## Music Theory and the Mainstream*

With all the indisputable growth and fermentation of music-theoretical research over the past few years, there has been some worry that music theory has been losing cohesiveness as a discipline. Put more strongly, one may ask: with all the diverse scholarship to be observed in the field of music theory as witnessed at the annual meetings of the Society for Music Theory or recorded in the pages of *Music Theory Spectrum;* with all our various special interest groups in pedagogy, popular music, gender or gay studies, Schenkerian analysis, or music cognition; with all the cross-fertilization we observe from neighboring (and not so neighboring) disciplines such as historical musicology, ethnomusicology, literary theory, psychology, anthropology, and sociology; with all its many cross currents and undertows, is music theory still a truly unified and organic discipline?

While I am certain that no discipline is without its own anxieties of identity, I do get a sense that such anxiety has been especially acute in music theory over the past few years. With our familiar paradigms of "sets and Schenker" no longer prevailing, the nature of music theory may not be as clear as it might have been twenty years ago when I entered graduate school (although I think the purported uniformity of theoretical research at that time is today still much exaggerated). In fact, I have observed overt alarm and consternation among some members concerning this apparent fragmentation, with a few calling for greater vigilance by program committees, editorial boards, and electronic list monitors. While no one I am aware of is asking for the establishment of some regulatory commission for the "Detection and Elimination of Un-Theoretical Activities," I do sense that there is a widespread recognition that our discipline seems to be pulled in a variety of new directions at once—developments welcomed by many, but greeted with apprehension by others.

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* The following essay is adapted from the Presidential letter I penned for the Society of Music Theory Newsletter, Vol. XX/2 (August 2001).

It may be, of course, that music theory is now in a classic stage of paradigm shift (Thomas Kuhn might have called this the "pre-paradigm period," with conflicting and contentious analytic models and methods), and we await the emergence of a new general paradigm of theoretical research that will dominate our profession. Then again, we might better consider ourselves to be in the state of "fluctuating stasis" that Leonard Meyer with such prescience long ago characterized the post-modern condition of contemporary music: for the foreseeable future, we are in a period of pluralism in which multiple and incommensurable models of theory and analysis will continue to coexist side by side.

As a historian of music theory myself, I am somewhat bemused by much of this hand wringing concerning the identity and future of our discipline. Music theory has always been pulled in differing directions during its 2,500 years of recorded history, and much of the energy of theorists over this time has been spent mapping out new geographies of subject matter, of absorbing new ideas and methods of research. Rarely have there been prolonged periods when the domain and scope of music theory has not been questioned. Diversity and tension seem to be the hallmark—not the exception—of music theoretical discourse.

The dynamic quality of music theory is evident, I think, in what was arguably the very first major ontological crisis in the identity of music theory. Up until about the 11$^{th}$ century, music theory (or as it was more properly called, "harmonics") consisted largely of the numerical study and measurement of musical intervals and tuning systems inherited from the Greeks and transmitted via Boethius. Carried on in cathedral schools and subsequently the newly-founded Universities of Paris, Bologna, and Oxford, musical harmonics was a purely philosophical (or more accurately, mathematical) study with no relation or relevance to musical practice. Yet beginning with Carolingian reforms, there arose a new practical charge to these same scholars (who of course were also clerics active in the church) to reform chant practice and pedagogy. Among other tasks, there was a desperate need to bring order to widely varying chant practices, to find a means for codifying, teaching, and transmitting the repertoire of chant genres.

This pronounced tension between *theoria* and *practica* (or as it was more widely juxtaposed at the time, between the *musicus* who "knows" and the *cantor* who "does") became a recurrent theme in the writings of the first generation of Carolingian authors (Hucbald and Guido, especially), as well as the subsequent generations of musical encyclopedists from the 13th and 14th centuries: Jehan des Murs, Jacques of Liège, Walter of Oddington, Marchetto of Padua, and Jerome of Moravia. Put simply, "music theory" was forced to accommodate (although not yet absorb) problems of *musica practica*. Topics hitherto not considered a part of *musica speculativa*, such as modal classification, *contrapunctus*, and mensuration became increasingly accepted as topics of consideration.

It is possible to read the history of music theory until this very day as a similar dynamic process of accommodation to new ideas, to new charges. Whether it was the rise of humanism in the 15th century (Glarean and Zarlino), mechanical acoustics in the 17th century (Descartes and Rameau), or the fields of physiology and psychology in the 19th century (Helmholtz and Riemann), music theory has always been responding to new intellectual currents. And there is absolutely no reason to doubt that the same will not be true in the future. (While it is precarious to make such predictions, I would dare hazard a guess that recent research in musical cognition may well signal one of the next major research movements of music theory.)

Yet for all the flux and variety to be observed historically in music theory, it is also striking how much cohesion there is. This is not to say that there is uniformity. Rather, it is simply to observe that over time, theorists—scholars and musicians contemplating the nature of musical materials and their uses—seem to coalesce around clusters of common questions. It is this animation through communal problems that seems to define and give cohesion to the music-theoretical enterprise, even if the answers proposed do not always harmonize. (In this sense, music theory might more closely resemble the pluralistic "research traditions" by which the historian of science Larry Laudan characterizes the growth of scientific knowledge—growth that is neither strictly uniform nor cumulative.) And if at any moment music theory is felt to be in a

state of fragmentation or even disintegration, it seems to have an uncanny capacity for self-regulation and renewal over time. Thus, as we see in the future new intellectual tributaries feeding music theory, as we discover new configurations and trajectories of research, I think we will still detect a regularizing "main stream" of theoretical activity (to borrow Tovey's apt metaphor). This main stream of music theory will never remain static, of course (streams rarely do); nor will it be defined by strict allegiance to particular doctrines or methods. Instead, it will be a dynamic flow of ideas, one constituted by a community of citizens in conversation—with one another, and with thinkers of the past. Herein, I think, lies the cohesion and identity binding the music-theoretical enterprise and endowing it with such vitality.

Music theory has thrived as an intellectual activity almost from the moment humans began making music, and I have no doubt that it will continue to thrive—provided at least that there are those committed to contemplating and understanding an art form that engages both mind and heart, that there are those who will joyfully struggle together to answer that unanswerable question posed so long ago by the Scholastics: *Quid sit Musica?*

Thomas Christensen

## Revisiting the Future

"I have utterly failed at divination", Claude Palisca wrote in 1982, referring to his earlier prediction that a principal focus for musicology in the 1970s would be ethnomusicological approaches to the study of Western music.[1] Like Palisca, I have found it an uncomfortable experience to reread my previous attempt at

[1] From the Introduction to D. Kern Holoman and Claude V. Palisca (eds.), *Musicology in the 1980s* (New York: Da Capo, 1982).