DMA Theory Study Guide

Summer 2009

we hope you will find this file to be a useful resource
but please note that it is under construction
and will be revised from time to time

This file is organized into three main sections:

- **Introduction (1.1 – 1.9)**
- **Theory, with suggested readings (2.1 – 2.6)**
- **Model Readings (3.1 – 3.2)**
- **Examination (4.1 – 4.3)**

We strongly recommend that you use this file as a resource pack to enhance your study of the Musicology Study Guide, with which all DMA students need to be familiar.

Introduction

1.1 The concerns of music theory are often to do with what kind of musical knowledge we can have: how do we know that something about music of a particular period or style, or about a particular piece of music, is true?
1.2 For example, consider this sentence, quoted from the DMA Musicology Study Guide:

The first movement of Schubert’s Symphony No. 9 in C Major presents an early instance of a Romantic musical ‘apotheosis’ when the opening theme—originally for unaccompanied horn—returns in the coda stated by full orchestra with emphatic accompanying chords, creating a mood of grandeur and culmination.

Clearly, on the face of it this richly implicative statement captures something of the historical place of Schubert’s masterpiece. Undoubtedly, thematic transformation was pioneered compositionally by Schubert—this can be demonstrated in many of his works compared with those of contemporaneous composers—and was to become a central compositional preoccupation of later 19th-century composers.

1.3 The music theorist will be inclined to ask questions that test the robustness of such statements.

**Exercise:** Before reading on here, you may wish to examine that model sentence and ask yourself this question: what underlying assumptions does it make?

1.4 Every theorist, like any historian, has a point of view. The best thing we can do about our inevitable prejudices is to be aware of them. It is important to understand that what follows in this section is, in the end, an expression of opinion, with which you may not agree. However, our intention is to show that it is worthwhile, indeed extremely interesting, to interrogate what appears to be
musical ‘knowledge’. Our initial interrogation of the Schubert sentence may well begin as follows:

i) What counts as an ‘apotheosis’ and what doesn’t? If Schubert’s theme had returned ‘stated by full orchestra’, but without any ‘emphatic accompanying chords’ and presumably therefore with some different sort of ‘mood’, might this still have been a case of ‘apotheosis’?

From that we can learn that the theorist’s important contribution to musical understanding will include comparison (with other examples of ‘apotheosis’) and explanation (here, of the significance of Schubert’s instrumentation).

1.5 The music theorist is also typically interested in accurate musical perception, and convincing explanations of that perception, carefully expressed. So the next question might be this, again bearing in mind that this is not to criticize the Schubert sentence but to learn from it:

ii) Does the music always create this alleged ‘mood’ in every listener at every performance? If the idea of ‘grandeur’ had simply never occurred to me, even though I knew the music itself very well indeed, is the musicologist implying that I have somehow misunderstood what Schubert wrote?

Clearly that question is also asking about how much information is, as it were, hard-wired into a piece by its composer, or alternatively how much information is brought to the music by the listener.

Exercise: Assess whether the Schubert sentence is reflecting the perception of a Western art music specialist, or of the ‘ordinary’ listener, or perhaps of both.
1.6 Also reflecting issues of perception is a question of the following kind:

iii) How do I know about this ‘mood’ of ‘culmination’ until the movement has finished? The movement could have been much longer, after all: so is this fact—that the thematic return occurs in what turns out to have been a ‘coda’—what truly creates the ‘mood’; in which case how can it be the ‘return’ itself that is ‘creating’ the mood as we are listening?

You might agree that by this stage of our interrogation we are also beginning to form strong assumptions about what is often called the musical ‘object’. It appears to be, rather than an experience in real time, a kind of virtual, complete object which can be inspected as a whole. This is why theory is often characterized as, to put it informally, working with the score rather than with the actual music. Needless to say, it is difficult to say, definitively, what that ‘actual music’ in fact is—a question that lies more in the field of musical aesthetics.

Exercise: Think of a short piece that you know well from memory. It might well be a folksong, or a rock track, not necessarily a piece of Western art music. Can you analyze just its second half, usefully, and realistically? If not, why not?

1.7 Theory puts a premium on the use of language:

iv) Why use the superficially impressive word ‘culmination’, which is hardly ever used in everyday English, and which Webster’s Dictionary in fact defines as ‘climax’?—is the musicologist making a point about the overall
structure of Schubert’s movement and somehow suggesting that the coda
is more significant than other passages in this music?

That may seem to be a detailed and unnecessary criticism of a well-intended
generalization about the Schubert movement. However, music theorists
emphasize the dangers of oversimplification in explaining how we understand
music. It is natural to think that a piece of music may have one special point of
climax, yet when you contemplate a long, complex musical item it seems obvious
that one particular passage is not actually any more ‘important’ than another
passage. Like a movie or stage play, a piece of music may have notable,
memorable events in its ‘plot’, but nevertheless any work of art (or, simply, any
story) exists as a whole.

1.8 You see how, when you think about it, enthusiastic critical verbalizing about
music can simply unwind into empty rhetoric. You will not be able to escape from
or solve the disciplinary tensions between general critique and focused analysis,
but you can learn a great deal from being aware of those tensions, and having the
intellectual freedom to decide how and why you are discussing music in the way
that you do.

1.9 You may think that the theorist’s approach (somewhat exaggerated perhaps
in the above scenario) is unnecessarily introspective, or even an approach that
raises unnecessary difficulties. However, Western art music is extremely
demanding on our musical intuition as well as on our conscious understanding.
Theorists tend to want to concentrate on specific musical substance, rather than
averages, trends, rough comparisons and so on.

Theory, with suggested readings
2.1 Music theory builds on its commitment to close musical observation, in order to construct ideas of what is often called musical ‘language’. Music theory has often overlapped, therefore, with compositional theory, for instance in the field of counterpoint, ranging from Johann Fux’s *Gradus ad Parnassum*, completed in 1725, and codifying the practices of writing tonal counterpoint, up to stylistic studies such as H.K. Andrews’ monumental *An Introduction to the Technique of Palestrina*, which in 1958 provided a complete set of ‘rules’ based on a painstaking analysis of the entire works of the supreme master in the Renaissance period of vocal composition.

2.2 Considerable attention was paid by nineteenth-century theorists to musical forms, especially sonata form, and it was in that period that music theory became more speculative, less obviously useful as compositional theory, but more obviously useful to performers and listeners. In 1885 the Viennese scholar Guido Adler codified these and similar trends into a division that places theory firmly within the realm of ‘systematic musicology’:

There are likely to be a number of contexts in your comprehensive written examination where it could be useful to refer to Adler’s ‘map’ of musical scholarship.

2.3 The scope of music theory is daunting in its extent, and sometimes its complexity. Something of that scope can be gleaned from examining *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*. You may browse this book online at:

http://histories.cambridge.org/book?id=chol9780521623711_CHOL9780521623711
2.4 Here, we offer some specific studies that provide a manageable, highly expert insight into some of the central issues of what is often called ‘theory building’, from a mass of evidence to focused conclusions.


Janet Schmalfeldt, Ch. 1 of *Wozzeck: Harmonic Language and Dramatic Design* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983. [Set theory primer.]

Larry Solomon’s theory website provides much valuable information. We recommend in particular the section on parametric analysis:

http://solomonsmusic.net/paramet.htm

For a systematic online introduction to Schenkerian analysis, the standard technique for the analysis of tonal ‘masterpieces’, see Tom Pankhurst’s ‘Schenker Guide’: http://www.schenkerguide.com/

2.5 There is a tendency to divide music theory, concerning recent centuries of Western art music, into ‘tonal’ and ‘atonal’. Music that is ‘tonal’, or ‘common practice’, can be said to predominate in the 21st-century repertoire of Western
art music. You should have learned your way around tonal theory skills, and the recommended book for review is:


2.6 Atonal theory ‘skills’ have not been so thoroughly codified. The atonal repertoire is undoubtedly falling into disuse, but it is important to realize that the music of virtually every modern composer whose music you encounter is deeply influenced by what theorists call ‘post-1908’ music—a reference to Schoenberg’s first completed atonal compositions. One approachable modern theory work in this area is:


A good example of a compelling music theory book about some of the work of an enduringly popular 20th-century composer is:

Joseph Straus: *Stravinsky’s Late Music* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001)


Model Readings
3.1 Whatever you think about that supposed polarization mentioned in 1.4, to get an informed view it is vital to study some of the best music-analytical literature. From the vast range of possibilities, we recommend the following excellent models:


This is an intense study of a short ‘sonata’, beloved of generations of keyboard players, including the pianist Vladimir Horowitz ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ImqDOjHx70](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ImqDOjHx70)). In addition to providing considerable factual information about the various secondary, manuscript and printed sources, this article attempts to interpret the style of Scarlatti’s composition, in a jargon-free, deeply probing account.


Here you can see a reductive ‘graphic’ analysis of the entire movement (p. 28), using no special notational symbols, which provides a kind of map of the music (advice: follow the analysis listening to the piece), especially strong in revealing the proportional relationships and the motivic thread running through 502 bars. Note that Schenker omits the recapitulation, writing ‘etc.’ and skipping to the coda. In this essay Schenker argues that there had been an endemic failure to understand the true motivic content of Beethoven’s movement. Gunther Schuler follows up this point in *The Compleat Conductor* (New York: OUP, 1997), explaining how so many recordings of the 5th Symphony have misinterpreted the music, with detailed critique of three authenticist interpretations in particular.

Webern’s Dehmel Lieder (only published in the 1960s by his biographer) provide a missing link between the tonal language of the late 19th century and the atonal and serial techniques that would characterize most of Webern’s music that we know. They also illustrate his lyrical approach to composition, which is not surprising, considering that more than half of his opus-numbered pieces are vocal, and that he began his career as a composer of Lieder. In this article, the author argues that certain vertical sonorities, whose links to late 19th-century harmony are clear, provide a recurrent and consistent harmonic vocabulary, though now in a much less tonal environment. He also shows how these “signposts” articulate key points in the texts and overall form in the pieces, which arguably form a “cycle” that is certainly deserving of wider recognition and performance.


3.2 The following essay by William Marvin is a modern, remarkably concise, memorable guide to analytical writing:

C:\Users\jdunby\Desktop\Marvin_WritingAnalyticEssays.pdf

Examination
4.1 In preparing for the comprehensive written examination, we recommend that you read the Musicology Study Guide, which provides you with one perspective on Parts I, II and IV. The comments above on a theory-and-analysis approach to musical study are particularly relevant to Part IV of the comprehensive examination, and part IIIA mentioned in the following section.

4.2 In Part IIIA you will be required to analyze one piece from a choice of two pieces, usually one each from the common-practice and the post-tonal repertoires. Section 3. above is strongly relevant to this examination.

4.3 In Part IIIB you will required to demonstrate your music writing skills. Typically, you will choose three tasks from tasks such as the following:

- completing two-part species counterpoint against a cantus firmus
- writing a fugal exposition on a given subject
- realizing in music notation a passage of figured bass completing a four-part passage in chorale style
- continuing an opening from a piece of Classical chamber music
- identifying or commenting on the permutational properties of a twelve tone row