

## Music Theory: Today and Tomorrow

Regarding the future direction of American music theory and concomitant matters, here are some observations as of September 14, 2001, tempered by the hideous event of September 11, which I hope will not damage our intellectual pursuits during the coming years.

It seems obvious to me that in order to know the future we should try to understand the recent past as well as the immediate present in the intellectual domain within which we operate as scholars. Especially in the later twentieth century, after its official detachment from musicology in 1977, marked by the formation of the Society for Music Theory, American music theory—by which I mean to include North American as well, not wishing to exclude our brothers and sisters in the Northland—has become a substantial field in itself, one that continues to show signs of vitality and strength that bode well for the future. Underlying my remarks in the present context is the conviction that what distinguishes music theory from other scholarly endeavors is its concern with deeper and often more general aspects of the art, specifically, those that involve “structure,” with all that that overused word may imply—and it may imply a great deal today (some might say too much!) when one takes into consideration the number of other fields that impinge upon it to some degree.

We may well ask what it is that drives scholarly work in music theory and makes it interesting, perhaps even compelling, to the intellectually curious and musically competent. The answer of course is not exclusive to our field: it is the questions that invite and even demand answers. Indeed, as in every line of scholarly endeavor, the questions may be more important than the answers. In my own work, I have always found it fruitful, when confronted with a music-related issue, a received truth, or even a theory, to say to myself “there must be more to it.”

It is precisely here that the recent expansion of interest in the history of music theory has played a potentially important role, since much of that history concerns efforts to illuminate questions, and is replete with ridiculous answers, which, I must say, are

nevertheless taken very seriously by some scholars, those who regard the answers as fundamental truths rather than as stepping stones to further questions. But whether research in history of music theory is music theory in the contemporary sense, is itself a question worthy of deeper consideration. Despite the recent ascendance of such work, its implicit presentation as music theory, and the attendant and perhaps sentimental reversion to exegeses of the intellectual achievements of our distant ancestors, now well established in many publications (some of which win important prizes), we might well ask what this means for questions that could be asked even in the near future, if, indeed, they have not already been posed and answered. For example: is Schenkerian theory now merely intellectual history? Or, why must “neo” be attached to Riemannian?

With respect to music theory—and in this context I refrain from a discussion of what that term means in an academic environment, since I wrote about it many years ago—what concerns me more than questions of pedagogy, non-traditional repertoires as subjects of study, or technology (having been involved in all of these for more years than I care to remember) is the quality and direction of music-theoretic enterprises yet to be initiated by younger scholars whose efforts will determine the future of our field. Here of course, tempted as I am to deliver an immortal prognostic, I find myself on very shaky ground, since I have no desire to provide a pompous and risible quotation to future music critics on the staff of *The New York Times*. They will have other and far more important responsibilities, as they continue to inform the public, with impeccable pedantry, as to what are to be regarded as acceptable musical values.

I will, however, venture a recommendation: that burgeoning music-theorists, while remaining close to music, either composed or yet to be composed, and informed about the history of the field, would do well to proceed without arbitrary restrictions, or even prescriptives, concerning “old” approaches or “new” ones, but, instead, ought to develop their own sensitivities to questions they perceive to be important, whether or not they satisfy the requirements of the academic marketplace—surely a tough

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.