

Hearing “What Might Have Been”: Using Recomposition to Foster Music Appreciation in the Theory Classroom¹

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“To appreciate fully what something is—to comprehend its significance—is to have some notion (however informal or unformulated) about what it might have been. [...] The road actually taken is invariably understood partly in terms of those not taken.”

Leonard B. Meyer²

The majority of music majors spend little time listening to music from the common-practice period; they begin college with a woefully impoverished knowledge of repertoire, even that composed for their major instrument. Because they do not listen to—let alone study the scores of—this repertoire regularly, few students learn to *appreciate* in any substantive manner the construction of a piece and what makes it both unique and yet part of a larger body of music in a given style. Fortunately, some proficiency is gained in their core classes, but it is not sufficient to provide a sophisticated appreciation and general proficiency in grappling with this important repertoire.

But proficiency is not the same as appreciation, if by “appreciation” we mean Meyer’s helpful definition in the passage cited above: to possess a true appreciation means that one can “comprehend the significance” of various musical events in light of an understanding of “what it might have been”—that is, what might have been composed instead. In my view, instilling such an appreciation in our students is just as important as any other musical skills that we hope our students will develop. This article presents a pedagogical approach I call *recomposition*, which serves as a reminder of “what might have been,” whose goal is to refine and heighten students’ ability to “comprehend the significance” of

¹I wish to thank the anonymous readers of the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*, as well as the journal’s editor, Steven G. Laitz, for their many helpful comments as I prepared the final draft of this article.

²Leonard B. Meyer, *Style and Music: Theory, History and Ideology*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press (1989), 32.

various musical events. In recomposition, students closely study a work, and compose (or imagine, in the context of class discussions) alternate versions of the same work; in one case, students are asked to write a reflective essay comparing their recomposition with the composer's original work. Hearing the original version of a work side-by-side with a different (usually simpler) version encourages students to understand the work they are studying against the backdrop of "what might have been" written instead; it piques their intellectual curiosity, and sharpens their aural skills.³

³While recomposition is a commonly invoked approach in professional music-theoretical discourse, it has had a limited application in music theory pedagogy, and deserves further exploration and dissemination in that regard. Two (of many) examples of recomposition in the theoretical literature are: William Rothstein, *Phrase Rhythm in Tonal Music* (see especially pages 23-24), and Matthew L. BaileyShea, "Filletted Mignon: A New Recipe for Analysis and Recomposition," *Music Theory Online*, Vol. 13, no. 4 (December 2007), <http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.07.13.4/mto.07.13.4.baileyshea.html>.

Some types of composition assignments related to the recompositional activities I submit in this article have a long history in the pedagogies of improvisation, composition, and music theory. Using recomposition for pedagogical purposes, for instance, calls to mind the related Baroque practice of learning composition through *partimenti*, as represented by, among others, Giorgio Sanguinetti's *The Art of Partimento: History, Theory, and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). *Partimenti*, as William Renwick points out, "...fall precisely on the cusp between musical exercises and compositions. They exhibit the formal properties normally associated with complete compositions, yet their focus is pedagogical, leading to studies in improvisation and fugal composition" (William Renwick, *The Langloz Manuscript: Fugal Improvisation Through Figured bass* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], 2). Interested readers should also reference Nicholas Cook's excellent text *Analysis Through Composition: Principles of the Classical Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), which presents a range of projects asking students to complete works that exist only in sketch form, or are otherwise incomplete (there are a few examples of complete works, but Cook's intention is for these assignments to be used in self-study). Cook chooses these kinds of examples precisely so that students will be unable to look up the original, complete version of the piece (*Analysis Through Composition*, xi). I would note that the activities I propose in this article are actually recompositions, and not completions of works in the manner of Cook's text, or in the manner of the *partimenti* tradition cited above. Assignments along similar lines are also often included in keyboard skills texts, an exhaustive list of which would be too extensive to include

While most of this article will focus on recompositional activities for upper-level students, I will begin with a simple demonstration of recomposition that I use when introducing secondary dominants to first-year students. (Because beginning students are still learning about basic stylistic characteristics and expectations, instructor demonstrations are the best way to begin to encourage this kind of thinking. A reduction of the opening of Beethoven's Symphony no. 1, which features two secondary dominants as well as deceptive motion, is shown in Example 1a. After playing the introduction for the class and encouraging them to come to grips with the perceptual confusion created by the misleading opening harmonies and lack of V-I motion in the tonic key, I show them the score, and help them to discover the role of secondary dominants in this passage. I will then humorously offer gratitude to the world of harmony for providing today's theory students with such compelling and colorful chords. Just imagine, I will say, what this symphony's opening might be like *without* such harmonies—what if the chromatic chords in this passage were replaced by their diatonic counterparts? I then play Example 1b, which shows a recomposition of the symphony's opening, now using only diatonic chords.



Example 1a. Beethoven, Symphony no. 1, Introduction (reduction)

here; of course, the aims of keyboard skills texts differ substantially from those of most theory curricula for at least two obvious reasons: students in a written theory class often possess widely varying levels of piano proficiency, so expectations cannot be consistent; and, most theory curricula are not taught in piano labs (at least, not every semester).



Example 1b. Beethoven, Symphony no. 1, Introduction (recomposed reduction)

While the musical effect of Example 1b is disappointing in comparison with Beethoven's original, the pedagogical effect is profound: instead of dreading these new chords out of an understandable fear that they won't be able to grasp them, students approach these new chords with a sense of fascination, and can't wait to learn more about them. In other words, they have begun to develop an *appreciation* for these new chords, and for Beethoven's Symphony no. 1, by experiencing "what might have been." Opportunities for similar demonstrations abound throughout the core theory sequence.

The remainder of this article presents ideas for incorporating the general approach of recomposition into upper-level classes, and for placing the task in the hands of the students; such a venture is particularly effective if students have had the seeds planted for this kind of thinking in their lower-level theory classes, in a manner similar to the Beethoven example. Using recomposition in more advanced classes can not only lead to a valuable discussion about what made the original so compelling in comparison to the recomposed version, but it has additional benefits: finely honing their sense of stylistic expectations and a greater capacity to envision composers' choices in various contexts. I reserve this advanced level of application for students who have completed the lower-level theory sequence, and have therefore gained proficiency in part writing, form, and counterpoint. I have used all of the examples and assignments in this article in my elective form and analysis class for juniors and seniors.⁴

⁴Of course, it is certainly possible that some instructors will find it useful to apply some of these ideas in lower-level classes such as sophomore, or perhaps even freshman, theory.

Musical features most effectively illuminated by a recompositional approach include melodic composition, harmonic progression, period structure, and more advanced phrase structure techniques (such as phrase overlap and expansion by deceptive motion), each of which I explore in order below.

1. MELODIC ANALYSIS AND RECOMPOSITION

While there are a number of ways in which melodic recomposition might be implemented, I have found it to be particularly useful for explicating the intricacies of compound melodic structures, which can often be lost on students who tend to read, hear, and consequently perform music in a literal, note-by-note fashion. The first step in recomposing a compound melody is creating a reduction; this encourages attention not only to the adjacent intervallic relationships of an elaborate passage, but also to large-scale linear progressions—structural stepwise lines that occur below the surface of the music and are connected because they occur at the same structural level. Such an endeavor thus imparts valuable insight regarding how the passage is constructed from the inside out.⁵ After creating a reduction, the next step is for students to compose a new melody that is based on the reduced structure of the original, while maintaining the given style. The instructor or students should then perform their recomposed versions and discuss them as a class.

Students are likely to recognize the beginning of Bach's well-known chorale prelude on the hymn "Wachet auf," which features seemingly difficult leaps and accented embellishing tones on its

⁵ It is possible to frame the creation of a melodic reduction itself as a kind of recomposition if one presents the reduction as a simpler version of the original piece. Such thinking leads to a clear comparison with the process of learning species counterpoint or four-part writing: I often tell my students that in counterpoint or four-part writing, we start with something simple and embellish it; in analysis, we start with something that is already embellished and simplify it to better comprehend the structure. Such thinking can also help to clarify the beginning (reduction) stages of Schenkerian analysis; as William Benjamin has observed, "What Schenker asks us to do is to compose simple pieces which may intuitively be heard to underlie pieces from the tonal repertory" (William Benjamin, "Schenker's Theory and the Future of Music," *Journal of Music Theory*, vol. 25, no. 1 [1981]: 159, cited in BaileyShea, "Filletted Mignon," *Music Theory Online*, Vol. 13, no. 4).

surface (Example 2). These leaps and embellishments are easily clarified through step-by-step simplification of embellishments, which can be determined as a class (see Examples 3a-c), and through reduction and discussion, it soon becomes clear that a compound melody forms the background structure of this passage. Students are then asked to create recompositions based on this reduction. Example 4 provides the assignment instructions and template, and Example 5 provides sample student solutions based on the reduction.

After we determined a basic melodic reduction for this exercise as a group, students were given about fifteen minutes to complete their recompositions. Afterward, we played or sang and discussed their solutions. The discussion included both positive and critical observations, but the less-than-perfect solutions turned out to be especially illuminating; the class was able to unpack, for instance, why an apparent unresolved dissonance in Bach's example made sense (usually because of compound melodic structures), while it might not have made sense in a student solution. Asking students to compose a new melody based on this reduction, in other words, facilitated an immediate connection with the common pedagogical techniques of four-part writing and embellishment of simple structures, which can seem artificial if divorced from a work from the literature.

More generally, students agreed that they gained valuable insights into the multiple possibilities inherent in a single structure, and that they grasped the complexity and nuance in Bach's original by trying to compose their own version. In short, they were reminded of "what might have been," in a way that increased their appreciation for Bach's original version and for Bach's contrapuntal prowess in general.⁶

⁶This activity may be thought of as a more advanced version of a common pedagogical exercise for lower-level theory classes—asking students to embellish a given basic framework and then study a major composer's realization of that framework. Additionally, activities similar to this may prove to be a useful way to help students "get their hands dirty" before writing a longer Baroque piece, such as a dance suite movement, an activity which is often quite intimidating for students (particularly those who have not played Baroque dance suite movements for keyboard); while I have not yet had the opportunity to try this technique with my advanced counterpoint students, I believe that it will help them get over the intimidation they feel at the outset of such an assignment.

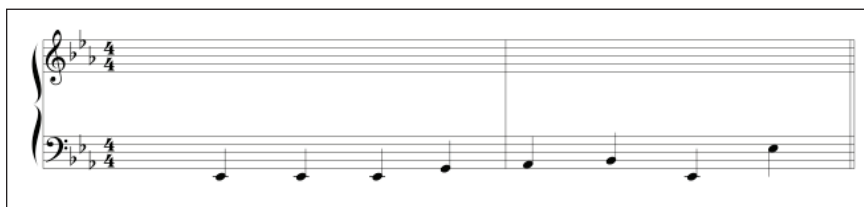
P=Passing tone
IN=Incomplete neighbor (appoggiatura or neighbor tone)
SUS=Suspension

Example 2. Bach, Chorale Prelude on Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme, BWV 645 (measures 1–2)

Examples 3a-c. Bach, Chorale Prelude on Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme, BWV 645 (measures 1–2, reductions)

Having closely studied Bach's chorale prelude, compose a new melody to go above the original bass line that might form the beginning of your own chorale prelude. You may wish to use the reduction shown in (c) above as a framework, or you may depart from it in some places.

Use primarily eighth notes with some sixteenth notes. Aside from a harmonic and contrapuntal treatment that follows the path of the given example, the style of your recomposition should remain appropriate to the Baroque era, including common Baroque techniques such as *Fortspinnung* and *style brisé*. You may also wish to include compound melody in the manner of Bach's original. (Note: space has been reserved for an anacrusis, should you wish to add one).



Example 4. Recomposition of Bach, Chorale Prelude on Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme: Assignment

Example 5. Recomposition of Bach, Chorale Prelude on Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme: Sample student solutions

Melodic recomposition can also demonstrate the importance of other melodic features, such as octave displacement. The removal of such a disruptive displacement, of course, can have serious ramifications for the character of a melody. Such examples abound in Brahms's music. For instance, Example 6 provides the beginning of Brahms's *Intermezzo* in A Major (op. 118, no. 2), which features a prominent octave displacement between B4 and A5. Example 7 shows a simple recomposition of this passage, in which the A5 is replaced with an A4—the minor seventh becomes a major second,⁷ and the entire character of the work is changed.⁷ There is truly a difference between pointing out an octave displacement and actually playing a version in which the displacement is removed. This is particularly true in this case, where the octave displacement motivates much of the melodic activity. When I play the recomposed version in the context of the rest of the texture, students gain a more tangible appreciation for Brahms's version.



Example 6. Brahms, *Intermezzo* in A Major, op. 118, no. (measures 1–2)



Example 7. Brahms, *Intermezzo* in A Major, op. 118, no. 2 (measures 1–2; octave displacement removed)

⁷ Of course, this octave displacement amounts to a compositional premise: Brahms intentionally avoids the stepwise $\hat{3} - \hat{2} - \hat{1}$ until the last three notes of the piece. Recomposing it as shown in Example 7 wholly deflates the *Intermezzo*'s impetus for continuation, which proves the importance of the awkward octave displacement to students who might otherwise take it for granted.

2. HARMONIC PROGRESSION

Recomposition can easily be introduced into the harmonic realm by substituting original harmonies with others that share the same function. Opportunities exist wherever chromatic harmonies occur. The fourth movement of Brahms's *ein Deutsches Requiem* provides ample opportunity for harmonic recomposition, particularly in the second theme area, which features two prominent occurrences of $\flat VI$, both on the word *Wohnungen*. The first occurrence (m. 30) results from chromatic 5-6 motion, and it is easy, but revealing, to replace $\flat VI6$ with diatonic $vi6$, which sounds lackluster compared to the magical and distant $\flat VI6$. The second occurrence of $\flat VI$ (m. 40) occurs as a deceptive motion. Substituting tonic or vi are disappointing solutions, paling compared with Brahms's original. Again, such substitutions foster a deeper appreciation of Brahms's version.

Of course, it is essential to incorporate text-music analysis, and to ask students to consider why Brahms might have reserved such a distant chromatic harmony (within what is otherwise a mostly diatonic passage) for the two occurrences of the word *Wohnungen*. *Wohnungen* refers to the Lord's house, which remains accessible only in death. This remote harmony in the original key, then, is appropriate, and the diatonic version would have ill-served the crucial image of the text.

The "Crucifixus" from the *Credo* of Bach's *Mass in B Minor* provides another opportunity for such a discussion. Its acclaimed lament bass in E minor depicts Christ's crucifixion and burial, an apt setting for this portion of the Mass ordinary. The closing measures of the movement, however, present a shock: the appearance of the extraordinary German diminished-third chord wrenches the music toward G major for the final cadence. Once we have identified the tonal function of this aurally marked sonority, I ask students what other more-traditional harmonic solutions are possible. Students usually respond that a secondary dominant or leading-tone seventh chord could have performed the same function as the $Gr^{\circ}3$.

As I play these mundane substitutes, we begin to answer the question, "What does the music gain from the use of $Gr^{\circ}3$ that these other solutions do not deliver?" Students point out that the inclusion of the $E\flat$ as part of the $Gr^{\circ}3$ allows for a chromatic descent in the soprano line, and also (relatedly) that the $E\flat$ enables a $\flat\hat{6}-\hat{5}$ motion above the bass in the new key of G major, which echoes the

lament bass that persisted throughout most of the “Crucifixus.”

I then ask the students to consider whether replacing the Gr^o3 with more expected harmonies affects our interpretation of the text. This question leads to a meaningful discussion of text painting: the chromatic and transformative nature of the Gr^o3 could be considered a musical analogue, one that precisely mirrors the potent text: the harmonic treatment, with the expected chord dramatically transformed into the Gr^o3, could be viewed as the musical representation of the Biblical miracle, as the stone blocking Jesus’s tomb being rolled away, yielding hope for new life and salvation.

In both the Brahms and Bach examples, students are once again reminded of “what might have been”; through detailed consideration of harmonic recompositions, they gain a deep, if not even spiritual, appreciation for these pieces, and their interpretive skills are heightened as a result. I also find that students come away from such discussions much more inspired about the music than if we had just considered the music as written, because hearing the alternate possibilities awakens their ears to the small differences among works that create such diverse musical realizations. While I have described ways in which this technique might work in the written theory classroom, the listening skills gained by such an approach cannot be overestimated; substitution of similar harmonies should be used as frequently as possible in the aural skills classroom, for both listening- and dictation-related activities.

3. PHRASE AND PERIOD STRUCTURE

Asking students to compose or improvise a consequent phrase based on a given antecedent is a ubiquitous pedagogical technique featured in many written and aural skills textbooks, and one that I use regularly. For a more advanced class, I propose a slightly different approach that asks students to recompose an existing consequent with which they are already familiar. As is typical for assignments that ask students to compose a consequent based on a given antecedent, students are asked to complete the period with voice leading and texture taken from the original antecedent.⁸ They are then asked to compare their recomposition with the composer’s

⁸Texts that include assignments in which students are asked to compose a consequent based on a given antecedent are too numerous to list here. One aural skills text that requires this skill is Robert Ottman

original version. The instructor might place several constraints on the recomposition: perhaps they will ask students to recompose a given contrasting consequent phrase to make it parallel with its antecedent, to recompose an expanded consequent to make the phrase symmetrical, or to recompose an existing consequent so that it modulates to a variety of tonal destinations.

A sample assignment follows, which asks students to recompose the well-known contrasting period at the beginning of the second movement of Beethoven's *Pathétique* sonata as a *parallel* period.⁹ Students in form and analysis class will already have encountered this movement at least four times in their theory coursework: once in first-semester theory, when learning part-writing basics; a second time in second-semester theory, when learning phrase structure; a third time in second-semester theory when studying sequence and secondary functions; and a fourth time in sophomore theory when studying rondo form. Students were also instructed to play through the period before beginning the assignment. (Example 8 provides the score referenced in the assignment, and Example 9 shows one student's recomposition of Beethoven's consequent phrase.)

and Nancy Rogers, *Music for Sight Singing*, 7th ed., (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 23–24.

⁹This particular contrasting period falls within a category that Laitz calls "contrasting continuous period," a label which accounts for the lack of tonic return at the beginning of the consequent phrase (Laitz, *The Complete Musician*, 304).

I. Play through the familiar contrasting period (see below) several times. (You may wish to block the chords in this excerpt to get a better handle on the voice leading.) Sing each part, taking care to notice that there are four, not three, “voice” parts throughout most of the excerpt.

II. Compose a new consequent phrase that is parallel to the given antecedent phrase (measures 1–4) and which is the same length as the given antecedent. Maintain the texture, melodic character, and general register of the antecedent in your consequent. Be sure to play your consequent phrase at the piano, or, if you are unable to do so, please have a colleague play your work so that you can hear the effect of your solution.

III. Write a brief essay (1–2 double-spaced pages) describing the decisions you made in composing your parallel consequent phrase, and compare your consequent phrase with Beethoven’s original contrasting consequent.

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. The title is "Adagio cantabile". The score is written for piano, with a treble staff and a bass staff. The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 2/4. The original melody is in the treble staff, and the recomposed melody is in the bass staff. The recomposition maintains the same texture and melodic character as the original.

Example 8. Recomposition assignment: Beethoven, Piano Sonata in C minor, op. 13, II (measures 1–8)¹⁰

¹⁰Ludwig van Beethoven, *Complete Piano Sonatas*, Vol. 1, ed. Heinrich Schenker (Vienna: Universal Edition), 1918.



Example 9. Sample student recomposition of Beethoven, Piano Sonata in C Minor, op. 13, II

The recomposition in Example 9 was the most convincing of the group, and was written by a student who confirmed that she played through her solution at the piano as she composed it.¹¹ As in the melodic recomposition assignment, discussing the technical issues in somewhat weaker solutions proved to be just as valuable as closely studying the stronger solutions; the resulting conversation went a step beyond typical classroom discussions of part writing or counterpoint solutions, because we could compare Beethoven's treatment of these compositional challenges with student solutions.

A class discussion of errors found in a figured-bass realization often refers only to so-called "rules" that have been discussed in class, instead of comparison with actual compositional practice; often, despite the instructor's best efforts, students are left with the impression that the composition part of music theory is all about ironclad "rules."¹² By contrast, a discussion of errors in this kind

¹¹ Not surprisingly, students who admitted to not playing through their recompositions had, on the whole, weaker solutions. Problems typically encountered in the weaker solutions included intervals too large to play successfully in the right hand, questionable doublings, and occasional unresolved sevenths leading to odd melodic trajectories.

¹² As a theorist, I am, of course, the first to admit that music does have "rules." However, among students and non-theorist colleagues, such language can sometimes contribute to a negative characterization of music theory. I am always careful to mitigate such language and

of recomposition assignment invites immediate and close study of Beethoven's actual compositional practice, because the solutions are based on a model from a real piece of music. Finally, within the constraint that the new consequent be parallel to the original antecedent, students are given the ability to choose how to treat the pre-dominant area, and to determine the kind of melodic line that would work best to finish the consequent phrase. Such an activity invites the student to explore or exercise his or her personal instincts and musical tastes, something that is unusual in the standard theory curriculum.

The essay portion of the assignment was particularly illuminating, as it encouraged students to compare the details of their solutions with Beethoven's. More than one student said that while it was quite challenging, they found it revealing to recompose Beethoven's existing consequent while retaining the established piano texture and general approach to voice leading. One student composed several consequents, and another experimented with recomposing the antecedent to end on scale-degree 2 in the upper voice after composing a new consequent. Several students mentioned applying their understanding of melodic fluency to their recomposition of the consequent. One student's description of this process follows:

"The next step was to focus on the antecedent - the melodic fluency as well as how the outer voices were relating to each other (contrapuntally speaking). By focusing on the *shape* of the antecedent, I could see the *shape* of a potential consequent. By seeing the intervallic relationship with the outer voices, I could better see the direction my potential consequent was headed."

Of course, this kind of recomposition assignment retains the benefits gained by the more typical "compose a new consequent to a given antecedent" assignment frequently found in music theory texts; that is, students model (often literally copying at first) the existing texture and voice leading when recomposing the consequent phrase, thus creating a situation in which these parameters may be experienced from within the music's fabric. This is exactly the kind of skill that is not easily developed by moving directly from species or part-writing exercises to model compositions (particularly for students who are not pianists).

to contextualize "rules" with examples from music literature, thus clarifying that rules are really just a reflection of established musical practice.

This assignment also requires students to deal with the harmonic acceleration necessary for a parallel consequent phrase to be the same length as a given antecedent, which is something we regularly discuss in our analysis of phrase structure.

Recomposing an existing period to change its structure demonstrates how exceptional Beethoven's original version is; having tried to compose a convincing parallel consequent phrase based on Beethoven's original antecedent, students gain an appreciation of how intuitive and natural-sounding Beethoven's contrasting consequent is when they listen to it again. We can talk about the contour of the original counterpoint and the expansiveness of the original harmonic progression with an insider's perspective, comparing Beethoven's version with the admittedly somewhat forced continuation of the antecedent as a parallel phrase period.

4. MORE ADVANCED PHRASE STRUCTURE ISSUES

Another application of recomposition clarifies more sophisticated issues of phrase structure, such as phrase overlap and phrase expansion by deceptive motion. In Example 10, a prominent phrase overlap at the beginning of the *Allegro* portion of the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony no. 2 is dismantled to demonstrate the important role phrase overlaps play in the forward momentum of a long sonata-form movement.¹³ This is a straightforward example that can be used to demonstrate the more complex aspects of phrase structure. Removing the overlap demonstrates how halting the music sounds without its exciting momentum-building presence; if repeatedly confronted by such demonstrations (or asked to come up with them themselves), students are unlikely to forget what a phrase overlap is, or why a composer might use this technique. Actually playing a recomposition like the one shown in Example 11 (and not just talking about it!) increases students' appreciation of the original more effectively than merely defining the technique and showing examples of its use.¹⁴

¹³I prefer to begin with a symphonic example (in piano reduction format) because the instrumentation change makes the phrase overlap easier to hear.

¹⁴Another simple symphonic example of phrase overlap appears in Haydn, Symphony no. 101 in D Major, IV (measure 28 is the exact point of phrase overlap). A clear example in piano literature appears in Beethoven, Piano Sonata no. 5 in C minor, op. 10, no. 1, II (measure 91 is the exact point of overlap).

Allegro con brio (♩ = 100)

Instr. a cordes

f *p* *cresc.*

p

Hautb. et Basson

f *p* *cresc.*

f *p* *cresc.*

Example 10. Beethoven, Symphony no. 2 in D Major, measures 34–50
(piano transcription by Franz Liszt)¹⁵

¹⁵Franz Liszt, *Beethoven Symphonies Transcribed for Solo Piano, Vol. 1* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1871).

Allegro con brio ($\text{♩} = 100$)

Instr. a cordes

f *p* *cresc.*

Hautb. et Basson

p *cresc.* *etc.*

And. *

Example 11. Beethoven, Symphony no. 2 in D Major, recomposition of measures 34–50 (the last three measures of this example constitute my recomposition)

Recomposition can also be used to clarify phrase structure through removal of a phrase expansion, particularly expansion caused by deceptive motion.¹⁶ Students sometimes have difficulty grasping the real function of deceptive motion, which is often to expand a phrase through evasion of an authentic cadence on tonic. This evasion is usually achieved by returning the phrase to the predominant area, thus requiring another trip through the

¹⁶ See Rothstein's excellent discussion of the role of deceptive motion in phrase expansion (*Phrase Rhythm in Tonal Music*, 78–80). Steve Laitz also offers an especially clear explanation of deceptive motion in his undergraduate textbook *The Complete Musician: An Integrated Approach to Tonal Theory, Analysis & Listening*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 271–2.

dominant area, and finally moving on toward tonic.¹⁷ Removing the deceptive motion and re-routing the music to the original cadence clarifies the function of most deceptive motions.

A perusal of examples of recomposition in the theoretical literature reveals that the process is most often applied to works of the classical and romantic periods, undoubtedly because of the significant degree to which stylistic convention played a central role in shaping musical structure of those periods. There is no reason to restrict recomposition to music of the common practice period, however, because popular music frequently relies on convention and thwarted expectations. This essay has also focused on common-practice repertoire so far, largely because of my initial observation that students are not familiar with this important body of music. I have found, though, that students also do not know “common-practice” popular and rock music, such as that by the Beatles or the Police. Incorporating popular music in teaching is, in general, an effective way to remind students that what they are learning in music theory can apply to different styles of music, and increases their appreciation for the many musical techniques that are common to all tonal styles. For all of these reasons, I try to incorporate popular music examples where appropriate in my teaching, and the next two examples will originate from popular repertoire.

¹⁷ The way in which I have here described the harmonic functions involved with deceptive motion represents how an undergraduate might most easily understand it at first: as it unfolds in time, where the first predominant area leads to a dominant that seems to promise an authentic cadence. This dominant, however, turns out to be followed by deceptive motion, which, in turn, throws the progression back to the predominant area for another attempt at an authentic cadence. At a higher structural level, of course, the vi that follows the V in the deceptive motion would supersede the first V in structural importance, and one would understand the “real” predominant as arriving only after the deceptive motion has occurred, just before the structural V-I cadence. While the latter explanation is the most accurate way of understanding the voice leading, it does represent a retrospective hearing and understanding of deceptive motion, which is why I postpone this deeper yet perceptual explanation until after the students have experienced the progression in its simplest form.

One of my favorite examples of phrase-expanding deceptive motion appears at the end of the Beatles' song, "Octopus's Garden."¹⁸ Recomposing the end of the song to remove the expansion is a simple and effective way to demonstrate the function of deceptive motion in this example.¹⁹ Another example of deceptive motion occurs at the end of the first phrase of The Police's "Every Breath You Take." As would typically occur if a phrase ends with a half or imperfect authentic cadence, this deceptive motion is answered by a perfect authentic cadence at the end of the next phrase.²⁰ As a bonus, the repeated deceptive motions in the song hold particular relevance given the text's meaning, and this aspect should be incorporated into the class discussion: the narrator is threatening to stalk the object of the text ("Every breath you take, / Every move you make, / Every bond you break, Every step you take, / I'll be watching you..."). The deceptive motions that occur throughout the song provide an uncanny portrayal of the narrator's disturbing threat of constant surveillance; the smooth deception of the harmonic progression deepens the text's implication that the narrator is not to be trusted, or, that the narrator has been deceived, and the deception is repeated in the music, followed by "I'll be watching you." (Even the musical terminology—"evaded" and "deceptive"—plays into this reading.) Recomposing the first phrase of this song so that it ends with an authentic or half cadence would undermine/contradict the text, and thus provides ample evidence of the importance of text-setting subtleties, whether it be found in classical or popular music.

¹⁸ Two additional examples of deceptive motion used for phrase-expanding purposes, both by Mozart, include the Piano Sonata in A minor, K. 310, III, measures 16–20 (replace measure 16 with measure 20, and omit the intervening measures), and the Piano Sonata in C major, K. 279, II, measures 1–6 (replace measure 4 with measure 6, and omit the intervening measures).

¹⁹ This use of deceptive motion in cadence evasion is an example of what Janet Schmalfeldt has called the "one more time" technique ("Cadential Processes: The Evaded Cadence and the 'One More Time' Technique," *Journal of Musicological Research* 12/1–2 [1992], 1–52).

²⁰ This use of deceptive motion (where the cadence evasion takes the place of a half or authentic cadence in a would-be phrase period model, thus returning the harmonic progression to the tonic area instead of the pre-dominant area) is relatively unusual. For an example with a similar structure, see Mozart, Trio in E $\flat$ major, K. 498, measures 9–16, which is cited in Edward Aldwell and Carl Schachter (with Allen Cadwallader), *Harmony and Voice Leading*, 4th ed., (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2011), 238.

Of course, recomposition need not fall into any of the specific categories outlined above; I frequently turn to recomposition in other situations as well. For instance, when introducing the *Prelude* to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, I first play the opening three measures and ask the class what tonic is implied, without revealing the rest of the score. The best answer at this point is A, due to the E major-minor seventh chord in measure 3. I then play a recomposed version of measures 4–7, which leads to a cadence on A (see Example 14). This recomposition prolongs and eventually resolves the dominant function originally presented in measure 3.

Though we discuss the complex harmonic issues contained within measures 1–3, the recomposition shown in Example 14 demonstrates that the opening of the *Prelude* itself is not so tonally vague; it is in fact the sequential treatment of this material that throws the tonality of the opening passage into question. This sequential tendency is one of the central traits of the *Prelude*, and demonstrating the potential direction of the opening motivic material through recomposition clarifies the role of sequence in the *Prelude's* peripatetic harmonic unfoldings. The recomposition is, of course, a different thing altogether than Wagner's original *Prelude*, which is exactly the point: to illuminate what is so unique or special about the *Prelude* by offering an alternative. Hearing my recomposition first sets students up to be even more amazed by Wagner's inventive treatment of harmony, counterpoint, motive, and form.²¹



Example 14. Recomposition of the *Prelude* to *Tristan und Isolde*, measures 1–7 (measures 1–3 are a piano reduction of Wagner's original version; measures 4–7 are a recomposition of the original)

²¹ For a detailed discussion of implied dominants in the first measures of the *Tristan* Prelude, see John Rothgeb, "The *Tristan* Prelude: Identity and Origin," *Music Theory Online* 1/1 (January 1992), <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.95.1.1/mto.95.1.1.rothgeb.art>.

PRACTICAL MATTERS

The reader may be wondering about the implications of class size for the activities I have proposed above; while instructor demonstrations using recomposition work well for classes of any size, I have only used small-group recomposition or assigned take-home recompositions in classes of fifteen or fewer students. The question of assessment may also be of concern to some readers. For me, it is important that recomposition remains a low-risk activity so that students are encouraged to explore without fear of grade penalties. Often, I assign short recompositions to be completed during class, either alone or in pairs, and they are not graded at all. Instead, I play the solutions without revealing the composer, and the class discusses them. When I collect solutions for a grade, I grade based on contrapuntal correctness (as I would a counterpoint assignment), and, where appropriate, on how thoughtfully students answer questions that explain the choices they made in their recompositions.

CONCLUSION

Recomposition can be a powerful tool in music theory teaching. By asking students to consider the various possibilities inherent within a given musical construct, recomposition challenges the unexamined assumption on the part of many music students that the way a work stands at its completion was inevitable; it reinforces the valuable idea that there are many paths a piece of music might have taken that would also have been technically correct, if, however, not as convincing. Fostering such engagement allows students to develop a sense of surprise toward musical events that they might at first take for granted; it encourages them to more actively engage with the creative process of music analysis by making them aware of the myriad possibilities and realizations that abound in any piece of music. As shown through the various activities outlined in this article, recomposition also allows for discussion of *why* a composer might make a particular compositional choice over another. The point of such a discussion, of course, is not necessarily to come to a single conclusion, because in most cases it is impossible to know the definitive answer to such a question. Rather, the purpose of such speculation, and of recomposition in general, is to encourage students to participate in the moment-to-moment decisions made among a spectrum of possible alternatives as a piece of music unfolds: to remind students to remain sensitive to “what might have been,” and, ultimately, to heighten their appreciation and understanding.

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