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# THE DEFECTS OF A REIGNING THEORY

*UDC 781.1/.4 Schenker H.*

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**Abstract**. *Contemporary theoretical musicology, and especially its anglophone section, has been heavily influenced by the ideas and analytical methods of Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935) who was an Austrian. Schenkerian-inspired theory, once imported in the United States from Austria, spread widely on American soil, where it was "enriched" conceptually, and was then re-exported to Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and other English speaking countries. The old American school of harmony that stemmed from the best German, French, and Russian traditions, found itself pushed to the wall by the ever growing Schenkerian school of thought which was erecting a cult of his creator. A "new order" in harmony and analysis was gradually established that regarded tonality as a business between tonic and dominant alone, the rest of the chords being of peripheral importance. This mentality shut the door to diversity and freedom in functional thinking, and opened the door to highly biased harmonic and formal analyses which erased harmonic cadences, presented tonality in black and white, breached syntactical units to create a new way of hearing music (the so-called "distance hearing" or "structural hearing"), and inevitably ended up with the same fundamental structure in melody and harmony, named "Ursatz". This essay discusses major defects of Schenkerian theory and their negative impact on traditional harmony and analysis.*

**Key words**: *Schenker, analysis, theory, harmony, structure*

## INTRODUCTION

The landscape of the classical study of harmony in North America has been changing during the past seventy years. Its colorful panorama gradually dissolved into a gray scale of uniformity and rigid theoretical methods. Schenkerian theories have been pushing aside traditional values in favor of questionable analytical conceptions. The traditional

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school of harmony has been continuously drained of the ideas of great musicians and theorists of the past, to succumb to a “new order” built on a binary functional system, linear principles, and omnipresent functional prolongations. Schenkerian analysis – aggressively propagated as the ultimate analytical method for the music in classical style – has acquired the status of biblical truth.

In this essay I will offer a brief discussion on what I consider majors defects of Schenkerian theory, and will give a hint to its detrimental impact in the studies of harmony and analysis.

A list of suggested major defects of Schenkerian theory is exposed below. Each one of those headlines will be examined separately.

1. Repudiation of the subdominant function and the plagal cadence.
2. Imposition of an exaggerated notion of functional prolongation, which leads to elimination of stepwise cadences as well as implied cadences over a pedal point.
3. Repudiation of ascending melodic lines and the leading tone as structurally important factors in background analysis.
4. Interpretation of typical six-four chords as dissonant sonorities.
5. Neglect of rhythm and phrase structure as important factors in tonal analysis.

Heinrich Schenker offered his concept of *Fundamental Structure* with the following words:

“In opposition to this theory, I here present a new concept, one inherent in the works of the great masters; indeed, it is the very secret and source of their being: the concept of organic coherence” (Schenker, 1935/56, xxi). The fundamental structure consists of a melodic line descending to the tonic note, and a bass figure performing scale degrees 1–5–1:

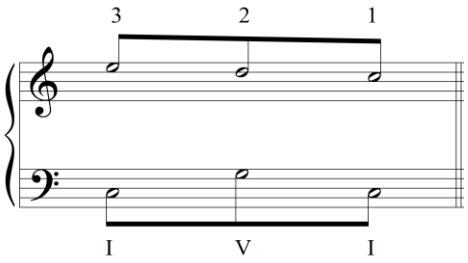


**Fig. 1** Ursatz (Fundamental Structure) = Urlinie (Fundamental Line) + Bassbrechung (Bass Arpeggiation)

“Tonal space” is the most fundamental idea of Schenker's theory of tonality  The tonic triad is a point of departure and the ultimate point of arrival, while the space between and around its tones is filled with other chords and new tonal spaces, until the surface of the composition is created. As illustrated schematically below, the creative process starts from a few elements, gains momentum, and flourishes into a complete work.

Composing → background – middle ground – foreground ← Analysis

## 1. Subdominant Function, Plagal Cadence and Plagal Half Cadences

The repudiation of the subdominant function results in the rejection of plagal relationship of various chords with the tonal center, therefore eliminating the plagal cadence and plagal half-cadence as types of harmonic closure.

Downgrading the subdominant, Schenkerians made up two subcategories out of it: 1) predominant; and 2) tonic prolongation. The former term gained some popularity mostly in the US, but not massively, and not necessarily in jazz departments.

In the realm of tonality, all musical components depend on a single tonal center whose magnitude holds the system together. Therefore, the main functional characteristic of any chord is determined according to its relationship with the tonal center, that is – the tonic. This relationship depends on the level of instability the given chord projects towards the tonic. By naming a chord "a predominant", Schenkerians are trying to redefine a harmonic function in relation to the dominant, ignoring the governance of the tonal center. Yet, IV and II do not depend on the dominant for their existence and validation; their role in the harmonic syntax is to introduce a concrete level of instability towards the tonal center. This level could be increased by the appearance of D which represents the ultimate point of harmonic tension, after which the appearance of T is expected. Furthermore, in terms of proper harmonic syntax, all the chords in a key, including the tonic, may precede a dominant function, making the word "predominant" devoid of concrete meaning.

The denial of S brings about a radical revision of the theory of harmonic functions. In their final analysis, Schenker and his followers build a house on two pillars, claiming that tonality is fully represented by two main triads: tonic and dominant. This "binary" concept drains functional thinking of diversity and downgrades a fundamental harmonic progression from T–S–D–T to T–D–T. I find this approach detrimental to the development of solid working knowledge in harmony, especially related to the art of harmonization, and the ability to interpret and explore the modulating potential of some chords.

In his book Classical form, William Caplin claims that a plagal cadence does not exist in Classical music. He writes: "In as much as the progression IV–I cannot confirm a tonality (it lacks any leading tone resolution), it cannot articulate formal closure in the sense developed in this book" (Caplin 1998, 43-44). It is hard to assume that the plagal cadence suddenly sprang up out of nowhere in Romantic music, when Dvořak decided to use it as a true final cadence of a main theme. Throughout the second movement of his Symphony No. 9, the main theme occurs several times, its closure alternating between authentic and plagal. The following excerpt illustrates a plagal closure in the form of $II^6/_5$ – I (measure 39).

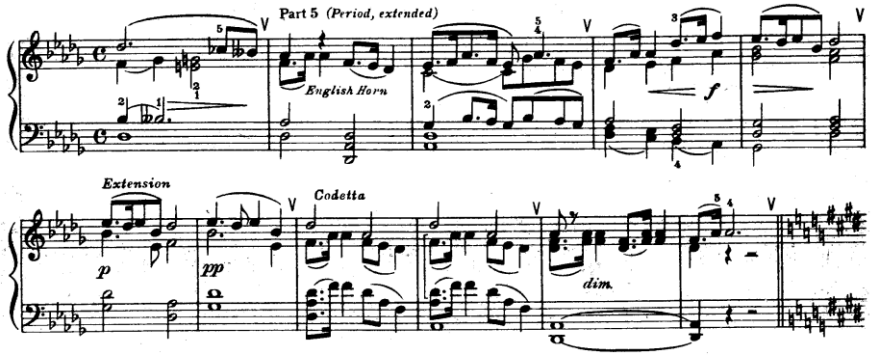


**Fig. 2** Dvořak, Symphony No. 9, II, Part five of Principal Theme in Exposition, mm. 35-45

I wonder how Schenkerians would handle the phenomenon **plagal cadence as a true final cadence**. Would they simply dismiss it as "tonic prolongation", thus destroying the sense of strong acoustic root-to-root motion between S and T? Would they as well destroy the concept of parallel period and revise radically its definition? Or...would they recognize the inadequacy of a rigid theory?

The next example illustrates **a plagal half cadence** in the end of the second phrase.

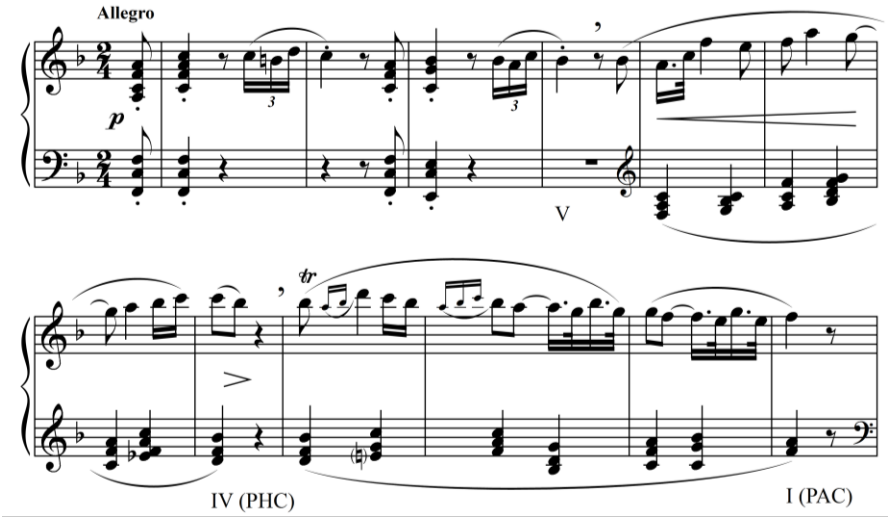


**Fig. 3** Beethoven, Piano Sonata No. 6 in F, Op. 10 No. 2, I, mm. 1–12

About one hundred and twenty years ago, this rare event – concluding a phrase on the subdominant function – has been defined by N. Rimsky-Korsakov as *a plagal half-cadence* (Korsakov/Steinberg 1912/1924). It is astonishing that a great number of music theorists are still unaware of it. I attribute this unawareness (or non-recognition) to the recycling of a limited definition of a half cadence which only includes the dominant triad as a final chord.

## 2. Functional Prolongation Versus Cadence

In their attempts to promote the conception of tonic and dominant prolongation, some Schenkerian-influenced theorists imply that *cadence*[1] in classical music is a phenomenon that shall be reduced to two main cases – 1) a perfect authentic cadence, and 2) a root position imperfect authentic cadence (wherein both D and T are in root position, but the soprano ends on degree 3 or 5). Some scholars even insist that the meaning of the word "cadence" must be different from the meaning of the word "closure". For example, Caplin's astonishing allegation that "...not all closure in music is cadential" (Caplin 2004, 56) sounds to me like: "not all closure is closing" or "not all cadences are cadential".

[1] From the Latin verb "cado" or "caderer" (to fall).

Inflated out of proportion, the concept of "non-cadential prolongational space" endorses the assumption that *functional prolongation* eliminates the sense of *cadence*. This assumption is so easily dismissed by various examples from music literature, that it cannot be sustained without destroying the traditional notion of some basic formal structures. For example, a number of phrases or larger passages either involve a stepwise bass or unfold over a pedal point (the most obvious form of functional prolongation), or their cadences are present or clearly implied, helping the listener to perceive a logical structure with points of division. For example, the length of the main theme in the excerpt below is only four measures. It represents a phrase ending with an imperfect cadence involving an inverted dominant.

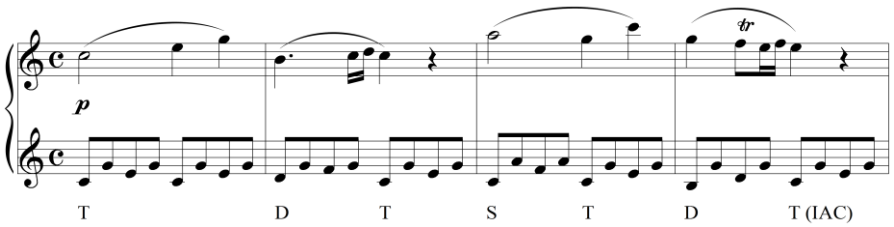


**Fig. 4** Mozart, Piano Sonata No. 16 in C, K 545, I, mm. 1–4

When they describe the above passage as "tonic prolongation", Schenkerians imply that the main theme of this sonata-allegro does not have a harmonic cadence.

Here follows a similar example, involving a part of a theme. The basic idea is presented in a T–D form, while the repetition of the basic idea is in a D–T form, which creates a harmonic response, resulting in a relative closure. Therefore, the presentation phrase of the first theme ends with an imperfect cadence involving an inverted dominant.

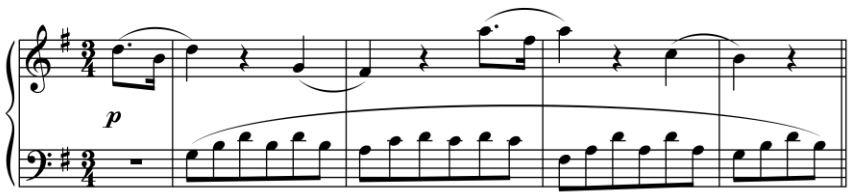


**Fig. 5** Mozart, Piano Sonata No. 5 in G, K 283, I, mm. 1–4

Let us create two analytical versions of the excerpt shown above, and hear which one sounds closer to the original. The first one includes the fundamental basses of the main functions T and D, while the second one only relies on the feeling of "tonic prolongation", eliminating functional exchange in the background.

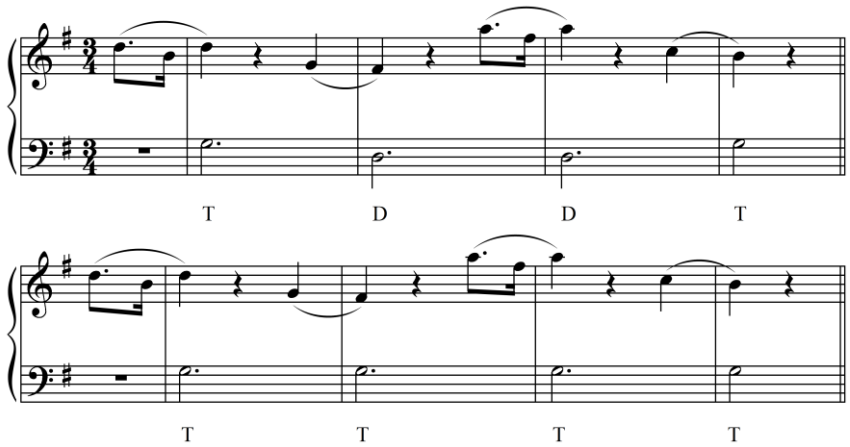


**Fig. 6** Two analytical versions of the partial theme exposed in the previous figure

Musically, it is obvious that the first version represents the true harmonic background of the original Mozart excerpt. The second version represents an imaginary background harmony, based on the allegation that stepwise passages which begin and end with the tonic chord are to be heard and analyzed as tonic prolongations. Therefore, one may conclude that:

*Linear is not an immediate equivalent of non-functional or non-cadential*

"Following the logic of Jean Philippe Rameau, who warns that a chord root does not have to be in the bass in order to be heard (Rameau 1722/1971, 242), the analyst realizes that there is no need to hear only chords in root position in order to recognize a harmonic progression, a harmonic goal, or a cadence" (Dimitar Ninov 2021).

On the surface we hear perfect and imperfect cadences. The latter stem from the former and have the same background. Furthermore, a physically present tonic prolongation does not necessarily suppress cadence. The following excerpt represents a parallel period with implied cadences over a double pedal point on the tonic. What could be a more obvious form of functional prolongation than the pedal point? Yet, the cadences and the formal structure are clear.

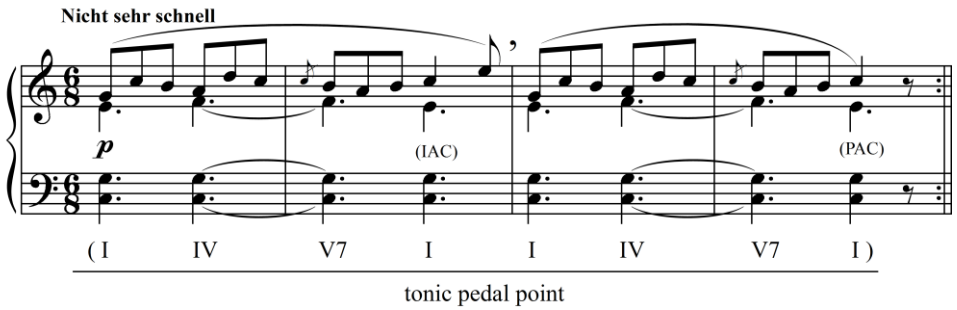


**Fig. 7** Schumann, Op. 68 No. 18 *Schnitterliedchen*, mm. 1–4

It looks as if this Schumann excerpt would not lend itself to one of the forms of the Ursatz, which brings up the question:

*May a parallel period have no fundamental structure, and therefore no harmonic cadence? Or, should the period form be radically revised to fit the Schenkerian mold?*

Ironically, here the tonic prolongation represents surface, behind which the implied background harmony will be heard as an idiomatic T–S–D–T cadential progression as shown below:

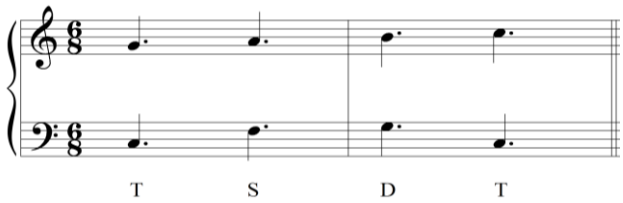


**Fig. 8** Background harmony and melody of Schumann's excerpt

Another example reveals a genuine double period which consists of two parallel periods, both ending with a PAC in two different keys. The first and third phrases unfold over a tonic pedal point which does not undermine the perception of the subtle cadential progression T–DD–D–T (tonic – double dominant – dominant – tonic) and the implied authentic cadences.

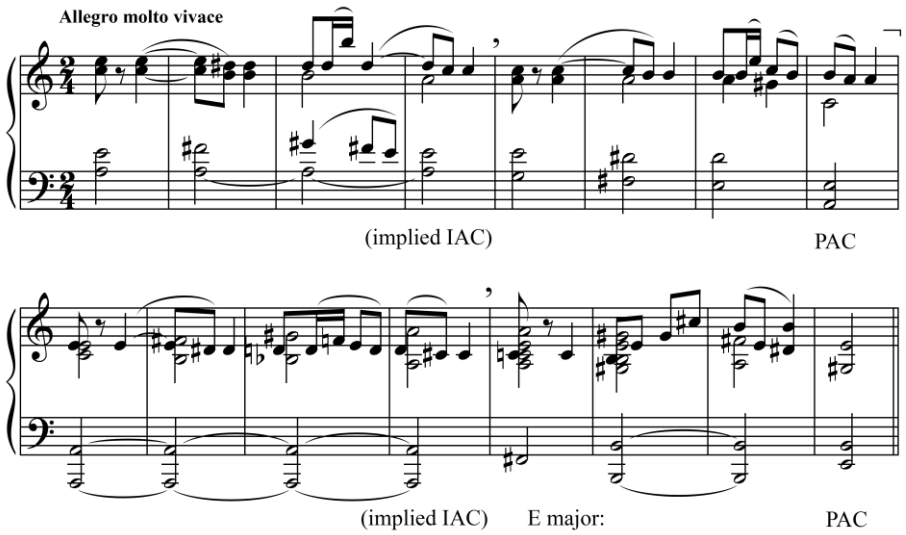


**Fig. 9** Grieg, Sonata for violin and piano, No. 1, III, mm. 1–16

The presented empirical evidence and reflections on functional prolongation and cadence lead to the following two conclusions:

1. *Functional prolongation does not automatically erase the sense of cadence; these two harmonic devices may coexist.*
2. *Presence or absence of a cadence is not determined by the bass position of the last two chords in a harmonic progression, but by the functional interaction between the chords at the end of a musical gesture. The bass may enhance or diminish the effect of a cadence.*

## 3. Ascending Melodic Line and the Leading Tone

"Why can't the *Urlinie* rise?" This common question of the beginner in Schenkerian analysis has not been answered in any convincing way, and the instructor is usually left to respond with some variation on "Because Schenker said so... At least one form of the ascending Urlinie, 5–6–7–8, has both theoretical and contrapuntal justification equal or superior to the descending fundamental lines from 5 and 8" (David Neumeyer 1987).

The rejection of *sol–la–si–do*[2] as a perfect melodic-cadential contour may lead to astonishing graphical distortions which are meant to prove that – somewhere deeper in the texture – this ascending line is, in fact, a descending one!

David Neumeyer has done work on adapting the Urlinie into logical units that don't necessarily descend (some ascend) or even begin and end on different pitches (Neumeyer 1987). Henry Martin has adapted material from this article and applied it to jazz theory in his article "Schenker and the Tonal Jazz Repertory"(Martin 2011). However, considering the inflexible nature of Schenker's theory, I am afraid that there will be no decisive revision of the upper portion of the Ursatz.

## 4. Six-Four Chords

By interpreting typical six-four chords as dissonant sonorities, Schenkerians advise the musical world that major and minor triads automatically become dissonant when they are placed in second inversion. Some theorists even insist that second inversion triads do not exist per se but represent discords (Wick 1991, 5, 67). I wonder if those theorists hear numerous dissonances and discords in marches, waltzes and polkas, where the bass part typically alternates between the root and the fifth of a consonant triad, producing an arpeggiated six-four...

In their book *Harmony and Voice Leading*, Edward Aldwell and Carl Schachter recognize the arpeggiated six-four as a consonant structure, but fail to do so in relation to weak passing and pedal six-four chords. Their point of view stems from a strict contrapuntal rule describing the perfect fourth as a dissonance if the bass is involved in its formation. However, this rule has been mechanically transferred from the sixteenth century counterpoint (when the study of functional harmony did not exist) into the homophonic era which developed a century and a half later, with no regard to different realities concerning texture, chord structure, style, and metrical position. If the reader wanted to consult Example 4 again, wherein Mozart uses a pedal subdominant six-four

[2] In this book the seven syllables of the fixed Do solfège are used for occasional reference.

chord on the downbeat of the third measure, he would realize that the harmonic exchange between T and S is very clear, with no implications of dissonance. By exception, there the pedal six-four occurs on a strong beat.

The topic of six-four chords may occupy hundreds of pages, and therefore it cannot be exhausted in this article, but a few thoughts will be shared on the nature of these chords. Acoustically, a triad[3] is most stable when it is presented in root position, as the overtone series naturally proves that. When the third of a triad is placed in the bass, the stability of the chord is somewhat weakened, but the sixth chord is still a genuine representative of the original triad whose inversion it is. When the fifth of a triad is placed in the bass, the triad becomes ambiguous, not because the perfect fourth is a dissonant interval per se, but because of the greater contrast in terms of space between the root and the fifth. The aural effect may be compared to placing the third harmonic tone below the fundamental in an overtone series. This situation opens the door to two contrasting options in treating the six-four chords:

A. Smoothing out the ambiguity of the six-four chord so that it retains the original function of the triad whose inversion it is. This procedure is illustrated in the use of weak **six-four chords**, such as *passing, pedal and arpeggiated*, whose features are softened by the surrounding harmonies and by the unaccented metrical position they appear in. Thus, the six-four chords in question sound like genuine triads in second inversion, which is their weakest form.

B. Exacerbating the ambiguity of the six-four chord so that a functional conflict is triggered within itself, and then resolved in favor of one of the colliding functions. This is illustrated in the use of **strong six-four chords**, such as the *cadential six-four*, which embodies a tonic-dominant conflict, and the *accented subdominant six-four*, which embodies a subdominant-tonic conflict. Both chords are of cadential type as they mark concluding moments in the development of a musical idea. However, while the former is widely used as a typical feature in a cadential progression, the latter is used far more rarely and has not acquired the status of a typical cadential chord.

The four typical types of six-four chords are presented below, followed by the accented S six-four. As one can see, the arpeggiated six-four may occur even on a strong or relatively strong metrical moment, which does not affect its nature of a second inversion triad.

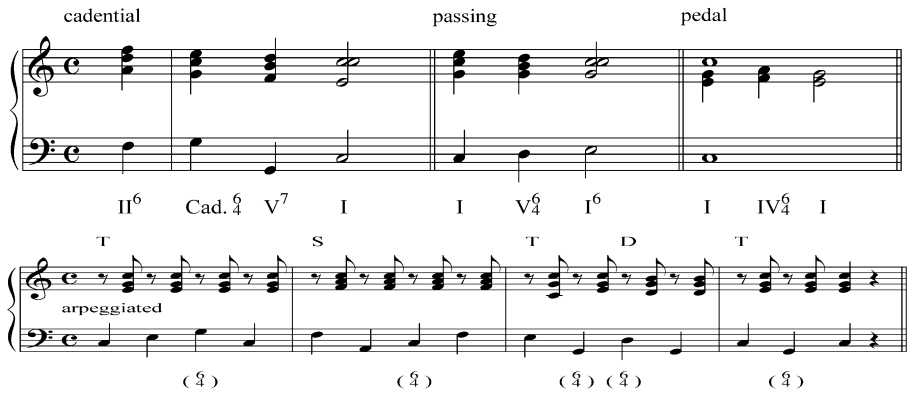


**Fig. 10** Typical Six-Four Chords: cadential, passing, pedal and arpeggiated

[3] These commentaries mostly refer to major and minor triads.

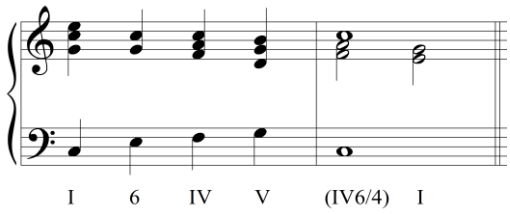


**Fig. 11** Accented Subdominant Six-Four

As already mentioned, the cadential six-four is a bi-functional chord which embodies an intrinsic conflict between tonic and dominant. It would be erroneous to determine that chord as a mere dominant with two non-chord tones, for several reasons, some of which are listed below:

- In contrast with a genuine dominant chord with suspended tones, the cadential six-four is unable to produce an authentic resolution into the tonic. Placed before a tonic triad, it sounds like an arpeggiated six-four on a strong beat. On the other hand, a genuine dominant will sound like a dominant even if the suspended tones are not resolved prior to the resolution into the tonic.
- Due to its structural equality with the tonic, the cadential six-four is occasionally embellished as a chord on its own: non-chord tones and altered chords resolve into it in the same way they resolve into a tonic triad.
- Also due to its structural equality with the tonic, the cadential six-four may sometimes be instantly reconsidered as a passing or arpeggiated tonic six-four on a strong metrical position. This process may be described as "fusion of cadential and tonic six-four". Such perception would not be possible if K6/4 were a dominant with two non-chord tones.
- Sometimes, the cadential six-four is freely extended and arpeggiated. The aural effect of this operation is not one of rearranging non-chord tones above a dominant bass, but one of arpeggiating a tonic triad above a dominant bass.

With all the above reasoning in mind – which is amply supported with empirical evidence from the musical literature in a special article of mine – I would like to quote the concluding statement of that article:

"Granting the cadential six-four a license of being an undisputed dominant is no less erroneous than declaring it as a pure tonic in second inversion. The cadential six-four is a bi-functional chord in which an intrinsic conflict between the two most polar harmonic functions – tonic and dominant – is manifest" (Dimitar Ninov 2016, 95).

## 5. Rhythm and Phrase Structure

In the actual Schenkerian analysis, neglecting rhythm and phrase structure leads to the creation of "free" graphs made of floating note heads, whose function is to project the most important relationships in tonal music. This "free tonal space" may indiscriminately bridge formal endings and caesura moments, thus counteracting their role in shaping a musical phrase. Some theorists refer to this phenomenon as "Schenkerian hearing", "distance hearing", or "structural hearing" (Wilhelm Furtwängler 1954, and Felix Salzer 1952).

Bridging of phrases stems from the exaggerated notion of functional prolongation discussed before.

"In most Schenkerian analyses (including Schenker's own), the V of the Ursatz and the immediately preceding predominant chords – corresponding to mm. 20–23 of the Bach prelude – occur at the very end of the piece (or perhaps just before the coda), so that almost the entire work is a prolongation of the initial I" (Temperley 2011).

## CONCLUSION

Anticipating a musician's impression of Schenkerian analysis as an inflexible method that forces a musical excerpt into a pre-existing outer-voice contour, Schenker and his followers raise the following disclaimer: "Schenkerian analysis is not about demonstrating that all compositions can be reduced to the same background, but about showing how each work elaborates the background in a unique, individual manner, determining both its identity and its meaning." Schenker himself mentioned and refuted the criticism, in Chapter 29 of his *Free Composition* (Schenker 1935).

One may strongly disagree with the proposition that the creation of a musical work inevitably involves a departure from and an elaboration of a strictly predetermined harmonic-melodic background. For example, one may suggest that the process of composing is a result of procedures which reflect both the creative achievements of a musical epoch and the subjective approach of a composer. In this latter sense, a composer who embarks on composing a new work would hardly think of a pre-existing musical skeleton available for elaboration, but would rather use his intellectual faculties paired with a good knowledge of tradition, to create a unique musical picture. Whether or not the result of his creation will be a subject of compelling analysis will depend on the persuasiveness of the given analytical method.

Considering all the comments made so far, I find pretentious the implication that Schenkerian-inspired books of harmony are "more contrapuntal", that is – closer to the process of linear voice leading. It is enough to remind the reader that the so-called *Clausula Vera* (true cadence: si-do and re-do in outer voices) with its melodic perfection in the art of 16$^{th}$ century counterpoint, does not exist as a concept in Schenkerian analysis. Other familiar cadences from the Baroque era, such as *Cadentia Minor* (today's plagal cadence) and *Cadentia Minima* (a cadence involving stepwise motion), are not recognized by Schenkerians either.

In Greek mythology, a *Procustean bed* is a symbol of an arbitrary standard which imposes strict conformity to all curious and naive souls. I will name Schenkerian analysis "one of the Procustean beds in music theory" – a rigid and pretentious analytical method which, thanks to its aforementioned fundamental defects, does not stand up to a serious musical discipline such as harmony, counterpoint, or formal analysis. I think that a reductive harmonic analysis must possess the potential, diversity and flexibility to accommodate a greater variety of creative works and stylistic features, without trimming "unwanted" or "inconvenient" elements. This means that an analytical method shall follow the trends in music and develop as an open space, rather than arise from a set of unbending rules, biding its time to force musical examples into a container.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundamental_structure

# NEDOSTACI VLADAJUĆE TEORIJE

*Savremena teorijska muzikologija, a posebno njen anglofonski deo, pod velikim su uticajem ideja i analitičkih metoda Hajnriha Šenkera (1868-1935), koji je bio Austrijanac. Teorija inspirisana Šenkerom, jednom uvezena u Sjedinjene Države iz Austrije, znatno se proširila na američko tlo, gde je konceptualno obogaćena, a zatim ponovo izvezena u Kanadu, Veliku Britaniju, Australiju i druge zemlje engleskog govornog područja. Stara američka škola harmonije koja je proizašla iz najboljih nemačkih, francuskih i ruskih tradicija, gurnuta je uza zid usled neprestano rastuće šenkerijanske škole mišljenja, koja je podizala kult njenog tvorca. Postepeno je uspostavljen „novi poredak" u harmoniji i analizi koji je tonalitet posmatrao samo kao odnos između tonike i dominante, dok su ostali akordi imali periferni značaj. Ovaj način mišljenja zatvorio je vrata različitosti i slobodi u funkcionalnom razmišljanju i otvorio vrata veoma pristrasnim harmonskim i formalnim analizama kojima su izbrisane harmonske kadence, tonalitet je predstavljen kroz crno-belu prizmu, probijene su sintaksičke jedinice da bi se stvorio novi način slušanja muzike (nazvan „slušanje na daljinu" ili „strukturni sluh") i neizbežno je završio sa istom osnovnom strukturom u melodiji i harmoniji, nazvanom „Ursatz". Ovaj esej raspravlja o glavnim nedostacima šenkerijanske teorije i njihovom negativnom uticaju na tradicionalnu harmoniju i analizu.*

Ključne reči: *Šenker, analiza, teorija, harmonija, struktura*