suggestion to realize. Those who are able to do this, taking, if relevant, the best from the past and present, will be instrumental in forming the future of our field. Good luck to them!

Allen Forte

Three Challenges for Music Theory in Our Time

Among the challenges that face the discipline of music theory at the present time and into the foreseeable future, three interest and concern me the most.

1. Finding common ground despite our even widening differences is the first challenge. Far beyond the concerns of music theory *per se*, diversity is a basic component of our democratic way of life. And with diversity comes the corollary challenge to unify conflicting values so that they are able to cohere into some larger common good.

It is safe to say that the study of music theory has never encompassed as much diversity as it does today, and continued diversification seems sure for the foreseeable future. Along with diversity comes the challenge of coherence, the need for a sense of *community*. At stake is our ability to have meaning for one another as scholars, as well as our ability to develop strong, rich and coherent music curriculums for our students.

2. While some branches of music theory are fairly abstract, most music theory is connected to one musical literature or another, one performance practice or another. A second challenge is to achieve a greater impact and relevance from scholar-practitioners of music theory for performing musicians, as well as their audiences. Relevance and impact in the realm of practical music-making is not the only kind of relevance and impact we can have as a discipline, but it is surely at the core of our reason for being.

3. The third challenge is to create a heightened sense of dialogue with other disciplines. While most music theorists are substantially influenced by readings in "extra-musical" studies—areas of mathematics, philosophy, literature, literary criticism, cultural studies, and so forth—those same disciplines seem, for the most part, to not be interested in (or cognizant of) the work that we do in music theory. Only through real dialogue among the disciplines can musical thought emerge as a significant constituent of our larger society.

I. Community as common grounding

> You cannot jump from the ground without using the resistance of the ground.
>
> Ralph Waldo Emerson

By this point in time, at least in the context of Western democracies, the quest for a singular certain truth, a sure guide for our course and behavior through life, reflected in all aspects of our human relationships, in the things we make, the stories we tell and music we hear, has become either quaint or foreboding. The quest is quaint if it summons up nostalgias for the lost certainties of the past. It is foreboding if it summons up the singular, certain truths of intolerant fundamentalism, visions whose horrible consequences in the political realm have recently come to fruition. The alternative, in a multicultural society is mutual tolerance, and mutual understanding.

The health of any creative practice (to include science, the arts and humanities) depends on the ability of individuals to interact within a larger community. The traditional idea of community, implies both *common ground* and *common grounding.* When a community is multicultural, like Córdoba in 10th-century Spain, or New York City in 21st-century America, or the world community today, a high degree of mutual tolerance is necessary if the community is to survive. Diversity itself may be essential to a given community, but diversity in and of itself is not the basis of commonality. To be sure, the lack of commonality can be celebrated; indeed, it can be argued that liberation from totalizing

hegemonies is a major achievement of our post-modern age. I would argue nonetheless, borrowing an image from Walt Whitman's vision of America, that we will succeed best if our contradictions form parts of a larger common good. Healthy argument is necessary and positive among our constituents, but the parts need somehow to engage the whole.

On the one hand, the opening of new creative space through the study of diverse musical practices and the development of theoretical and analytical approaches appropriate to those practices is crucial to the health of our field; on the other hand, we need to find enough common ground so that we can forge such disparate work into a meaningfully coherent community of practice and scholarship. In practical terms this means that scholarship has to find ways of bridging the gaps that separate its various camps from one another. In particular, strong graduate programs in music theory, the training grounds for future teachers and scholars, need to inspire a healthy curiosity that ranges broadly among our constituents, while at the same time avoiding the degeneration of the field into pockets of dilettantism: a tall order.

Among the most difficult challenges that music theorists face in their roles as teachers is in developing a curriculum. I, for one, hope that the idea of a musical canon can be salvaged, this despite much negative baggage that has gone along with canonization in the past. The canon that I have in mind is not fixed—those excluded need not remain excluded, and those included may indeed become marginal in time—and it is certainly not finished. It reaches back over a thousand years, and is alive and well in the works of our contemporaries. Its roots are largely European, but its current practices and influences are global. It is a glorious tradition, one of the grand achievements of human civilization.

II. The usefulness of music for music theory and of music theory for music

While abstract, speculative music theory will always have its place, the music theory that matters most to me is that which engages specific musical practices (compositional or

improvisational), and addresses specific musical works. There will be, most likely, great disagreement on the continued viability of the Western canon, and no doubt, even greater disagreement on the constituents of a canon, however loosely defined, that might survive the 21st century. Yet, whatever tradition(s) we hope to engage as scholars, the field of music theory cannot remain significant without having a meaningful impact on musical performance and reception.

Music theory tends to be a detail-oriented study, and that is fine so far as it goes. For example, our teaching of harmony, especially at the undergraduate level, tends to be situated at the phrase level (if it is that encompassing). When we teach whole works, it is often through isolated movements (which are not whole works after all), and even then we choose movements that are short enough, and simple enough, to be managed in day-to-day assignments. The idea behind all of this is that the student will gradually build up enough technique to be able to deal with an entire work. The reality is that, apart from doctoral-level theorists, music students rarely get to that point. In contrast, as performers, and listeners, we do deal with whole works, and we interrelate those works, with greater or lesser degrees of understanding, to larger traditions. And so, there is a disconnect between theory and practice.

To be sure, there are good pedagogical reasons for our atomistic approaches, but there are also compelling reasons to deal with entire musical works, seen in the context of the larger traditions that they are part of. Our studies and teaching will remain largely impractical for performers and audiences so long as we avoid the very thing that brought us to musical scholarship in first place: thoughtful engagement with musical works that we understood in an emerging context of interrelated references.

Over the past 50 years or so, music theory has developed a close relationship with many of the most challenging musical literatures of recent years. I hope that music theory will maintain this role. There are scholars who feel that the Western canon is already complete; I do not consider this kind of thinking healthy for music, and I do not think it is healthy for our society. I would

hope that a strong voice to the contrary will endure, arguing for the relevance of contemporary music, and not only in terms of its own intrinsic achievements, but also in the ways that new music changes our understandings of what has come before.

It would be nice if thoughtful hearings of music could play a larger role in children's educations, from kindergarten to high school; and, in this, music theory has a role to play from early on. The way to prepare thoughtful audiences for the future is by stimulating the innate ability of children to perceive music's imaginative content. "Thoughtful listening" is a phrase currently without meaning for too many. Thoughtful discourse about music needs to play a central role in liberal arts curriculums. Music theorists need to find more creative ways to engage that population.

Within college education for music majors, I believe that whole works, including substantial works, should be part of the curriculum beginning with the freshman year and continuing throughout the student's education. If we do not have meaningful ways of engaging substantial works, apart from the highly technical discussions found in dissertation-level studies, then perhaps we had better develop those ways.

In addition to our role in training musicians, music theorists need to find ways to reach musical audiences. Our highly technical vocabulary and methodologies have their reasons for being, and their continued development is important for the health of the field. But we also need to find ways to speak to "the educated layman," because if we don't, there won't be any "educated laypersons" left to speak to.

To be sure, all of this is an uphill battle. Music has not had a serious place even in our liberal educations for a long time. Moreover, teachers and scholars fight against a mind-numbing *entertainment industry*, an industry that has vast resources, and an incredible and largely negative impact on the music heard in our society. Yet, if we believe that music-making is an important part of our humanity, and if we believe that those of us who have dedicated our lives to the study of music might have something significant to share with non-musicians, then such issues deserve to be among our central concerns.

III. Music in dialogue with other disciplines

Let me begin by inserting a narrative that makes a far-fetched but palpable connection between the late 16th-century speculations of Giordano Bruno and the implications of content in the music of Arnold Schoenberg. The narrative is meant to stimulate conversation. The conversation is meant to include musical thought in a wider context of meaning.

Giordano Bruno's claims of an infinite and mutable universe caused something of a stir in the intellectual life of Europe; Bruno was excommunicated and burned at the stake on February 17, 1600.[1] *Within a relatively short time, Galileo Galilei, aided by the use of a telescope, added fuel to the fire that's burned since. The universe, apparently, was not unchanging; it lacked perfection. But Western civilization remained addicted to stories with perfect endings; if the universe is process, it was reasoned, then it surely must be process toward some perfection, a* telos, *an Aristotelian final cause, the goal of all being. This was our master-narrative; it was reflected in our religions, our science, our histories, and in our art. The idea of ultimate perfection was represented in our music, perhaps more successfully and emphatically than in any other realm of human imagination: we closed our musical works by cadencing into perfection.*

In the late 19th and early 20th century, however, teleological understandings of the universe underwent devastating critiques on multiple fronts. Darwinian biology, Einsteinian and then quantum physics, American pragmatic philosophy, the Emersonian tradition in American letters and fiction, and parallel developments in European philosophy and literature all argue against a world that closes in perfection. The first composer to imagine musical time and space which is not concluded in perfection was, of course, Arnold Schoenberg. Could Schoenberg himself understand the implications of his own musical intuitions? Of course not.

---

[1] Bruno's thought is discussed and placed into a larger context of ideas by Alexander Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957). See especially Chapter 2, pp. 28-57.

Musical thought is part of human thought, and so musical thought interacts with other aspects of human imagination, human values, and the like. The variety and significance of those interactions between musical thought and other areas of thought have profound implications for the materials of music-making. Of course, the streams of influence run both ways. The study of such correlations is clearly within the purview of music theory. To be sure, music theory has adapted methods from a wide range of disciplines: mathematics, philosophy (and the history of ideas), cultural history, cultural studies, semiotics, rhetoric, narratology, literary theory, feminist studies, cognitive psychology, acoustics and more. Still, there is little sign that genuine dialogue among the disciplines has taken place. I believe this is in part because music theorists have tended to adapt modeling or metaphors from various disciplines without genuinely engaging those disciplines. Genuine engagement requires a response. If an idea adapted from literary theory is useful for the study of music, then should it not follow that the study of music is useful for the literary critic?

Work done in the field of music theory can have and should have implications for the larger society. Music theory needs to find ways to engage its sibling disciplines so that musical thought, and thought about music, might take their place in the larger conversation. Music theory is an ancient discipline, and our attitude toward other disciplines need not be like the poor cousin borrowing a cup of flour from the rich one. The discipline of music theory is part of a larger enterprise, and we hope to be part of it.

Michael Cherlin