Depth: Composing through Schenker

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Abstract
This article provides an insight into a composer's creative process through a reflective understanding of the self (the composer as creator) and the other (the composer as analyst). In (re)presenting musical meaning by deconstructing the Schenkerian process of musical analysis, *Depth* explores the notion of crafting and unfolding the musical content of a creative task from a reverse paradigm of designing the components as if they already belong to a musical whole - the only difference is that the piece is yet to exist. What then would an ensuing piece sound like if the Foreground, Middleground and Background constructs have been delineated? What would the score look like and how would it sound "different" each time it is played? *Depth* evolves from these inquisitive ploys, to which it is now the object of reflection.

Keywords: musical deconstruction, quarter-tone notation, Schenkerian analysis, symbolism

Abstrak
Artikel *Depth: Composing through Schenker* membayangkan proses komposisi sebagai refleksi persona *self* dan *other* oleh pencipta dan penyelidik melalui analisa muzik teknik Schenkerian. Keistimewaannya adalah analisa komposisi *Depth* dibuat sebelum hasil penciptaan secara paradigma terbalik di mana skor diperkembangkan melalui struktur *Foreground, Middleground* dan *Background* dan setiap persembahan mempunyai simbolisma kelainan.

Kata Kunci: analisa Schenkerian, dekonstruksi muzik, notasi quarter-tone, simbolisma

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Introduction

This article is a reflection of the compositional approach undertaken in creating *Depth*, an original work for chamber ensemble composed by this writer. Commissioned by the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO), *Depth* was premiered on 15 December 2005 by MPO's Associate Conductor Kevin Field. The work is scored for flute/alto flute, oboe/cor-anglais, B flat clarinet/bass clarinet, French horn, tenor trombone, marimba, piano, violins one and two, viola, violoncello and double bass.

Musical works are often subjected to analyses by using a variety of techniques, usually after the composition has been completed and performed. *Depth* was created as a piece which deconstructed the Schenkerian process of musical analysis. I explored the notion of crafting and unfolding the musical content of a creative task from a reverse paradigm of designing the parts as if they already belonged to a musical whole. At the time of composition, I wanted to analyse a creation as if I was analysing an existing piece – the only difference was that the piece had yet to exist. I wanted to satisfy the creative inquisitiveness of moulding a work from the *Urstaz*, the fundamental structure and its ensuing musical interruptions along the passage of time, much like life's journey. I wanted to play with the rhythmic and pitch patterns found in the Foreground and Middleground, a luxury that only the composer can afford. The analyst can only interpret such musical documentations. An elucidation of this self-other dichotomy is thus represented in this article *Depth*: *Composing through Schenker*.

Symbolism of Schenker

Depth was inspired by the philosophy of Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935), regarded as one of the most influential music theorists of the twentieth century. Schenker was dissatisfied with the prevalent approach to the analysis of music theory which he felt conformed to a rigid formal scheme. He set out to discover and formulate new ways of explaining musical events. Schenker inaugurated a new trend towards the analysis of a composition by explaining and demonstrating the organic coherence of a composition through a network of music symbols arranged in graphic notation (Schenker, 1969). In his approach, Schenker demonstrated the manner in which the analysis of musical structures could be heard and experienced in particular musical contexts through the immediate, intermediate and remote levels of perception which he termed in his theory as the Foreground (*Vordergrund*), Middleground (*Mittelgrund*) and Background (*Hintergrund*) of musical events. To further understand the essence of Schenker's theory, his philosophical stance may be inferred from the following statement:

> The origin of every life, whether of nation, clan, or individual, becomes its destiny. Hegel defines destiny as 'the manifestation of the inborn, original disposition of each individual'. The inner law of origin accompanies all development and is ultimately part of the present. Origin, development and present I call background, middleground and foreground; their union expresses the oneness of an individual, self-contained life... Therefore the principle of origin, development and present as background, middleground and foreground applies also to the life of the idea within us. (Schenker, 1935 p. 3)

Schenker's methodology was unique in that he relied on symbols in graphs to illustrate differences between structural and non-structural formations, surface movements of pitch, register and texture as well as directed motions of the fundamental structure in conjuring musical meaning through the interpretation of signs (Cadwallader & Gagne, 2006; Forte & Gilbert, 1982). Schenker's work is premised primarily on two main formative levels, the first being the idea that all musical events stem from a Fundamental Structure or *Ursatz* which in turn acts as a backbone and stimulus to the second level of development and continuity through a process of continuous transformation. Schenker viewed the process of transformation in musical development as being continuous or discontinuous, directed

or meandering, chromatic or diatonic and one that may also shift registers. This, he believed is in contrast to the imaginary voices of the Background or Fundamental Structure, which he regarded as being continuous, directed, diatonic and which did not shift registers. The significance of Schenker's theory in relation to the stratification of social-analytical levels (in this case the stability of the fundamental structure against the "less stable" and changing/shifting transformative level) is perhaps reflected in his reference to the power of social institutions. Schenker (1935) states, "It is also true that the fundamental structure amounts to a sort of secret-hidden and unsuspected; a secret which incidentally, provides music with a kind of natural preservation from destruction by the masses" (p. 9).

In the second-half of the twentieth century, educational researchers have witnessed a surge of interest in the interpretive approaches in the study of culture, biography and human expressions arguing that the structures of representation may be viewed through symbolic statements and action (Denzin, 1989; Hoffer, 1992). Music, with its innate communicative properties may function connotatively or symbolically. Musicologist, Van Den Toorn (1991) argues that it is quite possible to describe and study aspects of music and musical experience that are openly representational without relinquishing a belief in the irreducible essences of interpretation. In particular reference to Schenker's use of symbolism, Van Den Toorn (1991) says, "Many of Schenker's 'technical' terms are expressive and metaphorical, yet their use and understanding would not contradict a belief in meanings that are beyond the reach of metaphors, analogies, and symbols" (p.280).

Schenker's method of hierarchical demarcation in structural functions has also drawn the attention of feminist theorists. In the deconstruction of power relationships, McClary (2002) alludes to the use of sexual symbolism in Schenker's musical terminology. Debates continue on the use of Schenkerian approaches in the understanding of post-tonal music and its socio-cultural connotations (Cook, 2007; Oswald, 1982). The postulation of the covert and overt significance of the "symbol" has continued to exert its influence on the development of postmodernist theories and even research possibilities (Ayotte, 2004). Thus, Schenker's play of musical signs and symbols has attracted the attention of sociologists and musicologists alike in the postmodern era, each interpreting different sets of meanings from the literal to the metaphorical and also across the spectrum of interdisciplinary discourse and deliberations.

Structural Framework

The idea of reversing the paradigm in analysing music before it has been written intrigued me. In writing about this work, I began to wonder if my own historical and cultural background had subconsciously directed my creativity to express itself in a peculiar way. I pondered if the Background, Middleground and Foreground of musical events were, in fact socially and culturally grounded in my psyche as a Malaysian composer from a multi-cultural milieu, living in a country whose historical roots mirror my musical voice.

Schenker's allusion to the stratification of music as symbols of life's path spurred my creativity. As a result, I came out with the structural framework of *Depth*. This musical map represented the compositional analysis of a Schenkerian-inspired work (Figure 1).

The structural framework comprises three main components, namely the Background (also known as the Fundamental Structure), Middleground and the Foreground. Different sets of pitch-classes are assigned to the Background and the Middleground. Units of rhythmic patterns are assigned to the Foreground. There is also a brief descriptor of the Schenkerian terms used. The work is scored for 12 players divided into Group A, Group B and Group C. Each group exists separately but interacts spontaneously as bounded by time. Each group is responsible for the musical content occurring in the Background (or Fundamental Structure), Middleground and Foreground respectively. Figure 1 illustrates the structural framework upon which *Depth* evolved.

Figure 1: Structural Framework

The act of composing is an active endeavor in the sense that the score is being physically crafted through time whilst the process of analysis is often an act of reflection, a form of post-compositional experience to further understand the resultant work. In creating *Depth,* I imagined that the ensuing structural framework was the outcome of understanding musical meaning based on Schenkerian analysis – my analysis of an imaginary score. The title of the work was a reflection of the depth of musical symbolism as enunciated by the extensive use of quarter-tone notation and rhythmic challenges. The use of quarter tones, that is, a scale being divided into twenty-four quarter tones instead of the usual twelve semitones, represents a significant compositional tool for me and provides a broader canvas of musical tones and harmonies.

Fundamental Structure / Background

In designing *Depth,* I first created a central line which I called the Fundamental Structure or Background of musical events. These events are represented by thirty pitch-class notes divided into nine segments (I-IX). Each segment lasts 60 seconds in real-time, except for the final segment, which lasts 75 seconds (segment IX). The total duration of the entire work is 9 minutes and 15 seconds. The notes in these nine segments symbolise life's journey through time.

Thirty pitches (Figure 2) were composed as one long non-tonal melodic line, poised to emerge progressively throughout the work. This melody was created spontaneously and musically rather than being mathematically contrived. These thirty notes were then plotted throughout the length of the central line of the Fundamental Structure / Background. This wide-ranged melodic line would later be shared by four instruments, namely the flute doubling with alto flute, French horn, piano and double bass, enunciated poignantly over a period of nine minutes and fifteen seconds. Overall, this group (A) possesses musical content that is sweet and genteel, yet dominant and powerful when heard with the other groups. Figure 2 illustrates the melodic line found in the Fundamental Structure / Background.
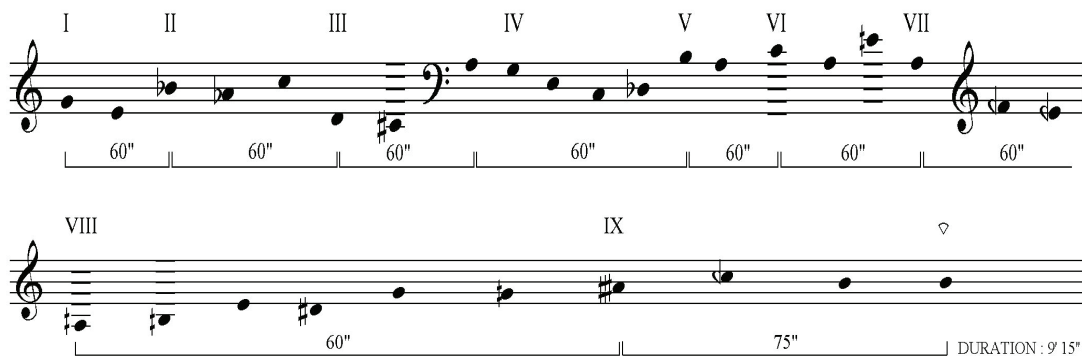
Figure 2: Fundamental Structure / Background

In Schenkerian analysis, the *Ursatz* represents the basic contrapuntal design that underlines the entire structure of a piece. The reduction in the layers of sound unveils the background of musical events which is prolonged by interruptions. Such interruptions occur soon after the opening note G where branch lines emerge from the Fundamental Structure. These graphic illustrations represent the emergence of musical materials "analysed" as belonging to the Foreground and the Middleground of musical events which were later developed.

Foreground

Musical materials in the Foreground are played by 2 violins, 1 viola and 1 marimba, representing Group B instrumentalists. They play musical materials which are written within 37 bars of 15-second real-time blocks totaling 9 minutes and 15 seconds. The focus is on the development of distinct rhythmic patterns executed by the marimba and the trio of strings. Here, rhythmic counterpoint in the form of call and response add jest and character to the Foreground in contrast to the lyricism of the background.

Groups of rhythmic units emerge in the Foreground at different points of the Fundamental Structure as mapped in the structural framework. Several of the rhythmic units also evolve in the Middleground and Background. Figure 3 illustrates some of the rhythmic units upon which the musical content developed.
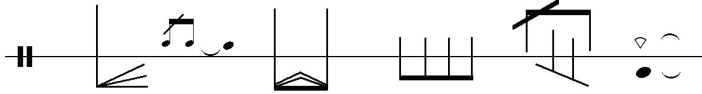
(i)   Rhythmic call and response between marimba and strings
         (Foreground: bars 1-13)

(ii)   Rhythmic interplay between violin one & violin two
         (Foreground: bars 11-14)
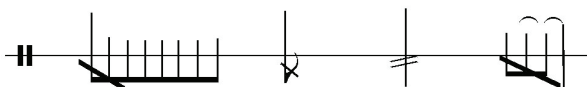
(iii)   Rhythmic patterns featured by oboe, bass clarinet, trombone
            (Middleground: bars 27-31)

(iv)   Spatial time found in the prolongation of the fundamental structure
            (Background: bars 35 – 36)

Figure 3: Rhythmic units

        The visual-aural impact of an analysis was important to Schenker. He created a unique system of symbols to explain melodic and rhythmic motion (Schenker 1969). Forte and Gilbert (1982) grouped Schenker's graphs into rhythmic and structural types. In rhythmic reduction, often called metric reduction, the original note durations and their meanings were kept, whilst in structural analysis longer rhythmic values indicated greater structural importance. In creating *Depth*, rhythmic units were designed as motives, emerging from the Foreground, and adopted by the Middleground and Background of musical events. The rhythmic patterns were complex but they were not bounded by time signatures. In composing the work, a stopwatch was used to calculate the number of times a rhythmic pattern may be repeated within a bar of 15 seconds. The visual location of the notes within a bar plays a significant role in the "fitting-in" of musical materials. Each instrumentalist is bounded by real-time units of 15 seconds per bar in which to play the musical content. Each player in their respective group realises the score within the said timeframe. In other words, they work independently within their own group.
        Each player reads his/her part from the full score of its group. The conductor's task is to unify the three groups by bringing out the thematic elements of the Background, Middleground and Foreground. The conductor is responsible for keeping (real) time so that each player in each group knows exactly where s/he is within the big picture. In this sense, no two performances will ever be the same. Figure 4 illustrates how time is actualised in the first four bars of the full score belonging to instruments playing in Group B.

SCORE IN C

GROUP B: FOREGROUND

DEPTH

VALERIE ROSS
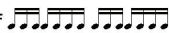
* Commence after 4 sets of ♫♩♫♫♩ ♫♩♫♫♩

  Rhythmic values in proportionate value, played within the real-time blocks of 15 sec.

  PLAYERS TO READ FROM <u>FULL FOREGROUND</u> SCORE

 CONDUCTOR DIRECTS FROM FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURE-FOREGROUND-MIDDLEGROUND SCORES
  SCORE WRITTEN IN C : NO SEPARATE PARTS

Figure 4: Actualising real-time

Middleground

Musical materials in the Middleground are played by four instrumentalists, namely, the oboe (doubling on cor anglais), B flat clarinet (doubling on bass clarinet), tenor trombone and the violoncello. The pointillistic direction of the winds provides a contrast against the tremolo textures of the violoncello. Of the three groups, the musical materials in the Middleground are the most developed. The pitches are engaged in three ways, namely, as (i) melodic phrases units, (ii) wide-ranging melodic points and (iii) gradual quarter-tone harmonic ascent. Figure 5 illustrates the manner in which melodic materials are designed in the Middleground.

(i)   Melodic phrase units
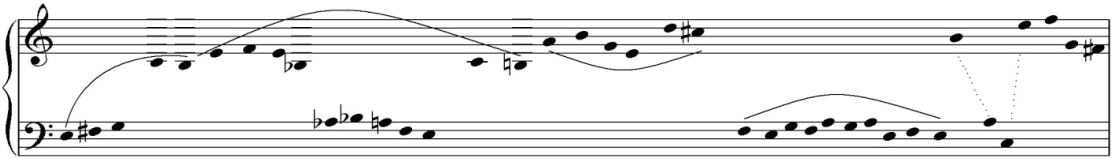
(ii)   Wide-ranging melodic points

(iii)   Gradual quarter-tone harmonic ascent

Figure 5: Middleground melodic treatment

The melodic units are essentially developed by Group C instrumentalists. Their treatment is best illustrated in the culminating bars of the Middleground (bars 33-36). Here, melodic phrases are graciously shared between the cor-anglais, bass clarinet and trombone. One moment the cor-anglais is whispering tiny little semitone steps, then without hesitation passed over to the low trombone tones, then quickly picked up by the eagerly waiting clarinet, sometimes mistaken for the bass clarinet. Meanwhile, the violoncello plays an ascending and descending phrase anxiously in quarter-tone glissando motions, creating dangerously subtle harmonies along the way.

Performance challenges and conclusion

Depth may be regarded as a challenge in realising musical time. It is exploratory yet highly structured. It is simplistically presented within real-time blocks yet complex in melodic and harmonic construct. An understanding of the beauty and demands of quarter-tone playing techniques and the

Schenkerian approach to musical ideas is essential to the effective interpretation of *Depth*. The conductor plays a pivotal role in realising the artistic intention of the work. Each instrument is treated individually and each group is uniquely bonded. Each group member knows what others in their group are playing but can only respond intuitively to what they hear as interpreted by others from their group. They may be inspired or uninspired by each other's deliberations. The challenge is to attain group cohesion with one another, rhythmically, melodically, musically and responsively.

Schenker saw musical compositions as complex elaborations of basic musical formulae, which was understood from the standpoint of a listener rather than the compositional history of the piece. Thus, as a Schenkerian analyst seeks to reverse engineer a composition by unveiling the successive layers of elaboration, this composer seeks to "reverse compose" through an analytical structure.

By applying practice-led research as methodology (Blom, Bennett & Wright, 2011; Freeman, 2010; Smith & Dean, 2005), this article hopes to foster new knowledge and understandings about compositional practice. It maps the creative process through writing about one's own practice of which the output may possibly serve as a source of primary data for other researchers interested in the domain of deconstructing musical creativity, artistry and meaning.

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Biography

Dr Valerie Ross is an established composer-researcher with works premiered in major cities in Europe and the Asia Pacific. She has received composition awards from the Rockefeller Foundation, Commonwealth Foundation and Japan Foundation, and has held composer-lectureship residencies in Darmstadt International Institute for New Music, Bellagio Study and Conference Centre and the Centre for Intercultural Musicology. Premieres of her works in 2011 include *Ragaslendro* (Wollongong), *Quiet Night Thoughts* (Glasgow) and *Soliloquy* (Cambridge). Valerie has various publications. In 2010, she was a visiting research fellow at the Institute of Musical Research, University of London. Valerie is an Associate Professor of Music at Universiti Teknologi MARA and a by-fellow of Churchill College, University of Cambridge.