Introduction to some of the basic symbols and related issues in Schenkerian Analysis

Informal notes by Glen Halls ©2010

- Not all of the symbols and issues are discussed, but hopefully enough to get started and to analyze, at least consistent with the principles, a simple and relatively short piece of tonal music.

1. Basically, Schenkerian analysis concerns the reduction of a work, particularly tonal works from the classical and romantic periods, into three hierarchical layers, the Foreground, Middleground, and background. (there may be 1-3 levels of middleground, depending upon the length and complexity of a piece- it is not fixed. It's too bad really. one could argue for the use of, for example, different colors of pens to distinguish even finer layers of the middleground structure, as many of you have done on your analysis.)

a) It is a concept of dissonance resolution and species counterpoint applied to different 'structural levels' of the music.

b) Schenkerian analysis is 'about' the real time listening/understanding of a piece, but attempts to come to some terms with the complexity of real-time music (insert word here-) perception/listening/understanding.

c) It is a balance of two concepts really. 1) prolongation.. or 'being basically in effect and more important than most of the events around' and 2) ..embellishment or 'moving to-from- or about' some other musical event - a 'more memorable and important one, which is being prolonged. (though you might not realize it at the time) Roughly expressed, a neighbor tone may be heard to embellish a more important melodic note, yet that more important melodic note, in the context of an entire phrase might itself be interpreted as a neighbor tone to a yet more important melodic tone. (the literature would tend to use the term 'structural', and not important)

2. In the most general sense the foreground distinguishes between main melodic tones and dissonant or embellishing/ornamental tones. (note- we can see already that the theory can not really be termed linear, as we are confronted with the idea of a tonal hierarchy. in which the 'main tones' are basically chord tones (lower partials), consonant with some other simultaneous or near simultaneous chord tone below. i.e., a vertical concept. It assumes that the listener is hearing the tonic triad (vertically) virtually all the time, and I think there is a lot of truth in this.

The middleground, in the uppervoice/ melody, is in the most general sense a summary of the main melodic prolongations of a piece.

The middleground. In the Bass, in the most general sense describes the harmonic progressions of a phrase, (harmonic arrivals, which taken as a totality, resemble a progression, perhaps widely separated in time.

The background, in the most general sense is a summary of a piece's cadences, but particularly cadences to Tonic.

3. Primary tone= kopftone. Descending fundamental line = urline

Bassline, or bassbrechung, or bass arpeggiation. I V I or I III V I, or other.

The Ursatz is the fundamental structure, or fundamental line with bass arpeggiation.
4. So what makes a) upper voice melody and/or b) lowest note bass/harmony .. important.? This is an issue. I don't wish to derail this introduction, but let us pursue this issue just a bit..before defining terms.

- an upper voice 'middleground event' is an embellished, or prolonged, or somehow 'residual' melody note.. perhaps a kind of 'pedal' in the soprano.

- the lowest voice bass/harmonic 'middleground event'. would typically be some kind of emphatic arrival, or perhaps but not necessarily as a more literal criterion, a 'cadence', especially a tonicization.

So it would seem that we have two different 'perceptual modality criteria' for determining a middleground status? Yes and No. If an upper voice 'middleground' event... is "SUPPORTED'... which means , it is sounding more or less simultaneously WITH.. and CONSONANT -TO ( species counterpoint rules ) a lower voice middleground event.... then the two factors are mutually supportive. These types of mutually supportive middleground events will be considered of higher/deeper structural value than middleground events which are not mutually supportive.

5. First steps.

- be able to reduce, conceptually, the melodic parts down to a 'chord', consistent with the prevailing pulse/harmonic rhythm, and , be prepared to reduce a melody and accompaniment to an accurate, but more primitive species counterpoint model.

- be able to decide, in terms of the harmonic flow, when you are firmly 'in a key', moving to a key, or even in transition between keys ( key need not be taken too literally... ) and identify the most important cadences or arrivals. This of course is highly subjective and can only be done if you listen to the music.- but it of course assumes you have some facility with modulation and tonicization, and can recognize when this has occurred.

- understand all of the various 'embellishing melodic motion' types.. Neighbor,(complete-incomplete, suffix, prefix ) passing, appoggiatura, suspension, consonant skip, arpeggiation.etc.

5. Tools/symbols to represent motion/prolongation/and hierarchy.

a)White notes are for the background only.

Note: The Open note, is overused and is only for the fundamental structure of an entire piece or movement.

( Does the white note have to have a stem? .. Yes.. An unstemmed white note would indicate that it is embellishing some yet higher structural level)

Does the while note have to be attached to the beam...In almost all cases yest, but not always- but a white note, used, not attached to a beam.. would indicate that the piece has no prevailing tonic drone... ie.. the basic unity argued for in the model, has broken down.

b) The Beam.

The beam, is in a way, like a tie. . It says' we are all the same thing' and 'we are all togther' Schenker argues
that there is really only one structural model in tonal music, and the beam represents this argued fundamental structure. The piece, must be built around this, he would say.

The Beam, connects notes connecting to the fundamental structure, but you can also use beamed notes to highlight significant stepwise melodic motions( but in most cases only the beginning and end notes of the lines are actually beamed, the rest are slurred.

Beams are for the fundamental line and other significant lines. ( ZUGs and LIPS with harmonic support) ( like a smaller scale motivic reference to the fundamental structure archetype.)

The Hanging Beam - the fundamental line is initiated but not continued. ( i’m not sure what this is.. )

c) Stem: Any note which is significant should have a stem of some kind.

Prolonged notes are stemmed.

c) Can stemmed black notes be used, which are not tied or slurred to the white notes/fundamental structure. Yes. this is often the case for Inversions in the bass of the tonic harmony.

d) The flag.

The eight note flag is used to indicate a significant neighbor tone.- the prolonged neighbor note. ( but may be used to highlight any melody and bass notes of significant intermediate value.. some significant arrival, or even some emphatic new gesture.. remember that it is a perceptual model, not a rule model per se.

e) Slur The slur, connects outer most notes of an arpeggiation.

Prolongational motions are slurred, and slurs within slurs denote subsidiary motions within larger ones.

Arpeggiation normally prolongs its most structural note.

Prolongation- a given harmony is said to be 'in control' of a given passage.

Melodic prolongation- The 'effect' of a given note remains.

incomplete lower neighbor suffix.. often an anticipation of the next chord. ( prefix suffix)

(the Doubly curved slur- basically used for a secondary dominant, moving to the structural dominant. And it is superimposed on whatever other slurs might be applied. )

f) Tie. The tie, is an implied pedal and indicates prolongations. ( so does the beam ) The tie, is really a middleground feature, often suggesting that a given tone or root continues to be in effect even though it might not actually be present.
ties are surprisingly uncommon.

Note, when using a tie the notes which are tied must be of equal significance, or the same 'function'. ( Confusing term- function here suggests a relative weight in terms of perceived and/or remembered significance ( with perception being more appropriate than remembering, in my opinion )

- judgment call/correction on the above... sometimes a 'white note is tied to black note, .. indicating that the 'first attack' is more memorable and more significant than its repetition.

- you can use a dotted line time if the prolongation seems a bit more tenuous.

ff) - Middleground ties? more discussion. If you really believe in the Ursatz, then the basic prolongation ( drone ) of the piece is already spoken for via the beam. A middle ground tie.. not connected to the beam.. could refer to prolonged/tied "neighbor motion" , or prolonged/tied tonic members which are somehow detached from the piece as a whole. This is possible. .. remember also that it is the combination of upper and lower voices which really makes things 'most structural, according the model.

g) Dotted Lines. Dotted lines may be used for ties or slurs, but suggest a more tenuous connection. ( Perhaps not to mean a less significant connection, just a more subliminal one - one that you probably would not hear, unless someone pointed them out to you )

Register transfer may be also be indicated with an arrow, or a dotted line.

h) Voice exchange arrows. use intersecting arrows. ( common in inner voices)

h) Implied notes ( in parenthesis)

- a suspension dissonance left unresolved, but the resolving harmony is present ( ear fills in the resolution)

- a pattern is set up, but one step in the pattern is omitted.

- a note is stated in a different register than expected

- a note is stated just after it was expected.

7Aside: Is it possible to have significant harmonic event.. But not given a stem.- just an unstemmed black not hanging there? .. yes. There may be instances like this where nothing particularly significant is going on. But a) as a 'terminal point' of a slur, that alone is indicating greater structural importance than those under the slur. b) Often, we will see a significant note in the upper part but a less significant note in the lower.. this is also possible.... so that the presence, for example, of a stemmed note above will make the unstemmed note below, more significant, for example, than for similar contexts where neither is stemmed. It is another on of those grey area, in between middleground ideas.
8 Note also, that a note gains significance by what it is attached to. An unstemmed bass note, attached by slur to a fundamental structure white note, is much more significant than one unattached.

9 Can black notes be stemmed, and attached to the main beam? Well, they shouldn't be. But if you got into a longer work, where the sense of one prevailing tonic drone was more tenuous. say fading, then yes. Remember, beam, is a curious kind of tie. It means these things are all the same and belong together.

10 Can a white note be unattached to a beam? Well, white notes should be attached to a beam. But the most basic idea of the white note, is, the deepest structural layer. A white note attached to a beam really means, the deepest structural layer, is all the same and belongs together. A white note, not attached to a beam, is really suggesting that at the deepest structural level, this piece is not unified... it is not the resonance of the same basic sound/idea. and certainly that is a valid notion as pieces get longer, and more concerned with the moment per se.

other terms.

Double line, train tracks. Interruption. In a rounded Binary ABA form.

Diagonal lines, ( solid ) suggest an alignment of higher level events ( which may or may not be simultaneous)

Arabic numerals: are used for figured bass inner voice motion. LIPs., And if they have a caret.. The fundamental structure. ( you might choose to use figured bass if you decide not to show the inner voices ( it can get very busy)

Parenthesis around carets- if you see a self similar local event ( local event replicates the background)

Primary tones. P. of the structural descent.

Diagonal line connects structural counterpoint. ( Even if they are not simultaneous )

Other more advanced concepts/terms- perhaps to be dealt with later, or in your next course.

The cover tone. a prominent soprano note which is not part of the essential voice leading. Usually given a stem and a flag.

Ubergreifen. reaching over, or overlapping. An upward leap followed by a stepwise descent. An inner voice reaches over the top, it might be a significant middleground line, but not the main line.

LIP. Linear intervallic pattern: a sequence. ought to be recognized somehow. even using LIP, Perhaps a beam, perhaps slurs, perhaps numbers. It becomes important if we suspect a replication of a pattern on different levels.

Zug. Basically either an emphatic line, or emphatic bass progression, mutually supported somehow, which either replicates the fundamental structure, or otherwise cohere as a significant progression and arrival, independent of the total overall structure. ( kind of a way to deal with embedded phrases in longer pieces. )
inner voices?

11 Given that the basic model is species counterpoint applied to higher structural levels, .. additional clarification of harmony, or perhaps inner voice motion, is preferably undertaken with figured-bass notation. ( which, it seems to me, works best for chords in root position ). But this is not a strict idea.. many hybrid representations are allowed. Some figured bass, some roman numbers, some key changes ( rarely ) and some 'applied harmony over pedal' .. But, the term 'modulation' is suppressed.. And even the idea of tonicization.. is suppressed. The idea is that the single triadic tonic harmony, is the only key, the only impression, and these other departures are long range melodic embellishments. But there is absolutely nothing wrong with adding some roman numeral/figured bass notation to describe harmony, which you feel the reduction has perhaps made 'too light' of, of made unclear.

12 Inner voices, duplicate voices: It depends upon your intent. Essentially, the model is to reduce the entire piece , at some level, to two voice counterpoint.. So at some level, the inner voices disappear. But in your first foreground reduction.. you might wish to retain inner voices where significant independence is demonstrated,.. and where a significant altered note enables a tonicization, or where this inner voice is 'needed' as 'consonant support' for an outer voice. Also, one often finds significant 'motive-play' , a certain interval perhaps, in an inner voice which replicates melodic motion in an outer voice at a higher structural level. This is of course of interest. One need not attach all inner voice lines via slur to higher level events, however. ( inner voices are often just 'in-there'- the outer voice species counterpoint is more important. ( But in more complex works, inner voices often' run' or overlap or cover the outer voice.. say in pieces where the alto suddenly 'takes the lead'... then we have to note this, and note that it is an inner voice.

13 In a simple, homogeneous melody and accompaniment model.. we may give only occasional mention to the inner voice- enough to suggest the voicing. Also, where continuous arpeggiation in the bass occurs, it is not necessary to duplicate the entire chord over and over.. just project the basic idea of the arpeggiation- simplify it.

These last two paragraphs are just ideas though, not to be taken as rules. I don't wish to suggest that inner voices and arpeggios are not significant sounds, but the basic idea of a Schenkerian reduction, however, is to reduce. to strip away to the most fundamental structure.

14 What is a fundamental structure? that's another discussion. A core logic, a natural phenomena, memory... question... is this 'fundamental structure more "real".. or more "valued" .. than the real time experience.? .. and what is the nature of the real time experience? Thinking out loud, the Schenkerian background points to an interpretation of music, where there is no dissonance, just a sustained consonant resonance. Is this an ideal, or is it reality? I personally feel it to be an ideal- for why not simply defer to a drone, why bother with dissonance? The answer must be, that some dissonance is desired, making the experience more pleasurable. by intent. .. But to conclude, there is no doubt of the value of Schenkerian analysis in drawing attention to the complexities of music perception and composition, and especially the different levels of time-engagement suggested, for that really is what the levels refer to.  - Glen Halls.