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Music, Theory, and Education in the Wake of Schenkergate: A UK Perspective

Music Theory is American. The USA became music theory's undisputed centre of gravity around the time Schenker's ideas arrived there after the Second World War, and American dominance has obtained ever since. The vast majority of current theory being published—certainly in English, but probably in general—comes from American academics, departments, and university presses. It has already been more than 20 years since Jim Samson made the cautionary observation that “an ethos of professionalism risks separating disciplines from the underlying... questions they pose” (Samson 1999, 38). By importing American theory, we import the product of any political, economic, and institutional structures that have shaped it. This may count as a positive in certain respects. Some scholars in Europe look across the Atlantic with a degree of envy, given US theory's barely contested disciplinary sturdiness—a dividend of the professionalisation that Samson identified. We do, however, also import some less welcome symptoms. Samson went on to remark that “[t]he transformation of Schenker's thought into a straightforward, modern scientific truth stripped of metaphysical resonance is symptomatic of this later stage of analytical enquiry, one which subsequently fed through from American to British analysts, clearly differentiating both from German theorists” (Samson 1999, 43). While the music-analytical community in the UK has made sustained efforts to get its own house in order in the wake of the New Musicology and all the structural reorientations that it catalysed in the 1990s, the narrative coming from some historical musicologists, as Julian Horton has recently argued, is predicated on the idea that theory and analysis had been de-commissioned long ago as an unviable avenue for scholarship (Horton 2020).

2020 was a remarkable year in which the Black Lives Matter movement garnered renewed public awareness and received increased media attention. In the USA, political tensions were rising as the November presidential election grew closer, and the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in May of that year—the most famous in a long list of killings in the preceding months—assured the continued and high-profile presence of BLM during the election campaign. In the UK, statues of slave traders (the British parallel to Confederate monuments in the US) such as Edward Colston's in Bristol became the focal point of protests and demonstrations. After Colston's statue was taken down by protestors and thrown into Bristol Harbour on June 7, statues across the UK became the subject of intensified scrutiny.

Counter-protestors on the political right were quick to jump to the rescue of these monuments in the name of protection of public property and of history itself, mobilising to demonstrate against the BLM movement. This “protection” extended beyond statues of wealthy and powerful colonialists, evidenced by the curious incident of right-wing racists claiming to be protecting the statue of George Eliot (a well-known critic of slavery and antisemitism) in the English town of Nuneaton, Warwickshire. It was alarming to see not only how quickly the right could mobilise their foot soldiers, but also how the important issues and arguments collapsed into crude tribalism. For a time it appeared there was a significant section of the British public who simply believed that people on the right liked statues and people on the left didn’t. The issue with statues is likely to endure, not least because of their physical, material nature. Oriel College, University of Oxford, after a prolonged campaign led by the protest movement Rhodes Must Fall, recently decided against the removal of their statue of the colonialist Cecil Rhodes, citing regulatory and financial challenges as being too complex and difficult to overcome. This decision was quickly endorsed by the Conservative government’s Education Secretary Gavin Williamson, who argued that the focus should be on reducing inequality and not “censoring history.”

The question of statues is homologous with the questions raised about music theory: both were briefly in the public spotlight in summer 2020, providing a platform on which the so-called “culture war” could be played out, and both controversies drew on objections to Eurocentric (and therefore imperialist) structures of thought, identity, and power. The “Schenkergate” controversy undoubtedly positioned Schenker “the man” as its main object of focus. Many commentators were also keen to focus on the individual composers that Schenker was interested in, but the body of theory and analysis that followed in the 85 years since Schenker’s death seemed only to be of secondary importance. After Ewell made his important arguments in both written and spoken form in 2019 the responses were effective in drawing the debate about Schenker into a frenzied realm in which opposing sides resolutely refused to listen or engage each other’s arguments. This was especially the case online. Most of the *dramatis personae* outside of academia probably cared little about the details of Schenkerian theory, and much less understood Schenker’s musical aims or the ways his theory might be useful for enhancing our understanding of a particular repertoire. Even within academic debates the argument took on the prevailing structure of the time, with two polarised sides either shouting past each other or playing to their own supporters. During this time the problematic fact that the theory under discussion was being attacked for being too Eurocentric despite nearly all of it originating from America was barely acknowledged.

Schenker and the textbooks

Theory means different things in the UK and the USA, and within the UK it is interpreted differently in academic contexts compared with the wider environment of music education. The tendency to defer to music theory textbooks in higher education is

out of fashion in the UK. Here, though, we need to draw a distinction between two types of textbook in circulation. The first forms the backbone of what goes on in the research environment, conceptually belonging with the theoretical articles published in journals such as the *Journal of Music Theory*, *Music Theory Spectrum*, and *Music Analysis*. These texts present original research, advance the discipline, and include important contributions which now occupy many of our shelves: Hepokoski's and Darcy's *Elements of Sonata Theory*, Caplin's *Classical Form*, Schmalfeldt's *In the Process of Becoming*, and Gjerdingen's *Music in the Galant Style* are four such examples which are regularly found in bibliographies. The other type of textbook reorganises already known material in a format that is reproducible in the classroom. Examples of this sort include American publications such as Gauldin's *Harmonic Practice in Tonal Music* and Clendinning's and Marvin's *The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis*, and British ones such as Butterworth's *Harmony in Practice*. These tend to be used in a more anonymous way. That sonata form is organised into three sections, exposition, development, and recapitulation, is to be accepted in the same way that undergraduates in a physics department must accept that the speed of light in a vacuum is a universal constant. "Theory," in this case, is not a dynamic and protean humanities discipline; it is not a crucible of ideas but a monolithic and ahistorical series of "facts." Music theory, especially Schenker's theory of musical structure, is presented here as timeless and static. It is also presented as a single, unified theory despite the fact that Schenker changed his ideas considerably during his own lifetime. This approach tends not only to remove the metaphysical context (as Samson noted in 1999), but also any authorial presence. Much like we find in the sciences, the history of the type of theory taught in undergraduate curricula is often marginalised as an irrelevance. The history of science, for example, is largely absent from undergraduate programmes in physics: the important information is the theoretical and experimental content and not any historical details of when this knowledge was developed, by who, and what the discoverers' views might have been on anything else. It is easy to see how Schenker's political views might be seen as irrelevant to his theoretical ideas in institutions in which academics work in their silos, unburdened by messy political interference. James Watson, to draw another comparison with the sciences, was the 1962 Nobel laureate, winning the prize for Psychology or Medicine for his contribution to the discovery of the structure of DNA. He also holds despicable and politically untenable views, including arguments for a correlation between skin colour and intelligence, future abortion of foetuses with the "gay gene" (should one be discovered), and the use of genetic engineering to increase female sexual attractiveness (Belluz 2019). No one is arguing as a result of this that his work on the structure of DNA should be thrown out. The reproducibility of the experimental method rules this argument out and the scientific community acknowledges that a bad man can have a good idea. Schenker held politically untenable views, but in the humanities it is very much more difficult to separate the man from the theory.

The Schenkergate scandal

Responses to Ewell's talk and its associated written versions (2020, 2021) varied considerably. Some thought that what he had to say was painfully obvious but nonetheless had to be spelled out. This position now seems to have become the majority view in the discipline. At the time, however, a vocal minority felt his argument was needlessly divisive, an irrelevance to the task at hand, and a vicious attack on one of music theory's most venerable figures. One of the tragedies of this saga is that much of the content of what Ewell had to say was overshadowed by the controversies contained within the pages of the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies* volume 12 (2019, hereafter, *JSS12*).

The *JSS12* responses to Ewell's presentation ranged from the thoughtful to the unrelated, irrelevant, and incendiary. The structural and professional problems with the *JSS12* call were summed up in the fact that only 20 days were given from the announcement to the deadline, and Ewell was not invited to respond to the essays published therein. A few of these articles responded positively to Ewell's work, and among these I would draw attention to essays by Susannah Clark and Christopher Segall. Some were unrelated to the theme of the issue, but many were hostile to Ewell's proposals, and these tended to be short and to the point (and in one case, anonymous). On reading these responses, it was difficult to reconcile the seriousness of the issue at hand and the scholarly nature of the publication (to which a previous volume Ewell himself contributed) with the brevity and blithely casual attitude that many of the contributors seemed to bring to the discussion. The whimsical admission from the anonymous contributor (Anon. 2019) read: "I'm certainly not as informed about Schenker the person as I am the Schenkerian methodology," but they were nevertheless content to publish their thoughts on the matter while hiding behind the mask of anonymity, a gambit borrowed from social media where it has been a given at least since the early days of Twitter.

A question of context

Ewell used Schenker as an example of a wider problem in American music theory, the "white racial frame," a structure which serves to marginalise non-white musics and theories. His point was not solely about Schenker, though Schenkerian theory was the obvious exemplar for all sorts of reasons, extending, but not limited, to its curricular centrality in the USA, the narrowly European repertoire that it applies to, the hierarchical organisation of musical structure that it proposes, and the untenable political opinions Schenker held. Of all the suggestions that Ewell made, his recommendation for a reduction of the number of compulsory semesters of Schenkerian theory from four to two, freeing up time to do something else, non-white or non-Western, was for some his most provocative. On the future of Schenkerian theory, he wrote, "if music theory is to survive in the twenty-first century, as I hope it does, we have much soul searching to do with respect to race. If Schenkerian theory is to survive in the twenty-first century, as I hope it does, we must confront the uncomfortable realities not

just of Schenker himself but, more important, of the legacy of how we have engaged with his ideas and what that means with respect to race in American music theory” (Ewell 2020, §8.1). Viewed from a UK perspective, the modesty of Ewell’s suggestion was rivalled by the ferocity of the reaction against it. In the UK there is far less theory going on than in the USA, and the discipline is not as professionalised. We do not have theory programmes; rather, professors and lecturers in music theory and analysis are housed within music programmes with a much broader remit, rubbing shoulders with historical musicologists, ethnomusicologists, composers, and performers. This more flexible institutional structure, in which researchers are more readily able to oscillate dialectically between historical, theoretical, and creative modes of thought (a freedom that many of us revel in), also leads to a situation in which the amount of space in the curriculum for each of these subjects is scarcer. In my own department (which might be representative) we offer 2 compulsory semesters of foundational music theory in the first year of the degree (something short of Schenkerian analysis), followed by two optional semesters of theory and analysis in the second year. This precious time needs to be spent carefully, and I have come to the view that Schenkerian theory should figure for three reasons: it is a unique approach to a repertoire; it has been hugely influential, spawning a vast literature, and teaching the theory removes a barrier to critical engagement with that literature; and it is a way of getting students to deal with musical materials outside of the contexts of composition and performance. Schenkerian theory cannot, however, be the only advanced theory that our students should be inducted into. While I usually reserve one semester for Schenker, I give the other semester over to *New Formenlehre*. From the perspective of my own institution, then, Ewell is calling for double the amount of Schenkerian theory than we currently offer. The objection was bluntly handled by the anonymous contributor in *JSS12*, who wrote that “[i]n Ewell’s defence, he certainly didn’t suggest what many people later drew from his remarks. I felt on board with his paper in the beginning, that diversifying the music repertoire is a good idea. And while I would also support additional classes that teach music theory for non-European traditions, I did not like the suggestion of reducing the core theory courses from four to two classes (most undergrads are bad enough after four classes as it is!)” (Anon. 2019). One of the practical problems that this situation raises has to do with breadth and depth. When time, resource, and expertise are scarce (most of us specialise in one musical tradition), how do we diversify the curriculum while maintaining a depth of knowledge and understanding? This issue will continue to sustain itself unless there is either a considerable increase in the space accorded to theory within music studies, an injection of resource to support it, or some kind of radical re-skilling within the profession. Given the current precarious state of music education in the UK, these changes seem unlikely to materialise.

Rather than simply giving time over to black composers in music theory classes, an approach which is open to charges of tokenism (Samuel Coleridge Taylor as the “Black Mahler,” Ludovic Lamothe as the “Black Chopin,” the Chevalier de Saint-Georges as the “Black Mozart” and so on), and which Ewell explicitly states is not a sustainable solution to decoupling the white racial frame, would it not be more pro-

ductive to introduce more context to our theoretical endeavours? This is not to say that making a start on diversifying the repertoire is not a good idea, but that Ewell was arguing for something more than this approach alone. Drawing attention to historical events which seem to cut against the “Great White Dead Men” narrative could be a useful starting point, and one that involves a way of thinking about the music theory curriculum that might be more familiar to European rather than American academics. An example of this approach could be the collaborative context behind Haydn’s success in Paris: in 1785, the Chevalier de Saint-Georges was charged with arranging a commission of six symphonies from Haydn for the *Concert de la Loge Olympique*. Saint-Georges conducted the première performances of the six new “Paris” symphonies. Another could be the London music scene around 1900, which Samuel Coleridge Taylor had exploded onto with *Hiawatha’s Wedding Feast* in 1898 at the age of 22. Elgar, already 41 by this point, had yet to break through with his *Enigma Variations*, which would only receive its first performance the following year; yet, the quality of Coleridge Taylor’s music is still assessed by the yardstick of Elgar’s approval. This approach is less a full-scale reform of music theory and more an integration of theory with other parts of the curriculum. The interlacing of these important contextual points seems a healthy method of building up a sustainable antiracist music history, which then demands theoretical mediation. Current efforts only actively pursue the reverse—the antiracist contexts are being mobilised in order to mediate theory. Both approaches are necessary for the discipline as a whole to progress.

Is it better to remove Schenker’s name from the theory, calling it “prolongational analysis” instead? Christopher Segall makes just this suggestion, proposing “a reapellation of Schenkerian analysis to prolongational analysis and the replacement of English terms for German ones, since both alternatives carry less baggage” (2019, 183). Or is it better to call it what it is, shining a harsh light on the context? My own view is that it would be a lost opportunity to attempt to disguise or to diminish Schenker’s pivotal role in such central and widely used theoretical ideas as “prolongation” and the *Ursatz*. We need more context and not less. Robert P. Morgan’s book does well to bring Schenker’s politics and metaphysics closer to his musical thinking, recoupling those ideas after their artificial abstraction from one-another during Schenker’s importation into American universities in the middle of the twentieth century (Morgan 2014).

Public Musicology

The online response to *JSS12* was able to quickly collapse a succession of important arguments. The result was that theory as presented in those responses became diminished, incurably tainted as a racist discipline, notably in Adam Neely’s video on “Music Theory and White Supremacy.” While the initial material of the dispute emerged in scholarly circles (i.e., an article and a talk at the SMT by Philip Ewell, then the responses in *JSS12*), the bulk of the reaction has happened on social media, blogs, newspapers, and YouTube. The expanding field of public musicology, also primarily an American phenomenon, differs most fundamentally from academic discourse be-

cause it is aimed at a lay audience and presented in simplified short-form formats. Scholarship allows for much more nuance, internal disagreement, and complexity, which often disappears in public discourse. In this context, misunderstandings and collapsing arguments begin to proliferate. Principal among these is the idea that because Schenker held racist views, and he is the most famous twentieth-century music theorist, all music theory is white-supremacist. Even though Schenker's own work is demonstrably not pluralist in its aims, more recent attempts to diversify both the approach and the repertoire have made progress, and music theory as a whole is a plural enough discipline to encompass all sorts of music from Europe and anywhere else in the world.

A valuable example of this is Kofi Agawu's book on African music (I use the author's terminology, which he carefully unpacks in the opening pages). Agawu (2016) engages those repertoires from a theoretical perspective and, in doing so, also stops non-Western music from being the preserve of ethnomusicologists alone while engaging in post-colonial critique through music theory. In other words, music in its diversity is approachable by theory, although the theory that overwhelmingly appears in the textbooks relies on a static set of inviolable laws which are regularly presented as all there is. This definitional false-start has been repeated over and over, with social media personalities propagating the idea that theory is Roman numerals, Schenkerian graphs, and, in Neely's case, "the harmonic style of eighteenth-century European composers" itself. Such a corpus of theory does exist in the textbooks, but it does not account for the entire discipline. The cure for the white-supremacism embedded in eighteenth-century European music presented here is a specifically American form of free-market liberalism. American popular music is the genre which occupies the economically privileged position, but mass appeal is not always an indicator of merit. This has been a well-rehearsed part of musicological debate since Adorno's and Horkheimer's critique of "mass culture," later refined in Adorno's study of the "culture industry" (Adorno 2001). When Ewell called for more of "the music theories of Asia, Africa, [and] the Americas" he was not endorsing a decisive shift of emphasis towards highly commercialised Anglo-American pop. There is already a rich and dynamic field of analytical scholarship on popular music and it is, perhaps, not a coincidence that much of this music theory first appeared from British scholars, rather than Americans. British musicologists such as Allan Moore (1992, 1995, 2002, 2010), Richard Middleton (1983, 1985, 1993, 2007), David Clarke (2007), Philip Tagg (1982, 1987, 1998), and Kenneth Smith (2014, 2019) have been arguing for decades that we take seriously—and critique—popular music. The argument from the field of public musicology, it seems, is knocking at an open door—one that has been unlocked in scholarly writing for some time now.

The critique of *JSS12* that flooded the internet also involved a mixture of free-market economics and a scientific approach to the study of music—something that is in the end a human activity. The "timeless" quality of music theory (and tonal theory in particular) as it is often presented in textbooks belies the fact that it has its own history which long pre-dates the eighteenth century, and this seems to have again been

either forgotten or wilfully ignored both by the Schenkerian traditionalists and by those critiquing them. The controversy, which has largely been conducted on the basis that theory is ahistorical, is doing as much now to jeopardise the future of music theory as conservatism or neo-liberalism. In the USA this may be in part a result of the very same “professionalisation” of the discipline which, at the undergraduate end of the conveyor belt, presents theory as a narrowly defined curriculum that can be taught from (often) a (single) textbook, and kept quite separate from historical musicology. Neely adopts a broadly pro-American and anti-European position which reproduces the short-circuit that J.P.E. Harper-Scott (2011, 12) identified in Richard Taruskin’s *The Oxford History of Western Music*, namely that anything “European” immediately defaults to being “German”, and anything “German” immediately defaults to “Nazism” (or, in this case, white supremacism more generally). The argument is peculiarly fixated on how Eurocentric all the oppressive structures are within the discipline, despite all the publications under scrutiny having emerged from American authors, universities, and publishing houses. The Eurocentric nature of this music theory stems in no small part, today, from North America rather than from European scholarship itself. It is of course a product of European colonialism, but nowadays it is largely, and ironically, US scholars who are perpetuating this Eurocentricism.

Alternatives to Schenkerism

The rage against Schenkerian theory also risks drawing in anything that *looks like* Schenkerian theory, which extends to schema theory (Gjerdingen 2007), an approach that employs notation of scale degrees and figured bass, but which has little to do with harmony or the hierarchical organisation and notions of canon and genius that Schenkerian theory presupposes. In schema theory there is no requirement for any sort of hierarchical organisation—more or less any schema can be either subordinate or superordinate to any other. Gjerdingen’s book primarily considers Italian and Austro-German composers and therefore seems an unlikely candidate for an anti-racist theory. The book could, however, make a contribution to such an approach because of the decoupling from older canonical practices that it achieves within the limited context of a particular musical common tongue in a specific culture and time. While this is a step away from the “Great White Men” narrative it is not a challenge to the field’s whiteness; but the historical and social context of the book is precisely the one in which such a decoupling process is most revealing. Through its promotion of a kind of historically informed listening, it severs some unhelpful ties between twenty-first-century music theory and its nineteenth- and twentieth-century roots. The composers that Gjerdingen is interested in are not presented here as part of the “Great White Men” narrative of cultural superiority. By contrast, Gjerdingen is interested in what is typical, and not in what is great. He asks us to understand this music in the historically informed context of the “jobbing musician” with an emphasis on composers as workers and composition as labour, a decentralised world in which a L. van Beethoven holds as much cultural currency as a J.J. Prinner (in fact, Prinner, who has a schema

named after him, is elevated over Beethoven in this case). The ethos of the theory is encapsulated in this remarkably unromantic passage from the book's introduction:

The popular view of the composer—a Romantic view inherited from the nineteenth century—does not fit the eighteenth-century reality. The composer of galant music, rather than being a struggling artist alone against the world, was more like a prosperous civil servant.... He worried less about the meaning of art and more about whether his second violin player would be sober enough to play Sunday Mass. (Gjerdingen 2007, 6)

I compare the approaches of Schenker and Gjerdingen to demonstrate that music theory, even in the specific context of eighteenth-century European art music, is diverse. Not all theory is so obsessed with a canon of masterworks and such a heavy focus on Schenker is ultimately a distraction from the underlying problems that need to be addressed in music theory and music education more broadly.

Racial injustice exists in large part as a class issue and requires an economic response. Here, I would argue, Ewell could have gone further. The solutions that he proposes to address racism in American music theory should be instated in full, but they all, ultimately, involve making adjustments to the cultural superstructure and do not directly challenge the inequality in the economic base. These recommendations can be summarised as follows: renaming a committee, convening an anti-racist conference or inviting an antiracist speaker to a conference, encouraging more disciplinary flexibility, offering a new award for antiracist music scholarship, and the removal of Confederate and other controversial monuments from music theory textbooks. It seems here, again, that none of these recommendations involves parting with any large sums of money that would be needed in order to address broader inequalities of access. These recommendations are within the power of institutions such as the SMT and universities to implement, and they should do so, but without the necessary political and economic action they can only have a limited effect.

The American academy is the dominant force in music theory. This essay calls for more contextualisation of theory both in the classroom and in research contexts. After the furore that ensued in 2020 following the publication of *JSS12*, the interlacing of these important contextual points seems a healthy method of building up sustainable antiracist music history and theory, each of which can be mediated by the other. Cultural change alone, however, is not enough. Until we can develop a willingness to discuss music theory, education, outreach, and participation in economic terms that carve out a material response to the current inequalities of access, the problems we face are unlikely to be resolved. For all the justified charges of Eurocentrism in the white racial frame of music theory, it may be worthwhile for our US colleagues to look across the Atlantic and consider how European models of curricular contextualisation and disciplinary flexibility may help address the challenges that face music theory today. Such models may not in themselves be antiracist, but if nothing else they do, for instance, show that Schenker need not be the bedrock upon which music theory stands.

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