

Detail, Reduction, and Organicism: A Response to Philip Ewell

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As someone who studies jazz, and as a human being concerned with social justice, I was happy to see Philip Ewell stand in front of hundreds of theorists at the plenary session of the SMT annual meeting and begin his talk by stating what for me has always been a painfully obvious truth: “Music theory is white” (0:31). In his concluding remarks, Ewell suggests that real change might include making major revisions to the standard undergraduate curriculum (20:08). In my view, there is no single correct path to take in curricular innovation, and highly traditional programs are vitally important and must continue to exist. The problem with music departments has not necessarily been the curricular structures themselves, but the homogeneity of these curricula—the fact that nearly all programs have offered the same basic experience. There are few schools of music where one can comprehensively study non-white or non-Western musics and music theories, including jazz and jazz theory.

I mention jazz not only because I study it, but because it would seem to be a music offering everything theorists value: it contains a richly continuous spectrum of music—often within a single decade—from tonal to atonal, improvised to composed (sometimes notated, sometimes not), complex to simple, African to European, “high” to “low,” solo to orchestral, and vocal to instrumental; it has a lengthy and well-developed theoretical tradition, both inside and outside of academia; it is frequently described as “America’s classical music”; and it is an unusually egalitarian art form in many respects, from its collective and improvisatory nature to the diversity of its audience and practitioners. Yet, the amount of attention, respect, and resources accorded to jazz in academia is wildly disproportionate to its contributions to music and music theory. Moreover, the reasons for this disparity are obviously (if sometimes unknowingly) connected with issues of power and race—from decisions about degree programs and hiring to condescending, implicitly racialized questioning of whether jazz musicians know anything about theory and self-perpetuating ignorance that equates jazz only with bebop and big band (in keeping with the limited scope of jazz presented in schools of music due to the paucity of resources).¹

As someone who also teaches Schenker, I was happy to hear Ewell’s call for Schenker’s racism to be presented alongside his theories. In my seminar on reductive analysis I always assign Schachter’s (2001) article on Schenker’s politics. Schachter’s writing, as ever, is evenhanded and moderate. It is therefore no surprise that he approaches the issue of Schenker’s racism from more than one perspective. Ultimately, Schachter contends that Schenker’s racist ideology must be studied when his theory is the focus, but that the analytical practice can be separated from the ideology. Ewell does not cite Schachter’s essay, but I find that it is an excellent starting point for introducing this subject, and the discussions it engenders among my students are civil, thoughtful, and substantive, following Schachter’s model.

Because Schenker viewed the world through a hierarchical lens that was racist (and more), and

¹ For more on the challenges jazz and jazz theory have faced in academia, see Larson 2005 and Tymoczko 2011, 387–90.

because his ideology is closely connected with his music theory, it is logical enough to conclude that he placed little value on the lower structural levels. However, to reach this conclusion—which Ewell did not *explicitly* do in his talk—is to fundamentally misunderstand Schenker.² This is the case for two closely-related reasons, which I will discuss for the remainder of this essay. First, there is another significant aspect to Schenker’s thought, one which is concerned specifically with the relationship between the whole and the part—organicism. Second, to reach this conclusion is to fall into the trap of believing that Schenkerian analysis merely reduces away the vibrant details of a piece of music—the classic misinterpretation of Schenker.³

In Schenker’s own writings there are innumerable passages providing evidence that he did not view music or analysis in the way suggested by criticism along these lines; I will mention only a few.⁴ In his discussion of Chopin’s étude op. 10, no. 3, Schenker remarks: “How imaginatively the neighboring-note harmony II_3^7 is expanded in measures 22–41, how striking the figurations in measures 41–53!” ([1935] 1979, §310). Yet, his graph indicates very little about the expansion and shows none of the figurations; they have been reduced out at the level given. Reduction of detail serves an important practical function—imagine how difficult it would be if maps of our world were only available at a scale that showed every detail.⁵ At the same time, even though we can zoom out our view of a piece’s voice-leading map, we should not fly “over the work of art in the same manner that one flies over villages, cities, palaces, castles, fields, woods, rivers, and lakes.” Rather, the “inner relationships” of a work of art “demand to be ‘traversed’” ([1935] 1979, 6).

Moreover, the details were not only aesthetically significant for Schenker ([1935] 1979), but themselves representative of the whole—“The total work lives and moves in each diminution, even those of the lowest order. Not the smallest part exists without the whole” (§253)—and even the secret hiding place of large-scale structure itself: ““One must conceal the depths. Where? On the surface”” (6).⁶ This is the essence of Schenker’s organicism.

There are also innumerable discussions of this question about reduction in the secondary literature; again, I will mention just a few. The polemical Beach/Smith exchange of the 1980s (Smith 1986, Beach 1987, Smith 1987) is worth revisiting because it demonstrates that even scholars who work extensively

2 Ewell did not specifically state that Schenker placed low value on the lower structural levels. He did provide evidence that Schenker believed the higher levels controlled the lower levels, that Schenker believed in the “inequality of tones,” and connected these beliefs with analogous, racist statements (15:38).

3 For instances of this argument being made that are not subsequently cited, see Narmour 1977, 9; Kerman [1980–81] 1994, 23–25; Kerman 1985, 34; Russ 1993, 268; and Cumming 2000, 172. For defenses against this critique (again, not otherwise cited), see Martin 1978, 197–98; Cook 1994, 89–90; and 2007, 132–33 (regarding Schenker and Salzer on ornamentation; see further citations there).

4 For passages of Salzer, see [1952] 1982, pages 45, 207, and 220.

5 Schenker’s omission of foreground graphs also allows him to present a large number of analyses in one volume. For a discussion of omitted foreground graphs in the work of Schenker and Salzer vis-à-vis that of Lerdahl (and Jackendoff), see Pellegrin 2013, 119–22.

6 In the latter passage, Schenker is quoting Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

on Schenker can fall into subtle variations of the trap I have described. While Smith's response conveys a sense of reasonability and rationality, aiming to make Beach appear fanatical by comparison (and to some extent succeeding), Beach had good reason to be critical of Smith 1986; for the same fundamental misunderstanding of reduction is at the root of Smith's argument. Beach rebukes Smith along these lines, but in his response, Smith insists upon his point:

He [Beach] states that my argument illustrates only “the principle that changes in surface design do not necessarily alter underlying structure” (p. 180). This is, in fact, an eloquent statement, in Schenkerian language, of the very point I have been trying to make. Having accepted this “principle,” as well as (I presume) the undeniable fact that the *Introduzione* [from the *Waldstein*] is a far better piece of music than my graceless counterfeit, how can Beach avoid the conclusion of *FE* [Smith 1986]? What are we to make of an analysis that cannot reveal such a significant distinction? In other words, of what ultimate analytical value is an “underlying structure” that is not affected by such radical “changes in surface design”?⁷ (Smith 1987, 191)

In this statement, Smith seems to misunderstand the essence of Schenkerian analysis. As surface features are reduced away (the core objection lurking behind this passage) and one moves further away from the foreground, the structures encountered naturally become more generic.⁸

Similar to Smith's argument is Russ's (1993, 281) reference to “the closed Schenkerian view of the musical world . . . where music does not evolve, but constantly produces more variants of the same type—a view which prefers to treat adventurousness parenthetically rather than progressively.” Schenkerians are indeed circumspect in the way they approach the issue of repertoire (which is one reason why it is important to sustain a Salzerian tradition as well), and the question of reduction does become more relevant in the analysis of post-Schenkerian repertoire. However, the parenthesization itself of progressive passages is not the underlying issue. Every event is in some sense parenthetical, in both Schenkerian and Salzerian analysis (as well as Lerdahl's (2001) work on tonal and post-tonal repertoire), except for events at the level of the background—that is simply the nature of reductive analysis. The crux of the matter is more qualified: the question of when—at what structural level—a passage should be reduced out becomes more complex and more consequential as increasingly progressive repertoire is encountered.⁹

Schachter 1999 is significant in that it addresses the matter of reduction directly, and begins by providing illustrative passages regarding the importance of detail by Viktor Zuckerkandl, Allen Forte and Stephen Gilbert, and Felix Salzer. Most of this contribution examines the question of levels through the analysis of works where “elements of the background are ‘foregrounded’” (299). Through this discussion Schachter highlights the fact that within the Schenkerian analytical tradition, “progressive

7 Smith's “counterfeit” is composed in such a way that the underlying structure is the same as the *Introduzione*.

8 While the issue involved does become more relevant in later repertoire (see below)—and Smith does deal with some such music towards the end of his essay—it must be thoroughly understood in that context as well.

9 For more on this subject, see Pellegrin 2013, 77–83. For a discussion of parenthetical passages (more strictly defined), see the section titled “Expansion by Parenthetical Insertion” in Rothstein 1989, 87–93.

reduction” is only one “analytic strategy.” He states, “‘Ihr Bild’ [Schubert] . . . calls into question the widespread belief (even among many Schenkerians) that Schenker’s approach is based on reduction” (302).¹⁰ Schachter speaks of each successively higher structural level as a “horizon that clarifies and gives meaning to the level beneath it” (302). Through these types of statements, he engages with the question of the relative balance of “top-down” and “bottom-up” analytical processes, another issue which arises frequently in the literature.¹¹

In contrast to Beach, Schachter’s writing here is again reasonable and moderate, exemplifying the “more relaxed rhetoric” of which Rothstein spoke (1986, 13). However, even Schachter uses the strongest word possible—“heresy”—to respond to critics who object to according more structural weight to some details than others. This occurs in the conclusion of his essay, where Schachter acknowledges, with characteristic diplomacy, that Schenkerian theory can easily lead one to unwittingly undervalue musical detail; at the same time, he makes clear that this issue is of critical importance:

My disagreements with Rosen’s statement are probably obvious to anyone who is reading this paper. . . . In any case, I am not quoting these words to argue but—in part—to agree. In doing analysis, in teaching it, in trying to learn it, even in reading Schenker’s graphs, it can become all too easy to fall into the heresy of valuing the work’s deep structure more highly than the work itself. (313–14)

Cook 1999 considers Schenker’s ([1925] 1994) article on editorial practice, “Abolish the Phrasing Slur.” Schenker’s essay, particularly its conclusion, draws explicit connections between editors’ elimination of detail through use of the phrasing slur and contemporary ideological analogs, railing against “the social and political ideology that understands unity only as uniformity” (30). So much is this the case that Cook reads the entire article as “a demonstration through music of how individual difference can be reconciled with social cohesion, of how society can discharge its ‘duty to the particular’ (Schenker [1925] 1994, 30), in this way giving the lie to oversimplified interpretations of Schenker’s anti-democratic and xenophobic political views” (1999, 101).

Lastly, it is instructive to revisit the perspective offered by Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1983). They distinguish between salience, which is defined as a function of metric placement, duration, parallelism, loudness, register, etc., and stability, which is more directly related to pitch space, tonal closure, and prolongation. (The rhythmic work of Rothstein (1981, 1989, 1990) and Schachter ([1976] 1999, [1980] 1999, [1987] 1999) is entirely consistent with Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1977, 1983).)¹² Section 2.1—

10 Even in cases where a mere path of progressive reduction is followed, such a process would only be the first step in analysis, as Salzer ([1952] 1982) makes clear on many occasions, for example: “Knowledge of structure alone is by no means enough. The mere statement that a melody features a descending fifth as structural outline is fragmentary knowledge” (45).

11 For a discussion of this issue within the context of the work of Schenker and Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1983), see Pellegrin 2013, 17–20. For discussion pertaining to Salzer and Lerdahl 2001, see Pellegrin 2013, 108–110. See also Salzer [1952] 1982, 206–08; Narmour 1977, 70 and 122; 2011, 13; Keiler 1978, 203ff.; 1983/84, 194; Agmon 1990, 297–98; Pople 1994, 113–14 and 121; Larson 1997, 116; Lerdahl 1997, 152–53; and Brown 1998, 121. This issue is also intrinsically involved with any discussion of reduction or the perception of the whole and the part.

12 See Pellegrin 2013, 3–15 for discussion. The work of these scholars also developed concurrently, and their ideas cross-

“The Need for Reductions”—provides a thorough justification for reduction, all the way to the level of the “background” (105–11), and contains the following statement:

We do not deprecate the aural or analytic importance of salient events; it is just that reductions are designed to capture other, grammatically more basic aspects of musical intuition. A salient event may or may not be reductionally important. It is within the context of the reductional hierarchy that salient events are integrated into one’s hearing of a piece.¹³ (109)

The use of the word “salient” here is relevant because many of Schenker’s critics specifically oppose the reduction of salient details. This objection is sometimes even formulated with the word “salient,” prompting Rothgeb (1997) to publish an essay entitled “Salient Features.”¹⁴ Opposing the reduction of salient details is different than taking issue with the reduction of details in general. Those who object specifically to the reduction of salient details tacitly agree that events vary in their degree of structural importance; the disagreement is simply that they wish to use the criterion of salience rather than that of stability to make these distinctions.

Consider another passage from the same section of Lerdahl and Jackendoff 1983, which is accompanied by a score excerpt with two circled portions labeled *m* and *n*:

Suppose that we were listening to a recording of the scherzo of Beethoven’s Sonata op. 10, no. 2 (5.3), and that a speck of dust obliterated the sound of event *m*. The effect would be one of mild interruption. But if the cadence *n* were obliterated, the effect would be far more disconcerting, because *n* is structurally more important than *m*. In other words, it would change the sense of a phrase more if its goal—a cadence—were omitted than if an event en route toward that goal were omitted. (107)

I would first emphasize their choice of words, “structurally more important,” which is consistent with the Schenkerian language of “structure.” There are different types of importance; for example, structural and aesthetic. The trunk of a tree is structurally more important than a twig, an apt metaphor considering Lerdahl and Jackendoff’s prolongational trees (as well as Schenker’s organicism), which are part of their formalization of Schenkerian analysis.¹⁵ Their argument in this passage could be rephrased by stating that event *n* represents a larger branch than event *m*.¹⁶ By contrast, Schenker’s comments on Chopin’s étude, op. 10, no. 3, cited above, highlight the aesthetic significance of the lower levels.

fertilized.

13 I mentioned above that the issue of reduction becomes more relevant in post-Schenkerian repertoire. It should be noted here that Lerdahl 2001, which considers both tonal and post-tonal music, also continues reductions all the way to the “background.”

14 For example, see Kerman 1985, 82; and Rosen 1971, 38. Rothgeb’s (1997) view of the relationship between stability and salience is entirely consonant with that of Lerdahl and Jackendoff. However, he redefines—at least rhetorically—the notion of salience, ultimately arguing that the structural features of a piece are the truly salient ones.

15 See Pellegrin 2013, 20–27.

16 To make the example more obvious one could compare the opening tonic chord in one of their analyses, which would be represented with a large branch, with a surface-level embellishment, which would be represented as a twig.

Equally significant is the fact that this passage from Lerdahl and Jackendoff's work exemplifies a belief in the "inequality of tones," to use Ewell's words (15:41). However, this inequality presents no problem for the same reason cited above—tones are only unequal in their *structural* importance. There is nothing inherently racist about Lerdahl and Jackendoff's example, any more than it is racist to observe that a tree severed at the trunk will die, whereas the removal of a twig will scarcely affect it. As Schachter has written, "one does not need to be a monarchist or pan-German nationalist to perceive musical hierarchies" (2001, 12).¹⁷ Hierarchy is natural, often a matter of life and death, and is in and all around us—from the fractal, branching structures of our circulatory and nervous systems to those of rivers and snowflakes; from networks of paths and roadways to electrical, plumbing, and delivery systems; and from rhythm and meter in tonal music to harmony and voice leading.¹⁸ It is only in social and political systems that hierarchy becomes oppressive, due to the human capacity for abuse of power. Not everything is or should be organized hierarchically; there are other important systems—such as heterarchy and anarchy—which possess their own sets of advantages.¹⁹ However, in social and political contexts, these systems are unfortunately vulnerable to precisely the same shortcoming—the strong may still choose to oppress the weak.

17 It should also be remembered that Schenker was not the first to approach music "reductively." Schenker's concept of diminution was influenced by the Italian embellishment manuals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which sometimes presented information in the reverse order, "de-embellishing" existing music. (See Schenker [1935] 1979, §251; Forte and Gilbert 1982, 7–10; and Bent 1987, 9 and 38–41.) Furthermore, Morgan (1978) contends that the "roots" of Schenker's approach "extend far back into Western music history and encompass a wide range of theorists and theoretical ideas" (73). Morgan demonstrates the ways in which *musica poetica* (the theory of musical figures, or the rhetoric of music) and functional harmonic theory—as well as diminution technique—prefigure Schenker's concept of levels, arguing "that his theory represents a remarkable synthesis of some of the main currents of Western musical thought" (73).

18 For an examination of the relationship between fractal geometry and Schenker's organicism, see Pellegrin 2006.

19 See Martin and Waters 2017 for a comparison of hierarchical and heterarchical approaches to reductive analysis of two Wayne Shorter compositions. Martin allows for ambiguity at the highest levels, leading him to argue that his approach is heterarchical, since it blends "organizational systems at different levels" (see his example 6). But other Schenkerians, including Salzer and Schachter, also allow for such ambiguity—see section entitled "Salience and Subjectivity" in Pellegrin 2013 (32–43).

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