Tracing the Improvisatory Impulse in Early Schenkerian Theory

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A conceptual chasm greets the music analyst who endeavors to understand the relationship between improvisation and sonata form. At first glance, it seems that the two have little to do with one another: improvisation, after all, is a performance practice, while sonata form symbolizes the most learned type of compositional planning. And yet, Felix Salzer sought to bridge this chasm in his dissertation "Sonata Form in Franz Schubert" (1926).[1] Salzer took improvisation as the basic aesthetic underpinning for the construction of sonata form and, while hailing the works of C.P.E. Bach (hereafter simply "Bach"), Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, he used improvisation as a yardstick with which to critique Schubert's more lyrical handling of sonata form.

In Salzer's thinking, improvisation involves a forward-driving impulse (*treibende Kraft*) that creates a chain of accumulating motivic units (*Motivketten*), which in turn demand continual regeneration or renewal (*Neubildung*). By contrast, lyricism evokes the expansion and repetition of a single musical idea, whether it is a small motivic unit or a full eight-measure melody. Salzer argued that, though lyricism is well suited for songs and song forms, it is improvisation that governs sonata form—or, what we might better call the "improvisatory impulse."[2] He concluded that "the improvisatory impulse must influence all manifestations of the inner form [*Formung*] of sonata form...it is the essential foundation of sonata

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[1] Salzer's dissertation was published in a revised version in the 1928 *Studien zur Musikwissenschaft*. All references to Salzer's dissertation will come from his 1928 article; only in cases of discrepancy between the article and dissertation proper will the latter be cited. A more comprehensive account of Salzer's dissertation and article can be found in Koslovsky 2009, 77–107. Present-day authors who have commented on Salzer's article include Webster 1978; Burstein 1997; Burchard 2001; Buch 2005; and Mak 2006.

[2] Salzer uses the expression "das improvisatorische Element." I have chosen to render the word "Element" as "impulse," since it seems to better capture Salzer's intended meaning. See Salzer 1928, 89–90.

form."[3] Because the improvisatory impulse was so fundamental to his thinking, Salzer ultimately deemed Schubert's handling of sonata form beneath the standards of his predecessors.

While he may have been the first to juxtapose improvisatory and lyrical impulses with respect to sonata form, Salzer did not invent these constructions himself—they each had a basis in previous scholarship. The topic of lyricism in Schubert's instrumental works, for instance, had been discussed throughout the nineteenth century, and it continues to this day.[4] The connection between improvisation and sonata form, however, had a more local origin for Salzer; indeed, it can be directly traced to the work of Heinrich Schenker, for Schenker was perhaps the first to express an intimate connection between improvisation and cyclical composition. But where precisely did Salzer locate this connection?

As it happens, Salzer's early writings relied almost exclusively on two of Schenker's own early writings: his *Ein Beitrag zur Ornamentik*, first published in 1903; and his *Harmonielehre* of 1906.[5] This is true not only for Salzer's dissertation but for another early publication—his article on "The Significance of Ornaments in Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's Keyboard Works," published in 1930.[6] In this article Salzer made clear his intentions to build upon Schenker's *Ornamentik* by providing the structural-linear significance of Schenker's insights on ornamentation in the keyboard works of Bach. But just like his ornamentation article,

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[3] "Abschließend läßt sich feststellen, daß das improvisatorische Element alle Formungerscheinungen innerhalb der Sonatenform beeinflussen muß...In dem Wirken des improvisatorischen Elements besteht also das Grundwesen der Sonatenform" (Salzer 1928, 97).

[4] One common source for Salzer and others from his time is Grove's 1864 dictionary entry on Schubert. A recent discussion of Schubert and lyricism comes from Mak 2006.

[5] For a detailed discussion of the publication history of *Ornamentik*, see Bent 2005, 76–81; for the history concerning the transmission of *Harmonielehre* in the United States, see Wason 2008.

[6] Salzer 1930/1986.

Salzer's dissertation equally relied on Schenker's early work, both his ornamentation and harmony treatises.[7]

This essay will trace the improvisatory impulse in these two early writings by Schenker. It first defines the improvisatory impulse in the context of these writings, and then probes two musical works that Schenker analyzed as a result of his thinking on the subject: the Secondary area to the first movement of Bach's Keyboard Sonata in G major (*Kenner und Liebhaber* collection, W. 56), found in *Ornamentik*; and the Secondary area to the first movement of Beethoven's String Quartet in F minor (Op. 95), in *Harmonielehre*. Having gone through Schenker's analyses, the final portion of this essay will compare the improvisatory impulse and its analytical consequences with more recent notions of classical form, in particular the theory of formal functions. It will also put the improvisatory impulse back into the context of Schenker's later thought.[8]

Before turning expressly to *Ornamentik* and *Harmonielehre*, however, a brief discussion of improvisation with respect to all of Schenker's writings is first necessary. One of the few attempts to grapple with the topic comes from John Rink's article "Schenker and Improvisation."[9] Rink provides an overview of the subject through a broad survey of Schenker's entire *oeuvre*, and concludes that two principles underlie Schenker and improvisation: "first, like composition itself, the act of improvisation involves the prolongation of a remote structure—a 'basic plan' or model—which is linked directly to the middleground or background; second, the prolongation of that structure in improvisation takes place through diminution, specifically, diminution of the fundamental line."[10] Rink then follows his survey by providing his

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[7] Though Salzer's 1928 article does not make this clear, the dissertation itself does, as it contains footnotes and other references that the article omits.

[8] A recent discussion of form in Schenker's early thinking was presented by Jason Hooper at the thirty-fourth meeting of the Society for Music Theory (November 2010).

[9] Rink 1993; see also Matthew Brown's article in this volume.

[10] Rink 1993, 8.

own analyses of select "improvisatory" pieces by Beethoven, Schubert, and Chopin.[11]

Rink's informative survey notwithstanding, Schenker's thinking on improvisation looks somewhat different when considered strictly from the point of view of his early writings. It falls into two basic parts. The first is similar to the way Salzer interpreted it: a series of short, interconnected ideas weave the thread of the music. Each motive naturally inspires the next. These ideas then form larger groups, what Schenker refers to as *Gruppenbildung* ("group construction").[12] Connected with *Gruppenbildung* is the second part to the improvisatory impulse: that is, the ability of an artist to generate an abundance of musical ideas within an economy of harmony. The harmony necessitates the musical content, and the content is grouped based on the needs of the harmony—they live in a symbiotic relationship.

Schenker and Salzer did not describe the improvisatory impulse in exactly the same way. Their differences, though, are simply a matter of emphasis. While Salzer stressed its forward-driving momentum through the regeneration of motivic chains, and used it mainly as a counterweight to lyricism, Schenker emphasized *Gruppenbildung* and the economy of harmony, and did not compare it directly with lyrical impulses. Implicitly, Schenker sees a forward-driving momentum to music, but he does not stress the connection in the manner that Salzer does. And for his part, Salzer touches on the importance of group construction and harmony, but they are not his main focus. Nonetheless, Schenker's and Salzer's ideas intersect in a vital way: both stress the logical necessity of musical ideas in time and their ever-increasing abundance through the spirit of free fantasy. The improvisatory impulse thus delivers a motivic organicism based on a dynamic

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[11] Beethoven, Fantasy, Op. 77; Schubert, "Wanderer" Fantasy (D. 760) and Fantasy in F minor (D. 940); and Chopin, Polonaise-Fantasy, Op. 61.

[12] My translation of *Gruppenbildung* comes from Ian Bent and Anthony Pople's Grove article on "Analysis." There, they describe *Gruppenbildung* as "the diversifying of a single tonal unit of structure by thematic and motivic variety, by interior harmonic movement, by variety of rhythmic placing and patterning, and by contrast of dynamic levels." See Bent and Pople, "Analysis" (Part II, History; §4, 1910–1945).

flow of musical ideas rather than the outgrowth of a single motivic cell.[13]

Schenker's *Ornamentik* and Bach's Sonata in G Major, W. 56

With a basic understanding of the improvisatory impulse now in place, we can turn expressly to Schenker's writings. First published in 1903, *Ornamentik* underwent a second edition in 1908, which among other things included a new Preface.[14] In this new Preface, and in the Introduction, Schenker sought to show the intimate connection between ornamentation, improvisation, and form; at the same time, he aimed to salvage the status of Bach in the history of Western music.

Schenker's thoughts actually begin with his historiographic agenda: that is, to show why Bach should be considered the only forefather of the Viennese school. The 1908 Preface makes this clear, for it is nothing less than an attack on the work of Hugo Riemann in his early editions of the *Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Bayern*.[15] There, Riemann wagered that Johann Stamitz and the Mannheim School of composition (which included composers like Christian Cannabich, Anton Filtz, and Christoph Graupner) were

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[13] Both Schenker's and Salzer's thoughts on improvisation are biased towards keyboard improvisation of the late eighteenth century. It could be that they would think of the example of Haydn. Albert Christoph Dies, Haydn's biographer, famously wrote of the composer: "At 8 a.m. Haydn took his breakfast. Immediately thereafter he put himself in front of the keyboard and improvised (*phantasierte*) until he had found in his view the best musical ideas, which he would then commit to paper: these became the first sketches of his compositions" (Albert Christoph Dies, cited in Ferand 1938, 30). For his part, Rink notes that "Schenker derived his notion of improvisation largely, if not entirely, from C.P.E. Bach, in other words, from an eighteenth-century tradition rooted in thoroughbass practice" (Rink 1993, 10).

[14] All references to Schenker's treatise will come from the 1976 English translation, which is based on the 1908 edition. Also see Cook 2007, 89–139 for a discussion of Schenker and ornamentation in the context of fin-de-siècle Vienna. I am grateful to Hedi Siegel for providing helpful insights regarding the differences between the first and second editions.

[15] See Riemann 1902–1907.

the proper precursors to Viennese Classicism.[16] Though his name goes unmentioned, Schenker's prose makes it abundantly clear that it is Riemann he so much deplores. Schenker would have none of the musicologist's ideas, and would toss off his *Denkmäler* as a "paper cemetery" that promoted "thrice dead" composers.[17] Finding the only answer in Bach, he asks rhetorically: "What, specifically, was it that the Classical composers were able to learn from Bach alone, and not from those called their precursors?"[18] Leaving this question unanswered in the Preface, he returns to it at the opening of his Introduction when he suggests "we are dealing with an art and a technique that are hardly described or discussed at all, either in textbooks on composition or in the schools. I refer here to the way in which Bach's themes and motives follow one another; when, how, and where they enter; how they are connected and separated, etc.; how Bach effects a synthesis of ideas. This synthesis may rightly be considered the deepest, indeed the ultimate mystery of musical composition."[19]

While the connection to *Gruppenbildung* should already be clear from this last passage, Schenker's connection runs even deeper, even if he does not express it so directly. This concerns Bach's ability to ground his music in the improvisatory nature of the smallest embellishment. As Ian Bent explains, "There is...an important sense in which *Ornamentik* provides a foundation for all of Schenker's subsequent writings, namely in his identifying of C. P. E. Bach's musical art as essentially one of improvisation: ideas well up 'unbidden, undesigned, unwilled'; his imagination is 'wholly spontaneous and wholly unlabored.'"[20] Ornamentation and improvisation are thus all the components Schenker needs to dub

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[16] A larger debate around the precursors to Viennese Classicism arose in the ensuing years, specifically between Riemann and the Austrian musicologists Guido Adler and Wilhelm Fischer.

[17] Schenker 1908/1976, 13. Schenker even goes so far as to write "the *Denkmäler der Tonkunst in*...," leaving the reader to fill in the blank.

[18] *Ibid.*, 12.

[19] Schenker 1908/1976, 15.

[20] Bent 2005, 79. Bent goes on in this passage to draw a link between improvisation and the "association of ideas" ("Ideenassociationen"), which is closely connected to *Gruppenbildung*.

Bach the "founder of a new style," as they build a direct line to the emergence of form.[21] Schenker seems to encapsulate his whole argument in one particular passage:

> In viewing Bach's statements as a whole, we must assert that Bach should by no means be reproached for his use of embellishments; on the contrary, in precisely such use does he reveal his particular genius for keyboard writing. His use of original ornaments and figuration leads one to conclude that he is indeed the truest poet of the keyboard. I would go so far as to rank him, as a keyboard composer, even higher than Haydn or Mozart, whose primarily orchestral and symphonic outlook had begun to undermine their idiomatic keyboard style. As a keyboard composer I would rank him almost equally with Schumann and Chopin, though his genius was more natural and fundamental than theirs. Thus he led the way to the important cyclic sonata form and had the power to influence such composers as Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.[22]

In sum, the improvisatory impulse became the crucial factor linking Bach to the Viennese Classicists, and it provided the basic thrust for musical form.

Having shredded Riemann's "paper cemetery" and argued for the connection between Bach and the Viennese School, Schenker reaches a crucial juncture in his Introduction by making explicit the formal and analytical ramifications of the improvisatory impulse and *Gruppenbildung*, in a section entitled "Form in the Works of C.P.E. Bach." It is worth quoting his opening statements directly:

> What first strikes one about Bach's compositional technique is the absence of any kind of schematic formula, whether in regard to form, idea, or harmony. To invent something in advance, in isolation and out of context, only to insert it into a strained patchwork later on—this does not lie in his nature. Instead, everything—at its inception as well as during its successive development—exists by grace of an improvisatory imagination [*improvisierenden Phantasie*]. This imagination is always ready to contribute not only an initial idea but also its further consequence; thus the composer need spend no more effort than that required to write down his thoughts. Unlike others, unlike us epigoni, he does not need to

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[21] Schenker 1908/1976, 20.

[22] *Ibid.*, 26. As it happens, Schenker was not alone in his estimation of Bach's connection to the Viennese Classicists. Writing around the same time as Schenker, Heinrich Jalowetz (a pupil of Adler and also of Schoenberg) provides a lengthy discussion of Bach's use of melodic structure, motivic concentration, and connects it primarily to Beethoven's early work. See Jalowetz 1911.

look ahead anxiously beyond the first idea. He is not threatened by the cloud of future events, either in regard to form or to content. Nothing disturbs his enjoyment of the present moment; thus he can yield creatively and unreservedly to each idea.[23]

This leads Schenker to his description of *Gruppenbildung*: "Such readiness of imagination is always accompanied by a wealth and variety of ideas. This proliferation of musical ideas leads to a new and individual technique—to what we might call group [construction] (*Gruppenbildung*)."[24]

Crucially, three elements contribute to *Gruppenbildung*: tonality, rhythm, and dynamics. Schenker demonstrates each of these through an analysis of the Secondary area to Bach's Sonata in G major (mm. 8–22). Example 1 reproduces the entire Exposition from Schenker's own 1902 critical edition, and includes annotative boxes and arrows that indicate both Schenker's groups (above the top staff) and his harmonic interpretation (between the staves).[25] He describes each group as follows: "[1] we hear a cadence on the tonic in bar 12, [2] a rise to the dominant in bars 15 and 16, [3] a return to the tonic in bars 16–18, and [4] a cadence in bars 20–22, all of which clearly point up the independent character of each element. From this example we may easily determine the role of tonality: it tonally unites the diverse elements into a single group, with sacrificing the independence of the individual parts."[26] It is clear from this description that, when it comes to the tonality, the goal of each group takes precedence. In sum, Example 1 and Schenker's commentary demonstrate how the two-part aspect of the improvisatory impulse undergirds the analysis: a single harmonic area fuses four independent groups.

Schenker then goes on to show the involvement of rhythm and dynamics in the passage, both of which support the tonality and

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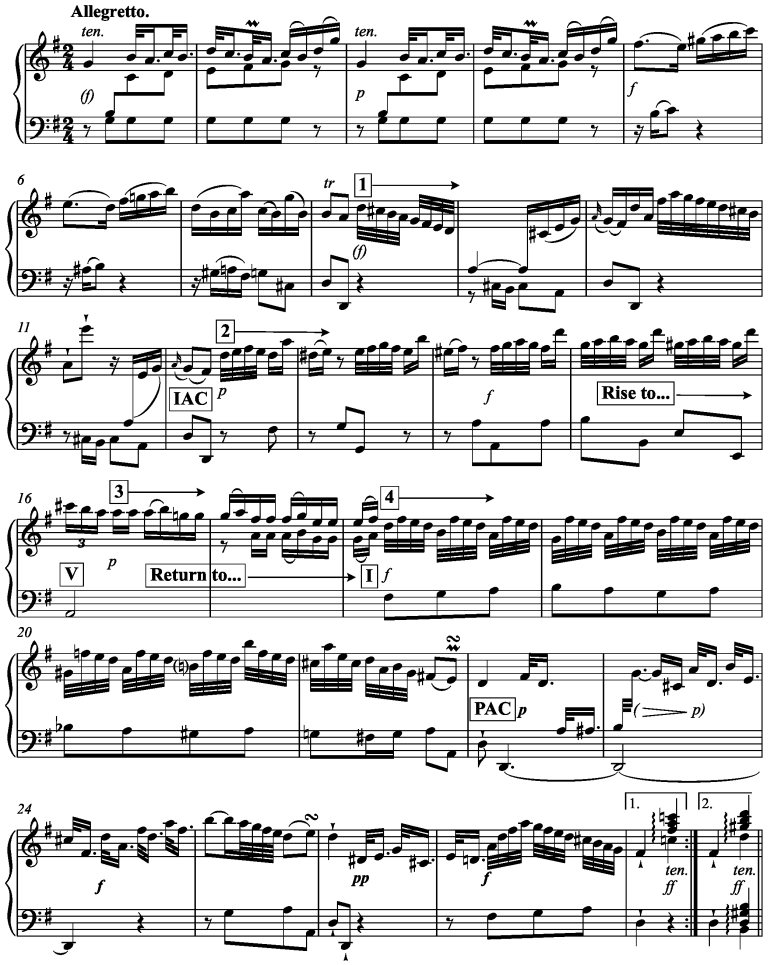
[23] Schenker 1908/1976, 27–28.

[24] *Ibid.*, 28. The 1976 translation uses the expression "group formation."

[25] For sake of clarity, the fingerings and editorial suggestions have been removed. Please refer to Schenker's edition for these (Schenker 1902).

[26] Schenker 1908/1976, 28.

Example 1: C.P.E. Bach, Keyboard Sonata in G major, W. 56 (Kenner und Liebhaber, set 2), mov't I, mm. 1–29.



articulate the onset of each group. By rhythm, Schenker is referring to the metrical placement of the groups rather than the rhythmic values of specific notes. The boxed numbers above the staff in Example 1 show such placement: [1] and [2] each begins on the third eighth note of the measure, [3] and [4] on the second. Schenker's point is to show that Bach does not have to begin his phrases monotonously on the downbeat—he can begin a group

equally on a weak or strong beat. Corresponding to the metrical placement of the groups are Bach's dynamic markings. The dynamics literally "mark" the beginning of each new group: [1] begins on *f*; [2] on *p* (then followed by a *f*); [3] on *p*; and [4] on *f* once again—thus, a constant alteration between *forte* and *piano*.[27] For Schenker, this "reinforce[s] the contrast between the individual components of the group, and contribute[s] to the expression of the rhythm."[28]

As it happens, Salzer also drew on Bach's sonata as his first example of the improvisatory impulse.[29] He provides an overview of the entire Exposition, and then turns to the Secondary area. While he reiterates Schenker's idea that D major unifies the groups, Salzer identifies three groups instead of four: 8–12; 12–16; and 16–22. He writes: "The first group (mm. 8–12) composes out the tonic, the second group (12–16) drives to the dominant, and the final group (16–22) again reaches the tonic. Thus a formal unity is undoubtedly established."[30] Despite the mainly trivial difference of interpretation, the moral of the story for Salzer is the same as Schenker's: because form derives from the construction, accumulation, and regeneration of groups within a unifying tonality (and thus from the improvisatory impulse), thematic complexes can have no bearing on a sonata form.

Schenker's *Harmonielehre* and Beethoven's Quartet in F minor, Op. 95

It was stated earlier that Schenker's ornamentation treatise saw a second edition five years after the first. But besides adding his

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[27] Note that the dynamic at "[1]" is Schenker's editorial marking.

[28] Schenker 1908/1976, 30. Note that Schenker also provides an interpretation of the dynamics of the closing group, mm. 22–28, to show how dynamics contribute to the "internal organization of a single idea." See Schenker 1908/1976, 31.

[29] This section was removed in the 1928 article. See Salzer 1926, 11–12.

[30] "Die erste Gruppe Takt 8–12 komponiert die Tonika aus, die zweite Gruppe von Takt 12–15 führt zur Dominante und die letzte Gruppe bis Takt 22 erreicht wieder die Tonika. Eine formale Einheit ist daher ganz zweifelsohne festgestellt" (*Ibid.*, 12).

new polemical Preface against Riemann, Schenker also took the liberty to add footnotes to the second edition. One of these footnotes is inserted at his definition of *Gruppenbildung*. It refers to §129 of *Harmonielehre* (Part 2, Chapter IV), "*Das Entstehen von Gedankengruppen*" ("The Emergence of Groups of Ideas").[31] Here, Schenker provides an analysis of the Secondary area to the first movement of Beethoven's Quartet, Op. 95 (mm. 24–47) to discuss the use of harmony within larger form.[32] Lurking behind this, though, is the notion of the improvisatory impulse: *Gruppenbildung* and the economy of harmony.

Example 2 reproduces mm. 18–58 of the Quartet, which includes the Transition, Secondary area, and Closing Group. Schenker's choice is at first sight rather peculiar, since he does not choose a normative eighteenth-century sonata form movement, and opts for a work that stylistically came at a time when Beethoven was undergoing a "musical crisis" between his middle and later period.[33] Many factors make this a less-than-standard deployment of Classical sonata form: among the more obvious things, it lacks repeat signs in the Exposition; its formal boundaries are blurred; and its Secondary area is in the submediant (VI). The beginning of the Secondary area is particularly obscured, with a "Medial Caesura" that occurs on a first inversion V7 chord (m. 21) and a "Fusion" of the Transition and Secondary Area.[34] To be sure, then, Beethoven's Quartet is not nearly as straightforward as Bach's sonata.

Just as the musical example's structure is less than obvious, so too is Schenker's explanation of the passage. Example 3 thus provides a formal diagram to elucidate Schenker's discussion. It shows his analysis in three "phrase levels," provides a grouping of measures, and indicates the harmonies as described in Schenker's

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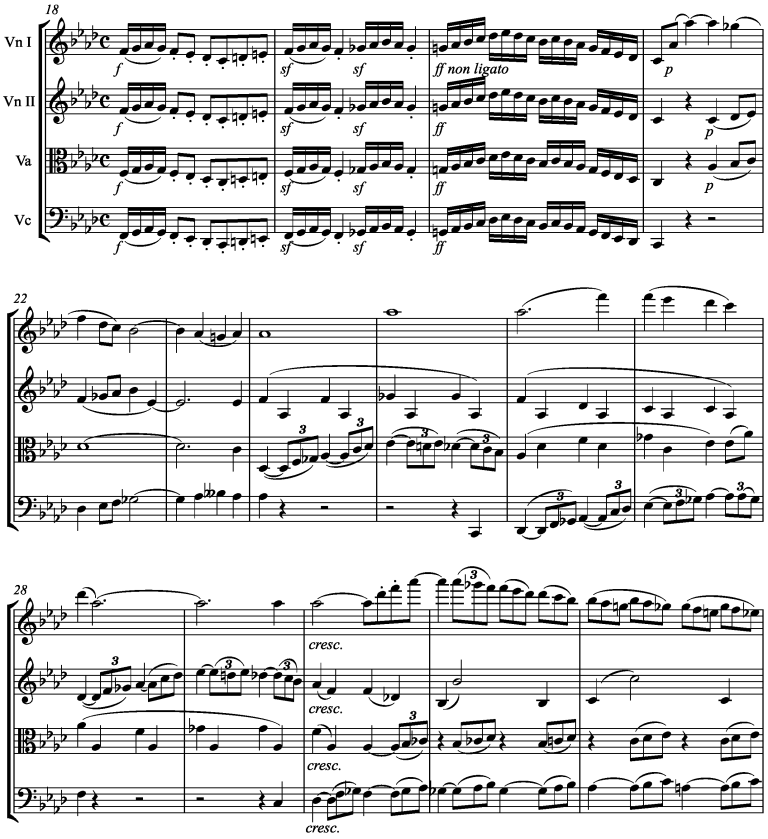
[31] Schenker 1906, 319–326; Schenker 1954, 241–245.

[32] At the end of this section in the 1906 edition, Schenker provides a list of works that use similar procedures. These were omitted in the 1954 English translation. See Schenker 1906, 325–326.

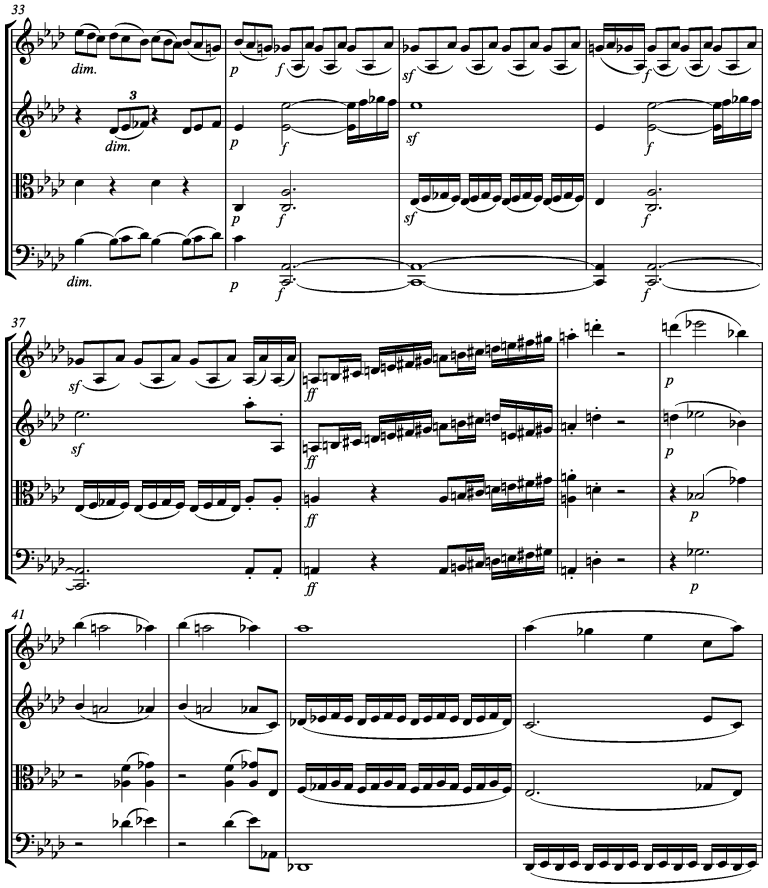
[33] See Rosen 1998, 404.

[34] The term "Medial Caesura" comes from Hepokoski and Darcy 2006, and the term "Transition/ Subordinate Theme Fusion" comes from Caplin 1998.

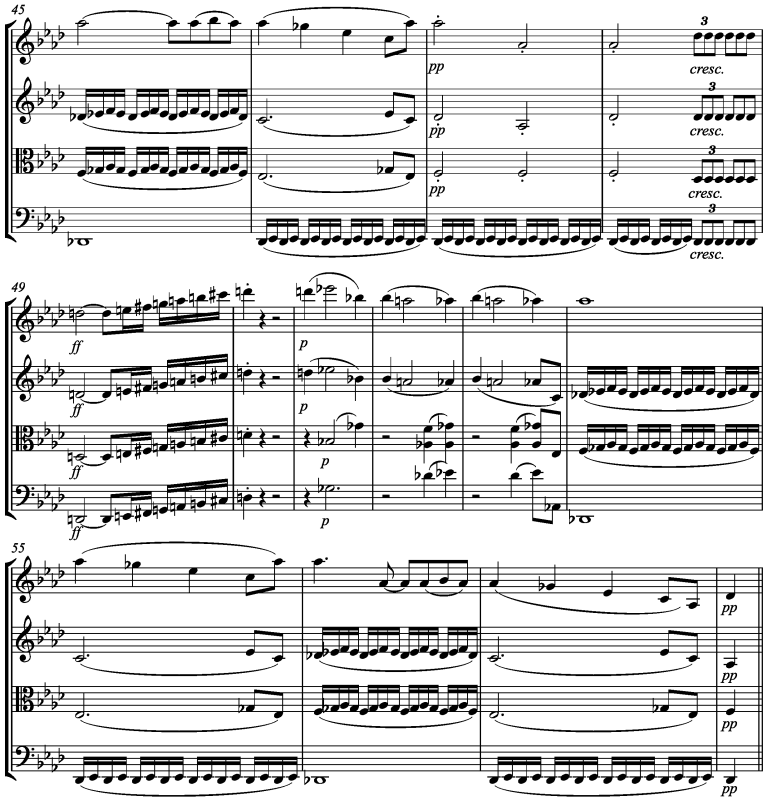
Example 2: Beethoven, String Quartet in F minor, Op. 95, mov't I, mm. 18–53.



Example 2 cont'd



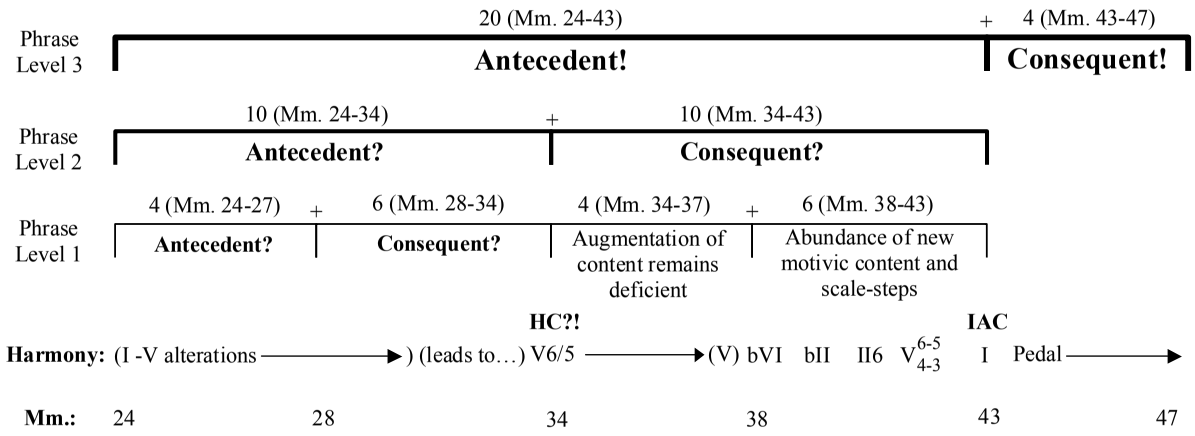
Example 2 cont'd



text. The phrase levels correspond to the way in which Schenker attempts, at three points, to understand the passage as a musical period, which was the most standard phrase model at that time.[35] In an almost dialectical way he shows the reader how he struggles to find the proper placement of the "Antecedent" and "Consequent" phrases.

[35] The term "sentence" was not in common parlance, and was only later introduced by Arnold Schoenberg in his *Fundamentals of Music Composition*. See Schoenberg 1967. More will be said of this in the final section.

Example 3: Form diagram showing Schenker's discussion of Beethoven's Quartet in F minor (Op. 95, mov't I, mm. 24–47).



Using a recurring two-measure phrase unit as his basis, Schenker identifies the start of the Secondary area at m. 24. The opening motive (demarcated with a rising and falling triplet figure) is first heard twice: in the viola (24–25) and then in the cello (26–27). Schenker identifies these four measures as an initial Antecedent ("Phrase Level 1"), since there is just one motive and only statements of tonic and dominant. Measure 28 marks the beginning of the first Consequent, where the second violin begins the triplet motive. As before, the cello follows suit at m. 30, but now the music veers off, as Beethoven introduces new harmonies that drive towards the dominant (32–33). The dominant arrives at m. 34 in first inversion (V$^6_5$), just like the moment of the Medial Caesura at m. 21. This punctuating arrival (note: on beat 2) counts for Schenker as a second possible Consequent ("Phrase Level 2"). But, because Schenker deems the "augmentation of the content up until now...quite deficient," the development of this content must continue.[36] Thus the V$^6_5$ chord prolongs for four measures (34–37). The music then takes one more unexpected turn and moves deceptively (and strikingly) to ♭VI (A major), which then acts as a local dominant to ♭II in a sweeping *unisono* ascending scale (mm. 38–39). This ♭II transforms back into its natural state at m. 40 (II6) to tilt the music back towards D♭ major and conclude with an imperfect authentic cadence. As Example 3 shows, Schenker refers to this entire final passage (mm. 38–43) as an "abundance of new motivic content and scale steps."[37] Following the cadence, the Closing Group commences with a long-awaited and stabilizing tonic pedal (43*ff*). This strong cadential arrival at m. 43 suggests to Schenker that one must interpret the entire Secondary area as a single Antecedent, whose Consequent is the Closing Group ("Phrase Level 3"). He concludes his analysis:

> However one may look at this situation, this much is clear, that Beethoven, instead of basing his conception of one single theme, has offered here a major group of several variegated motifs and elements, which nevertheless yield the effect of a closed conceptual unit. He reached this effect by using few, relatively very few, scale-steps for each single element while attempting to make the most, motivically,

[36] Schenker 1906/1954, 243.

[37] *Ibid*., 243.

of each scale-step…This technique—more content, less harmonic dispersion—thus allows for a variety of characterization. It exhausts the contents of each scale-step by interpreting it conceptually. By never wasting any harmony, it spares each one for whatever effect it may yet yield. The scale-steps and the themes motivated by them are assured, in any case, their desired effect, and there arises the image of organic unity which is so essential to a cyclic movement.[38]

Schenker and formal function theory

Having spelled out the improvisatory impulse in Schenker's early thought, and having discussed his analyses of two musical passages, a number of questions linger. First, to what extent do Schenker's ideas of the improvisatory impulse and of *Gruppenbildung* hold any validity today? Are these ideas merely a piece of historical curiosity? Has music theory somehow moved beyond the improvisatory impulse with more recent theories of form, especially those that deal with phrase-level analysis? And, what does all this mean in light of Schenker's later work? The final portion of this article will briefly address these questions.

In recent years, theorists have sought to align Schenker's later views of tonality with other views of form, both on the phrase level and at deeper levels of structure.[39] Janet Schmalfeldt's 1991 article "Towards a Reconciliation of Schenkerian Concepts with Traditional and Recent Theories of Form" provides one of the most useful discussions of Schoenbergian, Ratzian, and Caplinian views of formal function on the phrase level and their congruence with Schenker's later theory of the *Ursatz*; it also set the pace for many subsequent studies combining Schenkerian and form-functional approaches. Specifically, Schmalfeldt focuses on the role of the musical sentence—how it expresses both formal function and simultaneously closed (non-modulating) middleground progressions.

As she makes clear, theories of phrase structure had been discussed since the late eighteenth century, in the work of Heinrich Christoph Koch, even though the "sentence" had not been

[38] Schenker 1906/1954, 244–245.

[39] Important studies on Schenker and form include Rothstein 1989; Cadwallader 1990; Schmalfeldt 1991; Smith 1996; Cadwallader 2008; and Darcy 2008.

employed as a formal phrase type until Schoenberg's 1967 *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*. Because this term was not in common parlance before then, authors of the early twentieth century tended to explain everything as some type of period structure, which as a result suffered (in the words of Schmalfeldt) "from a historical morass of different meanings."[40] To be sure, this is evident in Schenker's analysis of the Beethoven passage cited above.

It is telling that the two examples Schenker uses to describe *Gruppenbildung* come from Secondary areas of sonata form Expositions and are both sentences; they would each classify under William Caplin's "Looser Sentential Functions."[41] In the case of Bach (refer back to Example 1), both the Primary and Secondary areas are sentences: the Primary area a tight-knit eight-measure sentence ending on a half cadence, and the Secondary area a loose-knit fourteen-measure sentence, built from a basic idea, a varied repetition, and an extended continuation. The continuation can be said to contain two motions to a cadence. It first briefly lands on a half cadence at m. 16, but this is "abandoned" to drive on to the perfect authentic cadence at m. 22. From this point of view Schenker's first cadence at m. 12 (an imperfect authentic cadence) is rather dubious. Beethoven's Secondary area (see Example 2) also presents a loose sentential structure, with the "additional repetition of the basic idea" in the Presentation and an expanded Continuation through evaded cadential motions.[42] One could easily conclude that Schenker's analysis of the passage is garbled. On the one hand, he seems wedded to finding a period structure. On the other, he is not content with period structure analysis, and seems to drift implicitly towards a sentence-like structure based on his discussion. But even if he had known the term sentence, would he agree that it is an appropriate way to view the phrase?

Whether Schenker would care about musical sentences at all remains unclear, and it also misses out on two crucial points. First, that the improvisatory impulse as defined in this article has

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[40] Schmalfeldt 1991, 259.

[41] See Caplin 1998, 97.

[42] *Ibid.*, 99.

concrete analytical ramifications, which exist irrespective of any *Ursatz* or *Urlinie* interpretation. Second, that formal function theory attempts to formalize a process that Schenker ultimately felt "unformalizable." Formal function is simply an external consequence to *Gruppenbildung*, an observable fact *a posteriori*. For it puts into a box something Schenker wanted to leave at the disposal of the creative genius. When it comes to formal function, then, Schenker is decidedly anti-formalist—it is only in the spirit of free fantasy that form can emerge at all. It makes sense that Schenker would pick passages that are loose in construction for his analyses, because while "tight-knit" phrases are typically beyond dispute, it is the more "loose-knit" ones that cause the analyst problems and where conflicting interpretations may result. So I believe it remains open to debate whether it is better to describe a passage as a free *Gruppenbildung* or as a "Looser Sentential Function." While I do not seek to discount the invaluable work of Caplin, Schmalfeldt, and many others, I do hold that, even though a Schenker graph may often align with a formal model, that does not confute the fact that such views stem from inherently conflicting epistemic conceits—maybe even irreconcilable ones.

Although Schenker ultimately became more concerned with deeper processes of tonality, and although most theorists today devote their time to Schenker's later work, the improvisatory impulse remains a vital factor in understanding the logic of Schenker's thought. Schmalfeldt herself picks a quote from *Der freie Satz*, Schenker's final work, that seems to carry a residue of the improvisatory impulse: "In the art of music, as in life, motion toward the goal encounters obstacles, reverses, disappointments, and involves great distances, detours, expansions, interpolations, and, in short, retardations of all kinds. Therein lies the source of all artistic delaying, from which the creative mind can derive content that is ever new."[43] And its direct link to sonata form would not be lost either. Twenty years after the publication of *Harmonielehre*, we find this link not only in the work of Salzer but also in an essay Schenker himself penned: "On organicism in sonata form," found in the second volume of *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik* (1926). There,

[43] Schenker, cited in Schmalfeldt 1991, 238–239.

he writes: "Thus the concept of sonata form, if it is to express the general more correctly, ought to include the following: *the whole must be created by improvisation*, if it is not to be a mere assemblage of individual parts and motives in accordance with a set of rules."[44]

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This essay has stressed the important connection between improvisation and sonata form in Schenker's early thinking. It has taken a thoroughly Schenkerian conceit we have known mainly through Salzer's early work and traced its origins directly to two of Schenker's earliest monographs: his *Ornamentik* and *Harmonielehre*. Since form occupied Schenker's and Salzer's minds throughout both their early writings, it is no wonder that improvisation would lie at the core of their thought, especially given their mutual quest to trace an historical lineage to C.P.E. Bach. Indeed, the improvisatory impulse is the basic factor governing every type of instrumental work, from the shortest prelude to the most expansive cyclical piece.

Throughout the latter part of his theoretical career, Schenker obsessed over the *Urlinie* and the *Ursatz*, which for him embodied the primordial progressions of works of tonal genius. But his revelations about these deeply mysterious progressions could not have developed were it not for a careful consideration of the realities of the musical detail. For the musical detail formed the lifeblood of the music, and was inseparable from the creative and improvisatory impulses of the artist. And herein lies the subtle link between cyclical form and improvisation, between the general and the particular, and between *Theorien und Phantasien*.

[44] Schenker 1926/1996, 23.

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