



How Theorists Relate To Musicians

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ABSTRACT: Despite the fact that much music-theoretical research applies directly to the activities of performers, composers, and listeners, many if not most of those musicians do not see theory as being relevant to them. If music theorists are to engage those musicians, theorists must create level playing fields where interactions with other musicians can take place.

[1] I open with two anecdotes that I believe to be both true and humorous—though ultimately they reflect a very sad reality.

[2] Some years ago, I'm told, the great violin pedagogue Joseph Gingold was coaching a student string quartet at Indiana University. He noticed that the first violinist, in addition to the first-violin part on his stand, also had a heavily annotated score to which he referred frequently. Gingold, a marvelous violinist, genuinely decent person, and wonderful teacher, picked up the score and asked the first violinist, "What are these markings on the score?" The violinist dutifully replied, "Mr. Gingold, I'm a double major, violin and theory. I wrote my analysis in the score." Gingold perused the score, closed it, put it down on a table on the other side of the room, and turned back to the quartet, "That's a nice hobby; now let's get back to music."

[3] Lest we feel too good, we should realize that performers I know laugh at the punchline for the very opposite reason that theorists do. Actually, the double effect of the punchline reminds me of a concert in New York about a quarter century ago at which the composer George Crumb joined members of the Da Capo Chamber Players sitting on stage in Carnegie Recital Hall after a performance of Crumb's *Voice of the Whale* to field questions from the audience about the piece and its performance. After the usual queries to be expected following a Crumb piece—"how did you discover those weird ways of playing the instruments?" and the like—a doctoral student in theory stood up and asked: "Mr. Crumb, I noticed in the opening flute vocalise that you use a gapped scale—that is, a scale with bunched semitones separated by augmented seconds and other larger intervals. I was wondering, was this an ethnic or exotic scale that you adopted or adapted, or did you invent it? And could you tell us about your motivations for using that scale?" Crumb sat quietly for a considerable time, and then slowly intoned, "Well . . . I suppose one *could* consider it a scale . . . I never did." Once again, the theorists in the audience laughed for quite a different reason than the composers and listeners; and I was reminded of the anger of the composer Miriam Gideon when she found out that a composer/theorist was using pitch-class set analysis to parse one of her songs. "I didn't work out the relations among any of those chords," she exclaimed, "I just put down the sounds that I liked."

[4] Joining these realities are what most of us deal with day in and day out in our teaching and lecturing: many students or concert audiences who either could care less about what we do as theorists, or who insist that it gets in the way of their listening or music-making. (Paul McCartney's refusal even to learn to read music because, he asserts, it would hamper his imagination is only the most extreme of such sentiments.) Theory for many of them is worse than broccoli is for George Bush—no matter how bad he thinks broccoli tastes, at least Bush understands that it might be good for you.

[5] In short, I fear that we as theorists have not communicated very well what it is we do, what it is we know, and what relevance it has for other musicians: for performers, for composers, and for listeners. I believe that's a shame, because what we as theorists have to communicate is indeed crucially important to understanding what it is that other musicians do every time they interact with music.

[6] The failures of communication are surely not entirely our own fault. Lazy sound-bite punchlines of the sort I offered above are just as detrimental to serious communication about music as sound-bite attack ads are to serious discussion of political issues. But if we care about what we do as theorists, we can ill afford to sit in our ivory towers and publish journal articles that are read by about as many people as can dance on the head of a pin. We need to inspire musicians to do the hard work of learning what we do, why we do it, and what is important about it. If anyone is to open the channels of communication, it must be us—I don't expect to find the members of the New York Philharmonic or the casts of the Metropolitan Opera suddenly deciding on their own to crowd the third floor of the New York Public Library to read the latest issues of *Music Theory Spectrum*. Not long ago, I was talking to a singer at the Met who looked at her watch and said, "Oh, I'm late for an appointment with my analyst," I quipped, "A Freudian or a Schenkerian?" She just looked puzzled; and when I explained who Schenker was, she confessed she'd never heard of him.

[7] I include performers, composers, and listeners in the category of "other musicians." When performers choose one fingering, bowing, or tonguing over another; when composers use a chord because they "like" it; when listeners respond to passages—in all these interactions, I believe that these musicians are doing at least a part of what we do as theorists. Performers may not realize that their choices of fingering or bowing are "analytic," but in the sense that those choices affect the projection of structure, they carry the same interpretive import as analytic notations.

[8] I believe that we as theorists miss opportunities to relate to other musicians because we insist on framing issues within theoretical traditions, and not within the ways that other musicians have dealt with those issues. For instance, if we do our bibliographic searches and fail to find a precedent in the theoretical literature for our latest research, we come to believe that our theoretical discussion of an issue is the first time the issue has been raised. With that belief, we proceed to issue edicts as to how the issue under consideration should be projected in performance or how a composer must have conceived of it. As a result, most of the literature relating analysis to performance is based on the premise that we analyze a passage in such and such a way, and therefore performers should project what we have found. If they do it another way, we assert that they have it wrong because they fail to articulate our analysis. If the conversation ever gets so far as performers objecting to our performance directions, we respond by asking them to provide an alternative analysis.

[9] Even further, we assume that an intentional act of analysis must precede any interaction between analysis and performance. This was the underlying and unchallenged premise of an extended discussion on the smt-list this past summer about analysis and performance. One strand of the discussion concerned Murray Perahia, who is one of those rare internationally famous concert artists who not only works out analyses but even admits it. Correspondents on the smt-list wondered if anyone could find a piece that Perahia had graphed and show how his performance had been affected by that graphing.

[10] This request is based on the assumption that only when performers intentionally think about a piece and then proceed to perform it—only then can we speak of their performance reflecting an analysis. That assumption, it seems to me, confuses intention and outcome. If a man gets up in the morning and says "Today, I will not intend to do anything," that does not mean that he has no responsibility for his acts, or that his acts have no causes. Every decision that is part of a performance has an affect on the projected structure. Performers communicate musical structure through performance, not through words and graphs.

[11] I am reminded of a discussion I had with a young professional violinist recently about Schoenberg's *Violin Phantasy*. She had worked on the piece with her violin teacher before asking for coaching from Felix Galimir—who at 87 is perhaps the last active musician among us who was an important figure in the Viennese music world that existed between the two world wars. Felix is a man of few words—very few of which are analytical. He heard her play the piece, and commented, “You know, today everyone thinks of Schoenberg as if he were a modern composer; and they try to play him that way. But you know, Schoenberg wanted his music to sound like Brahms.” And Felix proceeded to work with her to achieve that end. Felix's point is not far from the tales told by Peter Stadlen about Webern's dissatisfactions with performances of his own music. ⁽¹⁾

[12] To be sure, the instruction that Galimir gave to this violinist was not delivered in analytical terms. But her performance underwent a transformation—a transformation no less dramatic than that of theorists who might begin their analysis of the *Phantasy* (or any atonal work) by locating the row-forms and pitch-class sets and considering their interactions, and then change perspective to consider the surface motives, the phrasing, and the directionality of the gestures. Just as such a change of theoretical perspective will affect the entire tone of an analytical discussion of the piece, the attitude change inspired by Galimir's coaching transformed this violinist's performance in ways that resonate with analytical and theoretical significance. An interesting interaction between this violinist and a theorist might arise as both considered how their perspectives on the piece changed as they focused on more precompositional or abstract aspects and then on more compositional or projection-related issues.

[13] This allows us to consider how the perspectives of some recent Schoenberg articles in *Music Theory Spectrum* could enter this discussion. Joseph Auner's essay on *Die glückliche Hand* and Brian Alegant's on op. 33b each deal in one way or another with the issue of structure as a reflection of Schoenberg's compositional processes, which is likewise a central concern from a very different perspective in Ethan Haimo's essay on intentionality and analysis of atonal music. All three of these articles deal with the interaction of neoclassic and anachronistic impulses that is the focus of Martha Hyde's essay. ⁽²⁾

[14] All these issues would bear on my imagined interaction between theorist and violinist talking about the violin *Phantasy*. I find it particularly heartening that the underlying premises of all these issues are being addressed from so many different perspectives, many of which did not even exist just a few years ago. How should these varied perspectives affect the way we play or hear Schoenberg's music? Surely, the violinist's approach will be affected by learning about how Schoenberg composed, about the differences between a perspective based on finding fixed set structures and on perceiving developing variations—both of which approaches are surely relevant to the *Phantasy*. And the theorist's thinking about the piece will surely be affected by hearing the way it changes depending on the violinist's focus.

[15] But where could such an exchange take place? It would not happen in our journals, since performers cannot *perform* there! The verbal format of so many, if not all our theoretical forums demands that communication be primarily on the theorists' turf. The web might be an interesting site; a place where text files and sound files might be equally accessible. I'd bet that more non-theorists would explore that than read any article in a scholarly journal. Likewise, the contentious analytical issues raised by Ethan Haimo's article might be illuminated on a website by hearing how the various aspects of the alternative analyses in that article highlighted different aspects of different performances.

[16] And the neo-classical aspects that Martha Hyde cites in relating Schoenberg's Third String Quartet to Schubert's A-minor String Quartet could inspire a fascinating concert. How about having Martha invite a faculty string quartet to lunch to inspire them to program these two pieces side by side, having her attend rehearsals and interact with the performances (both by coaching them and learning about the performance traditions that performers bring to these works), and then give a pre-concert lecture to the audience at the performance. We will thereby create the musical equivalent of what adventurous museum curators do when they juxtapose stylistically clashing works in a gallery and communicate something interesting in a paragraph or two on the wall as we enter that room.

[17] Such interactions will only arise if we come to believe that just publishing our latest conclusions in a journal is simply not enough. And such interactions will only arise if we think of the resulting interactions as more than using the performers, in effect, to perform the examples in our analysis. When we confront performers with our formidable verbal and analytical skills, they often feel inadequate to challenge us on our turf. Do we ever consider that the inadequacies of performers in

theoretical forums like classrooms are akin to the inadequacies that many of us would feel at the prospect of getting up in Carnegie Hall to perform in concert alongside accomplished performers? These interactions will be most profitable and lead to a whole new climate of communication only if we listen to what performers do and then consider how their performance announces a structure different from the one we find in our analyses, and then consider the consequences of that circumstance.

[18] To be sure, we have come a long way in dealing with analysis and performance. The past decade has seen a rapidly growing bibliography. And theorists active in that field believe that they are relating theoretical concerns to performers. But I am not sure that that is necessarily happening. I remember a conversation I had just about the year this society was formed with a well-known theorist at one of our major conservatories. There was talk of offering a course entitled “Analysis for Performers” in that conservatory, and this theorist, who had published numerous analyses, was having trouble conceiving of what would be included in that course. He commented, “I guess I know a few instances where some hidden structure I’ve found should be brought out by a performer. But that’s not material enough to fill a course.”

[19] Too many theorists seem to believe that only when we find hidden structures or non-obvious aspects of structure are we doing “real” analysis. This focus causes us both to concentrate too often on hidden aspects of music, and at the same time to avoid other obvious areas that rarely seem to catch our attention, even though they are quite often central to performers.

[20] For instance, until David Beach called attention in print a few years ago to Mozart’s repeated use of a major III chord as an important goal of development sections in several of his pieces, the progression—one not at all uncommon—was hardly mentioned in harmony texts.⁽³⁾ Harmony texts tend to include primarily or even exclusively what the author’s theoretical perspective explains best. And amid the tonal norms of root progressions by fifth and passing and neighboring motions, the major III progressing to I in major keys—with its unresolved chromaticism and weak root progression—is indeed absent from or at best marginalized in many texts. Beach’s theoretical instincts were therefore certainly correct when he called attention to a usage largely ignored in the theoretical literature.

[21] Beach’s analyses tend to normalize uses of major III as a goal—to show how despite the uncommon surface progressions it often engenders, those development sections nonetheless express (albeit in rather hidden fashion) the underlying dominant-to-tonic that sonata-form theory teaches us should be expressed in Classical-era development sections leading into recapitulations.

[22] But what does that sort of analysis say to a performer who must play those developments? There is a very long-standing performance pedagogy tradition that probably stretches well back into the nineteenth century to treat appearances of chromaticism in Mozart’s largely diatonic surfaces as opportunities for highly expressive performance nuances. I know that I was coached in that tradition in the 1950s by performers who were born early in our century and who related that they learned it from their teachers. Aware performers have probably been nuancing performances of that progression and exploring its directionality for many generations. Should they perform those development sections as if they were like ones that end on the dominant?

[23] And how should we deal with all those other progressions that precede tonic arrivals and thematic returns in Classical repertoire? Haydn’s “Emperor” Quartet in C major from the op. 76 set ends its first-movement development on a *minor* iii triad; and the middle part of the outer sections of the F-major slow movement of Mozart’s D-minor String Quartet ends on a D-major chord followed by a first-inversion C triad before a tonic return in F. Again, I am not aware of any harmony text that discusses how the dominant of ii can lead directly to V.

[24] Because such progressions only occur in occasional pieces, they have largely been ignored by harmony texts, whereas other progressions that are ubiquitous—although by no means of any greater theoretical interest on their own merits (I think of the cadential $\frac{5}{4}$, for instance)—are the object of long theoretical controversies. But for generations every string quartet that plays these Haydn and Mozart war-horses has been dealing with how to articulate and color and pace these progressions. Far too rarely do analysts—in addition to checking the theoretical literature for references to previous analyses—research recordings of a piece to study the various ways that performers have dealt with a given passage.

[25] The same issues might arise from history-of-theory discussions. This is a field that has truly blossomed in the past decade. When I was in graduate school, there was no way to read the works of Rameau in any language unless your university library happened to own a copy of his works in their original eighteenth-century editions. Now, thanks to reprints, to a broad range of new research, and to anthologies such as Ian Bent's two volumes of 19th-century analyses, we have ready access to numerous earlier perspectives on musical structure and on individual pieces.⁽⁴⁾ The possibilities are virtually endless for imaginative interactions with performers and audiences based on these materials, especially if we add to the mix historical recordings now so readily available on CDs. Reading an analysis of an earlier era, listening to a recording of a performer who was born in the nineteenth century, and considering more recent analyses along with working with modern performers . . . just think of the interactions that would result.

[26] And the same issue affects twentieth-century music. Our task when we analyze the atonal repertoire is most often to show connections. So we analyze Webern's op. 11 cello and piano pieces—pieces with notoriously unconnected surfaces—with the same tools we apply to the fourth of his *Movements For String Quartet* from the op. 5 set, where it is hard to find a single note that is not part of ubiquitously recurring figures and pitch-class sets. But cellists who have played both pieces know well that the performance issues of one and the other are strikingly different.

[27] Underlying many of these examples are the topics that postmodernism in general and the New Musicology in particular have been raising, and how they affect our theoretical enterprise. There are scholars in those fields who argue that all our assertions of structuralism are out-dated, and that even if we believe that composers and performers intended to create and project organic and unified structures, that does not mean that organicism and structuralism are anything more than chimeras. Yet much if not most of our whole theoretical enterprise is built upon notions of organicism, structuralism, and intentionalism. When we analyze music, we are uncovering communicative elements—often organic and structural relationships—that were put there by a human being.

[28] What often strikes me when I move between the world of contemporary musical scholarship and the world of performers is how little all these discussions—our analyses, our history-of-theory research, all the other topics we deal with, and our interactions with post-structuralism—have changed the world of performers. To be sure, performance traditions and habits have changed—dramatically in many ways—over the generations. What was a chic way of performing Bach or Mozart or Beethoven a generation or two ago is no longer acceptable. Yet when I speak to performance teachers or visit master classes, I find that virtually nothing has changed from the way most performance teachers communicated to their students from generations ago.

[29] But in another sense everything has changed. These traditions of performers teaching younger performers arose in a vibrant culture in which composers, performers, amateur musicians, audiences, and patrons all interacted with one another to produce the works that now form the canon. But now the concert repertoire is largely a museum of works over a century old. There are many crises in the world of performance—not only the crises that hit the headlines: about graying audiences and greedy stars and concert promoters. A crisis that I worry about is whether we are properly educating a new generation of musicians. Because of the distractions of the modern world and the diminution in elementary and high school curricula of many traditional topics, young musicians today have fewer connections than ever to the past cultures in which the concert repertoire was created; and many young musicians are from parts of the world that have little historical connection with Europe and European culture. And this is happening as actuarial realities sever our last living links with the synergies of the past. Our students will transmit to the future the musical culture to which we devote our professional, if not our personal lives.

[30] A second crisis I worry about—and one quite closely related to this first—is the increasing uniformity of performance styles. Part of the reason that consumers are not flooding the audio market to buy the latest recordings of this or that sonata, string quartet, or symphony is that so many performers seem to sound so much alike. The sorts of interactions that I suggested earlier could well be an avenue to showing this younger generation how learning to mix theoretical and performance expertise will allow them to develop individual performance styles and find themselves artistically.

[31] In summary, I strongly believe that if our discoveries and controversies are not to be merely scholastic, we must find ways of communicating with other musicians not merely by announcing our positions, but by engaging other musicians on

level playing fields. I have focused here on analysis and performance issues; but have also touched upon issues of Schoenberg scholarship, analytic approaches to atonal music, issues of intentionality, and the history of theory. I could extend this list to most other areas of theoretical endeavor.

[32] One of the great joys of having been the editor of *Music Theory Spectrum* for the past three years is that it forced me to do something I haven't been forced to do since graduate school: read essays covering the entire breadth of the field. I can't think of a single article or review in *Spectrum* in those past three years that could not inspire interesting interactions with other musicians. For instance, Peter Westergaard's ode to musical space and Nicholas Cook's review-essay on semiotics raise very different sorts of issues of musical meaning, but they all suggest questions about how one would play or hear a piece or passage of the music of an historical era differently as a result of these focuses. ⁽⁵⁾

[33] But at the risk of wearing out my welcome here by repeating myself, I don't see such interactions happening if we insist that communication between theorists and other musicians must be in theoretical terms. I hope that this insistence is one of those immaturities that our field will grow past. For it will take mature confidence in what we do—not adolescent assertiveness—to communicate with other musicians as equals, not as pretended superiors.

[34] I fully realize that many things we do as theorists may well be solely of interest to other theorists. We try on meta-musical ideas; we build systems; and so forth. But ultimately, if these ideas and systems are to apply to something other than themselves, we must be the ones to communicate them to other musicians.

[35] I remember reading an essay by Jacques Barzun in the New York Times Sunday Book Review about a quarter century ago. Barzun related how when he was young, what passed for literary criticism in the most erudite of scholarly journals was quite pertinent to readers of literature. He lamented that what had come to be called literary criticism no longer bore any relation to the reading of books. If anything, the trend in that direction has accelerated considerably in the twenty-five years since.

[36] Just as much contemporary literary theorizing seems to have little to do with reading and writing, much of the music-theoretical literature I read is far too little directed to creating, performing, and listening to music—even when the import of those articles and books is indeed quite pertinent to those activities. We as theorists should, I believe, communicate our discoveries, whenever possible, in discourse relevant to performers, composers, and listeners.

[37] One closing anecdote: In the year that our society was formed, a theorist who held advanced degrees in both performance and theory remarked to me that he no longer wished to be called a performer—"Theory is a legitimate field that needs to be respected," he asserted, "and by insisting on calling myself a theorist, I am making a statement." I replied, "Why not call yourself a musician?"

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Footnotes

1. Peter Stadlen, "Serialism Reconsidered," *The Score* 22. (February, 1958): 12–27.

[Return to text](#)

2. Joseph H. Auner, "In Schoenberg's Workshop: Aggregates and Rerential Collections in *Die glückliche Hand*," *Music Theory Spectrum* 18 (1996): 77–105; Brian Alegant, "Unveiling Schoenberg's op. 33b," *Music Theory Spectrum* 18 (1996): 143–166; Ethan Haimo, "Atonality, Analysis, and the Intentional Fallacy," *Music Theory Spectrum* 18 (1996): 167–199; Martha M. Hyde, "Neoclassic and Anachronistic Impulses in Twentieth-Century Music," *Music Theory Spectrum* 18 (200–235).

[Return to text](#)

3. David Beach, "A Recurring Pattern in Mozart's Music," *Journal of Music Theory* 27 (1983): 1–29.

[Return to text](#)

4. Ian Bent, ed. *Music Analysis in the Nineteenth Century*. 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[Return to text](#)

5. Peter Westergaard, "Geometries in Musical Sound," *Music Theory Spectrum* 18 (1996): 1–21; Nicholas Cook, "Review Essay: Putting the Meaning Back into Music, or Semiotics Revisited," *Music Theory Spectrum* 18 (1996): 106–123.

[Return to text](#)

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