Unraveling Schenker’s Concept of the Auxiliary Cadence

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Schenker created the term “auxiliary cadence” (Hilfskadenz)—along with the synonymous term “incomplete transference of a form of the fundamental structure” (unvollständiger Übertragung einer Ursatzform)—to refer to a progression that begins on a non-tonic Stufe and is closed off (abgeriegelt) from the preceding harmonies. In most cases, only the final chord of the auxiliary cadence functions on deeper structural levels, so that this progression tends to yield a sense of expectancy and forward momentum. Schenker valued these progressions for their dramatic potential and their ability to aid in creating a sense of harmonic fluidity.

After all, according to Heinrich Schenker, a non-tonic opening is a prime means by which Art can confront Nature. It adds an illogical, human touch to a composition by reversing the normal procedures of tonal development. As an analogy, consider the way in which this paragraph begins. My first sentence would be more appropriate in the middle of a paragraph. But whereas my opening, is, admittedly, a bit odd in the present context, it would not be out of place in a work of art. Indeed, many a book, play, or piece of music begins as though already “in progress.”

Schenker was greatly intrigued by the power of such in medias res beginnings, which he felt could be realized in music through the use of non-tonic openings. Perhaps more than any theorist before him, Schenker recognized the implications of harmonic progressions that begin with non-tonic chords, admiring them for their dramatic potential and their ability to enhance tonal fluidity. His approach to the understanding of non-tonic openings forms a central part of his theories, especially as regards the relationships between compositional organicism and artistic expression.

Schenker’s discussion of the non-tonic opening reaches its most mature presentation in his formulation of what he termed the “auxiliary cadence.” His concept of the auxiliary cadence has been extremely influential, and it may be found at the core of many analytic discussions. Yet his descriptions of the auxiliary cadence are not easy to follow, and they often have been misinterpreted. Not surprisingly, many have cited Schenker’s discussions of the auxiliary cadence as among his most difficult to decipher. As a result of these difficulties

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2 For instance, see Cadwallader and Gagné 1998, 376; Laufer 1999a, 135; and Marvin 2001, 137.
and misunderstandings, some feel that the auxiliary cadence is either a static construct or an abstract concept that engages largely subliminal or mysterious forces. I argue, on the contrary, that a proper understanding of Schenker's concept of the auxiliary cadence reveals it to be a dynamic device that involves concrete features of musical experience. In spite of the difficulties involved, examining Schenker's ideas on the auxiliary cadence not only tells us much about non-tonic openings, but also helps demystify his theoretical approach in general.

**INCOMPLETE URSTAZFORM TRANSFERENCE: THE AUXILIARY CADENCE**

Although Schenker developed the auxiliary cadence as a full-fledged concept only towards the end of his life, its basic underpinnings may be found in a number of his earlier writings. Not only does he analyze the non-tonic openings of several individual compositions throughout his career, but he also directly addresses the topic of non-tonic openings in each of the three volumes of his magnum opus, *New Musical Theories and Fantasies*.3

In *Harmony* and *Counterpoint*, the first two volumes of this trilogy, Schenker deals with this subject in rather broad terms, describing the non-tonic opening as an artistic subversion of normal tonal procedures. For instance, in discussing off-tonic beginnings in *Harmony* §135, he notes that . . . . most compositions begin with a tonic—as the tonic responds best to the postulate of development. We should be wary, however, of all sorts of deceptions which spirited authors have in store for us, particularly at the beginning of a work.5

Schenker explicates this notion at greater length earlier within the same volume, where he precedes an examination of non-tonic openings by invoking a linguistic analogy (§16):

The sentence “Father rode his horse through the woods” ["*Der Vater ritt durch den Wald*"] makes a different impression from the other possible versions of the same sentence: “His horse rode father through the woods” ["*Es ritt der Vater durch den Wald*"] or “Through the woods father rode his horse” ["*Durch den Wald ritt der Vater*"]. The latter two versions differ from the original one by a nuance of tension. The natural way of proceeding is first to introduce the subject of our statement, and then to explain what it is all about regarding that subject. But . . . aesthetic reasons may induce the writer to prefer a different order, engendering an effect of tension. . . . The belated introduction of the subject finally resolves the tension, but tension undoubtedly has been created first. What could we not have thought during that brief moment of tension! “Who rode his horse?” friend? foe? stranger? acquaintance? etc.6

Schenker then relates this linguistic situation to instances where the tonic is withheld from the beginning of a piece of music, pointing out how such an opening likewise can create a sense of disorientation. He underlines the notion that an off-tonic opening does not derive strictly from natural processes, but rather represents an imposition of the will of the composer, and that the handling of such passages is one factor by which “the true master reveals himself and manifests his superiority vis-à-vis minor talents.”7

Schenker attempts to give these musings a more technical footing in *Free Composition*, the final volume of *New Musical Theories and Fantasies*, within a section devoted to “Specific Foreground Events.” This section begins with a discussion of

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6 Ibid., 31–32. As Mann Borgese’s inelegant translation suggests, the different versions of the sample German sentence do not convert readily into English.

7 Ibid., §16: 37.
“transferences of forms of the fundamental structure” (Übertragungen der Ursatzformen). To understand Schenker’s use of this term, it must be remembered that he regards the background as the essence of a musical artwork. As he sees it, background structures are not small progressions writ large; rather, small-scale progressions are imitations of the larger framework. That is, for Schenker, middleground and foreground progressions replicate or “transfer” a possible form of the background to a local level.

Much as the forms of the fundamental structure begin on a root-position tonic chord, so transferences of them usually start on a root-position tonic as well. However, in §244 and §245 of Free Composition, Schenker notes that it is also possible for the opening root-position tonic of progressions to be left out, thereby forming “incomplete transferences of forms of the fundamental structure” (unvollständige Übertragungen der Ursatzformen). To describe such incomplete progressions, he invents the more concise term “Hilfskadenz,” translated by Ernst Oster as “auxiliary cadence.” Thus, an auxiliary cadence is a middleground or foreground replication of an Ursatzform that omits the first element of the bass arpeggiation; namely, it omits the opening root-position tonic. As in the passages cited above from Harmony, Free Composition views progressions with off-tonic openings as variants of normative, complete progressions.

At the top of Figure 110 of Free Composition, Schenker lists various bass lines that could support an auxiliary cadence (see Example 1). Each auxiliary cadence is depicted as a progression that begins midstream, consisting of either a dominant moving to a tonic or a pre-dominant and dominant moving to a tonic. To demonstrate each of these possibilities, Schenker provides several analyses of works that exhibit auxiliary cadences of varying lengths. Several analyses show that the V chord of the auxiliary cadence may occur in inversion or be represented by a VII\(^6\) (as in Figure 110, b2) and that the pre-dominant chord likewise may appear in inversion (as in Figure 110, c4).

Many of his analyses indicate that I\(^6\) may also serve as the initial “non-tonic” harmony of an auxiliary cadence. As Schenker claims elsewhere, the lowest tone of a chord tends to serve as its root. As a result, for Schenker I\(^6\) often is understood to function in the manner of a III chord. For instance, in §245 Schenker cites the bracketed I\(^6\)–IV–V(I\(^6\))–I progression of Example 2 as exemplifying the III–(IV)–V–I progression seen in Example 1(c), with I\(^6\) substituting for III. Evidently, according to Schenker this I\(^6\) functions in the manner of a pre-dominant; it does not represent the tonic Stufe.

**The Tonal Shape of the Auxiliary Cadence**

The omission of an opening root-position tonic gives rise to a feeling of expectancy by shifting the weight of the tonality towards the end of a progression. That is, the point of

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9 Schenker himself avoids the term “harmonic progression” (Fortschreitung). His apparent dislike of this term perhaps derives from its implied emphasis on chord succession rather than organic development, as well as its focus on root motion rather than the contrapuntal outer-voice structure.
10 88–89.
11 Auxiliary cadences do not necessarily have anything to do with phrase endings, as the word “cadence” might erroneously suggest, nor does Schenker ever imply that they do.
12 Schenker never distinguishes between the terms “auxiliary cadence” and “incomplete transference of a form of the fundamental structure”; he treats the two as synonyms.
13 Although Schenker does not place a VI–V–I progression in this list (much as he does not list a I–VI–V–I progression within the earlier list of basic structures in Figures 14–18), he apparently recognizes the possibility of such an auxiliary cadence, as may be seen in his analysis in Figure 149, 5.
14 Some auxiliary cadences are as short as two eighth notes (as in Figure 112, 3a); others embrace an entire section or even an entire piece (as in Figures 110, d2 and 110, a3 respectively).
tional stability within the progression—and its only harmony that plays a role within the larger structure—does not arrive until its end. As such, the entire auxiliary cadence is in a constant “state of becoming” until its conclusion.

Schenker alludes to this effect of progressions that have off-tonic beginnings in the section discussed above from Harmony. He suggests that with such progressions one must wait until the tonic belatedly arrives to find “what it is all about regarding [the] subject,” thereby “arous[ing] in us a state of curiosity and tension.”¹⁶ Schenker reiterates this notion in Free Composition §244, where he explains that the opening harmonies of the typical auxiliary cadence point towards the I chord that appears at its end. Referring to the progressions shown in Example 1 above, Schenker claims that “we understand, in retrospect, that the fundamental tone is C in all such cases, especially since C ultimately appears” . . . and that “the IV, III, and II are related only to the forthcoming I; they point only to it.” Thus, the typical auxiliary cadence derives its tonal meaning within the larger context from its final chord alone; only the final chord plays a role on the deeper levels of voice leading. In this sense, the opening, later-level harmonies are “auxiliary” to the final tonic.

The structural and dramatic profile of an auxiliary cadence differs greatly from that of a typical complete progression. Whereas a complete progression first states the tonic

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