

‘The Whiteness’ *of Music* *Analysis.*

*A Gloss on Philip Ewell’s
Lamentation over Schenker*

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ABSTRACT

The article is a polemic with the views formulated in 2020 by Philip A. Ewell in the *Journal of the Society for Music Theory*. His text is a critique of European music theory, mainly as represented in the writings by Heinrich Schenker. Ewell's main claim is that European music theory is based on racist concepts.

Keywords: Schenker, music analysis, anthropological approach to music analysis, racism

INTRODUCTION

Music analysis, defined as the procedure of dividing musical structure into simpler elements and examining their functions within that structure, has sometimes been compared to objective chemical analysis, free of any value judgments.¹ Such qualities, normally found in the methodology of natural sciences, were attributed to the theory of Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935), which belonged to the mainstream of (especially American) musicology for several decades. The extraordinary success of Schenker's theory resulted from his very clear concept of the musical work, from its internal coherence, an illusion of scientific objectivism, the logic of theoretical construct, the elegant graphic representations of a work's structure, and the fact that his method passed the test when applied in actual research. Criticism of his approach, however, came quite early and was levelled at his theory from many different methodological perspectives.² I will discuss three critical analyses, presented by Joseph Kerman (1980),³ Wye Jamison Allanbrook (1994),⁴

and Philipp A. Ewell (2020).⁵ All of them attempted to deconstruct Schenker's theoretical tenets.

SCIENTIFIC DISPUTES WITH HEINRICH SCHENKER

Joseph Kerman observed as early as 1965 that music analysis is too preoccupied with its own techniques and internal logic to grasp the aesthetic dimension of the work of art.⁶ By gradually getting rid of value judgments, analysis employs scientific methodology to a progressively greater extent so as to attain precision and the status of scientific objectivism. Schenker's system aspired to provide the most comprehensive and universal analytic tool to deal with the entire vast tradition of European music; a tool that was insensitive not only to the music work's content and expressive qualities, but also to its historical transformations. It was in the function of such a technical tool that Schenkerian analysis was applied in America, similarly to the way in which Hugo Riemann's (1849–1919) formal and Hermann Erpf's (1891–1969) harmonic analytic methods were employed in Europe.

In his important and much quoted article of 1980, Joseph Kerman expressed his doubts as to the scientific impartiality of Schenker's theory. He claimed that, despite the illusion of technical objectivism, all of its components were derived from one specific worldview. Rather than being an element of science, Kerman claimed, Schenkerian analysis reflects 'a set of ideas' whose leitmotif is the belief in the supreme value of absolute music rooted in the German tradition.⁷ The idea of absolute music, which became the aesthetic paradigm of nineteenth-century German musical culture, was coupled with a number of well-known nineteenth-century concepts related to art and music. These included the notions of the spontaneity and authenticity of performance, and especially the Romantic myth of an artist as an enlightened and suffering hero. Another fundamental component of the methodological profile

¹ I.D. Bent, 'Analysis', in S. Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, London, Macmillan, 1980, vol. I, pp. 340–388.

² E.g. L.B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1956; Ch. Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven*, New York, The Viking Press, 1971; E. Narmour, *Beyond Schenkerism: The Need for Alternatives in Music Analysis*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1977.

³ J. Kerman, 'How We Got into Analysis and How to Get Out', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1980, pp. 311–331.

⁴ W.J. Allanbrook, *The Secular Commedia: Comic Mimesis in Late Eighteenth-Century Music*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2014.

⁵ Ph.A. Ewell, 'Music Theory and the White Racial Frame', *A Journal of the Society for Music Theory*, vol. 26, no. 2, September 2020, <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.ewell.html> (accessed 24 October 2022).

⁶ J. Kerman, 'Profile for American Musicology', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol. 18, Spring 1965, p. 65.

⁷ J. Kerman, 'How We Got into Analysis...'

of Schenkerian analysis was the concept of organic unity, which decided about the superior axiological status of a music work. Analytic procedures aimed to demonstrate in what way all the elements of a masterpiece work together so as to form a unified whole. The uni-dimensionality of Schenker's idea was, in Kerman's view, its main weakness. He recommended that the analytic field, reduced so far exclusively to demonstrating the work's organic unity as an aim *per se*, ought to be extended. Kerman argued that analysis must take into consideration the composer's intentions, gain insights into his or her personal associations and imagination, and, most of all, account for the historical transformations of styles, genres, and forms, on which the choice of the suitable analytic procedure depends. Since it espoused the Romantic ideology of German absolute music, Schenker's structuralism did not and could not attain the status of a universal analytic technique applicable to any kind of music. It was a system that sprang from research into one particular, closed chapter of European music history, limited to the output of composers from Bach to Brahms.

In her book *The Secular Commedia: Comic Mimesis in Late Eighteenth-Century Music*, Wye Jamison Allanbrook (1943–2010) touches upon what may be the most sensitive point of Schenker's theory; namely, the notion of deep structure, which is pivotal to his analytic concept. The idea of musical depth, originating in the German Romanticism, particularly – in Hegel's concept of Absolute Spirit, considers hidden deep truths as more important and momentous than the surface of phenomena. The latter is viewed as banal and devoid of seriousness. In Schenker's concept it is only the *Ursatz*, the inaudible fundamental principle, that has any ontological reality, whereas the top or surface layer of the composition is merely its external manifestation, illuminated by the light of that absolute principle. Allanbrook, on the other hand, turned in her programme and methodology to the expressive surface of the music work, in which, she claimed, the true communicative force of music resides (if we assume that communication is music's principal objective). The expressive gestures of the music's surface, referred to by Leonard Ratner as *topoi*, make up its lexicon, recognisable to the listeners, which allows them fully to comprehend the musical event. This analytic concept, radically different from that proposed by Schenker, was also developed by Kofi Agawu, who analysed the semiotic character of 18th-century *topoi*.⁸

⁸ V.K. Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991.

Philip A. Ewell's paper entitled 'Music Theory and the White Racial Frame', printed in September 2020 in the *Journal of the Society for Music Theory*, deals with the white racial framework that underlies European music theory. The author's main thesis is that Schenker's racist views are reflected in his analytic system, which thus infected with racism the entire Western European and American music-theoretical thinking, employed as a means of expressing the white man's supremacy over the black race. The racist profile of Schenker's theory manifests itself in numerous prejudices, the most important of which concerns the claim that white music is the only appropriate basis for music theory. This is reflected in educational practice, which revolves around works composed by 'white' composers. The supremacy of the white race is reflected in incorporating the European tonal model in a theoretical system constructed so as to exclude the tonal phenomena of 'black' music. Even worse, functional tonality, contaminated by 'white' thinking, is the best example and proof of racial motives behind the theory that reflects practices and social relations reinforcing the privileged status of white people.

Schenker demonstrates his belief in the supremacy of the white over the black race by glorifying Germans and German music. His concept of genius, which assumes that masterpieces are produced by German composers, is of particularly racist character, since it is tantamount to the conviction that black-skinned people would never prove capable of composing such masterful works.⁹ Racism is also latent in the idea that the work's unity is attained thanks to a fundamental or deep structure (*Ursatz*) and its emanations on the medium and surface levels of the composition. A work designed in accordance with the principles of *Ursatz* is only accessible to white people and unperformable for the blacks. The notion of structural hierarchies within the music work is likewise racist since it directly reflects the inequality and hierarchical organisation of human societies. The regulating and controlling function of *Ursatz* mirrors the social system in which black people have to be controlled by the whites.

⁹ Schenker implies that blacks are inferior because only the white German genius, with its superior *Menschenhumus*, is capable of creating the background that Schenker speaks of. In other words, to Schenker, blacks are not capable of producing the same level of artistry and beauty that whites are capable of, and among whites, Germans have been the best at producing such beauty. Cf. A. Ewell, 'Music Theory...', [4.5].

THE STEREOTYPICAL DISTORTION OF EUROPEAN MUSICAL TRADITION

It would be impossible to discuss all of the author's radical theses and opinions in rational terms. In many cases, those theses contradict both common experience and scientific knowledge. I would like to focus on several key arguments on which Philip A. Ewell based his polemic. His main tenet is that Schenker was a racist and expressed his racist views in his diaries and correspondence. The racist character of his theory is evident in its fundamental theses, namely those of the supremacy of absolute music, of German genius, the work's internal unity, functional tonality, and hierarchical structure of the composition. Schenker's concepts 'infected' the entire Western music theory with anti-black racism and must therefore be reformulated from scratch. As for Heinrich Schenker himself and his followers, they must be removed from the list of European theorists quoted in academic research.

It must be stated, first and foremost, that even though Schenker's theory, rooted in the Classical-Romantic aesthetics, did contain motifs which later became part and parcel of twentieth-century Nazi ideology, it was not racism in the sense of which Ewell writes, or at least not the 'anti-black' racism known from America. As concerns Schenker's analytic technique, derived from the concept of absolute music, which does not carry any notions or subject matter and whose only aim is purely cognitive, that technique is suited to the study of music as a product of the spirit and the intellect, and as such it was and remains far removed from any social mission or message. Ideas such as the tonal system, internal unity, hierarchical and multi-layered structure have no extramusical, political or ideological significance. Hierarchies of structural levels have nothing in common with the idea of racial superiority or inferiority. Hierarchical functional relations between notes within musical scales are quite unrelated to social and racial inequalities between humans. There is no way in which all these meanings could be either derived from or attributed to the abstract structure of Schenker's theory.

By emphasising cultural differences between groups of people, Ewell in fact proposes an oversimplified classification of those groups based on the opposition of 'us' vs 'others', well known from social psychology. The categories of 'us' vs 'others' imply 'ours' and 'theirs', that is, two mutually opposed worlds occupied by 'Us' and 'Them'. Unable to represent the outside world fully for reason of its complexity, people form simplified images

or stereotypes which account for only a small number of selected qualities of the given phenomenon.¹⁰ One example of such a stereotyped image is the aesthetics of socialist realism, built upon the opposition of 'us' vs 'them' and drawing on the mechanisms which determine the functioning of social groups, their sense of identity and community (including musical communities). In music, socialist realism was inaugurated by a famous review of Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (Rus. *Леда Макбет Мценского уезда*). The article, written most likely by Andrei Zhdanov at Stalin's behest, was published anonymously in January 1936 in *Pravda*.¹¹ In that review Zhdanov, who was musically educated to some degree, presents a model of stereotyped classification of music into positively valued 'our' (that is, classical and tonal) music and negatively valued 'other' or 'alien' (modernist) music. This division would be reiterated for decades in propagandist writings in the countries of the Soviet Bloc. 'Other music' was described as formalist, fundamentally wrong, smacking of the bourgeois decay of European and American music, naturalistic in a vulgar fashion, and trespassing not only beyond the limits of normal emotions, but also those of the normal human mind. Progressive Bolshevik music, on the other hand, was realistic, tonal, and pleasant – melodious and harmonious. Such works are the treasure house and the mainstay of Soviet music, which resists the pitiful bourgeois productions. This type of narration, as well as Zhdanov's catalogue of epithets and insults directed against 'other' music, became a model for statements made by numerous writers, journalists, and musicologists both in the Soviet Union and in the so-called 'people's democracies'. First and foremost, however, they became a tool for the political persecution of composers who dared to go beyond the tonality of the Russian Romanticism – artists such as Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Myaskovsky, Khachaturian, Kabalevsky, and Shebalin.

¹⁰ W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922; P. Hinton, 'Implicit stereotypes and the predictive brain: cognition and culture in "biased" person perception', *Palgrave Communications*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.86> (accessed 24 October 2022); P. Hinton, *Stereotypes, Cognition and Culture*, Hove, Psychology Press, 2000; I. Kurcz, *Zmienność i nieuchronność stereotypów* [The Changeability and Inevitability of Stereotypes], Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Instytutu Psychologii, 1994.

¹¹ Anonymous, 'Sumbur vmeste muzyki', *Pravda*, 28 January 1936, quoted after: V. Seroff, *Dimitri Shostakovich: the Life and Background of a Soviet Composer*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1943, pp. 204–207.

Ewell's opposition between 'white' music and its theory on the one hand and 'black' music on the other is in fact of the same kind as the Bolshevik opposition between realist and formalist music. 'White' music and its theory were isolated by Ewell from their broad historical context and represented in a simplified, stereotyped manner as products of the white people's racial hegemony. Astonishingly, Ewell presents virtually no arguments to demonstrate the link between music theory and Schenker's racist views. He has little to say about the music that Schenker analysed or about his theory for that matter, not to mention European music theory as a whole. Ewell's stereotype of European music and its theory involves functional tonality, the hierarchy of notes within the scale, and the structural hierarchy of music works. He opposes these to black, non-European music and theory, which should supposedly replace those of Schenker.

MUSIC AS AN OBJECT OF VERBAL DISCOURSE

The problem of 'whiteness' in European music theory extends far beyond the work, views and figure of Heinrich Schenker. The stigma of Europeanism is carried not only by this particular theorist and his ideas, but by the broadly conceived European conceptualisation of music as a non-verbal symbolic system¹² which becomes an object of verbal discourse, interpretations and assessments in all human cultures. Verbal discourse, of which analysis constitutes one specific type, universally accompanies the process of composing, performing, and listening to music. Talking about music allows people to organise transitory and intuitively sensed meanings, objectivise them, and situate them within one specific intellectual / axiological order which reflects the set of general human convictions and collective representations, as well as human worldviews. By talking about music, we thus exchange not only information concerning the organisation of sound material, but also a set of socially and culturally accepted 'instructions' for its possible interpretations. An understanding of music requires, therefore, familiarising oneself with both musical and musical-linguistic traditions, that is, with the heritage in which music production and interpretation is combined with an objectivization of those interpretations. 'Those

who are not afraid to become aware of the structure of language we use to speak about music, understand music more deeply and thoroughly,' Dahlhaus claimed.¹³

The structures of verbalised thought about music undergo cultural and historical transformations. Those structures depend to the greatest extent on the forms of cultural content transmission, which have a decisive impact on the shape of culture and of social practices, institutions and interpersonal relations that exist within culture. Cultures dominated by direct oral transmission differ in many respects from those based on writing.¹⁴ The cognitive, psychical and social contrast between orality and literacy is one of the main factors that differentiate the models of thinking 'in' music and 'about' music. Non-notated music is usually functional and depends on the social-situational context of performance as the only form of the music work's actualisation. Musical communication is invariably social, interactive, and personal in this case, oriented toward direct collaboration between musicians and their audience. This principle concerns traditional folk music just as much as tribal music involved in various (for instance ritual) contexts, as well as Asiatic music that attained a very high degree of autonomy in cultures which prefer the oral model of musical communication. Orally transmitted music is not accompanied by discourse of the analytic type, even in cases when techniques, forms and styles of composition demonstrate a high degree of complexity. The lack of techniques which could be labelled 'analytic' in the European sense, that is, 'dividing the work into smaller elements' results, on the one hand, from the formulaic model of structuring musical ideas, and on the other – from the composers' extremely strong self-identification with the very process of music-making.

The invention of graphic symbols which made it possible to notate melodies previously only circulating in oral transmission was an event of paramount importance in European music history. The notated signs stopped the movement of speech and melodic sounds and thus made it possible to represent the stream of language and

¹² J. Blacking, 'Some Problems of Theory and Method in the Study of Musical Change', *Yearbook of the Traditional Folk Music Council*, September 1977, pp. 1–27.

¹³ C. Dahlhaus, 'Das 'verstehen' von Musik und die Sprache der musikalischen Analyse', in P. Faltin and H.-P. Reinecke (eds), *Musik und Verstehen. Aufsätze zur semiotischen Theorie, Ästhetik und Soziologie der musikalischen Rezeption*, Köln, Arno Volk Verlag – Hans Gerig KG, 1973, pp. 37–47.

¹⁴ J. Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978; W. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*, New York, Routledge, 2002.

music by means of icons in a text,¹⁵ which with time became the sole representation of sequences of sound phenomena and the principal criterion of a music work's identity and completeness. The text (score), conceived henceforth as a static object, became the yardstick for the correct execution of a music work¹⁶ in the act of its performance. Writing and composing thus became synonymous with each other, and written music, as a form of expressing musical thought transferred from the audial to the visual sphere, lost its direct links to the social context, situation, and function. This initiated the long process of transforming music's structural foundations. Simultaneously with the development of music notation in Europe, a discourse on music evolved, based on the system of terms and notions once worked out by ancient Greek philosophers. Those Greek theoreticians created their complete set of theoretical-musical categories in a period when music was profoundly immersed in the orality, only gradually 'rarefied' by the imposition of a network of abstract ideas on audially experienced sound structures. Their intellectual work initiated the process of the development of modern-age European sound technique, differing in nearly every respect from the composition techniques applied in orally transmitted music. The material of oral music was thus conceptually split into a number of well-delineated, precisely defined, and relatively autonomous categories. Such concepts as music note, interval, musical scale, sound system, consonance and dissonance, melody, time, and rhythm lie at the foundation of the modern-age European concept of music. At the same time, those notions have been involved in the process of transformations taking place in the musical thought itself, which acquired an 'analytic' character.

This process of evolution in modern European thinking, taking place under the influence of the literate model of communication, culminated in the emergence of an aesthetic discourse. Aesthetics absorbed all the earlier speculative-philosophical and theoretical-compositional thought and employed it in the service of interpreting the senses of the music work, conceived as an autonomous

text and a means of conveying cultural values. Music analysis became the principal tool of aesthetic thought and at the same time its necessary complement. Analysis is an empirical procedure aiming to comprehend and describe the inner, logical and expressive structure of the work. As a technique of interpretation, analysis discovers and explains the senses of the music work as defined by aesthetics.

Notation and the broadly conceived discourse on music became a tool for the academic study of the music of non-European cultures, initiated in the nineteenth century. Such research, though motivated by cognitive curiosity, undeniably took the form of cultural confrontations, frequently tinged by European scholars' racial prejudice. One of the earliest examples of such an encounter between European science and non-European music is Guillaume André Villoteau's (1759–1839) report on his meeting with Egyptian musicians in Cairo, where he stayed in 1798–1801.¹⁷ The French researcher did not try to conceal the fact that transcribing Arab songs constituted the greatest difficulty for him, since European notation proved incompatible with orally transmitted music. Elements that are of paramount importance in oral music not submitted to the technology of writing, but have no place in the regular music notation, include complex melismata and ornaments as well as 'irrational' time signatures and rhythms. All this bears strongly on the graphic representations of such music, since the process of music being transformed into a written form necessitates its far-reaching and comprehensive reduction. Music notation imposes a selective approach to information about the music event. It is not, as Villoteau suggested, a mere innocent 'simplification' of the music's actual shape; instead, the process radically interferes with the oral concept of the music. *De l'art musical en Égypte* is a good illustration of problems posed by musicology as a *par excellence* European discipline, which makes efforts to comprehend 'other' music through the mediacy of its own, European cultural conventions and rules. Philip Ewell argues that the 'violence' inflicted by the researcher's conventions on the music of other cultures is a manifestation of white man's enforced supremacy, similarly as Schenker's

15 Cf. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*..., 2nd ed., p. 32, https://monoskop.org/images/d/db/Ong_Walter_J_Orality_and_Literacy_2nd_ed.pdf (accessed 24 October 2022).

16 This peculiar relation between composition, notation and performance is referred to by Leo Treitler as the 'paradigm of literacy'. Cf. L. Treitler, 'The Early History of Music Writing in the West', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol. XXXV, no. 2, 1982, pp. 237–279.

17 G.A. Villoteau, 'De l'état actuel de l'art musical en Égypte ou Relation historique et descriptive des recherches et observations faites sur la musique en ce pays par M. Villoteau', in *Description de l'Égypte*, vol. 14, Paris, C.L.F. Panckoucke, 1826, ch. II: De la pratique de la musique parmi les Égyptiens modernes, pp. 113–122.

theory, which has dominated music analysis, represents flagrant use of intellectual violence against the non-tonal music of other cultures.¹⁸ The transcription, theory and analysis of non-European music may admittedly involve unconscious modelling based on the researcher's own cognitive paradigm, which remains alien to that music. Literature abounds in examples of more or less successful analyses of non-European music which emulate the analytic models developed for the European music work. The results of such research procedures, which constitute, in a way, a form of intellectual oppression, are rarely satisfying. Even though witty Schenkerian analyses of Japanese music led to the construction of formally correct and elegant graphic representations,¹⁹ they have not brought us any closer to an understanding of the musical thinking of the Japanese, which is, in every possible way, different from the one for which Schenker originally built his system. European musicology, music theory and analysis, developed for the needs of European music, are all rooted in European intellectual culture and conceptually suited to that culture. Music, however, can only be understood by reference to those meanings which its composers, performers and audiences bestowed on it, and not – through the application of any theory hypothetically considered as universal.²⁰ Ewell's demand that Schenker's theory be adjusted to music other than European is therefore impracticable.

CONCLUSION

The debate concerning Schenker's theory, initiated by Joseph Kerman, was originally meant as a serious discussion on the methodological paradigm of music analysis. Criticism stemmed from a deconstruction of the ideological basis underlying Schenker's theory, rooted in a philosophical type of Romanticism with its apology

of German spirituality. The one-sidedness of his analytic concept, and in particular – his emphasis on testing the work's unity while ignoring its aesthetic aspects, and his ahistorical approach to analysis, came under heavy criticism.

In his paper, Philip Ewell further claimed that Schenker's theory was related to his views concerning racial inequality between humans. This claim, however, was neither properly documented nor honestly analysed. On the other hand, though, one may doubt whether even a detailed, precise and severe appraisal of the German scholar's concepts would make any sense in the context of the history of his theory, which was formulated and then applied for decades as a tool for objective or even objectivistic music analysis, and not – as an instrument of racial oppression. It might seem that Ewell's main charge against Schenker and his theory is not its racist construction but its European 'white' roots. Those roots are an undeniable historical and cultural fact, which Philip Ewell's accusations can hardly change. On the contrary, by expressing his aversion for the 'whites' and 'white' culture, Ewell perpetuates the 'us' vs 'them' division, in which he comes very close to the oppressive and exclusive doctrine of socialist realism.

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¹⁸ European music, including functional tonality, has undoubtedly assisted the colonisation and Europeanisation of non-European peoples and cultures, as Ewell claims in his paper (cf. V.K. Agawu, 'Tonality as a colonizing force in African Music', Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Music Media and Technology (CIRMMT), 11 March 2021, https://www.cirmmt.org/en/events/distinguished-lectures/Kofi_Agawu_2020-21 (accessed 24 October 2022)). This fact, however, is not related in any way to the ostensible racist character of Schenker's theory.

¹⁹ D. Loeb, 'An analytic Study of Japanese Koto Music', in F. Salzer (ed.), *The Music Forum*, vol. 4, 1976.

²⁰ J. Blacking, *Music, culture, and experience. Selected papers of John Blacking*, ed. and introd. R. Byron, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 223–243.

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