



## Music Theory as Community: A Perspective from the Late '90's

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ABSTRACT: The paper views the Society for Music Theory as a community: both how it functions internally, and how it relates to other musical and scholarly communities. It adopts these reflections as the basis for a direction for the future.

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[1] When I was asked to participate in the twentieth-anniversary retrospective of the Society for Music Theory, and was given free rein as to what I would talk about, my first thought was that I could celebrate our intellectual achievements over the past decade. The assigned task was to look back over the past ten years of the Society—that is, the ten years since the Rochester meeting in 1987, the tenth-anniversary meeting, with its topically oriented, bibliographical plenary session. It was at that very Rochester meeting, I have heard it frequently said, that the SMT took a great intellectual leap forward. No longer were we just the Society for Schenker, Set Theory, and the History of Music Theory. Suddenly we were the Society for all sorts of other things as well: the philosophy of music theory, aesthetics, and narrative theory, for example, plus all the wild and wonderful delights that John Rahn brought into play in his plenary talk and eventual bibliography on “New Research Paradigms.”<sup>(1)</sup> Since 1987 our discipline has pushed the frontiers of Schenkerian, pitch-class and twelve-tone theories, and the history of theory even further, and in imaginative and distinguished ways. At the same time it has opened out into areas such as music perception and cognition; it has taken spectacular advantage of new technologies, such as e-mail, the World-Wide web, and distance learning; it has engaged substantively the critique of music theory by the so-called New Musicology; it has sought out and adapted to productive analytical and musical ends a host of critical approaches from other disciplines—feminist theory, theories of influence, and post-structuralist and postmodern theories of various stripes. It has engaged the popular music that surrounds us in our own contemporary culture—jazz, rock, rap, hip-hop. And it has seen a rekindled interest in teaching music theory, including the founding of a thriving journal on music theory pedagogy.

[2] As I said, I *could* celebrate these and other intellectual achievements. But surely all of us are already aware of such accomplishments anyway, and everyone knows that the SMT is more of a free-wheeling affair than it was in the mid-1980's. To rehearse all that would be simply to bore you. Accordingly, I have hit on something else to talk about—something that is important to me now, for whatever reasons (the years I've put into the profession, the books I've read, the places I've taught); something that *may* bore you, but that I hope will not; something that we do not talk about frequently, but that is essential to all of our lives, professional and otherwise. That something is, in a word, *community*. What are we, as music

theorists, or, more specifically, as North American music theorists, like as a community? Or, more to the point in the present context, how is our community different in 1997 as compared to what it was in 1987? How has the function of the community changed? How has the power structure changed? How is it different for me, or for you, as an individual member of the profession, to negotiate the space of the community, to participate in and contribute to the discipline, to create a self, now, as opposed to ten years ago, or even twenty years ago?

[3] In approaching the music-theoretical community *as* a community, I recognize that the subject is a complex one. Analyzing a community involves evaluating how it functions internally, with respect to how it is governed and how its members interact; how it functions externally, with respect to other communities and to society at large; and how it works for the individual. I can hardly do full justice to such an endeavor in a short paper. But I can step back and take a broad view of the SMT as a society, as a social body, and make a few observations about how it has changed over the past ten or twenty years. In so doing, I will begin with what I see as the easiest task—to describe how the internal workings of the Society have changed. I will then proceed to the more difficult issues of relating our community to other communities, musical, academic and beyond, and of analyzing the relation between the Society and its individual members: how it regulates, encourages, empowers, and educates us.

[4] When I consider what it feels like to be a member of the SMT now, as opposed to ten or twenty years ago, what first comes to mind is that the Society is less monolithic. That it is less monolithic in its intellectual programme I have already mentioned—though I should note in passing that a look at the early conferences and the early volumes of *Music Theory Spectrum* shows convincingly that it was never so monolithic it as its detractors, both internal and external, sometimes portrayed it as being. But, for better or worse, the past ten years have indeed witnessed both a widening of scope and what my friend Richard Kaplan has called the “Balkanization” of music theory: our conference programs are more varied, it is more difficult for program committees to predict which sessions will draw a large crowd, and there has been a proliferation of organized interest groups that were not at all characteristic of the Society in its first decade.

[5] The Society is less monolithic administratively than it used to be as well. In the early days, as was natural for a small, new organization, power was concentrated in the hands of those few who conceived the idea of a music theory Society and brought it into being in the first place. Since the Society had no initiatives except to keep itself going, plan conferences, and produce a journal, the only administrative groups were the Executive Board, the Publications Committee, and the annual Program and Local Arrangements Committees to plan the conferences. But now, with a few hundred more members than we had a decade ago, and all sorts of new initiatives on the table, there has been a proliferation of committees analogous to the proliferation of new intellectual interests: the Committee on the Status of Women, the Awards Committee, the Networking Operations Committee, the Committee on Diversity, the Committee on Professional Development. All of these committees were organized in response to palpable needs in the Society—needs for diversity, for recognition of distinguished scholarship, for state-of-the-art communication, for mentoring.

[6] Concomitant with this expansion of the Society’s tasks has been a significant dispersion or levelling out of power. Part of the levelling process has been the result of a natural generational shift. Gradually over the past ten years, the leadership of the Society has passed from the hands of the small generation of its founders, who guided it so well, to the much larger generation of theorists my age and younger. (What better tribute could there be to the first generation of our Society than that they nurtured so well the larger generation that followed?) At the same time, the multiplication of the society’s interests and initiatives has meant that more and more of our members are now able to contribute in substantive ways, at earlier and earlier stages of their careers. In addition, the advent of electronic communication—remember, in 1987, and even in the early 1990’s, theorists communicated via the U. S. Post Office and Ma Bell—has levelled our music-theoretical playing field even more: it now means less to be located geographically at a major urban center or prestigious university, and it means less whether one is an established scholar or a graduate student. Many new and original voices that would never have been heard ten or twenty years ago are now heard. Even the small change of the term of the SMT President from three years to two has changed the dynamic of the Society, since the two-year term assures a frequent turnover of leadership and a regular injection of new ideas. Past President Joe Straus and I have in fact ruminated in jest together over the inevitable: that by twenty or twenty-five years from now we will have a whole pasture full of ex-SMT presidents contentedly munching away at conferences and watching wistfully from the sidelines.

[7] All in all, it seems to me that SMT's record as a functioning community has been a good one, and something to be proud of. We have grown, we have expanded our interests, we have broadened the powers of decision-making, and we have responded to the needs of our members within and to the challenges, technological and otherwise, without. To be sure, much remains to be done. We are nowhere close to being as diverse as we want to be: we have but a tiny number of minority members, and women constitute only about a quarter of our membership—on both counts we lag far behind both AMS and SEM. And we have much to do in the area of relating our work to a public beyond the confines of our own, admittedly rather small Society.

[8] It is thus to the question of how our community relates to other musical and intellectual communities, and to the public, the society, at large, that I now turn. To that end, I ask you to join me in a thought experiment. Imagine, improbable though it seems, that the academic music community is at the center of the social organization of the entire population of the world, and that the music theory community is at the center of the center. From that center we move out in ever broadening concentric circles, first to our students, then to sister societies in the academic musical world—AMS, SEM, and CMS—then to professionals in the larger world of the Western art music to which we have been primarily dedicated, then to amateurs in this same tradition, then to professionals, listeners, and consumers of our own popular musics, and then to participants in musics of other cultures. What does such a music-theoretical perspective on the world yield?

[9] What it first yields, I hope, is a realistic appraisal of where our music-academic society fits into musical culture worldwide. Of course, placing our small SMT at the center of all human beings who experience and participate in music—that is, virtually everyone on the planet—may seem not only preposterous, but offensive as well, inasmuch as it ostensibly reinscribes a form of ethnocentrism, cultural centrism, and elitism that we rightly seek to avoid. But I do not intend it as such. We all peer out at the world from inside ourselves—selves that are, for better or worse, the center of experience for *us*. I am not claiming that anyone else sees us at the center of the world, but that we, to understand our place in that world, must know what it feels like to look out from our own center. In constructing my fantasy, I have thus tried to place our SMT selves in a position that accords with where we really are—that is, in close proximity to the few with whom we have the most in common, more distant from the many with whom we share less, and on any account, rather narrow and specialized. Drawing the picture in this way points up *what* we are: a group of music scholars who study, write about, and teach the theory and analysis of music—principally Western art music, but increasingly, other musics as well.

[10] I am not the first to imagine the music theorist at the center of things. Over twenty-five years ago, Leonard Meyer, at a seminar at the University of Michigan, predicted that in music, by the end of the century, the *theorist* would be at the center of the action—that is, *really* at the center of the action, not just heuristically so, in a self-evaluative fantasy, as I am presenting here. Why? Although I do not know all the details—I was not a member of the seminar, and I heard this story second-hand—I might speculate that in Meyer's pluralistic world of stylistic stasis and competing artistic and intellectual currents, the clear-minded theorist might represent a much needed beacon of light.<sup>(2)</sup>

[11] So here we are at the end of the century. Do *we rule?*—as the teenage sitcoms say? And are we a much needed beacon of light? Meyer's prediction to the contrary, we can still hardly claim that “we rule,” either in the music-academic world or the world at large. And whether we are a beacon of light depends on what it is that one sees our work as shedding light upon. We have, I think, generally seen ourselves as illuminating *music*. But not everyone agrees. A charge that has frequently been leveled against us as theorists is that we treat music as a disembodied object to be studied, parsed, and explained; hence the portrayal of our work in some circles in recent years as “formalist.” As we move out through our concentric circles from SMT to AMS, SEM and CMS, from theory to musicology, ethnomusicology, and music pedagogy in general, we find ourselves haunted by formalism, since our work, in comparison to *their* work, seems to be particularly vulnerable to such a charge. A central plank in the SMT's breaking from AMS twenty years ago was, ironically enough, that we wanted to, and claimed that we could, engage music directly, as “music itself,” without the trappings of style identification, manuscript provenance or social history. Now the tables have turned, and we are portrayed as being lost, or trapped, within the “music itself” (a music that apparently doesn't exist anyway) and we are seen as being blind to its expressive, communicative, and cultural meanings—as being both insular and formalist. Musicologists criticize us for allegedly using pieces only to exemplify theories, ethnomusicologists criticize us for being interested only in structure rather than meaning and social function (and that in only a tiny fraction of the world's music), and many CMS members, and indeed many of our own members as well,

have from the very beginning criticized us as being elitist, as devoting our attentions only to analysis, and as being unconcerned with pedagogy. (Paradoxically, it is the latter, of course, that, much more than any analysis or research that we do, keeps bread on the table, and still makes us in some respects more employable than our colleagues in sister music-academic disciplines.)

[12] And for many of our neighbors in the widening circles beyond the music-academic community, our music theory is neither a dominant force nor a guiding light. Neither our conventional pedagogy nor our theory-based analysis sells well in a larger public forum. Pedagogy, our bread and butter, is simply uninteresting to the general public, and analysis is too technical to be accessible to the non-professional. Music, as an art, also lends itself more than the visual arts and literature to abstract, technical, insider analysis and criticism. Whatever the virtues of our analyses and our analytical systems, they resist popularization, and they tend to keep us looking insular. Critics of art and literature, and—truth be told—music historians as well, reach a large audience far more easily than we theorists do. All of us can think of musicologists whose work appears at least occasionally in daily newspapers, or in periodicals such as *The New York Review of Books*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, or the *New Republic*. But how many theorists do we see there? The educated public, and even the music performance establishment and the academic community, can relate easily to the Bach, Handel, or Mozart scholar, or to the specialist in a given repertoire. It cannot relate so easily to the technical work of the music theorist.

[13] All of which raises the question: what is our community, *as* a community, about? To what extent is it about doing work—technical or otherwise—that we find rewarding and stimulating for an audience of ourselves and each other, and to what extent is it about reaching out to other musical and other communities that transcend our own? We might first consider these questions in terms of the mandates set forth when our Society was founded in 1977. Our founders identified a need in academic musical culture for a scholarly and pedagogical organization focusing on music theory, and our organization's task has been, for the past twenty years, to open itself to all with an interest in the discipline, to create a coherent and active scholarly community, and to raise the level of music-theoretical discourse. Or, paraphrasing our own by-laws: to further scholarship and teaching in music theory at the highest level possible, and to provide a forum for same.<sup>(3)</sup> These are the goals that we set for ourselves, and few will argue that we have not made great strides toward achieving them.

[14] But to answer our questions about the degree to which we should reach out beyond ourselves, we somehow need to square this positive view of our accomplishments and our smoothly functioning music-theoretical community with the negative view that began to emerge when we tried to place music theory at the center of the musical, and then of the social, world. If we have done so well, why do we have the two problems that raised their ugly heads in our fantasy—the “formalism” problem and the “insularity” problem? One answer (and surely some SMT members will take this point of view) that these two problems are red herrings, that they are not problems at all. Such a position might turn on the argument that we are a scholarly society, scholarly societies are by definition specialized, we are specialized, and so therefore we are doing what we are supposed to be doing. From this point of view, if we are to expand, our expansion should be based on finding members and promoting activities that are congruent with our established interests: bringing into the Society teachers of music theory who have thus far been unaware of or uninterested in, or who have felt excluded by our work; attracting foreign scholars who are interested in our work and who might contribute to our journals and conferences; and lecturing and in other ways making contacts abroad. On this view, not only are formalism and insularity not problems for us; the charges that they *are* problems are refuted before our very eyes: we are bringing more members with more diverse backgrounds into the Society, including more minority members; foreign scholars are making splendid contributions to *Music Theory Online*, *smt-list*, and *mt-talk*; we are planning to invite international scholars to speak at our national conference in Atlanta in 1999.

[15] But for some of our members, whatever the value of all these initiatives, they do not address the underlying problem. This counter-position might claim that the SMT is indeed formalist and insular, and for the following reasons. Despite the Society's mandate to further both the best scholarship the best pedagogy, its real energies have gone into the scholarly arena more than the pedagogical one. That it has done so is, of course, a perfectly understandable course of action for an academic society. Academic societies tend to foster the best work in an area of specialization; in so doing, they make the discipline more and more specialized. And by establishing a public, competitive forum for such work, they establish a mechanism for the gauging of individual success. They enable more practitioners of the discipline to keep up with the cutting edge and to maintain a higher general level of competence, but more fundamentally, they make it more possible to judge what that

cutting edge is, thus inadvertently encouraging their members to become more and more narrow if they want to keep abreast of current developments and make their own mark on the discipline. Scholarly societies thus provide for a discipline both a means of cooperation and a means of competition. And both the cooperation and the competition tend to push the decimal places of research further and further out, thereby removing the discipline's work further and further from anyone but practitioners themselves. It requires little imagination to see that at least some of this general description is applicable to the SMT.

[16] If one believes that research and knowledge are of value for their own sake, this state of affairs offers no problem. But others want to see research reach out to a larger public. We all remember Senator William Proxmire's "Golden Fleece" Awards: awards that he presented for what he took to be the most useless federally supported research that he could find each year. Of course, music and music scholarship are hardly exempt from such criticism, as anyone even remotely familiar with the so-called New Musicology's critique of music theory will know. Nor are our music-scholarly culture wars of the 90's unique. We all know of the government-sponsored "Socialist Realist" attacks on the music of Shostakovich and Prokofiev in the Soviet Union of the late 1940's: their music was "formalist," and not for "the people." And in Germany in the first few decades of this century, a similar controversy—one also turning on issues of insularity and elitism, but focusing on music *scholarship* rather than on music—had already erupted. As Lee Rothfarb has shown, a central plank of August Halm's vision for music theory was the education of an ever wider musical public, in the hopes of creating a culture in which musical citizens could understand the meaning of art music themselves, rather than being dependent on the whims of journalistic critics. And Pamela Potter has pointed out that in German musicology, Hermann Kretzschmar, in 1903, and many of the most renowned scholars of the following decades (Friedrich Blume, Johannes Wolf, Arnold Schering) argued that musicology was too inbred, and that it should turn from its "ivory-tower isolationism" and serve the public—at least the music-loving public.<sup>(4)</sup> To be sure, our cultural situation in the musical and scholarly world of the U.S. in the 1990's is entirely different from that of the Soviet Union of the 1940's and 1950's or the Germany in the first few decades of the century. But in these historical precedents we do see a recurring theme of anxiety, whether justified or not, about the degree to which music, in one case, or musical scholarship, in the other, should be for the few or the many.

[17] So an important mission for us in the years to come is to decide how to deal with issues of community: to decide if and how we want to grow, and in what manner; to decide how to keep our community open and diverse, and at the same time internally healthy; to answer the questions of whether we should reach out to those in the concentric circles around us, and if we should, how far out we should reach. If we ignore criticisms of our work and decide to retrench, we run the risk of becoming what the sociologist Robert Bellah would call a "lifestyle enclave"—that is, a community of individuals with common interests who band together to enjoy their common passions safely (in a "gated community," as it were) but with little concern for a larger social good.<sup>(5)</sup> Or, put another way, we run the risk of being an "insular," "insider" community that pursues its own "formalist" interests in blithe disregard of its connection to other artistic, intellectual, and cultural entities. But if we reach out without a sober accounting of why we are doing so, we risk diluting what we do best, and chasing after goals that academic societies cannot achieve anyway.

[18] If I read our present situation correctly, and if I hear correctly what my colleagues who have preceded me on this plenary session have already said, some reaching out at this point in our history is both right and appropriate. But we will do well not only to reach out to *expand* our world *of* music theory, but also to reach out *into* the world—whether of performers, other musical scholars, other scholars, or members of other musical communities—*through* music theory. We might take as one of our causes in the coming years that of balancing the inwardly directed scholarly impulses that have brought us so many intellectual successes in the past twenty years with outwardly directed energies that connect us to the musical, academic, and social communities around us. For in pushing our specialized knowledge further and further *out*, we have sometimes ended up withdrawing further and further *in* to our own lifestyle enclave. To be sure, we are an academic society, not a political one. We can't, at least *as* an academic society, feed the poor or stop the wars, even though our members may do what they can on these fronts in other venues. Nor is it necessarily incumbent upon us to hold ourselves to the standards of social relevance and engagement propounded in the latest fashions in our sister academic societies, musical or otherwise. But it is surely incumbent upon us to be aware of the diverse communities around us, and to remember, however involved we become in our own work, how small we and our intellectual and musical traditions are in the world at large.

[19] We can decide for ourselves as individuals how far out beyond our music-theoretical center we want to reach. As both scholars and teachers, there is much that we can do. It is our privilege to share music and music theory every day with students. Our privilege is a particularly rewarding one, because as we all know, theory teachers and theory students somehow have a special relationship. Perhaps because the experience of learning to describe musical perceptions with concepts is an unusually personal and rich one, we can interact with students at a level that rivals that which students have with individual performance and composition teachers. Much of the richness of such interactions arises from what we as theorists do: for most of us there remains a value and a beauty in the finely wrought close analysis, the elegant theory—and is not our loving preservation of the close reading, the grasping and understanding of intricate detail, a cultural contribution in its own right these days? There is for most of us also a value and a beauty in teaching the simpler elements of music, and in finding ways that meaning in music connects to meaning in our lives. Our success as a community in the coming years will ultimately depend on how well we can communicate our sense of value, beauty, and meaning in music through our teaching and scholarship; and on how well, and how humbly, we can remain, in our teaching and scholarship, vigilantly aware of both the riches of our own musical culture and the riches of other musical cultures around us.

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## Footnotes

1. John Rahn, “New Research Paradigms,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 11.1 (1989): 84–94.

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2. The notions of stylistic stasis and pluralism are central to Meyer’s second book, *Music, the Arts, and Ideas: Patterns and Predictions in Twentieth-Century Culture* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967; reprinted “with new postlude,” Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

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3. See SMT By-Laws II, 1–5.

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4. Lee Rothfarb, “The ‘New Education’ and Music Theory, 1900–1925,” in *Music Theory and the Exploration of the Past*, ed. Christopher Hatch and David W. Bernstein, 449–72; idem., “Music Analysis, Cultural Morality, and Sociology in the Writings of August Halm,” *Indiana Theory Review* 16 (1995): 171–96; Pamela Potter, “Musicology Under Hitler: New Sources in Context,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 49.1 (1996): 73–74. I should note that it was precisely music criticism of the type popularized by Kretzschmar that Halm was attempting to educate the public *against*.

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5. See Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986; originally published, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 71–75. I cite the well-known older edition rather than the very recent updated edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

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