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Tonality as Drama

*Closure and Interruption
in Four Twentieth-Century American Operas*

EDWARD D. LATHAM

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Edward D. Latham

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To Cara—for the inspiration, and the perspiration.

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Preface

I am a singer. My parents are both singers. I married a singer. My three children are all singers. Thus, although for a number of reasons I had to cut the sections explicitly devoted to performance implications from the four analytical chapters in this book, I approached the analyses with a singer's perspective in mind. It is my fond hope that they will eventually prove useful to those engaged in the ongoing production of opera—performers, conductors, and directors. Whether you are “in the business,” or you are a music theorist, musicologist, or simply an opera enthusiast—read on! This is an analytical monograph by a Schenkerian music theorist, but it was also written by one performer and enthusiast for another.

My love for “dramatic vocal music”¹ began in high school, as I imagine it does for many high school students, with musical theater—in my case, with the musicals of Bernstein, Schwartz, Sondheim, Kander and Ebb, and (in my weaker moments) even some Lloyd Webber.² Though I dabbled in opera while a student at Phillips Academy (even taking direction from a spiky-haired Peter Sellars for a production of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*), I arrived at Yale College as something of a *naïf* with regard to art music. Professor Janet Schmalfeldt, now at Tufts University, saw to it that I did not remain that way. It was through my study of cadential harmonic processes and nineteenth-century *lieder* with her that I developed an abiding interest in tonal drama and its relationship to the text in dramatic vocal works, and became a music theorist.³

The singer-theorist is an exceedingly rare breed in the music-theoretical community, where the piano, for both practical and historical reasons, reigns supreme: Professors Elizabeth West Marvin of the Eastman School of Music, Cynthia Gonzales of the Texas State University, and Matthew Shaftel of the Florida State University are among the few other singer-theorists active at the national level. Perhaps this is due to a perceived “knowledge gap” between singers and theorists, who are stereotypically placed at opposite ends of the intellectual spectrum in descriptions of the music conservatory environment. Although most singers begin the formal study of their craft later than instrumentalists, it would be a mistake to assume that they do not have equally valuable insights to offer with regard to music theory and analysis. They are often highly attuned to aspects of melodic structure, register, and timbre, and they deal with text/music relationships on a daily basis. Moreover, a significant portion of the core tonal repertoire is comprised of operatic works—including the operas of Händel, Mozart, Rossini, and Verdi, to name just a few—and such leading Romantic composers as Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms lamented their inability (usually blamed on a poor librettist) to produce a successful work in one of the most important genres of their time.⁴ It is the singer who is uniquely qualified to bring an insider’s perspective to these important works.

To the singers who are interested in this book: unless you are preparing one of the roles discussed in Chapters 4 through 7, you are probably most familiar with the music of *Porgy and Bess*. Read the sections on “Scoring a Role” and “Applying the System to the Analysis of Opera” in Chapter 2 to get a sense of Stanislavsky’s system of dramatic objectives, and then skip to Chapter 5. You may want to read through Table 1 first, to evaluate my interpretation of Porgy’s objectives, then read through the analyses of his individual numbers—compare Figure 5 (“I Got Plenty O’ Nuttin’”) to Figure 13 (“Bess, Oh Where’s My Bess?”) to see how closure and lack of closure are displayed differently in the graphs (beamed open-note descent vs. beamed open-note repetition). Try to sing these two popular song/arias

to yourself while following the abstracted scores in the figures, and consider whether the closure or lack of closure shown in the graphs would impact the way you or your peers would perform these two songs.

To the broader theatrical community: the ongoing publication of new English translations of the complete works of Stanislavsky by Routledge Press is a testament to the enduring influence of his ideas on the current generation of actors, directors, and theatre educators. Overlooked amidst this flurry of activity is the fact that Stanislavsky ended his career as an opera director and devoted considerable time and energy to the genre throughout his lifetime. He saw opera as a new and greater challenge for the director, and despite his efforts, in many ways it remains so today; see the section on “Applying the System to the Analysis of Opera” in Chapter 2. Translations from the Russian of any production notes held in the Stanislavsky Archive for the operas directed by Stanislavsky (listed in Chapter 2, Figure 8) would be a valuable resource for further research into the dramatic analysis of opera.

To the Schenkerians who are interested in this book: aside from the occasional graphical oddities arising from the jazzy harmonic vocabulary of Gershwin and Weill (e.g., the multiple implied tones and substitutions in the background of Figure 11, “I Loves You Porgy”), the two primary innovations in the book are the permanent interruption and the multi-movement *Ursatz*. Both structures are discussed at length in the Introduction, and then incorporated into the subsequent analytical chapters. I have found similar structures in the nineteenth-century song cycles of Schubert and Schumann, as well as the operas of Verdi, Massenet and Puccini—the topics of my current research. What pieces do you know that end with an interrupted or broken line, or that might contain background structures spanning multiple movements, given their tonal plans?

There are several additional items of theoretical interest in the graphs: in Chapter 5, the chromatic *Aussensatz* in Figure 5 (“I Got Plenty O’ Nuttin”), the augmented initial arpeggiation in Figure 9 (“Bess, You Is My Woman Now”), and the “gapped” 5-line in Figure 15 (“Oh Lawd, I’m On My

Way”); in Chapter 6, the interrupted 8-line in Figure 2 (“Lonely House”), and the imperfect authentic “interruption” at $\hat{3}$ in Figure 8 (“We’ll Go Away Together”); in Chapter 7, the deceptive cadence from V^{11}_7 to IV harmonizing $\hat{1}$ in Figure 1c (“Once I Thought”).

To the broader music-theoretical community: while the four operas studied here are certainly not representative of early twentieth-century opera in general, they do speak to a broader trend in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century “transitional” music toward what I call the “strategic use of tonality.” Ignoring for a moment the specter of intentionality raised by this turn of phrase, reconsider your favorite pieces from this period. Given that post-Wagnerian composers were no longer bound by the common-practice rules of harmonic progression and cadential resolution, don’t those occasional authentic cadences, all the more prominent for their isolation and strangeness, take on more semantic significance? I have found numerous moments that are semantically significant in this way in the works of Debussy, Scriabin, Janáček, and Britten, among others. For other instances of unusual harmonies and modulation schemes that make great teaching examples, see the following figures: in Chapter 4, the $\flat VI-V-\flat III-IV$ modulation scheme in Figure 2c (“The Bag of Luck”); in Chapter 5, the use of i^{add6} in Figure 1 (“They Pass By Singin”), the use of $\sharp IV$ in Figures 4 and 5, and the $I-III^\sharp-\flat VI$ ($\sharp V$) modulation scheme in Figure 9 (“Bess, You Is My Woman Now”).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ I define “dramatic vocal music,” as any vocal genre or individual piece that is built around one or more characters who attempt to overcome obstacles to achieve a specific objective, including most operas, operettas, musicals, and oratorios, as well as some cantatas, art songs, and song cycles. Other vocal genres include “narrative” and “poetic” vocal music.
- ² Composer Maury Yeston, however, currently ranks first on my list, as the only Yale-educated music theorist that I know of that makes a living writing Broadway musicals. For his theoretical work, see Maury Yeston, *The Stratification of Musical Rhythm* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), and Maury Yeston, ed., *Readings in Schenker Analysis and Other Approaches* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).
- ³ See Janet Schmalfeldt, “Cadential Processes: The Evaded Cadence and the ‘One More Time’ Technique,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 12/1-2 (1992): 1–52, and “Towards a Reconciliation of Schenkerian Concepts with Traditional and Recent Theories of Form,” *Music Analysis* 10/3 (1991): 233–87.
- ⁴ Several important twentieth-century composers, including Debussy (*Pelléas et Mélisande*) and Schoenberg (*Moses und Aron*), in addition to the composers studied in this book, considered their lone operas to be their greatest masterpieces.

Acknowledgments

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CHAPTER 1

Tonality as Drama: An Introduction

Is tonality, as defined by harmonic and linear progression, inherently dramatic? It should be clear from its title where the present book and its author stand on that issue. Though Austrian music theorist Heinrich Schenker's declaration that "in music the drama of the fundamental structure [das Drama des Ursatzes] is the main event"¹ was later cited by would-be detractors as an example of his narrow-minded focus on "the music itself," it is actually an explicit acknowledgment of Schenkerian theory as a theory of musical drama, an idea that will be further explored in Chapter 3. Carl Schachter notes that "elements of the fundamental structure ... become charged with dramatic tension through their suppression or their transformation"² and analytical work by other scholars has developed this theme.³ In fact, the unfolding of tonal musical structure—with all its detours, roadblocks, dead ends, and arrivals—is a roadmap for an inherently dramatic journey. This idea, implicit in some of the best writing on music (e.g., Edward T. Cone's article on Schubert's "promissory note"),⁴ is one of the most valuable and invigorating insights of musical scholarship, and a vital aspect of Schenkerian theory. Despite its significance, the relationship between musical and dramatic structure, particularly in vocal music, has not yet been formalized in an explicitly interdisciplinary analytical methodology.

Perhaps, part of the problem is a lack of precedent. Though Schenker was an opera critic in the early stages of his professional life,⁵ as an analyst he broke his customary silence on the subject of opera only to comment

negatively on Wagner's music. Schenker, as Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker point out, "did not otherwise venture into the brackish waters of opera, not even as far as the illusory purity of the Mozartean set-piece."⁶ However, since Schenker's death in 1935, music theorists—particularly in the United States—have adapted his ideas for application to a wider repertoire. As will be indicated in Chapter 2, this "Americanization" of Schenker (to use William Rothstein's term) bears some resemblance to the dissemination of Russian director Konstantin Stanislavsky's ideas on acting, in that "disciples" of varying degrees of orthodoxy—including the present author—have appropriated Schenker's system for their own purposes and to serve their own agendas.⁷ If combined with an equally nuanced and flexible mode of dramatic analysis, this expanded form of Schenkerian analysis might provide a model for the analysis of opera and other forms of "dramatic vocal music."⁸

Merging Tonal and Dramatic Analysis

What would be the methodological requirements for this new "linear-dramatic" hybrid?⁹ When Abbate and Parker, in the preface to *Analyzing Opera*, boldly declared that "'analyzing opera' should mean not only 'analyzing music' but simultaneously engaging with equal sophistication, the poetry and the drama,"¹⁰ they set a very high standard. Like the conundrum regarding the relative importance of text versus music in opera composition, captured by the famous seventeenth-century "words as the mistress of music" debate between the brothers Monteverdi and the critic Artusi, opera analysis has historically tended to migrate from one pole (music) to the other (poetry) and back again, while drama remained in a no man's land between the two, an uncharted territory that must be crossed in order to reach the true destination. A formalist enterprise at the outset, music analysis has been adapted, only with difficulty, to the demands of the operatic genre.

The results of this adaptation have largely tended to reinforce the notion of polarization.

One of the earliest examples of opera analysis, the fundamental-bass analysis by Jean d'Alembert of "*Enfin, il est en ma puissance*," from Lully's *Armide*, places opera analysis firmly in the formalist camp, presenting a harmonic analysis devoid of any commentary on the accompanying text.¹¹ By the end of the nineteenth century, however, composer-critics such as Berlioz, Schumann, and Carl Maria von Weber, all of whom, like Wagner after them, had a vested interest in maintaining the air of mystery surrounding the act of musical composition, had steered opera analysis away from the music and toward the poetry.¹² In 1912, music criticism had devolved to such a state that Schoenberg could complain that the critics "prattle almost exclusively about the libretto, the theatrical effectiveness, and the performers."¹³ Schoenberg does not exempt composer-critics. He asserts:

This is even true in the case of a composer's writing criticisms. Even if he is a good composer. [*sic*] For in the moment when he writes criticisms he is not a composer, not *musically inspired*. If he were inspired he would not describe how the piece ought to be composed, but would compose it himself.¹⁴

Later in the twentieth century, several explorers made the trek back towards analysis focused on the music itself. Led by Edward J. Dent, in whose capable hands music criticism began to take on a more analytical aspect once again, opera analysts began to return their focus to the music.¹⁵ Foremost among the resurgent formalists was Alfred O. Lorenz, whose studies of Wagnerian leitmotif were responsible for the creation of an entire cottage industry.¹⁶ Armed with their newfound focus on the music and, specifically, the motive, opera analysts tackled works by Mozart, Verdi, and Berg, as well as Wagner.¹⁷

In the 1990s, the pendulum began to swing back toward the text, as opera analysis was swept up in a broader cross-disciplinary examination of the

meaning of musical structure.¹⁸ As a result, a more balanced approach—one that includes the examination of text and music in equal proportions—is apparent in several recent opera studies.¹⁹ Amid all the attention paid to the music and the poetry, either individually or collectively, drama *per se* has nonetheless received short shrift, often relegated to a brief plot summary or outline.²⁰ While the method presented in Chapter 2—Stanislavsky’s system of character objectives—is not intended to provide a comprehensive response to Abbate and Parker’s challenge, it attempts to provide a more sophisticated and detailed means of analyzing what characters *want*, as opposed to what they say or sing. By seeking a method of dramatic analysis that focuses on the successes and failures of individual characters *vis à vis* their spoken and unspoken desires, the opera analyst can move beyond surface issues of plot to examine character motivations at a deeper level.

The Permanent Interruption and the Multi-Movement *Ursatz*

Linear-dramatic analysis—if it is committed to examining the dramatic goals or objectives of individual characters, both those that are successfully achieved and those that are undermined—must also define tonal success and failure in order to facilitate a comparison of the two. In Schenkerian analysis, ultimate tonal success in a given piece is defined by the completion of its *Ursatz*, or fundamental structure, comprised of the *Urlinie* (fundamental line) and the *Bassbrechung* (bass arpeggiation). An *Ursatz* is considered complete upon linear and harmonic arrival at its tonic pitch and triad, respectively, usually in a piece’s final measures. This arrival at tonic is an example of musical closure in the broadest possible terms, often prefigured by the many smaller linear completions and cadences during the course of the piece.

Given Schenker’s perceived emphasis on the fundamental structure in his analytical system (an emphasis that has drawn occasional criticism due to its

drastic graphical simplification of the musical surface)²¹ any compositional strategy that he allowed to impede the progress of the *Ursatz* ought to receive pride of place in a theory of tonal drama. That strategy—the most dramatic of all Schenkerian concepts—is the interruption. Typically a breaking of the line at $\hat{2}$ over the dominant followed by a return of the primary tone and a completed descent to $\hat{1}$ over the tonic, the interruption is typically discussed in relation to sonata form. Recent articles on form in music of the common-practice period include representative discussions of this concept.²² Its role as a marker of formal or phrase-structural division notwithstanding, the interruption is by its very nature a dramatic event—even its symbol (two vertical lines breaking the horizontal beam of the background line: $-||$) is visually striking.

Schenker's discussion of the interruption is primarily confined to two sections of *Der freie Satz*, the latter of which is devoted to sonata form. The first section occurs in the context of his presentation of structural aspects of the first middleground.²³ After demonstrating an interrupted 3-line, Schenker notes that “the initial succession $\hat{3}-\hat{2}$ gives the impression that it is the first attempt at the complete fundamental line,” but that “ $\hat{2}/V$ appears as the limit of an initial forward motion of the fundamental line.”²⁴ As Peter Smith has noted, this statement contradicts Schenker's later assertion that the interruption “has the effect of a delay, or retardation, on the way to the ultimate goal.”²⁵ The apparent contradiction concerns the relative importance of the first half of the interruption. According to the first statement, the initial descent from $\hat{3}-\hat{2}$ is subordinate to the completed version that follows it, while the latter statement gives the interruption more weight, de-emphasizing the subsequent retracing of the $\hat{3}-\hat{2}$ as a mere “delay.” In an editorial note on the two contrasting descriptions, Ernst Oster points out that although Schenker used two different notations for the interruption, both were intended to show the same thing: the relative importance of the first half of the interruption or what Allen Cadwallader and David Gagné call the “first branch.”²⁶

Schenker's emphasis on this "first branch" of the interruption makes phenomenological sense. He makes his emphasis explicit by stating that "with respect to the unity of the fundamental structure, the first occurrence of $\hat{2}/V$ is more significant than the second."²⁷ Because it receives priority of place in a musical work, the initial interrupted descent is of primary importance. In fact, it is possible to argue that the term "interruption" properly belongs only to the initial "broken" descent: the reinstatement of the primary tone and closure to $\hat{1}/I$, as noted by Smith, are more correctly identified as the "completion" or "continuation" of the fundamental line. As Cadwallader and Gagné put it, the actual "'point' of interruption" occurs at the end of the first branch.²⁸

Given the teleological significance of the point of interruption, should the analyst not then admit the possibility of a "permanent" or "sustained" interruption, one in which the second "branch," the completion or continuation, is omitted? Schenker implicitly dismissed the possibility of such a broken structure in *Der freie Satz*, maintaining that "if recent musical products have almost no end or seem to find no end, it is because they do not derive from a fundamental structure and hence do not arrive at a genuine $\hat{1}$; without the $\hat{1}$ a work is bound to give the effect of incompleteness."²⁹ But what if "the effect of incompleteness," particularly as it pertains to a fundamental structure, is precisely the effect a composer seeks to create?

Two articles, in particular, have addressed this issue in various ways: David Loeb's essay on "dual-key movements" in *Schenker Studies*, and Schachter's article on "*Das Drama des Ursatzes*" in *Schenker Studies 2*.³⁰ While Loeb's essay includes some trenchant observations, most notably that "when pieces begin and end in different keys such that neither key is understood as subsidiary to the other, then we must abandon our usual approach and seek a different kind of overall structure,"³¹ his focus is primarily on Baroque instrumental forms. Schachter, for his part, notes that in the absence of a normative background structure, "what the analyst must do is to arrive at the intuition of some higher level—middleground or background—and to

test that intuition against the totality of impressions made by the piece.”³² He then goes on to graph Chopin’s *Mazurka in A \flat major*, Op. 41/3 as a 5-line in which “the ghostly presence of the missing $\hat{2}$ and $\hat{1}$ is so clearly evident that the analysis should suggest something like the following: $\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}$ —but where are $\hat{2}$ and $\hat{1}$?”³³ His graph uses question marks and parentheses to indicate the absent, implied structural pitches.

Schachter maintains that “often, as here, Schenkerian theory is able to accommodate structural anomalies without the need for extending it by postulating, for example, new *Ursatz*-forms”; the mazurka would count as “a transformed 5-line piece, and not one that simply traverses a third from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{3}$.”³⁴ When the “totality of impressions” made by a piece includes a narrative in which a protagonist fails to reach a desired goal, however, it is tempting to disagree with Schachter. A *permanent interruption*—a broken background line descending only as far as $\hat{5}$ (for an 8-line) or $\hat{2}$ (for a 5-line or a 3-line)—is an effective, and indeed compelling, compositional response to such a scenario.³⁵ Schenker pupil Adele Katz puts it best when she claims that Wagner’s music, and by extension dramatic vocal music in general, must be studied

from two different points of view: first, whether it demonstrates the principles of structural unity; second, whether any sacrifice of these principles is due to the demands of the text.... [One must] consider any deviations in the basic techniques in relation to the text or dramatic action they represent.³⁶

Even with the permanent interruption representing musical failure, linear-dramatic analysis requires a second theoretical concession in order to compare the changing objectives of a character across an entire role to that character’s music—namely, the *multi-movement Ursatz*, a “meta-fundamental structure” in which each of the notes of the fundamental line is the primary tone of a separate aria, number, or movement, supported by the tonic of that number. Traditionally, Schenkerian analysts have restricted their analytical endeavors

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