

## Part I Chapter Two

### A. Chord grammar—Chord significance

Schenker's conceptions are based on a fundamental observation, the recognition of which formed the starting point of his entire work—the distinction between what will be called *chord grammar* and *chord significance*. While this distinction may have been instinctively felt by other musicians, they do not seem to have recognized its vast implications nor to have drawn from it any tangible conclusions for the theory of music and composition. Schenker examined this distinction, and, following up its implications, arrived at new and far-reaching conclusions.

Chord grammar denotes the usual type of analysis in which separate designations and labels are assigned to triads, seventh chords, etc. It is a purely descriptive means of registering and labeling each chord and relating it to different key centers. Chord grammar is the backbone of our present-day harmonic analysis, which is primarily concerned with recognition of the grammatical status of each chord in a musical work. It breaks up a phrase into a group of isolated chord entities. The study of chord significance, on the other hand, reveals the meaning of a chord and the specific role it plays in a phrase or section of a work, or in the work in its entirety. Chord significance, since it discloses the function of a chord, goes far beyond grammatical description by pointing out the special, architectonic purpose of a chord within a phrase. As a first result of this distinction, Schenker found that the roles which chords play in a musical phrase or section are very diverse; even two grammatically identical chords appearing in the same phrase can fulfill totally different functions. Thus it follows that labeling chords according to their grammatical status never explains their functions or how they combine to create a unified whole.

As an illustration of the difference between chord grammar and chord significance, let us consider the opening measures of Bach's Prelude in B $\flat$  Major from Book I of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. In addition to illustrating this distinction, this brief example also provides the oppor-

tunity to demonstrate some of its broader consequences. ►[Ex. I]◄

The Roman numerals appearing directly below the music represent the usual type of harmonic analysis, indicating the status of the chord in the key and its position (root position or inversion). The customary melodic analysis would point to a sequence embracing four tones (D-C-D-F) as a motive. The last group of four chords together with the tonic chord in the final measure would be indicated as a cadence. Because of this cadence as well as for the sake of variety, the melodic sequence would be considered changed in the third and fourth quarters of measure 2. Or, the presence of the sequence might lead to an alternative reading of the chords on the last eighth-note of meas. 1 and the fourth eighth-note of meas. 2 as secondary dominants of the preceding chords, despite the fact that the D chord is minor. This reading would result in the following harmonic analysis: I-V<sup>e</sup>-I-V-VI-III<sup>e</sup>-VI-V of VI-IV-I<sup>e</sup>-IV-V of IV-II, etc. Although this reading of the chords appears to be somewhat more discriminating than the first, the approach is essentially the same; it is purely descriptive and vertical. It completely dissects the phrase, turning an organic musical idea into a group of isolated chords and motives, each of which is represented as an independent entity through the application of grammatical symbols.

Many musicians feel that this type of analysis, though indispensable as groundwork, is incomplete, and that the most vital problems of the music have not been explained or even touched upon. What has this analysis revealed of the phrase's motion, and of the function of the chords and sequences within that motion? Has it been explained whether or not these tones, chords and motives are integral parts of an organic whole?

### B. Music as directed motion—Structure and prolongation

We often hear and read about the motion of music and about a piece of music as an organic whole. But these facts are seldom subjected to analytical investigation. If, however, a musical phrase is an expression of motion, questions as to the musical meaning of this motion are in order and will have to be answered. To put these questions in more specific form: Where does the motion begin? What is its goal? And how does the composer reach that goal?

Like a logical argument or a literary composition, a musical work is directed; its direction is determined by the very goal towards which it moves. Thus the significance of tones and chords and the functions they fulfill depend upon this goal and the direction the motion takes to attain

it. It was this observation which led Schenker to the conclusion that grammatically identical chords may play diverse roles. Obviously a bare description of grammatical facts fails to take into account the problems of musical direction.

To return to the fragment of the Bach Prelude, let us first discuss melodic direction in terms of the sequence. We hear the sequence begin on the B $\flat$ -Major tonic and come to an end upon the incomplete C-minor chord (meas. 2), at which point the motive changes. The sequential motion and the point of change have a twofold meaning: First, they unify the motion up to the point of change; second, this very unification serves in turn to stress the C-minor chord as a temporary goal, thus giving it more weight than the preceding submediant and subdominant chords. In the following chords, the emphasis falls upon the dominant seventh chord on F, the top voice circling around E $\flat$ , and this leads to the conclusion of the whole phrase on the B $\flat$  tonic. Thus the motion outlined in the whole phrase progresses from the initial B $\flat$  chord to the B $\flat$  chord in the third measure. The supertonic triad and the dominant seventh chord, as temporary goals, give specific shape to the outline, together with the two B $\flat$ -Major tonics, they form the progression I-II-V-I. This progression, supporting a motion in the top voice of D-E $\flat$ -E $\flat$ -D, governs the entire phrase and constitutes its *structural framework* or *fundamental structure*. Its members will be called *structural chords* (Graph a).

We come now to those chords in the phrase which do not serve as members of the I-II-V-I progression. What is their function in the motion and what purpose do they serve in maintaining the organic unity of the phrase? <sup>1</sup> Graph a has shown that instead of moving a tone upward from the B $\flat$ -Major to the C-minor chord, the possibility represented in Graph c, Bach inverted this obvious movement and descended a seventh in the outer voices. The filling in of this descending seventh engenders those intervening chords between the I and the II that contribute individuality and richness to the progression. These chords that fill the space of a seventh have a different origin and function from the chords that outline that space, the I and II. They constitute the means of passing from I to II, a motion emphasized and held together by the melodic character of the sequence (Graph b).

In this instance, the motion from I to II is achieved by means of the VI

<sup>1</sup> The use of half-notes for chords of the structural progression in the graphs is not intended to indicate time-values, but to differentiate structural points from chords having a different function. Roman numerals are applied only to chords defining the structural framework.

and the IV. Had Bach descended from the B $\flat$ -Major to the C-minor chord in a stepwise progression, the intermediate chords would be clearly defined as passing chords. Instead, however, he devised a musical pattern which moves in thirds through the G-minor and E $\flat$ -Major chords. Although the progression is not stepwise, these chords do in fact serve as passing chords. They are the connecting links between the I and the II, since they provide the motion between these structural chords. Both the structural and the passing chords are further strengthened through neighbor-note chords on the second and sixth eighth-notes, meas. 1, and the second eighth-note, meas. 2. The incomplete F-Major, D-minor and B $\flat$ -Major chords that follow the B $\flat$ -Major, G-minor and E $\flat$ -Major passing chords may be termed embellishing chords since they support embellishing tones of the melody. The primary function of these chords, as well as of the passing G-minor and E $\flat$ -Major chords, is to *prolong* the motion from the B $\flat$ -Major to the C-minor chord. Hence in distinction to the structural I and II, these passing, neighbor-note and embellishing chords are called *prolonging chords*. The G-minor and F-Major chords in first inversion appearing between the structural II and V have a similar origin; since they support G and F in the top voice, tones embellishing the structural tone E $\flat$ , they are embellishing and passing chords that prolong the motion from II to V.

It is now clear how the questions posed on page 11 regarding musical motion are to be answered with reference to the opening of the Bach Prelude. The reader, for final confirmation, should play or listen carefully first to Graphs a and b, and then to the quotation itself.

Schenker developed the distinction between chords of structure and chords of prolongation directly out of his differentiation between chord grammar and chord significance, and from his insistence upon taking the music's direction into consideration. This distinction between structure and prolongation became the backbone of his whole approach.<sup>2</sup> By means of this distinction we hear a work, not as a series of fragmentary and isolated phrases and sections, but as a single organic structure through whose prolongation the principle of artistic unity and variety is maintained. This way of understanding musical motion represents, I believe, the instinctive perception of the truly musical ear and can be termed "structural hearing."

<sup>2</sup> The analogous and equally important distinction between melody tones of structure and melody tones of prolongation will be discussed in more detail in Part II. The graphs in the present chapter necessarily show the melody's significance, and for the present the reader must be content to follow their indications as well as he can, and to concentrate more on the bass if necessary.



# I BACH Prelude No. 21 (Well-Tempered Clavier, Bk I)

a

b

c

2

# II BACH Chorale (No. 294)

a

b

I VI

# III BACH Chorale (No. 23)

a

b

c

IV

e graph III a  
f chorale