

# Musical brokenness, intentionality, and the singer-actor: A view from the stage

Dr. Edward D. Latham

Boyer College of Music and Dance, Temple University, USA  
elatham@temple.edu - <http://www.temple.edu/boyer>

Dr. Roberta Sloan

School of Communications and Theater, Temple University, USA  
rsloan@temple.edu - <http://www.temple.edu/sct>

Proceedings of the fourth Conference on Interdisciplinary Musicology (CIM08)  
Thessaloniki, Greece, 3-6 July 2008, <http://web.auth.gr/cim08/>

**Background in music theory and analysis.** Recent examinations of the intentionality of musical structure (Almén, 2006), the relationship between analysis and performance (Latham, 2006), and the use of interdisciplinary methods for the analysis of opera (Abbate, 2001) provide a basis for the present study. From a 'New Schenkerian' perspective that incorporates recent contributions on the meaning of musical structure (Burstein, 2006; Brown, 2005; Everett, 2004; Schachter, 1999), this paper will propose two alternative models of background structure—the permanent interruption and the multi-movement *Ursatz* (Latham, 2005)—that are better able to represent the musico-dramatic structures of opera and, by extension, other large-scale or fractured works. Examples will be given from the operas of Joplin and Weill, and particular emphasis will be placed on the potential impact of the new analytical models for performance.

**Background in performance.** This paper will use Constantin Stanislavsky's concept of the dramatic objective as a starting point for its discussion of performance, particularly as it relates to the Schenkerian concept of interruption, or failure to achieve linear closure. The ongoing publication by Routledge Press of a new English translation of the complete works of Stanislavsky (Carnicke, 1993) indicates the continued relevance of his theories for present-day actors and directors. Historically neglected by students of "the Method," Stanislavsky's system of objectives (Stanislavsky, 1961; Hagen, 1991; Levin, 1992 and 2002) can lend valuable insights into dramatic structure and re-open the question of intentionality for texted musical works. A particular character's failure to achieve his or her dramatic objective will be considered a dramatic interruption and will be discussed with regard to its potential correlation with music-structural interruptions. The status of Stanislavsky's system as a practical tool intended for use by performers will be discussed and compared with Schenkerian theory, which, though still far from attaining it, aspires to a similar status.

**Aims.** We aim to expand Schenkerian theory by opening it to other disciplines, particularly dramatic theory, and to re-examine the question of intentionality in light of our findings on the correlations between musical and dramatic structure. Through our synthesis of two different fields of inquiry (music theory and dramatic theory), we hope to reinvigorate analysis and performance studies, particularly of vocal music.

**Main contribution.** Most analyses of dramatic vocal music (song cycles, operas, operettas, oratorios, etc.) tend to focus almost exclusively on either the musical or textual elements of the work. This paper provides a synthesis of musical and dramatic structure that addresses the controversial issue of intentionality by focusing on character.

**Implications.** Studies like this one will empower singers to join the emerging dialogue on analysis and performance by referring directly to their character-based perspective on opera. The approach taken here also raises the possibility of infusing musical insights into the analysis of roles by opera directors and singer-actors during the rehearsal process. If it can also help to foster the development of "inter-artistic" collaborations that draw on historical and methodological insights from within the arts, promote the expansion of Schenkerian theory to include insights from other disciplines, and/or point toward a re-examination of intentionality for music analysis, then it will have accomplished everything the authors could have hoped for and more.

There is a perceived 'knowledge gap' between singers and music theorists, who are stereotypically placed at opposite ends of the intellectual spectrum in casual 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.<sup>1</sup> It is the singer that is uniquely qualified to bring an insider's perspective to these important works.

### Tonality as drama

One way to encourage the participation of performers in the analytical process is to establish a common language or set of parameters for both disciplines. For opera singers, and such common language must begin with the central issues of dramatic context and melodic line. Is tonality, as defined by harmonic and melodic progression, inherently dramatic? It should be clear from its title where the present paper and its authors 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" was later cited by would-be detractors as an example of his narrow-minded focus on 'the music itself', it is actually an explicit acknowledgement of Schenkerian theory as a theory of musical drama. Carl Schachter notes that "elements of the fundamental structure . . . become charged with dramatic tension through their suppression or their transformation,"<sup>2</sup> and analytical work by other scholars has developed this theme. In fact, the notion that the unfolding of tonal musical structure—with all its detours, roadblocks, dead ends, and arrivals—is a roadmap for an inherently dramatic journey, an idea implicit in some of the best writing on music (e.g., Edward T. Cone's article on Schubert's "promissory note"<sup>3</sup>), is one of the most valuable and invigorating insights of musical scholarship, and a vital aspect of Schenkerian theory. Despite its significance, however, 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 he was an opera critic in the early stages of his professional life, and broke his customary silence on the subject to comment negatively on Wagner's music,

Schenker, as Abbate and 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."<sup>4</sup> Since Schenker's death in 1935, however, music theorists, particularly in the United States, have adapted his ideas for application to a wider repertoire. 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 authors—have appropriated Schenker's system for their own purposes and to serve their own agendas.<sup>5</sup> 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.

### Musical brokenness

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, a hybrid of linear and dramatic analysis must 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 *Urfinie* (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, 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<sup>6</sup>, the only compositional strategy that he allowed to impede the progress of the *Ursatz* ought to receive pride of place in any discussion of tonal drama. That strategy is the most dramatic of all Schenkerian concepts—the interruption. 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, is typically discussed as a form-defining

event: two articles in *Music Theory Spectrum*, David Smyth's on "balanced interruption" and Peter Smith's on sonata form according to Brahms and Schenker, are representative.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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."<sup>9</sup> As Peter Smith has noted, this statement apparently contradicts Schenker's later assertion that the interruption "has the effect of a delay, or retardation, on the way to the ultimate goal."<sup>10</sup> 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 gives it 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, what Allen Cadwallader and David Gagné call the "first branch."<sup>11</sup>

Schenker's emphasis on this "first branch" of the interruption, which he makes explicit in stating that "with respect to the unity of the fundamental structure, the first occurrence of  $\hat{2}/V$  is more significant than the second,"<sup>12</sup> makes phenomenological sense. 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.<sup>13</sup>

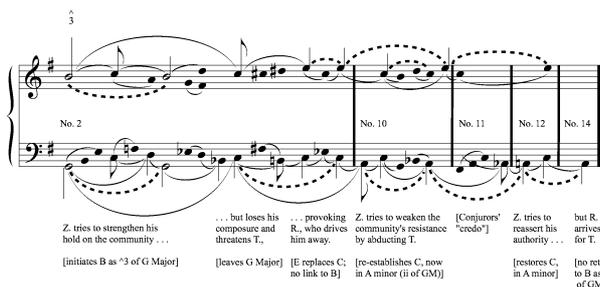
Given the teleological significance of the point of interruption, should not the analyst then admit the possibility of a "permanent" or "sustained" interruption, one in which the second "branch," the completion or continuation, is omitted? Schenker implicitly dismissed the possibility of such a broken 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."<sup>14</sup> But what if "the effect of incompleteness," particularly as it pertains to a fundamental structure, is precisely the effect a composer seeks to create?

### Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*

After their initial confrontation at the beginning of Act 1 in Scott Joplin's ragtime opera *Treemonisha*, each of the two main characters (Zodzetrick and Treemonisha) is forced to make a decision. Faced with resistance from a determined political rival, each must change their strategy or risk losing the battle for the hearts and minds of the plantation's slave community. In contrast to Zodzetrick, whose refusal to abandon his single-minded determination to remove her as an obstacle ultimately leads to dramatic failure, Treemonisha comes up with an alternate solution that represents a triumph of intellect over brute force. Instead of running over Zodzetrick, she goes around him, asserting her leadership and strengthening her bond to the community with the help of Andy and Monisha. While Zodzetrick is absent for the remainder of Act 1, Treemonisha is constantly present, welcoming new laborers ("The Corn-Huskers"), planning entertainment ("We're Goin' Around"), participating in traditional activities ("The Wreath"), and showing respect to the elders of the community ("Treemonisha's Bringing Up"). Thus, when she is kidnapped, the entire community immediately decides to rescue her, and she then uses her near-martyrdom as leverage to persuade the people to abandon superstition

and vengeance for faith and mercy, ending Zozetrick's 'reign of terror.' It must also be noted that, although she initially demurs when asked by the people to be their leader, it is Treemonisha herself who proposed such an election, and the demurral is merely an adept public relations maneuver by an adroit politician.

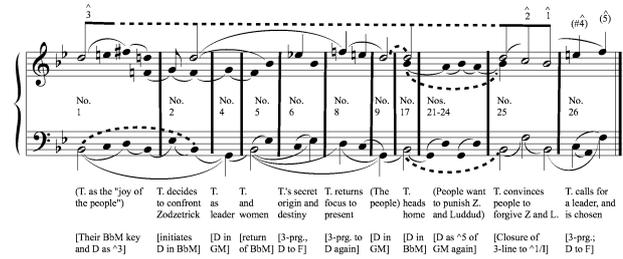
The background structure of Zozetrick's role, as defined by the connections between the tonal areas and primary tones of each of the numbers in which his influence is exerted, comprises a motion from G major (I) to C major (IV) and finally to A minor (ii), as shown in Figure 1. As a result of his confrontation with Treemonisha ("The Bag of Luck"), during which, with the help of her friends and family, she effects a shift to the subdominant key area (C major) and changes the prolonged tone from B to E, Zozetrick is forced to spend Act II trying to establish a tonal center that will support a viable return to C as upper-neighbor to B, thereby enabling him to eventually return to his original key (G major) and primary tone (B) and successfully complete a closed tonal structure for the opera as a whole.<sup>15</sup> Though he accomplishes a shift to A minor ("Confusion"), he is unable to permanently install C as primary tone. Instead, E returns and is reinterpreted as  $\hat{5}$  of A minor, and Zozetrick ends the opera where he began: on the losing end of a (tonal) struggle with Treemonisha.



**Figure 1.** The background structure of Zozetrick's role. This figure highlights the absence of tonal closure in Zozetrick's music in the opera as a whole, due to his failure to re-establish G major.

An examination of the background structure of Treemonisha's role, shown in Figure 2, provides a stark contrast to the

incompleteness of Zozetrick's background, focusing as it does on closure in B<sup>b</sup> major (indicated by the long dotted and solid beam running across the top of the graph).



**Figure 2.** The background structure of Treemonisha's role. This figure highlights the tonal closure in B<sup>b</sup> major that bookends Treemonisha's music.

In the case of *Treemonisha*, then, musical brokenness manifests itself in the failure of Zozetrick's music to return to G major, and this broken background structure may be seen as a strong correlate to his dramatic failure in the opera.

### Kurt Weill's *Street Scene*

Like the titular characters in Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*, Sam Kaplan and Rose Maurant, the main characters in Kurt Weill's opera *Street Scene* eventually join forces to attempt the attainment of their respective superobjectives. Sam wants to find a cure for his loneliness, but throughout Acts 1 and 2 he is unable to escape from the depressing realities of life in his neighborhood. He tries to come to grips with his feelings of isolation and when that fails he attempts to convince Rose to come away with him, out of the city, to start a new life together (another "inverted" reference to *Porgy and Bess*).

Rose, for her part, wants to find a true soulmate. She begins well, establishing her personal credo in her opening aria, but like Sam she wishes she could escape the anxiety and sadness in her life, and is unable to do so. Moreover, when she finally decides to put her dreams of a life together with Sam behind her in their final duet, she nonetheless leaves open the possibility of seeing him and returning home.

Like Sam's famous aria "Lonely House", Rose's aria "What Good Would the Moon Be" reveals her superobjective, to find a true

soul-mate. Her immediate and impassioned rejection of Mr. Easter's unwelcome advances prior to the aria ("Wouldn't You Like to Be on Broadway?") stand in sharp contrast to Bess's mute capitulation to Sporting Life in *Porgy and Bess*, following "There's a Boat That's Leavin' Soon For New York." Set in E<sup>b</sup> major, the key of "Lonely House," her aria begins with two poignant foreground pitch motives, both in m. 4: the melodic leap to the goal tone (1, E<sup>b</sup>), suggesting her desire to pursue beauty in her life, and the use of <sup>b</sup>3 (G<sup>b</sup>) on the word "cold," portraying her disillusionment. As shown in Figure 3, the primary tone (5, B<sup>b</sup>) is initiated at m. 6, and a middleground descent to 2 that is strongly reminiscent of the one in "Lonely House" ensues, including both the prolongation of a chromatic passing tone (#4, vs. <sup>b</sup>7 in "Lonely House") in mm. 7-9 and a reaching over that obscures the interruption itself (mm. 10-11). As in "Lonely House," this interruption is subsequently repeated, and treated to a substantial expansion (mm. 23-27).



**Figure 3.** The background structure of Rose's aria, "What Good Would the Moon Be?" This figure highlights two interruptions followed by closure in E<sup>b</sup> major, respectively indicating Rose's longing and optimism.

## References

- Abbate, Carolyn. (2001). *In Search of Opera*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Almén, Byron and Edward R. Pearsall, ed. (2006). *Approaches to Meaning in Music*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Brown, Matthew. (2005). *Explaining Tonality: Schenkerian Theory and Beyond*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.
- Burstein, L. Poundie and David Gagné, ed. (2006). *Structure and Meaning in Tonal Music: Festschrift in Honor of Carl Schachter*. Hillsdale: Pendragon.
- Carnicke, Sharon Marie. (1993). Stanislavsky: Uncensored and Unabridged. *TDR*, 37/1, 22-37.
- Everett, Walter. (2004). Deep-Level Portrayals of Directed and Misdirected Motions in Nineteenth-Century Lyric Song. *Journal of Music Theory*, 48/1, 25-68.
- Hagen, Uta. (1991). *A Challenge for the Actor*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Latham, Edward D. (2006). Analysis and Performance Studies: A Summary of Current Research. *Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie*. Originally published in *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie 2/2* (2005), <http://www.gmth.de/www/zeitschrift.php?option=show&ausgabe=7&archiv=1>
- . (2005). It Ain't Necessarily So: Sporting Life's Triumph in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. *Indiana Theory Review*, 25, 29-45.
- Levin, Irina and Igor Levin. (1992). *Working on the Play and the Role: The Stanislavsky Method for Analyzing the Characters in a Drama*. Chicago: Ivan R. Doe.
- . (2002). *The Stanislavsky Secret: Not a System, Not a Method, But a Way of Thinking*. New York: Meriweather Publishers.
- Schachter, Carl. (1999). Structure as Foreground: 'Das Drama des Ursatzes'. In *Schenker Studies 2*, ed. Carl Schachter and Hedi Siegel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stanislavsky, Konstantin. (1961). *Creating A Role*. Ed. Hermine I. Popper and trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. New York: Theatre Arts Books.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Schachter (1999), 309. The title of the recent *Festschrift* for Schachter testifies to his belief in the meaning inherent in tonal structure. See Almén (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Edward T. Cone, "Schubert's Promissory Note: An Exercise in Musical Hermeneutics," *Nineteenth-Century Music* 5/3 (1982): 233.

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, "On Analyzing Opera," in *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner*, ed. Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 4. For a recent and thorough list of Schenker's most important publications as well as secondary sources on Schenkerian theory, see David Carson Berry, *A Topical Guide to Schenkerian Literature: An Annotated Bibliography With Indices* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon, 2004). See also David Damschroder, *Music Theory From Zarlino to Schenker: A Bibliography and Guide* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1990), 304-17; Nicholas Rast, "A Checklist of Essays and Reviews by Heinrich Schenker," *Music Analysis* 7/2 (July 1988): 121-32; and Larry Laskowski, *Heinrich Schenker: An Annotated Index to His Analyses of Musical Works* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> See William Rothstein, "The Americanization of Heinrich Schenker," *In Theory Only* 9/1 (1986): 5-17. Reprinted in *Schenker Studies*, ed. Hedi Siegel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 193-203.

<sup>6</sup> The misperception that Schenker privileged the fundamental structure at the expense of the musical surface is perpetuated largely by the current practice of teaching Schenkerian analysis in a large university seminar format, instead of in individual instructional sessions, as Schenker taught the system to his first students. The lack of individual instruction leads inevitably to a greater focus on the *Ursatz* as a consensus builder in classroom discussion. In actuality, as a performer and conductor, Schenker considered the musical surface (the foreground) of equal importance for its integral and aurally salient interrelationship with the background. On the importance of the foreground, see John Rothgeb, "Design as a Key to Structure in Tonal Music," *Journal of Music Theory* 15/1-2 (1971): 230-53. For Schenker's views on performance, see Heinrich Schenker, *The Art of Performance*, ed. Heribert Esser and trans. Irene Scott Schreier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and William Rothstein, "Analysis and the Act of Performance," in *The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation*, ed. John S. Rink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 217-40.

<sup>7</sup> See David Smyth, "'Balanced Interruption' and the Formal Repeat," *Music Theory Spectrum* 15/1 (1993): 76, and Peter H. Smith, "Brahms and Schenker: A Mutual Response to Sonata Form," *Music Theory Spectrum* 16/1 (1994): 77. For a more recent discussion of the interruption, see Irna Priore, "The Case for a Continuous 5: Expanding the Schenkerian Interruption Concept—With Analytical Interpretations of Beethoven opp. 101, 109, and 111" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2004), and "Further Considerations of the Continuous 5 With an

Introduction and Explanation of Schenker's Five Interruption Models," *Indiana Theory Review* 25 (2004): 115-38.

<sup>8</sup> Schenker, *Free Composition*, 36-40. Carl Schachter, however, includes interruption as an element of background structure. See Schachter, "Structure as Foreground," 299.

<sup>9</sup> Schenker, *Free Composition*, 36.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>11</sup> Allen Cadwallader and David Gagné, *Analysis of Tonal Music: A Schenkerian Approach*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 113.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>14</sup> Schenker, *Free Composition*, 126 n6.

<sup>15</sup> Though C major itself could provide adequate support for C as primary tone, this would create an 8-line, which is rare in the Schenkerian literature. The shift to A minor establishes C as the would-be primary tone of a local 3-line in No. 12, though a subsequent return to C major prevents local closure to the tonic.