***What Does Musical Analysis Tell Us?***

Extracted from Nicholas Cook: *A Guide to Musical Analysis*, Chapter 6

There are plenty of clearly defined techniques of musical analysis, but it is not always too clear exactly what these techniques are telling us about the music. In fact, I think there is a good deal of muddled thinking on this topic, which has had two undesirable results: first, the development of analytical approaches that are themselves false or at least wrong-headed; and secondly, false or wrong-headed notions about what it is that we can learn from existing approaches such as Schenkerian analysis. A good way to tackle the question ‘what can analysis tell us’ is to ask what it is that makes one analysis good and another bad, because this immediately raises the question: good in what sense? good for what?

Normally, all instances in which an analysis can be unambiguously shown to be right or wrong are a bit exceptional. Normally we expect an analysis to tell us something about the way we experience music: we judge whether it is good or bad according to whether it seems true to experience or not, and the objection to old-fashioned harmonic and formal labeling was precisely that they were not true to experience. At the same time, the various analytical approaches that grew out of this objection do not simply consist of descriptions of what we experience when we listen to music.

Motivic analysts, for instance, talk about patterns which they find equally in the tiny notes of pianistic figuration and on the largest scale of inter-movemental relations: but do people really hear either of these as motifs, let alone recognize the similarity between them, when they listen to music in the ordinary way? Again, Schenkerian analysis is based on the experience of large-scale tonal continuity and finality — but do people really experience these large-scale direction motions in the way Schenkerian analysis suggests they do? If we stopped a sonata movement half way through the development, would most listeners actually be able to sing out the home tonic at which the development is aiming? I doubt it: and analysts do not seem to be overly concerned with the facts of the matter, since they virtually never begin an analysis by making objective tests of audience responses like this.

It’s also true that an analysis can be aimed towards a specific group of listeners, who might have a stronger ear or better key sense than others. Recently one of my students felt that an analysis of a particular Mozart sonata wasn’t altogether legitimate, partly due to her extremely solid ear which could easily tell the difference between the subdominant key and the original tonic key. For a listener with such precise hearing, I would say that her analysis would probably make more sense. But based on the average listener’s experience, I would say that her analysis would be more confusing than helpful.

There are two possible justifications for analysts talking about things of which most musical listeners are not, in practice, aware. I think I can show both of them to be inadequate; but I shall explain what they are, partly because many analysts do believe one or the other, and partly because I consider a more satisfactory answer to the question ‘what does musical analysis tell us’ will emerge from the argument. The first justification, then, is a frankly elitist one. Schenker did not see himself as explaining how the average listener experienced music; in fact he was dismissive of the average person’s abilities to appreciate music at any serious level at all. What he was explaining was how the music demanded to be heard by a fully adequate listener — and he emphasized that hearing music correctly was no easy matter but required serious application. Now this is a perfectly coherent position — it involves no logical absurdity — but I think it narrows the purview of analysis to the point of irrelevance: isn’t the really fascinating thing about music the immediate effect it makes on even the most untutored listener?

I’m not so sure that Schenker’s position is all that coherent; from what I can gather of his teachings, he considered a ‘fully adequate listener’ to be one steeped in the long-scale polyphonic listening he himself advocated. That means that his argument was, at some level, circular: only a fully adequate listener can truly appreciate Schenkerian analysis, but only those steeped in Schenkerian analytical techniques can become fully adequate listeners.

The second possible justification has to be taken much more seriously and it involves the characteristically twentieth-century concept of unconscious perception. I shall explain what this means before showing how it applies to music. Analysts of music in the first half of the century derived their concept of unconscious perception from Freud. Freud had made sense of the apparently random and meaningless behaviour of neurotics by showing how it derived from their unconscious wishes or intentions. The neurotics themselves had no idea of these wishes or intentions; they had repressed them from their conscious mind, which is why they could not explain their own behavior. But these wishes and intentions still determined what they did. So Freud was making sense of the incoherent actions of neurotics by setting them in the context of the unconscious mind — an unconscious mind which could not be directly proved to exist, but whose existence could be deduced from its effect upon neurotic behavior. In the same way, musical analysts saw it as their task to make sense of the fragmentary and incomplete perceptions of musical listeners by setting these in the context of underlying structures which listeners don’t consciously perceive, such as motivic resemblances between tunes. Of course people aren’t consciously aware of these motivic parallels, the motivic analysts said, but they are responsible for the experience of musical unity none the less. And therefore the point of an analysis is not to *describe* what people consciously perceive: it is to *explain* their experience in terms of the totality of their perceptions, conscious and unconscious. Although it has been the motivic analysts who have adopted Freudian concepts most explicitly — and Hans Keller most of all — I imagine that Freud’s thinking had some influence on Schenker too. Certainly Schenker’s talk of the ‘daemonic forces’ of the middleground, and of the fundamental structure being a secret hidden behind the foreground, has a Freudian ring. And his concept of analytical interpretation being a process of revealing the meaning of the obvious, by deriving it from what is hidden, is very comparable with psychoanalysis.

The belief that analysis explains the experience of music in an essentially scientific sense — in other words that it uncovers causes of which a listener’s response is the effect — has been extremely influential in the twentieth century. I consider this belief to be misguided; but before going on to rebut it I want to show some of the consequences that follow if you hold it. The most important is the immediate association that will wind up being made between analysis and the aesthetic value of music. After all, if analysis can explain how it is that we respond to masterpieces with aesthetic pleasure, then it stands to reason that it can be used as a criterion of whether music is masterly or not. The result is a somewhat narrow and pedagogical aesthetic which puts a great premium on the clarity with which structural functions are expressed in music, on the absence of unnecessary ornamentation, and in general upon unity and inevitability. To many analysts it is unthinkable that in any particular compositional situation a whole range of alternatives will serve equally well — or at least they would consider this a condemnation of the music. In this way analysis has become associated with a kind of aesthetic determinism: the aim is to deduce aesthetic properties directly from the musical structure — or, more specifically, from the musical score. You might call this the ‘deletion of the listener’ as a free agent; he is replaced by a theory which correlates the material properties of the music with the appropriate aesthetic response. And in consequence of this it has come to be widely thought that the higehst aim of musical analysis — and the thing that distinguishes it from mere description — is the formation of general theories capable of being applied to any particular instance of music, rather like the theories of general grammar developed by the structural linguists. Perhaps this is the natural result of analysis having become to a large extent the preserve of the universities — institutions which are primarily geared to laying down a store of knowledge than to developing practical skills in the individual.

People who see musical analysis as some kind of scientific enterprise put a lot of effort into trying to prove the general superiority of one analytical method over another as a matter of theory. It seems to me that this is unfortunate because it leads people to adhere to one analytical method under all circumstances, and this can only blunt the analysts’ sensibility to all the individual qualities and variety of musical phenomena. Indeed, it can result in a kind of production-line mentality in which pieces are analyzed for no apparent reason except that they are there. In particular I am thinking of complex motivic and formal analyses that result in impressive tables and graphs whose actual significance nobody can quite figure out — especially when the music itself seems relatively simple and straightforward. This situation is the consequence of laying far too much significance on the theoretical component of analysis.

I would add to this that I detect a certain amount of ‘science envy’ on the part of analysts, particularly those who hang out in universities (which is most of them). Folks engaged in the humanities have been watching themselves slide into perceived irrelevance for most of the century, as the physical sciences and their technological offspring have taken over the academy in prestige, money, and mindshare. It wasn’t so in the nineteenth century, when study of the classics held sway as the dominant paradigm for collegiate education. But as Classics started down the slope, Humanities in general went right down the tubes with them. Nowadays humanists of all stripes seem compelled to paste faux-scientific fig leaves over their studies. No scholar likes to think of his or her work as silly, peripheral stuff — but that is an all-too-often encountered attitude in the academy these days. (Frankly, sometimes the attitude is fully justified.) Thus the almost frantic search for something that looks and acts ‘techie’.

One writer who has covered this situation with wit, clarity, and insight is Huston Smith, the author of “The World’s Religions” and  a major force in the field of comparative religion. He knows only too well what it is like to be a humanist amidst scientists and technologists: for many years he taught courses on religion and philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

So in analyzing music: reading the score several times, describing the details of the music in ordinary language, perhaps parsing the more complex chords — these simple procedures are usually more productive than immediately launching into some complex, theory-laden analysis. And in any case the difficulty two analysts can have in even agreeing what the facts of the matter are shows that the simplest description is not really neutral, but already involves interpretative criteria of some sort.

It’s always fun to share the same opinions as the author you’re reading. My own stance has always been to use analytical ‘tools’ only as the work grows more detailed, but always to start out with a lot of listening. Probably my most frequent piece of advice to analysis students is: listen to the piece over and over; drink it in; practically memorize it by ear; don’t write a word or make a single observation until you’ve listened past the point of satiation. It’s really easy to tell the difference in an analysis that is primarily eye- and intellect-driven, and another which really comes from the inner ear, the imagination, and the heart.

Whatever its theoretical shortcomings, a simple verbal description of the musical experience is a practical starting point for an analysis. And if there are drawbacks to such a verbal description, these are more practical than theoretical: for instance, a symbolic tabulation of thematic sections, period-lengths, keys and chordal types allows you to see the structure at a glance (in a way that a prose description does not) and also forces you to make rather more definite categorizations since such symbols on the whole can have more precise meanings that words — though there is a danger in this, in that such symbols may lead to a premature precision which your understanding of the music does not actually warrant. And even at a more advanced level it seems to me that the advantages and disadvantages of different analytical techniques are practical rather than theoretical. For instance Schenkerian analysis seems to me a much more useful technique in general than set-theoretical analysis, even though its theoretical foundation is manifestly spurious. In Schenkerian analysis there is a constant give-and-take between informal decision and formal consequence; even the symbols of the analysis are fluid, floating half way between musical note and analytical abstraction. The Schenkerian analyst may start (as analysts frequently do) with a hunch about some connection; as he tries it out graphically it will almost immediately become clear whether the connection makes sense or not. Conversely a graph-in-progress may suggest a certain connection and the analyst can immediately turn to the score, asking himself: is that a good way to hear the music? In this way a Schenkerian analysis allows a great deal of interaction between the aural experience on the one hand and the analytical rationalization on the other; and this is why (when it works, which is of course not always) it seems a more *musical* technique of analysis than others. Besides, it provides reasonably quick results.

This is a good, solid defense of the uses of Schenkerian analysis. Personally I think there’s very little objection to incorporating Schenker-style analysis, even if the background assumptions are wholly illogical and in some ways sound like the ravings of a wacko religious cult leader. As I tell my students, we aren’t doing engineering here so it doesn’t have to make logical sense. But I do object to the extravagant claims made by some Schenkerians, and also to the supercilious and arrogant tone that tends to accompany those claims. As a tool it has its uses within the context of a larger-scale analysis, and certainly encourages us to keep on listening and thinking and imagining.

If a misplaced belief in the scientific validity of their work has been a hindrance to musical analysts, I think this is not so much because it has led them to do wrong things but because it has led them to make the wrong claims for what they do. These claims have been both too ambitious and too modest. I think that the claim that analysis can produce reliable criteria for aesthetic evaluation is over-ambitious. Certainly the analytical process may clarify one’s ideas about  piece; quite possibly it will show evidence of a certain kind of craftsmanship; but there are too many fine pieces and even repertoires that cannot be satisfactorily analyzed for this to be a convincing criterion of aesthetic quality. Nor am I convinced that analysis is of that much significance as a means of creating an aesthetic appreciation where it previously did not exist. True, it encourages attentive listening, but anyone who only liked music because he could analyze it would be a crushing musical bore.

Inappropriate claims like these not only encourage a narrow-mindedness of musical response; they also deflect emphasis from the claims that can justifiably be made for analysis as it is practiced. It is at undergraduate and college level, not as an instrument of advanced research, that analysis seems to me to have its most vital role to play in today’s musical culture. It has this role because the ability to set aside details and ‘see’ large-scale connections appropriate to the particular musical context, which is what analysis encourages, is an essential part of the musician’s way of perceiving musical sound. For the performer, it is obvious that analysis has a role to play in the memorization of extended scores, and to some extent in the judgment of large-scale dynamic and rhythmic relationships (although some of the claims that Schenkerian analysis, in particular, is indispensable for performers and conductors have surely been overstated.) But it still has a more direct link with composition. To analyze a piece of music is to weigh alternatives, to judge how it would have been if the composer had done this instead of that — it is, in a sense, to recompose the music in a way that normal, concert-hall listening is not. In this way today’s composers serve their apprenticeship with masters of the past through analysis of their works; and it is obvious that the preoccupations of musical analysts are closely related to those of composers.

I’m a strong advocate of thorough training in analysis for performers, which is why over the past several years I have been bringing regular training in analysis into the SF Conservatory’s curriculum — not only as elective study at undergraduate and graduate levels, but also as part of the core curriculum followed by all undergraduate students during their first two years at SFCM.

However, I consider the value of analysis for blue-collar, performing musicians to be more of an organic nature than anything really concrete. Overall I consider its greatest single value to be the way it imposes on a performer the necessity of assimilating and understanding a piece of music without recourse to the usual reliance on instrumental or vocal technique. Many student performers learn a piece physically, get their interpretational ideas off records or from their teachers, and that’s about it. But analysis stands in the same general class as solfège — it doesn’t let them depend on those well-honed skills, but makes them think and listen.

As for the claim that Schenkerian analysis is ‘indispensable’ for performers and conductors, well — a moment’s reflection reveals such a statement for the fatuous pomposity that it is. If Schenkerian analysis is ‘indispensable’ for high-quality interpretation, then we must conclude that non-Schenkerians such as Artur Schnabel, Pablo Casals, and Andres Segovia were all mediocre interpreters. Among today’s more cerebral and analytic of performers, consider that neither Charles Rosen nor Paul Badura-Skoda are particularly Schenkerian in their outlook.