

(Slide 1)

On the Interpretation of Roman Numerals Using Art Song as an Introduction to Context Driven Analysis

(Slide 2)

Introduction

There are many challenges involved with teaching the typical lower division music theory sequence. Before the principles of voice leading and harmony can be taught, a teacher must be sure that the students have both an understanding of and fluency in the fundamental elements of music.

Traditionally, most theory curricula begin with concepts that are concrete and easily testable. The danger inherent in beginning college level music theory instruction with a focus on fundamental elements is that the student may come to view the subject as the rigid and mechanical process of identifying and labeling chords in the score. If this initial impression of music theory is allowed to take hold, many students will develop the view that harmony and voice leading consist solely of a series of arbitrary rules. Students who do not value the subject that they are learning will have problems with motivation and are rarely able to apply what they have learned to real world situations. Thus, one of the most critical tasks of the theory teacher is to be an avid sales person for their discipline; to convince their students that the subject matter being taught is both important and relevant. It is imperative therefore for the teacher to help students to make the connection between analysis and the other facets of their musical experience, whether it be performing, conducting, or teaching.

This paper will suggest a teaching methodology that will use the analysis of short Romantic art songs to illustrate for students how to use the analytical tools that they already possess to gain insight into a variety of other musical

elements. This introductory lesson in context-based analysis is also designed to point out deeper musical relationships that can be explored in later study. The ideal place for the proposed lesson would be in the third or fourth semester of study, after students have developed a basic understanding of the principles of voice leading, chromatic harmony, and modulation.

Romantic art songs are ideal for use in introductory analysis for a number of reasons: 1) they are short and less texturally complex, 2) are usually in strophic or other simple forms, 3) and the presence of a text provides an easy way to grasp context for analysis. It is also logical to begin with the analysis of song because vocal music is so prevalent in the rock/popular idiom that is the most familiar to the average student.

(Slide 3)

Methodology

This paper will demonstrate the proposed methodologies through a sample analysis of "*Ich grolle nicht*," the seventh song of Schumann's *Dichterliebe*, Op. 48. This work was chosen for its many singular features and its pivotal role within the song cycle, but techniques used in this analysis could be applied to a wide variety of works. This analysis will consist of four sections: 1) background and text, 2) phrases and other surface elements, 3) roman numeral analysis with discussion of the "cool chords," 4) and a discussion of stylistic anomalies (i.e. broken rules). The first three sections of the analysis serve to prepare the background and musical context for the final section, which asks questions like: What is unusual about this piece?, Where did Schumann "break the rules?", and Why do you think that he did it? Students will also be asked to come up with answers to these questions about the relationship between the music and the text.

The answers to these questions, though necessarily subjective in nature, will be based on evidence drawn from the music. Most decisions made in the interpretation of music are subjective ones, and I believe that, in the process of interpreting a song, the structure of the music should provide as many clues as the content of the poetry.

(Slide 4)

Background and Text

The wonderfully dramatic tension found in the first seven songs of *Dichterliebe* is instantly appealing to most students and, if a translation is provided, the German text should not pose much of a barrier to the students. To provide the dramatic and musical background to “*Ich grolle nicht*,” the first two songs of the cycle, “*Im wunderschönen Monat Mai*” and “*Aus meinen Thränen spriessen*,” would be played without scores given as a listening exercise. With judicious help from the teacher, the students should be able to pick up on the fluctuating A major/F# minor tonality of the first song and its inconclusive ending. Students should easily be able to note the relationship between these elements and the tentative quality of the first poem.

In the interest of time, I'll play just the setting of the second stanza for you. The translation of the text is as follows: In the lovely month of May, / As all the birds were singing, / Then I did confess to her / My longing, my desire. **(Play Excerpt)**

The second song should be played to show its harmonic link to the first song and to provide a little bit more of the story. Question to the students: He's professing his love, but do we know anything about the woman's reaction yet? Answer: no. The fourth song, “*Wenn ich in deine Augen seh'*,” is played next. This

song, with its frequent modulations and mysterious dramatic twist, appears in its entirety in the workbook that accompanies the Kostka/Payne theory text and it would be useful if it had been covered previously during the study of modulation. The dramatic twist occurs in the second of the two stanzas and creates a great amount of dramatic tension. Here's translation of the second stanza: When I lean on your breast,/ I feel heavenly joy;/ But when you say "I love you",/ Then I must weep bitterly. **(Play Excerpt)**

Are they tears of joy or of regretful memory? The answer to this question lies in the song to be analyzed.

(Slide 5)

Phrases and other Surface Elements

The students, equipped with scores and translations, now listen to a recording of "*Ich grolle nicht.*" **(Play Song)** They should have little trouble picking up on the bitterness and anger in the song that is ironically emphasized by the frequent repetition of the words "*Ich grolle nicht.*" The students could also locate the major sectional divisions and note that the piece remains in C major throughout. The process of analysis could begin by asking the following question: What is there in Schumann's musical setting that helps to convey the mood/meaning of the poetry? Possible answers include the relentless pulsing chords, dynamic accents, bass line doubled in octaves, upward leaps in the vocal line, ect. With a little luck, the discussion will turn to the importance of the bass line in this piece, which would provide the perfect segue to a discussion of the harmony.

(Slide 6)

Harmonic Analysis

It would be of great benefit to the class discussion if the students had already attempted a roman numeral analysis of the piece. One possibility would be to have the students bring a photocopied version of their analysis to class where they could make notes and corrections in pencil. There are many opportunities as this point to work on analysis skills (i.e. Who thought that the piece begins with a tonic six-four chord? Is that really a bass note? ect.) Most students will be especially challenged by the second chord of the fourth measure, C-E-G#-B. Is it an augmented-major tonic chord? The piece also contains mode mixture and common tone diminished seventh chords.

(Discuss “Cool Chords” 1-- word painting, passing chords, prolongation, deceptive resolution of secondary dominants, G# / Ab, ect.)

Stylistic Anomalies

This is the point in the analysis where the students have taken every concrete step that they can and have put a label of some sort on everything. They will be surprised at this point to learn that they are not yet finished. The big questions still remain, the ones that ask why. Things that are more unusual or that differ from the stylistic norms that they have learned should be examined and explanations attempted. Issues to be addressed include: **1)** the nonstandard cord progressions and unresolved chord sevenths in measures 4-8, **2)** the direct octaves and fifths, jagged voice leading and unusual tonicization of B minor found in measures 13-16, **3)** and the modified circle of fifths sequence at the climax of the piece in measures 28-30. In answering these questions, the students should be able to clearly articulate the reasoning behind the stylistic norm being violated and describe the effect that is created by breaking it. A useful tool to use at this point would be to work with the students to rewrite the passages in question in order to fix the “mistakes” that the composer has made. It is the

process of answering these questions that should provide the students with some interesting insights into the piece.

Slide 7 (mm. 4-8)

1. Atypical chord progressions (Kostka/Payne)
2. Non resolving chord sevenths
3. Possible explanations (echo of melodic figure in the voice / transferred resolution in the bass)
4. Test hypothesis by removing the offending sevenths (Wonderful Life)

Slide 8 (mm. 4-8 “corrected”) (Human Playback story)

1. Echo of the voice loses its potency
2. Unity of seventh chord texture lost
3. Drive of the four-three chords in the bass line diminished

Slide 9 (mm. 12-16 original and “corrected”)

1. Schumann “fails” music theory
2. Direct octaves and fifths / jagged voice leading (text setting?)
“Although you glitter with the splendor of diamonds, Not a spark falls into the darkness of your heart”
3. Point out rising sequence pattern, fore shadow importance of sequence in the piece.
4. Corrected version lacks power / notice consistent doubling of voice / piano (or piano / voice?)

Slide 10 (mm. 28-31 original and “corrected”)

1. Get students to see the underlying COF sequence implied by the bass line
2. RN Analysis make the sequence clear
3. Text setting / chromatic sliding / alternate notes
4. “Corrected” version

Slide 11 (General Principles)

1. Provides the “why” for the rules
2. Justifies the exceptions
3. Lead in to the discussion of sequences

Slide 12 (Sequential Patterns)

1. Rhythmic shifting of the sequence pattern provides drive
2. Descending fifth as a common element/ dominant prolongation provides extension.
3. Original pattern which stopped at the dominant (interruption) continues here, becomes traditional COF progression to finally resolve to a PAC
4. Discussion of Performance Practice Issues/ Could listen to multiple recordings and compare (**Play Piece Again**)

Conclusion

Translating the “theory” of music theory into actual practical benefit is one of the most difficult, yet vital, tasks that face the average music student. This paper is intended to provide a snapshot of one method of encouraging students to move beyond mechanical labels and to make subjective, artistic decisions that are based on their analyses. Another goal of this paper is to foster a discussion about the benefits and drawbacks of using this type of subjective text/music analysis in the theory curriculum.