

Lecture 5.1 Schenkerian Analysis & Narrativity

MUS 20 Exploring the Musical Mind

Summer Session II 2025

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Music as Narrative

Music As Narrative by Fred Everett Maus

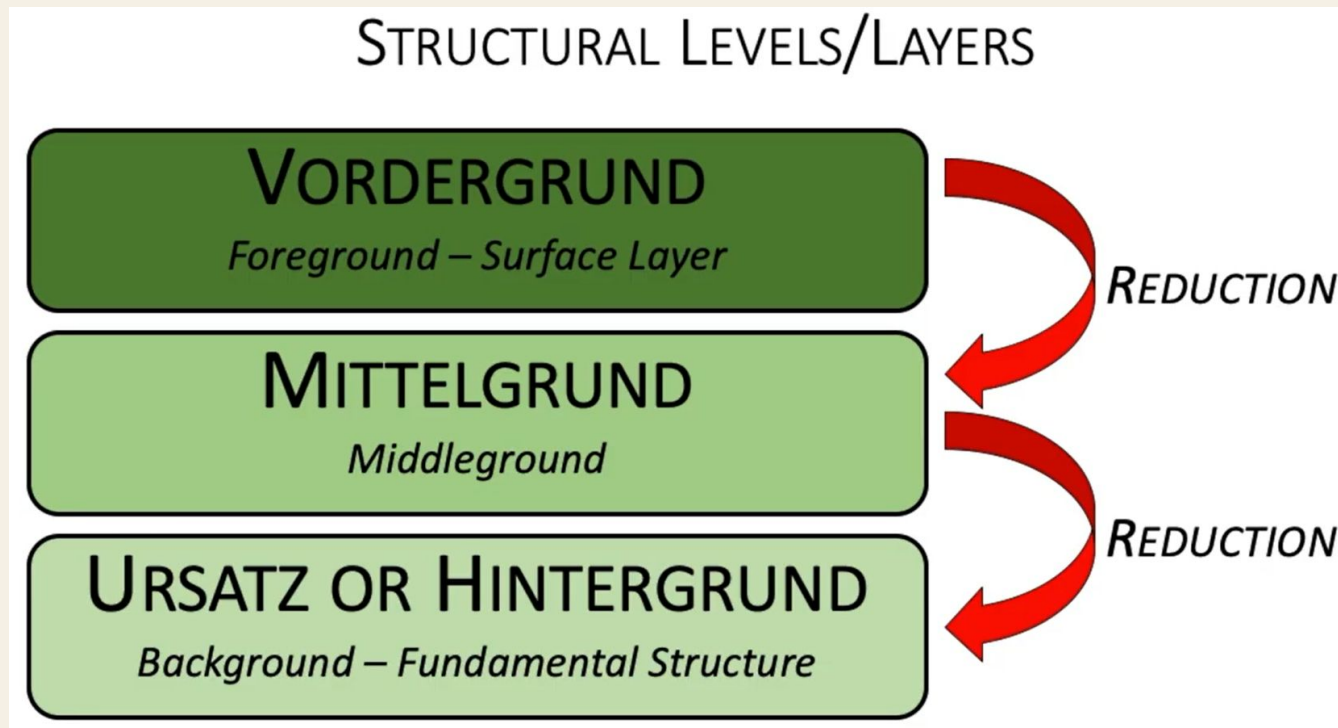
- In order to think about relations between literary narrative and classic or romantic instrumental music, one might draw on the study of *plot structure* or *narrative syntax*, as initiated by Russian Formalism and continued by later Structuralist studies.
- This branch of literary theory attempts to generalize about narrative by identifying recurring elements within plots and stating rules for combining them, somewhat as grammarians do for languages.

Music as Narrative

- Tonal music, as depicted by conventional analysis, resembles narrative, as depicted by Formalist and Structuralist writings, in that *individual texts consist of identifiable kinds of object arranged in partially predictable patterns.*
- Conventional descriptions of musical form obscure the hierarchical nature of musical structure, its layering of faster and slower instances of similar patterns.

In the art of music, as in life, motion toward the goal encounters obstacles, reverses, disappointments, and involves great distances, detours, expansions, interpolations, and, in short, retardations of all kinds. Therein lies the source of all artistic delaying, from which the creative mind can derive content that is ever new. Thus we hear in the middleground and foreground an almost dramatic course of events. – Schenker

Schenkerian analysis



Fundamental Structure

(German: *Ursatz*)

YouTube Video:

[Crash Course
Introduction to
Schenkerian
Analysis](#)

YouTube playlist:

[Schenkerian
Analysis](#)

Music as Narrative

- Schenker's remarks suggest the possibility of a generalized *plot structure* for tonal music; his list of "obstacles, reverses, disappointments," and so on enumerates, informally, kinds of event in musical plots.
- Barthes calls the structurally crucial functions *nuclei* or *cardinal functions*, the others *catalysers*. Nuclei will be understood as following each other to make up a coherent succession even when separated by the insertion of many catalysers; thus, they are roughly analogous to middleground and background events in Schenker's theory.
- Barthes emphasizes the role of catalysers in creating suspense, by delaying the appearance of the next nucleus.

Music as Narrative

- Tzvetan Todorov's theory displays a deeper similarity to Schenker's when he observes that plot sequences may be embedded within other plot sequences, with a complete sequence at one level constituting one portion of a higher-level sequence: this account indicates that similar principles govern the structure of sequences at different levels.
- “Paradigmatic or conventional narrative successions in literature and history” resemble “formal types in music”.
- Listeners can hear musical successions as story-like because they can find something like actions, thoughts, and characters in music.

Music as Narrative

- Musical events can be regarded as characters, or as gestures, assertions, responses, resolutions, goal-directed motions, references, and so on. Once they are so regarded, it is easy to regard successions of musical events as forming something like a story, in which these characters and actions go together to form something like a plot.