For more reasons than one, it just doesn’t seem possible to me that only within this last decade—even less than ten years ago—our Baltimore joint-conference hallways were buzzing about Maynard Solomon’s paper on Schubert and the peacocks of Benvenuto Cellini. That was in 1988. Only one year earlier—just ten years ago this month—did our conference promote the first official session of something called a Committee on the Status of Women. Even harder to believe, Susan McClary’s *Feminine Endings* hit the stands only as recently as 1991, also the year of the first Feminist Theory and Music Conference, in Minneapolis. And the first AMS/SMT Conference to be held jointly with the Center for Black Music Research, inaugurated in 1980, took place just two years ago. Topics concerning ethnicity, feminism, gender, and sexuality have by now so clearly made an impact on our field that they seem to have been with us for much longer. But colleagues in other fields—literature, philosophy, the social sciences, drama, art history, film, dance, you name it—are predictably incredulous when they learn that these issues are still so relatively new for us.

I submit today that these new cultural and social concerns are the ones to have exerted both the most profound and the most beneficial changes our field has seen in the last decade. Before dismissing this observation as pure cant, please think about it with me. Profound? Beneficial? On what grounds can I make these claims? And if I can indeed substantiate them, then how did it happen that the field of music theory seems as if to have waited for the 1990s before even tentatively beginning to investigate such concerns?

This last question engages countless elusive issues—academic, political, philosophical, sociological, dare I say even “purely musical.” For the record, Susan McClary’s sharp critiques of our field have from the very outset been complemented by her efforts to provide explanations for our behavior. In the following statement, from as early as 1988, her judgment is gentle yet firm: “Feminism has been very late in making an appearance in music criticism, and this is largely owing to the
success composers, musicologists, and theorists have had in maintaining the illusion that music is an entirely autonomous realm.”(3) In the 1997 collection of essays called *Keeping Score*, my distinguished plenary-session colleague Patrick McCreless presents a superb study in which he brings Michel Foucault’s version of the old adage “Knowledge is Power” to the task of construing *why* we theorists in particular have been so reluctant to relinquish the illusion that music is autonomous. McCreless posits that the willingness of two powerful East-Coast research universities—Yale and Princeton—to regard modern music theory as a professional academic discipline ultimately hinged in the 1950s on that very same illusion. Like others, Pat sees the twentieth-century notion of absolute music as a vestige of the shift in the early nineteenth century from compositional pedagogy to analysis, and towards an aesthetic of genius, originality, and romantic subjectivity.(4)

[4] In Pat’s view, in other words, our entree itself into the academy depended upon the following achievements of our American founding fathers—Milton Babbitt and Allen Forte: first, they regained intellectual respectability for music theory by shacking off its stigma in this country as mere pedagogy; second, they accomplished this by demonstrating most especially through twelve-tone, Schenkerian, and pitch-class set theories that our field is both a rigorous and a creative mode of thought. As what Pat calls “the driving intellectual forces of the discipline,” these two “central poles” “share a value system that explicitly privileges rigor, system, and theory-based analysis and implicitly share an aesthetic ideology whereby analysis validates masterworks that exhibit an unquestioned structural autonomy.”(5) From this perspective, we might just draw some understanding as to why it has been difficult for modern music theorists to give intellectual energy to the ways in which music reflects or expresses extra-musical meaning of any kind—whether this be relative to biography, social function, or even ethnic or national differences, let alone gender and sexuality: our initial prestige in the American academy, whence to this day cometh pay checks for most of us, rested on our promise that we could *explain* music in purely musical terms, rather than merely effuse about it. Better yet, we could promise to do this at a time when most musicologists were not particularly interested in theory, analysis, or criticism of any kind.

[5] Imagine our surprise, then, when our perhaps uneasy but ostensibly self-assured relationship with musicology began to show signs of crumbling in the early 1980s. The appearance of two sharp-pointed attacks on our kinds of analysis—from Joseph Kerman in 1980 and Leo Treitler in 1982(6)—created so much indignation (read alarm here) for some of us in the Theory Department at McGill University that we organized a special McGill colloquium to discuss these articles. But Kerman’s and Treitler’s critiques were only the beginnings—the first stage in what has since been perceived as a real siege on music theory. During moments of the invited session entitled “Contemporary Theory and the ‘New Musicology’” at our 1995 joint conference in New York, something dubbed by someone as “the new musicology” seemed to have become the name of our enemy.

[6] But let’s face it: as a postmodernist phenomenon, the “new musicology” has itself been phenomenally slow to arrive. How can we fathom that it took so many musicologists as well as theorists, most of us generally humanists at heart, such a long time to investigate the idea that the creation, performance, and study of music simply cannot help but be implicated in both past and present social, cultural, and political concerns? And, to this day, how comfortable have we become with the notion that *music theory* might actually profit from an engagement with some of the great outcries for social change our society and our world have seen in this century—movements towards real equity in respect to race, gender, and sexual orientation, with concomitant efforts to undercut bigotry and parochialism by breaking down cultural hegemonies?

[7] As McCreless readily explains, a Foucauldian assessment of any discipline treats the discipline as a social institution that regulates, or controls, individuals through its discourse; in Pat’s words, Foucault “tends to focus on discourse as an abstract site of knowledge, and to remove from this arena the motivation and action of the individual subject.”(7) Allow me to take quite a different tack today: I’d like to reverse Foucault’s strategy by shifting the focus from our discipline as an institution, or society, to some of its individual members, if only towards the goal of acknowledging recent individual contributions to our field. My premise should be obvious: disciplines become established as such mainly through the efforts of those individuals whose ideas seem to have emerged at just the right time and in the right place; by the same ineluctable process, the discourse of a discipline can change. Here, then, is some history “modeled on biography and human action,”(8) or, shall we say, an anecdotal approach to our recent history, informally inspired by Richard Rorty’s ideas in his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, from 1989. (9)
[8] Few would deny that the rise of the professional theorist in this country during the 1950s was partly, and “first of all”—as Milton Babbitt says—“a result of Schenker and of people who came over here who were Schenker students.”(10) But third- and fourth-generation Schenkerians who in turn studied with one or more of those people—Hans Weisse, Felix Salzer, Oswald Jonas, and Ernst Oster—can confirm, ironically, that, as immigrants, these teachers certainly did not find an easy market for Schenkerian theory during the 1960s or even in the early 70s. On a personal note, I can report that, as a candidate in 1970 for the M.M.A degree in Piano Performance, I did not have an easy time “defending” the Schenkerian aspects of my Masters thesis to my performance teachers in the Yale School of Music. So much for all that intellectual rigor and creative analytical thought that was supposed to have legitimized American music theory as an academic discipline by the late 50s. If, around 1979, when Schenker’s *Free Composition* (*Der freie Satz*) appeared in English translation, we had begun to show signs of smugness about our beautiful voice-leading graphs, let’s remember that only around then had institutions begun to exhibit pressure to hire Schenkerians who could also teach pitch-class set theory. And, if modern music theory has indeed been in competition with musicology for certain kinds of power through knowledge, then the appearance of Kerman’s and Treitler’s articles so shortly after 1979 seems like more than a coincidence. But I’ll contend that some brilliant pedagogy coupled with an ideological commitment to Schenker’s ideas on the part of those first, lone immigrant teachers initially sparked comparable passions in the hearts and minds of just a few receptive, gifted theorists, and that the subsequent dissemination of Schenkerian thought here and abroad can be greatly understood as contingent on the far-reaching actions of those individuals, rather than as a Foucauldian demonstration of our discipline qua regulative institution. Envision, if you will, please, the image of John Rothgeb in 1970 as an impassioned young theorist driving alone in his ‘64 Volvo all the way from Austin, Texas, to Riverside, California, for the single purpose of meeting and studying with Oswald Jonas, as recommended by Jonas’s student, and John’s teacher, Ernst Oster.

[9] If our field has now begun to drive in new directions, this has once again come about mostly, I think, as a result of the passionate, persuasive, persistent, and highly productive efforts of certain remarkable individuals. Where have these scholars come from? Not, initially, from the rank and file of the Society for Music Theory, it must be admitted; and not even so obviously from the core of the AMS. Maynard Solomon’s profoundly stimulating biographical studies of Beethoven, Ives, Schubert, and Mozart suggest a remarkable contact with the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis. (11) Susan McClary’s writings reflect her intensive involvement with feminist criticism in literary, film, and performance-artist studies. Lawrence Kramer’s wonderfully provocative books each overtly draw on his expertise in postmodernist literary theory as an Associate Professor of English. (12) Carolyn Abbate brings a command of both literary theory and semiotics to her work in musical narrative. (13) In other words, all four of these recently influential writers have devoted themselves to exhaustive interdisciplinary research. And, though none of them has insisted that we should all do the same, they have, each in their own way, urged us—or, perhaps in the case of some of our members, shown that we have permission—to explore new, broader contexts for our analytic skills, and to think critically about the kinds of messages that music, music theory, and music analysis might transmit and embrace as cultural forces.

[10] Whether or not the ideas of Solomon, McClary, Kramer, and Abbate have directly or even indirectly inspired the profusion of interdisciplinary, cultural, deconstructive, feminist, gender, sexuality, reception, popular, jazz, and rock studies in music since 1991, we have certainly witnessed this outpouring, now emanating from the more central card-carrying ranks of musicology and music theory. Amongst musicologists, consider, for example, Jeffrey Kallberg’s work on the rhetoric of genre and on the subject of sex in receptions of Chopin’s music, or Kristina Muxfeldt’s arduous documentary studies on the question of Schubert’s sexuality. (14) Note the coming-together of essays by musicologists and theorists—as if this distinction were really appropriate when describing Kofi Agawu, Susan McClary, James Webster, and Robert S. Winter—in the Commentary section within the 1993 Special Issue of 19th-Century Music, the issue entitled “Schubert: Music, Sexuality, Culture.”(15)

[11] From within the membership of our SMT, let’s especially celebrate the individual contributions of Fred Everett Maus, Marion Guck, and Joseph Dubiel on such issues, among many, as masculine discourse in music theory, analytical fictions, and deconstruction. (16) Musicologist Ruth Solie’s outspoken reading of Schumann’s *Frauenliebe* songs, her critique of theorist Pieter van den Toorn’s first publication about politics, feminism, and music theory, her leadership as editor of the collection *Musicology and Difference*, and her article on defining “feminism” in the first issue of the brand new journal *Women and Music* have all made a very big difference within our field. (17) But then so have van den Toorn’s responses to McClary, Treitler,
Kerman, and Solie, in his ardent book-length defense of musical autonomy and technical analysis. Finally, we have, in the latest issue of *19th-Century Music*, Marianne Kielian-Gilbert’s evocative meditation *a l’écriture feminine* on van den Toorn’s ideas about immediacy and the aesthetic experience; with this work, we can sense that the text/context debate delicately rests at the base of a new plateau: the dialogue between McClary and van den Toorn that Marianne imaginatively construes augurs well for those of us who never understood in the first place why text and context should be in conflict.

It really does seem to me, in short, that the kinds of contributions I’ve just mentioned have had a tremendously creative and liberating affect on our field; and there are so many other contributions I’ve had to neglect. It is of course absolutely essential to note, as Paula Higgins has done so emphatically, that much excellent historical work on music by women had already appeared in the 1980s, well before McClary’s earliest articles, and before the appearance of the 1987 collection *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception*, which McClary edited along with Richard Leppert. But Janet Wolff’s lead article in this volume seems to have struck on the topic—the ideology of autonomous art—that would become the Achilles’ heel of music theorists, eliciting genuine, explosive reactions both pro and con. And, let’s be frank, for a minority, yet substantial, membership within our society, “permission” in the form of encouragement to explode seems to have come as a welcome relief.

On the other hand, some might ask, Just what gave music theory permission not to address issues of social context for so long? As a society and a field of inquiry, we’ve not exactly played a leadership role here; and as the individual who stands before you right now, I’m a good case in point. But, for the very reason that I have not until now publicly entered the arena of feminist or postmodernist writings about music, I represent the majority of SMT members, while, at the same time—and I hope like others in my position—I’ve been openly receptive to these issues. From this perspective, perhaps I can claim to bring an unbeseiged and undefensive enthusiasm for the postmodernist breakthroughs I think our field has made over the course of this last decade. As your next SMT President, I feel obliged, moreover, to let you know where I stand.

Let me begin with several heartfelt tributes. First, as one who has been and probably always will be intensely involved with matters of form in tonal music, I cannot thank Scott Burnham enough for having aspired to recontextualize A. B. Marx’s gendering of sonata form in face of the embarrassingly superficial and misconstrued decontextualizations of Marx that have become a trademark of feminist critiques. Burnham’s thorough examination of Marx’s views really ought to put to rest the going assumption that the Marxian sonata-form plot tells of the triumph of the “masculine” main theme in its subjugation of the “feminine” secondary theme. Let’s also salute the 1996 SMT Awards Committee for having wasted no time in recognizing that Burnham’s book *Beethoven Hero* superbly demonstrates how contemporary music theory and analysis can embrace the ever broader contexts of stylistic studies, reception history, history of theory, canon formation, and even ethical as well as aesthetic valuation. Burnham “keeps the score”: that is, he offers his own first-rate analytic insights about Beethoven’s scores, both heroic and otherwise; but he insists that we critically contemplate his analyses, and those of others, in the light of the ideologies and myths about Beethoven that analyses can help to construct.

Second, let me note how fortunate we’ve been that two of our most impressive leaders in the recent expansion of theoretical domains just happen to have been the two most recent Presidents of our SMT—Patrick McCreless and Joseph Straus. Thanks to these two, and to the hard work of numerous volunteers, our society now has a Committee on Diversity and a Committee on Professional Development, with both of these serving as outreaches that have long been overdue. Like McCreless, Joe Straus has artfully carried our discipline across the border into the land of literary theory; and, like Kevin Korsyn, but in vastly different ways, Straus has provoked some healthy anxiety about how Harold Bloom’s theory of poetic influence might serve as yet another death threat to the notion of absolute music. Joe’s anthology—*Music by Women for Study and Analysis* (1993)—and his 1995 book on the music of Ruth Crawford Seeger place him at the forefront of theorists who are finally beginning to direct their analytic skills towards the recovery of music outside the canon by composers who happen to have been women.

Has the field of music theory really changed in profound ways over the last ten years? Well, here’s a small but significant sign: we’ve certainly become more adept at avoiding third-person masculine pronouns. And, even if we’re not Charles Rosen, Edward T. Cone, or any other distinguished male writer, we might be less likely to expect that our journal editors will delete every one of our first persons. Speaking of distinguished persons, we know that our field has changed, and that it will always...
be capable of change, when we note that Allen Forte—our first SMT president, also known as the inventor of pitch-class set theory and the author of some of the most influential hard-core theoretical writings of the last thirty years—has recently published a book on the American popular ballad. For this extraordinarily diversified and versatile soul, it was no big deal to shift from pitch-class set genera and octatonicism to Kay Swift and Duke Ellington. And it was just as easy for Allen then to turn to a book on the atonal music of Anton Webern. [26]

[17] Have the changes we’ve seen really been beneficial? You bet they have! Like Allen Forte in particular, the field of music theory in general has recently expressed a remarkable new diversity; in doing so, it has found ways of achieving greater inclusiveness and generosity. But what’s so beneficial about that? To say the obvious, every aspect of the world we live in—and that includes our musical world—has itself become more diverse. How can we justify not responding to this simple fact of our professional and personal lives? Probably very much like all of you, I’m currently teaching tonal theory to a class of young women and men from white, black, Asian, Indian, Hispanic, Philippine, and other backgrounds. Some of these elementary theory students would recognize the opening of Beethoven’s Third Symphony; some would not, but they may know a lot about rock music, jazz, or African drumming. And, if they’re interested in knowing more about nearly any culture on this planet, they can virtually surf over to check it out, through the mere flick of a finger or two online. How can I ask these students to come with me on journeys into the realms of early chant or Purcell or Mozart or even Gershwin if I know nothing about the musical trips they might also want to be taking, or if I can’t help them recognize the differences among styles and musical cultures that theory and analysis can help to articulate? These same students may not be ready to tackle the sophisticated essays in that wonderfully forward-looking new collection Concert Music, Rock, and Jazz Since 1945, edited by Elizabeth West Marvin and Richard Hermann; but this collection was not meant so much for them as for the likes of me. [27]

Here, and with the many other new publications about popular, jazz, and rock music, not to mention new SMT sessions on these topics, are opportunities for all of us to expand the range of our knowledge, interests, and cultural concerns, and, for many SMT members, chances to return to the music they grew up with. Though I won’t be able to demonstrate Steven Block’s analyses of “Bemsha Swing” to my tonal theory students next week, I can’t wait to tell them that, for the first time ever, the lead article in the very latest issue of our house journal, Music Theory Spectrum, is Block’s study of the transformation of a Bebop classic to free jazz. [28]

[18] In many of the recent writings and talks about popular, jazz, rock, and performance-artist repertoires, one senses that rare kind of enthusiasm arising first and foremost from a deep, personal involvement with the music. The most exciting of these and other new studies seem to be the ones that take a cue from recent ethnomusicology: rather than simply transferring old analytic techniques to new styles, they seek new approaches from within those styles and the cultures that have produced them. As always, however, it’s the personal engagement and commitment that count the most; and this brings me back to the idea of “keeping the score.”

[19] The field of music theory has been emphatically urged to branch out. Perhaps we can see a case of Foucauldian institutional regulation in the pressure music departments now exhibit to hire tonal and atonal theorists who can also teach world music, jazz, rock, and music by women. As one feminist has privately put it to me, a feminist victory will truly have been achieved on the day when jobs and tenure for women musicologists and theorists do not depend on their ability to teach courses about women in music, so that the “really good” music—by men—can be taught by the men. But institutional, societal, or peer pressures tend, in the long run, to be the least effective motivation for personal change; our individual efforts to branch out will count for little unless they come from the heart.

[20] Finally, I’ll maintain that we theorists have not only the right but the obligation to “keep the score”; that is, we should never feel the need to apologize for our interest in close readings of musical scores, nor should we have to justify our love of musical details, our endless fascination with compositional craft and musical coherence. There is one very obvious reason why music theory, by contrast with our sister disciplines musicology and ethnomusicology, has been historically, perhaps even definitively, bound to the musical score: to theorists has fallen the task of music pedagogy; and this domain will most likely always include the teaching of how to read, hear, and attempt to interpret Western score notation. But there are some other good reasons why the music text cannot be abandoned. I’m surely not the only one who has sometimes resisted feminist and postmodernist music criticism for the simple reason that the argument at hand has rested on what seem like superficial and unconvincing, if not downright inaccurate, music analyses. Even if we have fully come to accept the truism...
that analyses, and the interpretations they yield, are nothing more, or less, than documents of what we hear, what you and I hear will always be somewhat different, and the distinct details we choose for describing our individual responses will inevitably yield different interpretations, both musical and cultural. If theorists must continue to take collective pedagogical responsibility for the development of aural, score-reading, and interpretative musical skills, as well as responsibility for the exercise of self-criticism, historical knowledge, and good judgment in the preparation of analytic interpretations, then we theorists are beholden more than ever before to work together with our colleagues in musicology in the training of those young people who will perhaps be addressing our societies ten years from now. Yet another extraordinary series of changes may well be our topic at the SMT celebration in the year 2007; but I both hope and expect that we will still be talking about the texts of music—that we will still feel free to cherish and keep close to the score.

Janet Schmalfeldt
Tufts University
Department of Music
20 Professors Row
Medford, MA 02155
jschmalf@emerald.tufts.edu

Footnotes


8. Ibid.

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Prepared by Jon Koriagin and Rebecca Flore, Editorial Assistants