Plurality in Transformational Analyses

The theme of plurality maintains a central position in the analyses, theories, and musical conceptualizations presented in the given writings of Rings, Lewin, and Roeder. Each author provides options and alternatives to guide the listener through various musical styles and phenomena while adhering (at least ostensibly) to a rather rigorous mathematical system. The rationale for multiple interpretations and paths is simple enough, as described by Roeder: “The presentation…of so many different views of the same passage shows that multiple representations are sometimes needed to get at different aspects of a passage, even those that are consistent with each other.” In his article on Gesture and Agency in Bartók, Roeder employs two unique (but related) transformational networks in various graphs and animations to convincingly highlight various aurally salient and structural features of a 32 measure span of music. For Lewin, Schoenberg’s Op. 23 no. 3 similarly “suggests [multiple] transformational pathways,” which he later formalizes and integrates into a single, irreducible transformational system.

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3 Lewin, “Transformational Considerations,” 199. In formalizing and integrating his various “contextual inversions” with the standard T/I transformations, Lewin does reduce the plural pathways to a single group structure. But the fact remains that the various transformations “suggested” by the music remain distinct in their aural results.
While both Lewin’s and Roeder’s pluralities of networks remain firmly planted in a group-theoretical base throughout, Rings often employs other analytical “technologies” in order to best describe perceptually striking features.⁴ This departure from transformational theory as a sole analytical tool is motivated largely by the topic under consideration: tonality. Lewin and Roeder concern themselves with 20th century composers steeped in post-tonal practices (Schoenberg and Bartók respectively). Rings, on the other hand, probes the (under)definition of “tonality,” a subject of much theoretical work,⁵ by employing transformational networks and graphs on Bach, Mozart, Schubert, etc. In doing so, he must confront the various methodologies already in place for inspecting tonality while also attending to the “apperceptions” of various musical entities that an acculturated listener of Western music may have.⁶ Rings actually avoids challenging these approaches; he instead augments his transformational readings with the incorporation of Schenkerian analysis, Neo- and Paleo-Riemmanian theories, paradigmatic charts, and other “technologies” as he deems suitable.

I appreciate Rings’s sensitivities to various perceptual phenomena, and I commend him for his pragmatic methodological and analytical aims that embrace a pluralistic stance.⁷ But his willingness to move to and from transformational networks and other analytical “technologies” can be a bit unwieldy at times. Too many moves between systems may muddle an important facet of the music or of the analysis by introducing unnecessary conceptual shifts. Imagine

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⁴ As summarized by William O’Hara, Rings’s characterization of analytical approaches as “technologies” implies “that they are to be thought of not as ideological stances…but rather as interchangeable tools with particular strengths and weaknesses, to be used for sharpening and focusing our musical apperceptions.” O’Hara, Review of *Tonality and Transformation*, in *Mosaic*, Vol. 2 (2012).
⁶ As defined by Rings, *apperceptions* are “perceptions that are influenced by past experience and may involve present reflection.” *Tonality and Transformation*, 18.
⁷ Rings’s view of the “methodological orthogonality” between Schenkerian and transformational statements is a way to avoid any conflict between the two by claiming they are different means to different ends. (Tonality and Transformation, 35) Though well beyond the purview of this essay, I think this attitude may be a bit too conciliatory, rather than speculative, in its assertion and aims.
playing a game of Scrabble: you can play any or all of the letters in your hand during a given turn, but if none of them seem to work very well, you may have to waste a turn (a chance to open up new connections and opportunities) by trading them in for new tiles. The end result is often fewer total points. As a result, most Scrabblers would prefer to get some points from a turn than none. For a music analyst, a group of tiles is an analytical “technology,” the trading is in conceptual shifts, and the points are the resulting cohesiveness and clarity of the analysis.

Certainly, analysis is not a competition like Scrabble, and the metaphor may seem a bit simplistic. But compare it to Rings’s analysis of “Un’aura amarosa” from Mozart’s Così fan tutte. The aim is to explore two “phenomenologically dense moments” of the A section of the aria, and then “radiate outward from them” to broad considerations of the rest of the song and opera. But compare it to Rings’s analysis of “Un’aura amarosa” from Mozart’s Così fan tutte. The aim is to explore two “phenomenologically dense moments” of the A section of the aria, and then “radiate outward from them” to broad considerations of the rest of the song and opera. First, Rings gives a basic overview of the first few phrases in straightforward harmonic, structural, and Schenkerian terms, labeling the RNs, noting sentence structure and hypermetric bearings, and pointing out sung instances of the Kopfton. Next, he organizes information about the Kopfton into a table that necessitates explanation and clarification. Its intent, really, is to point out a particular arrangement in which the Kopfton (E or 5) is a dissonance in an unclear local harmony (F, A, E—is the E a 7th or a suspension?)

Rings appeals to a synchronic system, Kirnberger’s 18th century theory of dissonances, in an attempt to explain the role of the E in these ambiguous cases, but concludes that Mozart’s elisions and voice leading complicate the situation. Transformational concepts are invoked to help out; Rings trades in his tiles. After an exploratory trek through the harmonic possibilities underpinning the troublesome instances of the Kopfton, Rings advances a set of seven separate (though related) networks in a paradigmatic chart to describe six measures of music. These

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8 Rings, Tonality and Transformation, 171.
networks are composed of four chords, their inverses, and a set of res functions. Rings explains how one can understand the literal, sounding progression in terms of intentional moves and elisions between implicit chords and paradigmatic levels.

Rings then formalizes the transformations between the paradigmatic levels by explaining how some of the chords transform onto one another. He arrives at the conclusion that the relationship between two of the most important chords in his networks share pitches that “reside in the chromatic seam between diatonic $\tilde{5}$ and $\tilde{6}$.”

I have intentionally glossed over Rings’s transformational adventures since I believe he ends up applying somewhat circular logic. His analysis is far more sophisticated and nuanced than I give him credit for above, but the result seems to be obvious from the initial basic overview. The important scale degrees ($\tilde{5}$ and $\tilde{6}$) that Rings arrives at in the chromatic seam are the ones that gave him fits when trying to determine ambiguous local harmonies in the first place. It makes sense, without the transformational theory, that these notes would also arise in an analysis as the keys to unlocking an understanding of harmonic context and tonal deception. In other words, the notes Rings investigates end up being the ones he finds important. As a result, Rings’s subsequent radiation outward into larger musical space is not truly dependent on his transformational findings, and he makes no attempt to apply or generalize his networks to the aria or different parts of the opera as a whole. Rather, he focuses on the deceptive chords, the ambiguous harmonic goals, and the motivic interplay between $\tilde{5}$ and $\tilde{6}$ that encouraged the transformational “technology” in the first place. Had Rings not traded in his tiles too soon for the

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9 The res functions ($resIV$ and $resI$, for instance) are not bijective. Like many of Rings’s networks and graphs in his actual analyses, Rings concerns himself more frequently with transformations as opposed to operations, to semigroups instead of groups.

10 Rings, *Tonality and Transformation*, 180. One might also say the notes reside in an enharmonic seam.

11 To me, this is one of the most fascinating parts of transformation theory. When a single network is able to describe both local and more global events in a piece, it gains legitimacy.
enticing transformational possibilities, he would have arrived at the same conclusion either way.\textsuperscript{12}

Though I have criticized Rings harshly here for a single analysis, I believe his pragmatic plurality offers much to recommend it. Rings’s rightly asserts that “no musical phenomenon, however familiar, can be exhausted by a single theoretical paradigm.”\textsuperscript{13} When drawing from so many sources, though, one must be careful not to over-engineer a methodology. If an analyst is to make use of a given “technology,” he or she should do it fairly, by fully contemplating the options and possibilities in his or her hand before resorting to an exchange of tiles.

\textsuperscript{12} Of course, the result of an analysis isn’t necessarily its most important aspect. Kofi Agawu advises the would-be analyst that an analysis that merely traces a 3-line or lays out Z-related hexachords unnecessarily “trivializes the whole rich experience” of the musical engagement. It should instead be understood that analysis is an ongoing act, more concerned with the process (the how) than the result (the what.) Agawu, “How We Got Out of Analysis, and How to Get Back In Again,” \textit{Music Analysis} 23/2-3 (2004): 267-86.

\textsuperscript{13} Rings, \textit{Tonality and Transformation}, 4.