Notes on Schenker’s Analysis of Schumann, “Aus meinen Thränen spriessen” from *Dichterliebe*

The three levels of analysis (in descending order on one staff line each) are the *background* (top line), *middleground* (middle line), and *foreground* (bottom line)\(^1\).

The basic symbols of Schenkerian reductive analysis are:

- **Ties** link notes of the same or equivalent letter name, as in ordinary music notation.
- **Stems** designate notes which are considered structurally more important than those which are unstemmed – i.e., those which are considered closer to the long-range voice-leading that is the underlying structure of the piece. In the bass, stems are attached to those notes which are considered essential to the harmonic progression and are usually not reducible.
- **Slurs** group decorative notes in pairs or larger units, and often connect them to a note at a higher structural level.
- **Flags** draw attention to special notes, such as the apex of a phrase, and in the bass they often emphasize subordinate but important harmonic functions, such as the secondary dominant.
- **Beams** connect components of a large-scale melodic configuration, most often a stepwise line. In the bass, beams connect members of a chain of fifths.
- **Open noteheads** are used for those notes of very special importance, those representing the most long-range structure in the work (*Urlinie* and *Ursatz*).
- **Carets** above a number denote scale degrees in the prevailing key, such as 3.
- **Roman numerals** are used normally – indicators of harmonic roots within the prevailing key.
- **Figured bass symbols** are also used normally as in harmonic analysis – showing both the vertical makeup of a chord, and even more importantly, showing the horizontal motion of voice leading.

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\(^1\) Schenker’s analysis doesn’t include the musical score; I’ve provided it here for convenience, as well as to align Schenker’s analytical symbols precisely with the musical notation in the lied.
The Three Levels

Foreground

Already almost 75% of the notes are reduced away. Only those considered structurally important remain. Certain features are in particular reduced at this point:

- Repeated notes
- Figurations and other ornamental accompaniments
- Melodic figurations (such as neighbor tones, passing tones, chordal skips) that are not part of the underlying structure.
- Rhythmic values, but barlines remain giving an overall sense of metrical placement (although it is no longer exact.)

Middleground

The middleground takes the reduction one step further. At this point larger-scale ornamentations and figurations are reduced out of the texture, and the fundamental structures (the *Urlinie* and the *Ursatz*) become visible clearly in the analysis, although not as of yet completely realized.

In particular, repetitions of materials are subsumed into single lines that indicate larger-scale motions. So, for example, a melodic line of 5-4-3-5-3-2-1 might reduce to 5-4-3-2-1.

Background

The background completes the process. The basic structure of the piece is revealed much more clearly: the *Ursatz* (underlying fundamental structure) and the *Urlinie* (the implied melodic pattern) comprise the entirety of the background level.

In some works (such as the Schumann in this example) certain reduplications of the *Urlinie* occur; these are indicated with the use of unfilled noteheads (slurred together), while the *Urlinie* itself is given with open noteheads.

In the Schumann example, the *Urlinie* is revealed as a fundamental progression of 3-2-1, but broken by the pause on the dominant in measure 8, thus creating the pattern: 3-2-3-2-1. (Such ‘breaks’ in the *Urlinie* are common in compositions that make extensive use of half cadences – such as here – or which modulate to a significant secondary key center.)

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2 Multiple instances of foreground and middleground levels are possible, so that actual number of notated levels may be more than three – but there are only these three ‘types’ of levels.

3 In this particular analysis, that is – other analyses may not reduce as much, or may reduce more, in the transition from notated score to foreground.
Ten Advantages of Schenkerian Analysis

1. Many musicians are inclined to become distracted by the surface elements of a composition. Schenkerian analysis is a great tool for penetrating past the surface of a work and coming to understand it as an organic whole.

2. The actual process of reductive analysis is the real point, and not the discovery of the *Urlinie* or the culminating background level. Schenkerian analysis really encourages a careful and thorough investigation of the harmonic, contrapuntal, and formal aspects of analysis.

3. We often sense that there is something “right” or “inevitable” about the progression in well-crafted musical compositions. Schenkerian analysis is a fine tool for exploring that “rightness” or “inevitability”, given that it looks for underlying structures that may manifest at the surface level of the perceived music.

4. Combined with thorough motivic analysis, Schenkerian analysis is capable of accounting satisfactorily for a significant percentage of perceived phenomena in a composition.

5. Schenkerian analysis is highly economical, using very concise means to convey a great deal of information.

6. Schenkerian analysis concentrates on the polyphonic, or horizontal dimension of music; too often traditional analytical techniques are more homophonic or vertical in nature.

7. The surface form of a piece of music (such as ternary, binary, sonata form, etc.) is sometimes a block to further understanding of a composition. We think that once we’ve discerned the formal units of the composition we’ve “analyzed” it, when actually there is a great deal more to be discovered.

8. Larger compositions particularly benefit from reductive analytical techniques, given that their very length can sometimes act as a deterrent to thorough analysis. A Schenkerian “graphic analysis” provides a strong foundation on which to base an analysis, given that it is a technique that takes the long view and does not concern itself with superficial distractions.

9. Schenkerian analysis is a favored method of contemporary academic analysis and as such is worth knowing simply to keep up to date with current analytical writing.

10. Schenker’s theories of musical structure have come to permeate many aspects of music theory, even to the level of elementary harmony texts. Some knowledge and experience with Schenker’s theories is therefore extremely valuable, given their pervasiveness throughout the music theory community. (For example, the standard harmony textbook *Harmony and Voice-Leading*, by Aldwell and Schachter, is thoroughly grounded in Schenkerian principles.)
Some Problems With Schenkerian Analysis

Schenkerian analysis will not suffice as one’s only analytical method, extravagant claims notwithstanding, nor should Schenker’s theories be considered as complete, overarching universal laws. Reductive analysis has a fine and valuable place in a theorist’s toolbox, but it is only one tool among many. It cannot account for all of the perceived phenomena in a musical composition and in fact fails to do so quite spectacularly in a number of key areas. The first four of my enumerated “problems” below are aimed at elucidating the most critical of those areas.

Further “problems” concern those situations in which Schenkerian analysis may actually wind up obfuscating a composition rather than clarifying it, due primarily to its tendency to impose dogmatic “universal” principles to individual compositions, even if such principles are clearly incompatible with the composition being analyzed.

Problem #1

Take a look at the foreground level of the analysis, which is located on the bottom line of the analysis immediately above the score. (Schenker didn’t actually include the score in his analysis; I have supplied it for convenience.)

Ask yourself: **what elements are already reduced out that are vitally important to the understanding of this composition?** No doubt you will come up with several possibilities. But one of the most glaring is so obvious it might escape you: *the text has vanished.* Yet this is a lied, an art song! The entire purpose of the song is to heighten and communicate that little wisp of Heine’s poetry. Nevertheless, Schenker waves it out of the analysis with all the peremptory hauteur of a *grande dame* dismissing an uninvited guest at her toney *soirée.*

Schenker was the heir of an Austrian intellectual tradition that considered instrumental music to represent the purest, most noble strain of musical achievement, while vocal music of all varieties was demoted to a considerably lower caste. The same sharp bias is still encountered sometimes among more cerebral-type musicians, yet it sits very poorly with compositions such as this, or creators such as this who were as much *litterateurs* as *compositeurs.* Schenker, however, had absolutely no interest in the relation of poetry to music, and therefore treats Schumann’s lied as though it were wordless.

Therefore, problem #1 can be stated as: *Extra-musical elements which may be of significant importance are ignored by Schenkerian analysis; therefore Schenkerian analysis cannot account for all of the significant elements in a musical composition.*

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4 There has been some progress along these lines, incidentally; modern Schenkerians are more likely to take the text into consideration. Nonetheless, Schenkerian-style analysis remains obtusely pitch-centered for the most part, treating vocal music like instrumental music with unnecessary singing added. In his commentary to Schenker’s analysis of this song, Allen Forte mentions the text exactly once, almost in passing, and only in one instance which does not contradict Schenker’s analysis – although in fact the text does contradict the analysis in several key locations.
Problem #2

Having established the ‘missing’ text in the Schenker analysis, we can now turn to another, equally glaring, omission.

_The rhythm has been removed from the analysis._ Yet rhythm is absolutely vital to music. For many listeners, and not just unsophisticated ones, rhythm is the most important and noticeable element in hearing and understanding a composition. To omit all consideration of rhythm, beyond the very sketchy metrical relationships left remaining in the foreground analysis, is an omission of overwhelming implications.

To be sure, a great deal of energy has been spent over the last thirty years aiming at incorporating rhythmic phenomena within the Schenkerian theoretical worldview. However, Schenker’s original theories do not address rhythm, nor can it be shown convincingly that rhythmic phenomena display any underlying structural significance comparable to the polyphonic framework of Schenkerian theory. For the time being, there is no worthwhile system of incorporating rhythm into Schenkerian analysis, nor is it at all certain that Schenkerian analysis can actually accommodate rhythm beyond a fairly superficial level.

Therefore, problem #2 can be stated as: _Rhythm is ignored by Schenkerian analysis; therefore Schenkerian analysis cannot account for all of the significant elements in a musical composition._

Problem #3

Continuing to focus on just the foreground analysis as a way of seeing what’s missing in the analysis as of the ‘first pass’, as it were, we notice that _the distinction between the two performers – voice and piano – has been removed._

This is a serious omission. In a lied, the dialogue between voice and piano is a critically important source of expressiveness. Consider measures 3 and 4: the voice finishes the first line of the text with a perfect authentic cadence on the phrase: _Blumen hervor._ After a fermata the piano repeats the cadence on its own. To indulge for a moment in anthropomorphizing, the piano softly murmurs back the voice’s words. Now compare that to the foreground analysis: while the repeated cadence is present (shortly to be reduced out in the middleground analysis), there is no allowance made for the instrumental contrast. In fact, the entire analysis would be no different were the song to be performed with or without a singer, by a full orchestra, or a pipe organ, sung by a full choir, or for that matter played by a Japanese koto ensemble. Schenkerian analysis is anesthetic to instrumentation and tone color.

Therefore, problem #3 can be stated as: _Instrumentation and tone color are ignored by Schenkerian analysis; therefore Schenkerian analysis cannot account for all of the significant elements in a musical composition._

Problem #4

Again we continue to focus on the foreground analysis, inquiring as to which important elements are missing in Schenkerian analysis.
The lied’s tempo is enigmatic: nicht schnell, “not fast”. For the performers this presents an interpretational challenge in that a suitable tempo must be chosen on the basis of a fairly vague directive. While there can be no perfect, ideal tempo for any piece of music, certainly all musicians are aware of tempo’s critical role in an effective musical performance. Schumann’s elusive tempo mark paradoxically renders the decision even more important, given that it really lays the decision almost entirely at the performers’s feet with only minimal input from Herr Meister. Nor is this a robust composition which can withstand much in the way of temporal abuse; as in so much of Schumann’s music, tempo can make or break the whole thing.

But the Schenkerian analysis would be the same were the tempo Molto vivace or Adagio molto. Not only is tempo’s role in the song’s overall effectiveness ignored, but even the perception of those underlying Schenkerian polyphonic structures are strongly influenced by tempo. I would include in this category tempo-related elements such as fermatas or the ritardando in measure 15. But the analysis is agnostic to the point of indifference about this issue, despite its fundamental relevance to the listener and to the entire musical message of the composition.

Therefore, problem #4 can be stated as: Tempo is ignored by Schenkerian analysis; therefore Schenkerian analysis cannot account for all of the significant elements in a musical composition.

Problem #5

At this point I move past considerations of “what’s missing” and into other, perhaps broader (and yet just as serious) areas.

One of the bedrocks of Schenker’s theories is the Urlinie, which is defined as an underlying polyphonic-melodic structure, consisting of some kind of downward-arpeggiating tonic triad, whether from scale degrees 8, 5, or 3, usually with intervening scale steps along the way. Therefore a typical Urlinie might be 3-2-1, or 5-4-3-2-1. Despite whatever variants might be encountered, this simple downward arpeggiation of the tonic triad is, in Schenker’s own words, the “chord of nature”. One can think of it as a structural skeleton that lies below the surface flesh of the music.

But for something so vital and apparently “natural”, it’s rather disconcerting that world-class Schenkerian analysts disagree on the location of the Urlinie tones in even this relatively simple example. In Schenker’s analysis, the primary Urlinie tones 3-2-3-2-1 are located as follows:

• 3 is on the upbeat to measure 1
• 2 is on the upbeat to measure 9
• 3 is on the upbeat to measure 13
• 2 and 1 are in measure 15.

Schenker’s student Allen Forte, an enthusiastic and successful disseminator of Schenkerian theory, changes the location of the second 3 to the C# on beat 2 of measure 14. Arthur Komar, another Schenker student and a fine analyst, accepts Forte’s changes but changes the first 3 to the C# in measure 2. In both cases, the changes place the all-important Urlinie tone on the weak beat of a measure, metrically out of kilter with the perceived experience of the lied. (There’s that Schenkerian indifference towards rhythm again.)
Schenker analyzed the harmony in measure 2 as D major (IV) throughout the entire measure – as is clearly indicated in his harmonic analysis in the foreground level, as well as his identification of the C# on the second beat of measure 2 as a dissonant passing note within a context of IV. That’s an odd analysis; I myself would consider it incorrect as work of a first-year Harmony student. The chord on the second beat of the measure is indisputably an A Major triad, and not some kind of odd dissonance within a context of a D Major triad. Schenker’s identification of the D Major triad as an ‘adjacent tone’ (Nebennote) is certainly valid enough, but why is the resolution to A Major ignored? Forte and Komar both would seem to be correcting Schenker’s analysis by allowing that chord on the second beat to be, in fact, A Major, but then they allot it far too much structural significance.5

The above undoubtedly seems like a bunch of silly academic hair-splitting (and it is!) but the real concern is relatively serious: is it possible for anyone to show how the outcome of this issue affects the way people actually experience this composition? Otherwise, such “analysis” falls into the same category as medieval theologians arguing about angels dancing on the head of a pin.

Therefore, problem #5 can be stated as: Schenkerian analysis lends itself far too easily to trivial disputes that are of little, or no, value to furthering the understanding of a musical composition.

Problem #6

Schenker’s analysis of the Urlinie is dependent upon an assumption that all such fundamental lines must conform to one of three patterns: descent from 3, descent from 3̋, or descent from 3⃣. The patterns may be interrupted and then restarted (thus a pattern of 3⃣-2-3⃣-1 is possible, i.e., 3⃣-2-interruption-3⃣-2-1) but other variants are not allowed into the tonal world of the music.

Yet there is really no compelling reason why all tonal music should be shoehorned into such a narrow conceptual framework. This particular song is a case in point: one can make a very compelling analysis based on a fundamental line which makes significant use of 4, which figures so strongly in the song and which sets critically important words such as sprüßen, werden, and above all, klingen. Such an Urlinie might work out as: 3⃣(3⃣)-1-3⃣-2-interruption-3⃣-1-3⃣-2-1. Such an analysis takes full note of the song’s initial harmonic ambiguity (see Problem #8 below), and accounts for the opening Urlinie tone as being considered either 3 or 3⃣, while allowing for its counterpart at the upbeat to measure 5 being clearly 3⃣.

That isn’t to say that my analysis is better than Schenker’s. However, my analysis becomes possible once one discards Schenker’s straitjacketed notion of a limited number of Urlinie patterns.

Therefore, problem #6 can stated as: The self-imposed limitations of Schenkerian analysis tend to bias an analyst away from alternate, but equally valid, methods of interpreting the underlying structure of a composition.

5 I understand that the A Major chord on the second beat is viewed by Schenker as a ‘prolongation’ of IV. However, I don’t really understand why IV cannot be considered as a ‘prolongation’ of I, given that the IV really is a ‘neighboring’ or ‘adjacent’ chord to I, which makes the C# on beat 2 fully consonant, and not a passing tone at all. I can’t keep from thinking that Schenker is being a bit arbitrary here.
Problem #7

The fundamental priority of the *Urlinie* and *Ursatz* in Schenkerian analysis can result in theoretical concepts being allowed to take precedence over the actual experience of the music. In other words, an analyst who is deeply committed to Schenkerian principles runs a real danger of ‘massaging’ the analysis in order to make it ‘fit the theory.’

The modern scientific method arose partly as a response to similar transgressions. If the conclusion from an experiment is found to be biased in favor of validating an underlying theory, and is either overlooking contradictory evidence, or is massaging the facts to conform to the underlying theory, techniques exist to expose those biases.

In fact, the primary purpose of the scientific method is really to *disprove* theories. All legitimate theories allow for the experimental conditions under which they could conceivably be found invalid; in other words, they can be tested. Many of the bedrock theories of modern science are bedrock theories precisely because they have survived many challenges of disproof and have been found to remain valid. In fact, the author of a scientific theory will generally offer instances in which the theory could be disproved – such as Einstein’s listing a number of possible disproofs of his Special Theory of Relativity.

The modern scientific method does not extend to Schenkerian analysis, and yet Schenkerian analysis does impose certain theoretical assumptions upon tonal music, the notions of *Urlinie* and *Ursatz* being the most obvious. Because these assumptions are bedrock for orthodox Schenkerian analysts, one is led to suspect that dubious elements of an individual analysis may have been emphasized precisely because they fit the theory, and not because they have anything to do with the actual perceived experience of the music.

Schenker’s analysis of “Aus meinen Thränen spriessen” provides an interesting case in point. Consider the characteristic half cadences of measures 4, 8, and 17, each followed by a full cadence in the piano. Judging from Schenker’s graphic analysis, one would gather that he considers the half cadences in the vocal part for measures 4 and 8 to be of primary importance – given that they survive intact even to the background analysis. And yet in measure 17 he assigns a primary function to the *full* cadence in the piano part, despite measure 17 being (musically) a verbatim repeat of measures 4 and 8. In fact, the final closure of the piece (piano alone, measures 16 – 17) is reduced out of the analysis altogether in the middle- and background analyses.

Why measure 17 should be so different from its two clones goes unexplained in the analysis, but one possible explanation can be made, which is that a first scale degree (1) is required by Schenker’s theory to be the culminating point of the *Urlinie*, even though the analysis up to that point has assigned backseat status to that first scale degree, and has tended to downplay the piano part in previous instances of the same figure. Because the theory says we need a fundamental-tone 1, we get it – even though there’s nothing about this measure which supports that fundamental-tone 1 any more than its two predecessors.

Although this isn’t definite proof of a ‘salted’ analysis, it’s a compelling explanation for a seemingly arbitrary decision on Schenker’s part. A scientific paper with such evidence of bias-based tampering would not pass publication peer review.
Therefore, problem #7 can be stated as: Schenkerian analysis is biased towards the preservation of an untestable and unproveable assumption, thus lending itself far too easily to the manipulation of an analysis for the purpose of preserving that assumption.

Problem #8
An analysis which removes a piece of music entirely out of its native context is likely to be incomplete, and possibly misleading. That is certainly the case with Schenker’s analysis of this Schumann lied.

“Aus meinen Thränen spriessen” is the second lied of the song cycle Dichterliebe, immediately following the beautiful and haunting “Im wunderschönen monat Mai”. Among the most noticeable features of that particular lied is its enigmatic ending – the piano alone holding a pianissimo C# dominant seventh chord.

Schumann’s ending, far from being a blatant violation of the most fundamental rules of harmony, is perfect within the context of this song cycle, given that “Im wunderschönen monat Mai” leads directly into “Aus meinen Thränen spriessen”, which opens with an apparent resolution of that dangling dominant seventh chord – although as it turns out, the resolution is equally enigmatic.

The lied begins with a major third, formed by the pitches A-natural and C-sharp. Anyone hearing this song will immediately assume that it is in the key of F# Minor, hearing those notes as the third and fifth of an F# minor triad, the resolution of the C# dominant seventh chord immediately preceding. The chord on the second beat of measure 1 is, in fact, an F# minor triad, which further invites one to assume an F# minor tonic. It is only with the following harmony (an A Major chord in second inversion) that a whiff of suspicion arises that the tonality just might be A Major – a surmise which gives way to certainty over the next three measures in a series of cadences.\(^6\)

Certainly this tonal ambiguity is critical to the experience of both first and second songs in the cycle. And yet Schenker ignores Schumann’s harmonic fluidity, bluntly freezing the opening notes of song #2 into the root and third of the tonic triad in A Major.

The reason underlying such Puritan inflexibility would appear to lie, once again, in the dogmatic principle of the Urlinie, which is rendered dubious should that opening C# (identified as a fundamental tone) be heard as 3\(^6\) (over a tonic of F# minor) instead of as 3\(^5\) (over a tonic of A major.) In other words, Schumann’s delicate ambiguity, having committed the offense of conflicting with Schenker’s tonal theory, is briskly slapped out of sight. But what does it say of an analysis that elevates an intellectual abstraction – the Urlinie – over Schumann’s actual intentions?

It’s also worth mentioning that Schumann was devoted to poetic unity within the entire Dichterliebe cycle, and thus the above is not a trivial objection; rather, it concerns elements which

\(^6\) Well, maybe not absolute certainty. It’s possible to hear the entire song as being in F# minor to some extent or another, with the A major cadences being tonicizations of III. The middle section of the song revolves around B minor, which is actually supports F# minor (for which it is the subdominant) just a bit more strongly than A major, for which it is the supertonic – a much less-likely secondary key center in a tonal composition. For a perceptive listener the ambiguity may remain unresolved.
are absolutely fundamental to the experience of this music. “Aus meiner Thränen” is meant to be heard as a continuation of the previous song/poem, and not as a stand-alone entity.

Therefore, problem #8 can be stated as: *Schenkerian analysis is biased towards the preservation of an untestable and unproveable assumption, thus lending itself far too easily to the deliberate ignoring or obfuscating of elements in the composition that might contradict that assumption.*

Conclusion

The above essay (rant?) about Schenkerian analysis may well lead the reader to conclude that I wouldn’t use Schenkerian analysis on a bet. That is not my intention. I use reductive techniques frequently in my own work and find many of Schenker’s theories (though not all) useful as tools or springboards for musical inquiry. I would never base an analysis *entirely* on a Schenkerian approach. It’s too limited; it’s too easily misused; it’s just too doggone dogmatic.

So it ain’t the whole enchilada. Nor does it have to be: analytical methods abound. We are free to use what we find valuable and discard the rest. That is our privilege, and obligation, as students of musical analysis. We may like the overall polyphonic or reductive nature of Schenkerian analysis, but find the *Urlinie* or *Ursatz* to be so much much unfounded psychobabble. So we reduce without the *Urlinie*; it’s perfectly possible. Or we may prefer to employ an unrestricted *Urlinie*, one not bound to the tonic triad alone. That’s our prerogative, too.

In the end the only thing that really matters is the analyst’s ear. All doctrine, theory, and dogma must at all times be governed by the actual perceived experience of a piece of music. If we allow any of our preconceived notions, ideas, or biases to color or manipulate our musical analysis, then we are no longer engaging in the honorable practice of communicating a piece of music to a reader or listener: we are engaging instead in the far less honorable practice of propaganda.

Final Note on Sources

The ‘rant’ part of this essay is by no means all my original ranting. Joseph Kerman is the source of a number of these objections in his article “How We Got Into Analysis, and How To Get Out”, found most recently in the collection *Write All These Down*, published by the University of California Press in 1994. My essay selects from a number of Kerman’s points, puts them into the framework of my “problems”, and adds a number of points of my own. Problems 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 are entirely my own; Problem #7 is an adaptation of several passages in Kerman’s article; Problems 5 and 8 are both rewordings from Kerman’s article devoid of any particular original insights from me. The list of ten “Advantages” is entirely my own, however. My introduction, listing the various symbols found in Schenkerian analysis, is adapted from Allan Forte’s fascinating book *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era*, in which he applies Schenkerian analysis to songs by American masters such as Cole Porter, George Gershwin, and Irving Berlin.