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North American Approaches to Musical Form

William E. Caplin

Until recent years, the North American music-theoretical community has paid scant attention to the theory of musical form. In the early days of the Society for Music Theory (1970s–80s), speculative work on form was not only ignored by most theorists, but many developed a markedly antipathetic attitude toward the subject, most likely influenced in that respect by Heinrich Schenker's critique of the traditional "Formenlehre". As well, the two most popular textbooks used in music schools throughout the second half of the century – those by Douglass Green and Wallace Berry – broke little new theoretical ground.

In effect, theorists largely left research into musical form to historical musicologists, whose contributions can be roughly organized around three main lines of inquiry: (1) the "critical" writings of Charles Rosen, who builds upon Donald Francis Tovey's highly influential studies, while also incorporating key ideas from Edward Cone (one of the few early North American music theorists to address issues of form); (2) Jan LaRue's "descriptive" approach, which influenced studies by Eugene K. Wolf, Bathia Churgin, and others; and (3) the "historicist" views of Leonard G. Ratner, whose turning back to eighteenth-century theorists of form and phrase structure, especially H. C. Koch, inspired significant research by scholars such as Elaine Sisman, Janet Levy, Jane R. Stevens, Mark Evan Bonds, and Karol Berger. Though not so clearly associated with these three traditions, mention must also be made of contributions to nineteenth-century form by the historians James Webster and Anthony Newcomb.

A revival of interest in musical form among theorists of recent decades has been stimulated by a number of research initiatives. In the first instance, some new approaches to musical rhythm and meter have yielded significant insights into matters of form and phrase structure, especially in the writings of William Rothstein, David Beach, and Joel Lester. Second, whereas Schenker's acerbic remarks on the traditional theories of form were a major source of antagonism to the topic, a number of younger Schenkerians – including Charles Smith, Joel Galand, Wayne Petty, Peter Smith, and Poundie Burstein – have begun to reexamine Schenker's own views and analytical approach, with the goal of stimulating new research into matters of musical form. Third, the development and extension of the formal theories of Arnold Schönberg and his students (especially Erwin Ratz), recently espoused by William Caplin, along with studies by Janet Schmalfeldt, has brought a "theory of formal functions" to the attention of the theoretical community. Caplin proposes a wide range of categories (and an attendant terminology) for analyzing

formal functionality at all levels in the hierarchy of a work in the classical style, giving special attention to the role of cadence in articulating form. Fourth, the collaborative efforts of James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy have resulted in a new genre-based “sonata theory” for the analysis of classical and romantic forms. Key elements of their theory include defining a “medial caesura” within a sonata-form exposition, the notion of “rotational” form, and processes of formal “deformation”. In addition to the main developments just outlined, many other theorists in the past several decades have contributed individual studies to the theory and analysis of musical form, including those by Scott Burnham, Ethan Haimo, Jonathan Kramer, Robert Morgan, and David Smyth, to name but a few.

In light of the extraordinary flourishing of formal theory in recent years, the lacuna of research into form that existed at the very time when North American music theory was developing into a distinct academic discipline must be seen as a historical aberration, one that is now in the process of correction. As we begin the twenty-first century, a substantial segment of the theory community is reengaging the topic, often in productive dialogue with music historians. That the 2004 Mannes Institute on Advanced Theoretical Studies would be devoted exclusively to theories of musical form bears witness to the enormous progress that has been achieved in restoring this subject to its rightful place as a legitimate field of music-theoretical reflection.

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