



## Review of Carl Schachter, *Unfoldings: Essays in Schenkerian Theory and Analysis*, ed. by Joseph N. Straus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)

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[1] As a young student I often explored the music stacks of my college library. Small though its book collection was, I discovered there an astonishing world of information—a panoply of routes for my future development as a musician. A heavy, peculiarly wide, dark blue volume called *Counterpoint in Composition* intrigued me particularly. Though much that it contained was familiar, in its final chapter it seemed to go berserk: solid and dotted beams connected long spans of notes, some noteheads lacked stems altogether, and Roman numerals appeared with alarming infrequency. I astutely concluded that I had a lot more to learn, that none of my current mentors could help me, and that bizarre graphs such as these *might* some day become a focus of my musical life. The younger co-author of that book was, of course, Carl Schachter. And though others guided my journey through the foothills of Schenkerian theory, ultimately Schachter must count as one of my and of every Schenkerian's mentors, for the scope and brilliance of his writings in that field have been unmatched, at least since 1935.

[2] Laudably, Schachter has devoted himself to two separate audiences of readers. With Felix Salzer in *Counterpoint in Composition* (1969), and with Edward Aldwell in *Harmony and Voice Leading* (1978), he has endeavored to provide the best possible guidance and insight for the larger community of musicians in the inaugural phase of their theoretical study. And, in a steady stream of well-crafted essays spanning several decades, he has made generous offerings of his knowledge and skill for the community of scholars and teachers who pursue the Schenkerian perspective. It is this latter community to whom Oxford University Press's compendium, *Unfoldings: Essays in Schenkerian Theory and Analysis* (edited by Joseph N. Straus), is directed.

[3] Straus has arranged the essays in four categories: Rhythm and Linear Analysis (the three celebrated *Music Forum* articles), Schenkerian Theory ("Either/Or," "Analysis by Key: Another Look at Modulation," "The Triad as Place and Action," and a review of Oster's translation of *Free Composition*), Words and Music (samplings from Schubert and Mozart), and Analytical Monographs (a Bach fugue and Chopin's *Fantasy*, Op. 49). And there is a stimulating bonus: the book begins with a wide-ranging dialogue between editor and author. A list of Schachter's publications and an index conclude the volume. Since

many of the essays were originally published during the 1970s or 1980s and may be difficult to obtain in their original incarnation, this undertaking is most welcome.

[4] For those not acquainted with Schenker's method, this volume is not a very good place to start. Assumptions regarding terminology and notation would make for frustrating reading. For those with some experience, however, these essays are among the most rewarding material one could study beyond Schenker's own writings. A few of the essays might enhance a beginner's course, but most are for more mature practitioners.

[5] I am not inclined to use this space for airing perceived faults with Schachter's graphs or arguments. Any analyst of Schachter's stature will do things which make other analysts scratch their heads, though in this case the increased blood supply around the brain might lead one to realize that Schachter is probably right. Instead I would like to explore the essence of Schachter's particular gift as a thinker and writer by annotating a few striking sentences from among the essays in the compendium.

“One can be pretty sure that giraffes did not become plentiful in the zoological gardens of China” (pages 192–193)

[6] Schachter is fascinating to read, not only because he raises his readers to a most stimulating intellectual plane, but also because he is so elegant and humane. Here he is arguing subtly against the view of some unnamed analysts who reject the notion of fundamental lines descending from scale degree 5. He compares such analysts to a Chinese emperor who, upon encountering a giraffe, mandates: “It ought not to exist!” But if the emperor will take a good look at nature—or if such analysts will take a good look at the repertoire—it will be observed that, in fact, such creatures do exist.

“Learning to analyze means learning to hear in depth; a good analysis is always verifiable by the educated ear.” (page 19)

“If the analysis has been successful it leads to hearing that is incomparably clearer and more comprehensive than it had been before; it never leads to abstraction without sensory content.” (page 35)

[7] Receptivity to musical expression is not simply an innate talent. One's capacity for making sense of music can be augmented through study. For a few, the starting point of natural talent may be set very high. But for most people, even most people who devote their lives to the pursuit of music, developing an “educated ear” is a lifelong process. Every word that Schachter writes is intended to foster that endeavor.

“I do not wish to draw out the subject of duration to unendurable lengths” (page 28)

“Of course the name itself—‘Luise’—sounds more like whispering leaves and water than, say, ‘Katinka’ would.” (page 211)

[8] How refreshing to read an analyst with a twinkle in his eyes!

“If the ideas elaborated in this article and the analyses that illustrate them reveal anything significant about musical rhythm and meter, they are testimony to the continuing creative force that emanates from the work of our greatest music theorist, Heinrich Schenker.” (page 116)

[9] Humility is an attribute not necessarily associated with Schenkerians. Yet when reading Schachter, Schachter begins to disappear. It is the composer's world—and the interface between that world and Schenker's perspective—that we inhabit. Even when, as here, Schachter is expanding that perspective in new ways, it is the original theory—and its continuity with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century practice—that shines through.

“I doubt that this symmetry is accidental, though I can't prove that it is not.” (page 61)

“An irreducible residue of personal opinion remains in any metrical analysis of a piece which . . . lends itself to more than one plausible interpretation.” (page 101)

[10] Schachter accepts that the analytical enterprise is speculative, and despite the uncanny precision of his presentations, he acknowledges that there are unknowable elements. After all, Schenkerian analysis addresses issues that were never articulated in words or symbols during the period of composition. Schachter hopes to persuade his readers that certain ways of thinking about a piece are more insightful than other ways. Yet there are limits concerning what can be accomplished.

“[Anticipating §s] are hardly ever mentioned in theory books.” Footnote: “But see Edward Aldwell and Carl Schachter, *Harmony and Voice Leading*.” (pages 73 and 78)

[11] Like Schenker, Schachter can express exasperation concerning standard textbooks. Unlike Schenker, he has contributed significantly towards a solution.

“The performer must take care to project measures 29–30 as an upbeat to the II<sup>6</sup> in measure 31.” (page 74)

[12] Those who perform music and those who speculate about it generally pursue quite different regimens of training. Given the colossal and ever-increasing pressures within both fields, it might seem foolish to hope that many would devote significant energies to an auxiliary agenda, particularly one as daunting as Schenkerian analysis. Nevertheless Schachter expects that performers will be among his readers. Because performed art requires continual re-creation, a class of practitioners who can make sense of what music notation implies must thrive. Music analysis—especially Schenkerian analysis and, here, Schachter’s metric enhancement—is the systematic study of those implications. Every performer is the potential recipient of Schachter’s insights. Though many performers never develop a sophistication in music theory that would allow them to ponder their art at the level of these essays, those who do will find in Schachter an enthusiastic ally.

“For many reasons, I find it difficult to contemplate this song for the keyboard [Chopin, Prelude in E Minor] without attributing to it a programmatic character—I hear it as a vision of death, perhaps the imagination of one’s own death. . . . Needless to say, I don’t require anybody—not even my students—to believe in this program, but I find that many people do seem to have an emotional reaction to the piece that would be compatible with its being strongly tinged with grief, mourning, and the thought of death.” (pages 163, 165)

[13] On a superficial level, Schenker’s procedures may seem to reduce meaning out of a musical work. Schachter knows that that is not the case, and with characteristic eloquence he ponders musical meaning and, through the medium of analysis, offers insights into the means by which a composer imbues a work with a specific sentiment.

“Viewed purely as a ‘theoretical’ work, *Der freie Satz* falls short of *Kontrapunkt* in comprehensiveness, consistency, and elegance.” (page 185)

“I don’t know why Schenker includes all of the levels beyond the first in Part III [of *Der freie Satz*], but I believe that it is because these levels (as he describes them) can contain prolongational events characteristic of the foreground as well as those ‘transferred’ from the background and the first level of middleground.” (page 186)

“This position has occasioned a good deal of misunderstanding, probably because Schenker’s explanations are inadequate and confusing.” (page 201)

[14] Schachter understands Schenker’s theory as few others do. He knows the writings intimately, in both German and English. He has pondered the various nuances of change that occurred in Schenker’s thought over the course of his career, and is sensitive to lingering difficulties. This comprehensive immersion by one great mind in the work of another gives a special authority. Schachter can be critical without seeming negative. He can offer hunches that ring true. In the midst of a contemporary culture that glamorizes the newfangled, Schachter has pursued with steadfast devotion an inherited perspective, one which, through his own contributions, has continued to evolve dynamically.

[15] Though the eleven essays in *Unfoldings* reveal only a part of Schachter’s contribution to musical thought in the last third of the twentieth century, this convenient and inviting volume assures that his impact will persist well into the future. As long as there are inhabitants of the planet who care about the musical heritage of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,

Schachter will remain a trusted and inspiring mentor.

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