Beyond "Three Blind Mice": An Exemplar for "Day 1" of Schenkerian Analysis

**Introduction**

On four occasions—including Spring 2018—I have been privileged to teach a course on
Schenkerian analysis. My audience has included undergraduates and graduates, performers,
educators, and researchers in three distinct university settings. The following "Day 1" lesson
establishes the central tenets of Schenkerian theory for all student constituencies, particularly those
whose foundation is not proto-Schenkerian (e.g., texts by Aldwell/Schachter or Laitz). The lesson
plan could potentially comprise fifty minutes, but, ideally, the time allotted would be around seventy-
five minutes, so the first day of a twice-per-week class or the first half of a three-hour seminar.

**Part I / Day "1" / First Half**

1. First, I address the "Three Blind Mice" misconception by showing the limitations of a global
   snapshot (**Ex. 1**; the Norway graph was simply a result of my asking the students to "choose
   a country"), instead emphasizing that the theory encompasses all "views," ranging from the
   global (the background) to the "street view" (the foreground).

2. After providing a re-introduction to concepts of phrase model (T-PD-D-T) and
   prolongation, I supply several tonic expansion paradigms, summarized in **Ex. 2** (I must note
   that tenths "the long way" is a turn of phrase employed at the Eastman School of Music for
   I-IV$^6$-I$^6$). Students may sing the outer voices, both with or without accompaniment; the
   paradigms may also be assigned as keyboard exercises for transposition.

3. Altogether, these points elucidate two central tenets of Schenkerian theory:

a) There are chords which serve to expand a prevailing harmony, establishing the notion of tonal hierarchy and recursion.

b) Contrapuntal well-formedness—especially of the soprano and bass—underscore the theory's basis in species counterpoint, with a tonal inflection (Matthew Brown's "Heinrich Maneuver").

Depending on the student populations' previous exposure to the prolongation / linear view of harmony, this can also continue through the Day "2" of a Monday-Wednesday-Friday class. I also employ the **Ex. 2** chart during a Theory I class on inverted $V^7$ chords, though in that case, I would jump from **2h** to **Ex. 4**. (The novelty of the lesson plan, however, occurs next.)

The next step draws an application to "real music" through the combination of paradigms in **Ex. 2h** (termed "Karl Haas Special" by William Marvin at Eastman, in honor of the famed radio broadcaster whose theme music was Beethoven's Op 13 / ii). **Ex. 3** extracts the soprano and bass voices from the five-chord structure in **2h** and then suggests a possible outer voice framework that observes well-formed tonal counterpoint throughout the entire phrase. Unbeknownst to the students, it is the skeleton for the Beethoven. The students should then experience a modified version *with* inner voices (**3b**), and then a further modified version with the "Pathetique's" texture (**3c**); they may participate in these realizations vocally and/or instrumentally. If the discovery has not yet been made (it usually has), the secret is revealed with the actual score (**Ex. 4**), after which the embellishments—"what makes it Beethoven"—will become readily apparent.

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**Part II / Day "2" / Second Half**

The remainder of the class emphasizes the subtlety of the Schenkerian approach: namely, the score often belies paradigmatic voice-leading. The instructor can move on to **Ex. 5**, with several disclaimers, as the leap to this graph may feel notably abrupt:

1. This graph shows students what an end product graph would look like; a pedagogy of graphing is out-of-bounds for this early in the course.

2. What we can get from the graph: a melody, which a student may assume to comprise the same voice, is a product of several voices, including above and below the "soprano."

**Ex. 3** shows the "soprano" line of this example, which is notably stepwise (especially the D♮). In **Ex. 5**, however, an instructor can highlight:

1. Even though the D♮ (bar 3) is a soprano note in **Ex. 3**, Beethoven, however, arpeggiates the melody up to Ab, which for Schenker, is an inner voice pitch. In other words, the given melody is "higher" than the soprano. The C-D♮-Eb, however, is melodically *conjunct*. (Over the next few classes, the students will discover the principle of melodic fluency, and this is an excellent example of such.)

2. Furthermore, melody pitches B♭ (bar 5) and A♮ (bar 6) are inner voices; no single-lined melody will possess leaps that large. Since they comprise a *compound melody*, the B♭ and A♮ serve as alto/lower than soprano.

3. The final B♭—rhythmically displaced—travels downward to an inner voice G before resolving to the A♭. This cadence is an opportunity to inform the students that all leading tones—which travel to $\hat{1}$, serve as alto/lower than soprano, and all melodies resolve $\hat{2}$-$\hat{1}$.

From this exposition, it becomes abundantly clear that amongst the vast output of melodies, almost none are perfectly conjunct or "melodically fluent." To open up discussion for the next class, I invited students to bring in a melody, amongst their working repertoire, that was notably not conjunct. (This sort of "Show-And-Tell" assignment is popular amongst students, and an idea I adopted from Michael Buchler at Florida State.) Andrew Bearden—a choral conducting graduate student at SDSU—brought in an ideal example of such a "problematic" melody from Mendelssohn's *Elijah* (**Ex. 6a**); he also opted into the challenge of extracting a soprano and bass lines—this is entirely optional (**Ex. 6b**). The example resembles the "Pathetique" with its clear arpeggiation "reaching" over the prevailing line—a melodic "geyser" of sorts—only to return to its inevitable conclusion of $\hat{2}$-$\hat{1}$.

**Conclusion**

In all, I conclude that while the first eight bars represent a complete foreground structure, a more "zoomed out" view of the entire movement transforms this passage into a prolongational "branch"—akin to the relationships within a continued fraction (**Ex. 7**); at its background, a continued fraction takes the form $1 + 1/x$; this expression is then successively substituted for x, ad infinitum. This relationship is no different from the recursion of prolongational structures from background to foreground, as the organic beauty of Schenkerian theory lives in the mirroring of different structural levels. Thus, the lesson plan not only spotlights how harmony and counterpoint are the building blocks for common-practice tonality, but also how the same rules govern all levels of structure. Ultimately, Schenkerian analysis captures how these components manifest in the masterworks we study and perform.

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*Example 1. "Three Blind Mice" Debunked: A Google Maps Image of Norway*
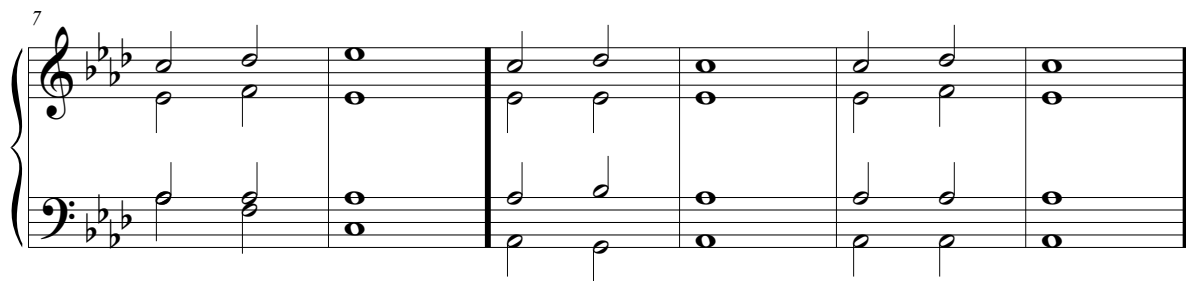
*Example 2. Tonic Paradigms Review*
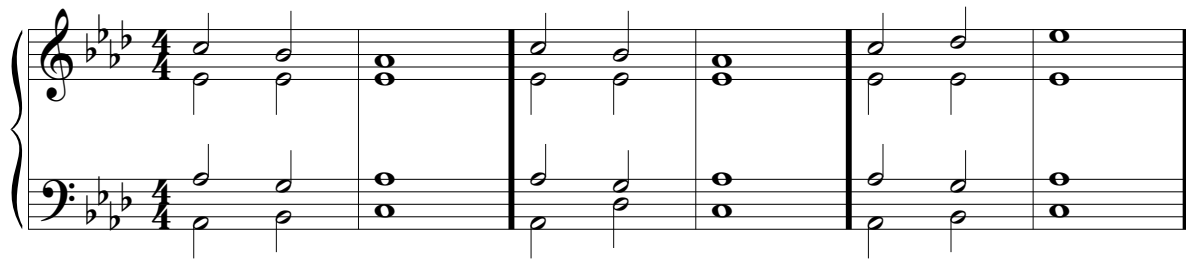


    a. Voice Exchange       b. Incomplete Neighbor    c. "Parallel Tenths"
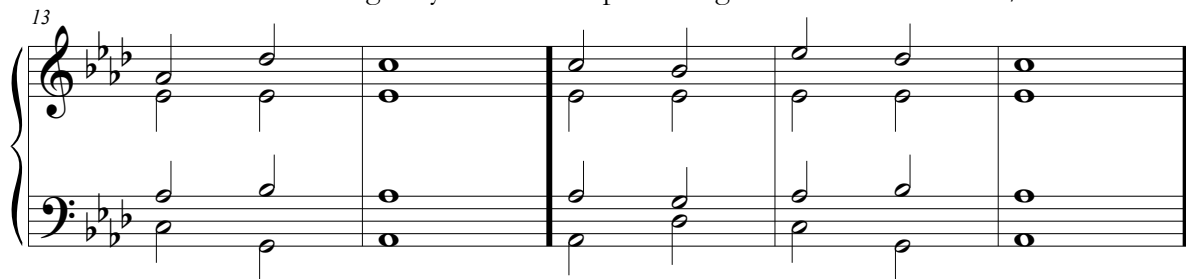


    d. Tenths "The Long Way"   e. Complete Neighbor    f. Pedal 6/4



    g. Double Incomplete Neighbor       h. Combined paradigms
                                   (termed "Karl Haas Special" at Eastman)

*Example 3. Soprano/Bass Counterpoint Becomes Pathetique/ii, mm. 1-8*

*Example 4. "Pathetique" / ii, mm. 1-8*



*Example 5. Schenkerian Sketch of mm. 1-8*

*Examples 6a and 6b: Sample HW Assignment: Extracting Soprano/Bass Pairs From a "Problematic" Melody*

*(Student Solution: Andrew Bearden, SDSU Graduate Student, chosen for "Show-And-Tell")*

*6a. Excerpted from "He, Watching over Israel" from Mendelssohn's Elijah, mm. 71–79*

*Example 6. cont.*

*6b. Student soprano/bass sketch, as instructed (annotation is mine)*

## He Watching Over Israel
## from "Elijah"

Mendelssohn

Arpeggiation "reaching over" the soprano



*Example 7: Continued Fraction*

$$1 + \cfrac{1}{1 + \cfrac{1}{1 + \cfrac{1}{1 + \cfrac{1}{1 + \cfrac{1}{1 + \cfrac{1}{1 + \cfrac{1}{\cdots}}}}}}}$$