently put it: “All analyses, technical as well as ideological, are controlled by our knowledge and experience of the traditional metaphors in the history of music, the conventions of meaning that have been given to the grammar and syntax of music.”<sup>(1)</sup> Take the example of tonic confirmation. There's plenty of tonic confirmation in Beethoven—of that there is no argument; what we tend to argue about is whether or not such confirmation represents something positive (the affirmation of a self) or something negative (the suppression of an other). But perhaps we should ask why no one questions the notion of tonic confirmation. Why do we feel—in Beethoven, as in most tonal music—that a key center is ultimately established in such a fashion that we can use the word “confirmed” without squirming?

[13] Our fundamental relation to the materiality of music—i.e. the things we all agree on—forms the one aspect of our sense of music that it rarely occurs to us to examine. And yet it is here that we might come closest to the mechanism by which music matters to us, how it gets under our skins, in our bones, and how it works there as the soundtrack to our most cherished mythologies of self. Music theorists in particular make *this* sense of music intellectually explicit because it is explicit for them—everything they have taken most closely to heart is a result of actually playing music, of handling the goods. (That they do not go far enough in acknowledging all the ramifications of this state of affairs is a point to which I will return a little later.) To wrap up this present train of thought, then: our shared sense of “the music itself,” which many theorists continue

to choose to make explicit, can be said to result from the nature of our training as practicing musicians, and from the way we tend to generalize about music, with palpable, internalized prototypes.

## Part II

[14] The literary critic Peter Brooks worries that recent literary studies are “constantly trumping the aesthetic by the ideological and the political—making the aesthetic simply a mask for the ideological. . . [Such studies thus risk] losing a sense of the functional role played by the aesthetic within human existence.” He continues: “What is more difficult for students . . . is to slow up the work of interpretation, the attempt to turn the text into some other discourse or system, and to consider it [instead] as a manifestation of the conventions, constraints, and possibilities of literature.”<sup>(2)</sup>

[15] We, too, need to do this more difficult thing, to slow up the work of interpretation—to ask not only what a musical text means but how it means. This is not to say that we should henceforth cease considering music as capable of speaking of things outside itself. But I would submit that if we wish to grant music the power to speak of other things, we inherently need to understand music as music, as an autonomous voice: we couldn’t reasonably expect something without its own voice to comment on anything—something without its own voice would at best be a mouthpiece for something else. Or, as Pieter van den Toorn has it: if we don’t credit music with an ability to “speak to some degree for itself, musical structures are not more but less free, less able to stand apart from the . . . materially purposeful.”<sup>(3)</sup> The case for music’s autonomy is not simply the default result of its lack of definable moorings in the world of referential denotation; rather, any claim about music meaning something presupposes that it has its own voice. In short, precisely because music is musical it can speak to us of things that are not strictly musical. This is how we hear music speak: not by reducing it to some other set of circumstances but by allowing it the opacity of its own voice, and then engaging that voice in ways that reflect both its presence and our own, much as we allow others a voice when we converse with them.

[16] Music theory explicitly concerns itself with that voice but clearly needs to do more in terms of linking the nature of that voice to general human values. It needs to broaden its engagement with music. For something like a guild mentality has arisen in the theory community, with the result that theorists are perceived as self-willed musical insiders, as a privileged priesthood, keepers of music’s voice, that most incorporeal of relics. The continuing disdain for music theory is thus easy to understand, and our recently won ability to engage with music professionally and academically, without having to do it in the pre-ordained ways of “music theory and analysis,” has been tremendously liberating and exhilarating, almost akin to escaping the walls of academia. Addressing music as part of one’s vital intellectual, political, and personal concerns really makes music speak one’s own language.

[17] Now the most devastating aspect of this reaction to music theory and analysis is not the claim that it is ideologically malodorous but rather the growing perception that it is simply no longer interesting. One of the more common complaints on the ideological front has been that music theory courts too much abstraction. And yet it is not the level of abstraction that is now felt to be tedious (and besides, there’s abstraction aplenty in any theoretical/academic enterprise—abstraction is the hot air that fills our balloons; without it, we would all collapse into the pragmatic gravity of civilian reality). No, it’s not abstraction that bores but rather all that heavy concretion—all the relentless details in any closely argued musical analysis, like so much jungle undergrowth to be “macheted” through in order to obtain a few insights that one can take back home. Few of us feel we have the time or inclination for such “close reading.”

[18] But in the end, like anything else truly worth cultivating, knowing music takes time, and your average theorist is someone who has taken the time to learn music as a functional language. Imagine practicing the criticism of English poetry if you yourself could not automatically form meaningful utterances in the English language! Now I know of some superb functional musicians who happen to be theorists and who, on account of the present climate in our field, are now feeling professionally disenfranchised. Can we really afford to usher these “insiders” and what they know of music out of our professional discourse, hoping they will confine themselves to the theory classroom (where, as shapers of many of our unquestioned assumptions about music, they will ironically continue to exercise deeper influence than any of the rest of us)?

## Part III

[19] Much of the present standoff between theory and new musicology is due to the ways in which academic areas develop and become empowered. Patrick McCreless has written a wonderfully informed essay on the way music theory has secured power in academia, and much of the iconoclastic energy (not to mention new found power) of so-called “new musicology” is of course a natural reaction to the perceived power of music theory. And yet New Musicology and contemporary music theory do not form a binary opposition. For we have not even begun to abandon our shared assumptions about musical materiality—about the nature of tonality, melody, motivic relations, etc. We all share the tendency to think in terms of palpable musical prototypes; it’s part of the way we relate to music in academia. But this is starting to sound like a “Theorists R Us” kind of argument, as if we are all theorists by default, and that might make many of you wince—for you may well feel that Theory would surely be a fate worse than . . . Musicology. So let’s play it safe and simply say that, along with their common assumptions, contemporary theorists and new musicologists share common concerns, and they (*we*) can learn from each other.

[20] So what can music theory learn from new musicology? Theory too can dare to subvert and/or critique the prevailing intellectual models (and some theorists are already doing this—Brian Hyer, David Cohen, and Kevin Korsyn come to mind as thinkers who are bringing poststructural sensibility and competence to the act of theorizing about music). The study of the history of music theory also provides a rich field of shared concerns: what could be more propos than the history of our intellectual assumptions about music? In this work, theory could stand to harness some of the interpretive energy and sparkle of New Musicology—and indeed it has begun to do so (Cambridge Press’s forthcoming collection of essays, edited by Ian Bent and entitled *Music Theory in the Age of Romanticism*, attests to this).

[21] But even more fundamental than these methodological rapprochements is a central and shared task: we can explore together our assumptions about music’s materiality. This is a question about *us*, after all—what we value in music, what music means for us (not narrowly, in the referential or even connotative sense, but broadly, in the sense of why music matters at all). Generally speaking, theorists, who work explicitly with the materiality of music, do not often attach those concerns to meaningful and relevant human values, and critics, who often work explicitly with such values, do not bother to acknowledge their assumptions about music’s materiality. Among other things, this type of shared exploration would involve a shift to the role of the body, for this is at the heart of my concern about palpable prototypes and the pleasures of music theory. (And I should mention here the work of Lawrence Zbikowski and Janna Saslaw, theorists who are interested in conceptual models of music that metaphorically invoke the body.) Cultivating this mind-body connection may bring us close to the secret of music’s power: perhaps we would find that music is the art form that most successfully models the human integration of mind and body.

[22] In short (and in conclusion), we have a lot to learn from each other, a lot of work to do: theorists can work on their myopia, new musicologists on their astigmatism. And we all have one big thing to unlearn: namely, our mutual disdain. In the words of the late, great novelist Stanley Elkin: “Listen, disdain is easy, a mug’s game, but look closely at anything and it’ll break your heart.” I’m not sure we need to break our hearts over each other, but it wouldn’t hurt to soften them, to remember that we all, at one time or another, have had pleasurable recourse to the claims of “the music itself”; we have all enjoyed playing Chopsticks.

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## Footnotes

1. Rosen, “The Triumph of Beethoven,” *New York Review of Books*, Sept. 21, 1995, p. 53.

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2. Peter Brooks, "Aesthetics and Ideology: What Happened to Poetics?" *Critical Inquiry* 20.3 (spring, 1994), p. 517.

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3. Pieter van den Toorn, "Reply to Richard Taruskin," *Modernism/Modernity* 2, No. 1 (1995). [I don't have a page number on this; I was working from a typescript]

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