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Questioning Theoretical Robustness: Quasi-Integration of Neo-Riemannian and Schenkerian Theories

ABSTRACT

Background

In the American music theory, since the latter half of the 20th century, the establishment of various societies and the publication of many specialized journals have triggered numerous studies and reviews on theoretical methods and, as a result, the diversification of methods. Among the diffusing methods, this study picks up Neo-Riemannian theory (derived from transformational theory) as among the current mainstream theories; it aims to contextualize and characterize the developmental process of the relevant academic discipline by tracing the complementary and competitive relationship of this theory with an existing theory: Schenkerian theory.

Aims and repertoire studied

Schenkerian theory has concerned mainly the classical tonal music, whereas Neo-Riemannian theory is an analytical tool for post-tonal and late Romantic music. Hence, Neo-Riemannian and Schenkerian theories cannot be compared even by these analytical objects. However, as observed by Julian Hook (2007, 168), who considered it a ‘mistake’ if one regards ‘transformation’ and ‘prolongation’ as antithetical conceptions, even though there is a fundamental difference between the theories, the integration or differentiation of the theories has been suggested in several studies. This case study focuses on these studies in terms of the relationship between the theories, examines the claims made by these studies, and clarifies the effects of the methodological arguments that advocate a new theory over an existing one.

With respect to both theories, individual arguments, such as the expansion of analytic objects and methodological refinements, have exchanged actively. Especially *Journal of Music Theory* Volume 42/2, which features Neo-Riemannian theory in 1998, and *The Oxford Handbook of Neo-Riemannian Music Theories*, which was published in 2011, have promoted Neo-Riemannian approaches.

Among these individual studies, those that question the relationship between both theories have emerged sporadically. The best example is *Journal of Schenkerian Studies* Volume 2, titled ‘Special Volume on Schenkerian and Neo-Riemannian Methodologies’ published in 2007. This study deciphers the characteristics of the methodological arguments in these studies that focus on the relationship.

Methods

Studies that argue the relationship between both theories, excluding those that do not compare them explicitly, are as follows: Cohn (1999), Samarotto (2003), Hook (2007), Golden-

berg (2007), Rings (2007), and Baker (2008). These arguments are divided into two standpoints:

- (1) studies that view the integration of methods of both theories as impossible, and are distinguished further as follows:
 - (i) studies that attempt to segregate as regards method and do not attempt to integrate (through a concrete analysis)
 - (ii) studies that show the methodological incompatibility of both theories by attempting to integrate through a concrete analysis
- (2) studies that integrate methods of both theories through a concrete analysis

Implications

First, as a study that corresponds to (1)-(i), Neo-Riemannian theorist Julian Hook’s (2007) discussion is to be examined. This article takes a standpoint that considers the comparison impossible, as both theories differ from the analytic objects and methodology. It points out the following three points: the difference of both theories’ nature and analytic objects, and whether or not to premise the hierarchical coherence, by replacing transformational figure of Beethoven’s first symphony by ‘quasi-Schenkerian graph’ (Hook 2007, 166–7). What transformational theory stresses is not the hierarchical coherence, but the meaningfulness that the analyst discovers.

Next, Richard Cohn’s (1999) article and Frank Samarotto’s (2003) research are categorized into (1)-(ii). Cohn, who has developed Neo-Riemannian theory much further, by relocating transformational analysis of the first movement of Schubert’s piano sonata B-flat major into Schenkerian graph, pointed out the sufficiency; the latter is not suitable to analyze the pieces that contain the diatonic contradiction, whereas the former that needs not the diatonic contextualization fits the analysis of this kind (Cohn 1999, 220). From this difference, the second issue is concerned on the difference of appropriate analytic objects, as Hook also noted. Finally, Cohn demolished the ‘organicist vision’ that considers the organic unity among foreground, middle ground, and background, whereas Neo-Riemannian theorists do not premise such a coherence (Cohn 1999, 232). Meanwhile, Schenkerian theorist Samarotto ventures into a case in which ‘transformational steps might be leading to a real conflict with prolongational coherence’ (Samarotto 2003, 2). As Cohn’s third issue, Samarotto insists that transformational theory does not presuppose the coherence by one chord, which related the whole piece. Taking Brahms’ works to show such a case, he also explained that the conflict between diatonic model and transformational chords cannot be explained only by Schenkerian theory (Samarotto 2003, 10). Moreover, the application of Neo-Riemannian theory to the 19th-century music is not carried out based on the *a priori* assumption and becomes

possible only by considering the context of the relevant piece. Such an examination leads to the contrast of the heuristic nature of Neo-Riemannian theory and the robustness of Schenkerian theory (Samarotto 2003, 11).

As studies that belong to (2), Yosef Goldenberg's (2007), Steven Rings' (2007), and Michael Baker's (2008) papers are examined. First, Goldenberg saw the difference of both theories in the approaches to chromaticism, and states at the same time that 'the separation is not absolute' (Goldenberg 2007, 66). By developing the analysis of Neo-Riemannian transformation and Schenkerian voice leading of the first movement of Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony within the same graph, he distinguished theory from analysis, and warned that the integration of both analytic procedures is productive but cannot always bring 'a single theoretical method' (Goldenberg 2007, 84). Transformational theorist Rings attempted to integrate both theories consistently within the framework of transformational theory. Taking Schubert's No. 2 from *4 Impromptus* D899 as an instance, the integration is accomplished not as competition or collaboration, but as a 'dialogue' (Rings 2007, 45). This means a parallel analysis of both theories. It becomes meaningful only if a contrast comes out: the significance of the integration depends on the analytic result. After all, his premise is also the incompatibility of them, the distinction of Schenkerian structural reading and 'esthetic pluralism' of Lewin's approach (Rings 2007, 39n), emphasizing on the productivity of 'more pragmatic' aims (Rings 2006[2011], 40). Partly similarly, Baker employed Brahms' *In der Fremde* to integrate the elements of both theories, through the new concept of 'common-tone prolongation' (Baker 2008, 72), although the prolongation of one chord is an essential feature of Schenkerian theory. This attempt is an integration in the sense that one modifies Schenkerian theory by introducing concepts of Neo-Riemannian theory. The integrated theory is the third 'heuristic method' (Baker 2008, 81).

In conclusion, the issues proposed by all studies are summarized into the following points, which are related to each other:

1. whether the theory premises the coherence
2. whether the theory depends on the (hierarchical or diatonic) context
3. difference of nature of theories
4. difference of analytic objects

The effects in such arguments are divided as follows: first, enabling heuristic interpretations through a hybrid theoretical framework by quasi-integration and, second, showing the capacity of one theory by explaining what the other theory reveals. In other words, a series of arguments stems from the methodological difference between the theories in terms of the priority of "interpretation" or "method," that is, theories differ in setting as an end objective of the renewal of the interpretation of musical pieces, or the evocation of a new theoretical model, by maintaining the incompatibility of methods. Inevitably, this effect causes one to question the methodological "robustness" of a theory, which enables a meta-level discussion of theory and analysis.

Keywords

Neo-Riemannian theory, Schenkerian theory, methodology, analysis and theory, interpretation

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