Informal Introduction to Schenkerian Analysis techniques

a student primer

by

Glen C. Halls ©2010

The basic concept is the reduction; basically, the elimination of ornamental pitches to suggest a higher structural level of music comprehension. (higher level, also means 'deeper level.) His is an emphatically linear concept( not entirely ), basically coming out of species counterpoint- suggesting the linear resolution of dissonance. As layer upon layer of ornamentation are stripped away, all simultaneous intervals at the highest structural level, must be consonant. The Key to Schenkerian analysis- linear ornamental figuration may be applied to all hierarchical levels.

Another way to think of Schenkerian Analysis, perhaps it's most significant contribution- is as a means of suggesting and distinguishing the modes of memory and of music perception which human beings engage in while listening to tonal music (all music, but mostly tonal music) The foreground relates to 'real-time' music perception, and possibly the shortest term memory, perhaps 1/2 second or less.

The middle ground is not really a real-time rendering of a piece... it refers to short term memory and to short term anticipation, arguably in the one to three second range, much less if there are many different chords in that span. Memory and anticipation of what?- of functional harmonic progression and cadence.

But there is more- for Schenkerian analysis implies a drone- whether actually sounding or simply as a residual impression within the mind of the listener. This means that whenever there is a significant arrival or tonicization of some harmony, other than the overall key/tonic- we are hearing more than the literal sound. We are hearing a given root, and mentally superimposing/imaging this root as a suspension over the drone.... . As the psychologists would say, we must have some kind of 'schema' or mental tool for projecting/imagining/creating/rehearsing ?? the actual present sound in the context of some kind of ideal sound, or drone. (insert illustration)

The background harmonic structure (the bass abstraction). essentially strips a piece of music of all but emphatic reinforcements of the prevailing drone. It is also argued that there is but a single kind of suspension (ie. residual harmonic perception) which is heard as being dissonant to the drone, at the same magnitude of the drone, and that is termed a structural dominant. There is quite of bit of argument here, in my opinion... basically this, "why should there be one kind of non-tonic/literal drone sound which is capable of upsetting the meditative serenity of the entire piece, while all other non-tonic/literal drone sounds are less provocative-capable of being assimilated if you will as a kind of 'suspension'.

This could be answered in one of two ways. 1) the idea of a structural dominant is faulty. A piece of tonal music is a series of suspensions, producing a kind of overall meditative effect. Dissonances are presented and resolved all the time in a kind of tension-release model. The listener does not wait in anticipation of some special, emphatic dissonance and special emphatic resolution near the end, or perhaps at the middle of a work.

2) There is a structural dominant, which results from a combination of factors including. 1) synchronization and completion of long range or 'pedalled' melodic dissonances in the upper part. 2) special emphasis of the
fifth in the bass, perhaps through orchestraion or the amount of repetition or lack of competing tonicizations.  
3) the special emphais given any V-I root motion, either as the result of historical conditioning (ie dance suite music etc ) or some other acoustic/perceptual phenomena.. ie V is the only tonal sound capable of 'balancing' I , creating a sense of a cycle competing, which is a different perception than a meditation of on a single sound. ( even so, the notion that it should occur only once. at the end. requires attention. )

**Remember, vs reminder**

**Commonpractice counterpoint non-harmonic tones:** passing tone, neighbour tone ( complete and incomplete) appoggiatura, cambiata, suspension ( and ritardation), consonant skip, arpeggiation. ( so we note the implication of regular meter, in which there are strong and weak beats of pulse) ( we also note that 'non-harmonic tones'.. are essentially reduced- they essentially disappear.

So, an we imagine a context where 'non-chord tones' are not reducible? Removal of non-chord tones ( upper partials, altered or unaltered) suggests , or rather points to , an ideal state- the major or minor triad. consider, do chords of suspensions, say b6, b4, +11, 9, .. do they also point to an ideal state of a triad. Do you hear them, as needing reduction- as being an ornamentation that would tend to a simpler, purer state? Possibly.

Aside, is Schenkerian reduction most appropriate to music which is essentially melody and accompaniment, melody with text or with 'song like' qualities. ? One could argue that for music with text, the foreground is closer to the middleground, whereas in melodic, instrumental music, the foreground is an embellished middleground. ie the basic 'text implied' song line, is concealed at the middle ground. .. What I'm getting at here is.. what is the relationship between tonal music in the classical/romantic vein, and the language. Language communication, for example, does not appear spontaneously, but is unfolded sequentially, with a 'point'. often, at the end. Also, language communication implies that one understands the words as they go by. ( i'm not arguing very well here.. but i'll through it out now and return to it later. Just thinking out loud.) ( also considering the notion of the same speaker, speaking about the same subject.. a certain consistency in the language model, as if the same speaker, speaking about the same subject, argued toward a certain conclusion... perhaps I am speaking about mood.)

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. )

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. ie, a vertical concept.

The middleground in the most general sense describes the harmonic progressions of a phrase.

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

**Details regarding notation:**

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

Prolonged notes are stemmed.
The flag.

The eight note flag is used to indicate a significant neighbor tone.

Flag= the prolonged neighbor note. ( but may be used to highlight melody and bass notes of significant intermediate value.

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.

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

Dotted Lines. Dotted lines may be used for ties or slurs, but suggest a more tenuous connection. ( 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.

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

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.

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.

**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.

**Beams** are for the fundamental line and other significant lines. (ZUGs and LIPS with harmonic support)

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.

The Hanging Beam - the fundamental line is initiated but not continued.

**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)

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

Übergreifen. 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.

Primary tone= kopftone. Descending fundamental line = uhrlne.

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.

He admits of register transfer, either by literal octave, or inverted step motion. (7th leaps)... in other words, the ear/mind/brain 'fills in' the correct register, or otherwise adjusts ones thinking to accommodate the idea of smooth connected line.
There are three types of melodic prolongation. From, to, and about.

The more direct the attachment to the fundamental structure, the greater its structural importance.

the criteria for determining relative structural significance. a) extensive embellishment, b) harmonic support. c) participation in cadence d) directness of attachment to fundamental structure. ( can we add any others. )

The background is the fundamental structure, the middleground are nots or motions attached directly to the fundamental structure ( problematic- ) the foreground is nots or motions attached directly to the middleground pitches.

Common specific prolongations.

a) the initial ascent ( note, to be middleground, each note must have harmonic support)

b) first order arpeggiation.

Unfolding, or 'ausfaltung. May occur in any voice, is ussally linear, but may have gaps. All the notes need not to have harmonic support.

( some kind of line, other than the primary line )

Linear Progression, or Zug. ( train ). is of a higher structural level than an unfolding. is a middleground phenomena, and all notes must have harmonic support. . The Head note, of a linear progression is still in effect at the end. - no direction change, diatonic, may be register transfer, in any voice but the bass. It IS beamed, but use arabic numerals only if it replicates the fundamental line.

The Obligatory register. .. the register, if you look at the whole piece, which seems to be the most important.

Octave coupling= a more continuous, systematic use of register transfer, a middleground device which moves the notes of a backgroun structure between regsiters. ( sort of a delaying, variation, prolongation technique)

Criteria for the Primary Tone: . repetition, embellishment, melodic emphasis. , is there a linear descent. ( might be other criteria )

Leerlaf., or empty run. An unsupported ( either no harmonic support, or no conclusion ) stretch which looks
like a structural descent.

Terms. **Sectional Binary, continuous Binary, rounded binary.**

**Divider, or teiler.** a dominant which isn't the structural dominant, but is heard as significant (an interruption) what to do here.

**Substitution.** a particular note is substituted for an implied note. (how to label this.. it's an unresolved suspension. ( how to mark this emphasis? )

Schenker admits middleground chromaticism.

The term' **first level'** refers to the first embellishment level imposed on the background.

- the first step is to label non-harmonic tones, and to remove the rhythm, into solid chords.

- the neighbour tone always relates to a single note, while the passing tone is connective. It relates to a pair of notes.

In the reduction of compound melody, write as many lines as you hear. 3-4 usually. ( reduce some compound melody)

melodies may be compound part of the time.

Linear intervalllic pattern, is not really of harmonic significance. really more of a transitional device.

Schenker never really uses the term modulation... toncization is sometimes used.. he avoids the term harmonic progression.

Assumption: piece begins and ends in the same key.

If you are looking at a phrase only, you can use filled-in notes with a stem and beam.

Initial ascent, or ansteig.

First order arpeggiation, the ascent to the highest or first primary tone.

**The linear unfolding or ausfaltung of an interval-** these could be considered simultaneous at a later stage of reduction... ( very important point )

The fundamental line descends to the tonic only once. (is this necessarily true? )

The final 2-1 is accompanied harmonically by the authentic cadence. ( is this true? why must this be true?)
The **ZED beam**. .. inner voice beams used for significant inner voice melodic statements which resemble the fundamental structure. (like a pervasive multilevel motive of hook) The Ziz zag beam keeps it out of the way, and also assumes all of the passing and embellishing tones within it.

**a Zug** is a middleground progression. A linear progression and false progressions are closer to the foreground, but the starting and ending points might be middleground events. (train)

The endpoints in unfoldings are supplied with stems pointing in reverse directions, which are beamed. (hence the Zed Beam )

A linear progression in the bass (zug) is his way of handling meandering harmonies. So long as he can find a main arrival key at the end of it.. that's his interest. so he looks for step progressions in the bass, with a main arrival, and will call this a zug.

Register transfer occurs and is admitted, and it often makes the fundamental structure less apparent. ( ie.. it is a good thing.. to make the fundamental structure less obvious.. and also suggests that the fundmental structure is intuited regardless of register, which I think is true.)

**Overlapping or Übergreifung, and Cover tone, or Deckton.** These are foreground events, but emerge as middleground events. It might even be a 321 melodic line which finishes the piece, while the fundamental line is hidden below.

Overlapping is the clear result of an inner voice, while Cover tone is a new route for the top voice.

**Auscompnierung.** Composing out: a second becomes a seventh.

**Dissonant and false progressions**... a linear progression which beings in one voice and ends in another. We Stem the starting and ending points. ( he's talking about the right hand I think )

**False progressions** are displaced neighbour tone progressions. - a big progression to a neighbour note, and here we might use the flag. (also the right hand)

Anyway, this is how I came to understand the basic concepts of Schenkerian analysis through my teachers, and my own interpretations and analysis. The one thing I really like about Schenkerian analysis, from a metaphysical level if you will, is that it defers to the primacy of the drone. The drone is there and active all the time, whether we acknowledge it or not. So from that perspective, inspite of all the crazy music I make and play, I believe the drone is there , and I hear it, and used it. I am in that sense a confirmed Schenkerian, and Schenker himself would have been extremely pleased with Indian classical music. - Glen Halls.