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Guest Editors' Introduction: "The More Questions, The Better"

Stephen Rodgers, Henry Martin, and Keith Waters

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[1] Steve Larson had an adage that went something like this: You don't have to answer the questions, you just have to ask them. This was the kind of advice he would give a student who was struggling to find a paper topic or fretting about the direction of a dissertation chapter, always offered with a Leprechaun glint in his eye and that unmistakable Steve smile. Of course, he was exaggerating a bit. His own work provided plenty of answers—about how music creates meaning, how listeners perceive musical patterns, how we understand music in terms of physical metaphors—and he recognized as much as anyone the importance of making a convincing argument. But the overstatement had a purpose: the student would leave his office feeling freed up, less encumbered by the fear of being wrong, less constrained by the thought that one should only pursue a research question with an easy answer.

[2] A related "Steve-ism" was his "question-answering recipe," a four-step guide to surviving the conference paper Q&A. One, listen carefully to the question. Two, repeat the question so everyone knows what it is, and ask the questioner if you've repeated the question correctly. Three, praise the question. Four (and this part was very much optional), answer the question. Steve can be heard relating his recipe to a student in the audio clip below.⁽¹⁾

Here, too, the point was not to give students license to dodge every difficult question that came their way, but to get them to forget their anxiety by focusing instead on the pleasure of the scholarly dialogue. As he put it, cheerfully, "The more questions, the better!"

[3] These adages reveal a lot about Steve: his wit, his playfulness, his penchant for lists, his generosity, his love of a good conversation, his knack for finding the perfect aphorism, and perhaps above all his willingness to pursue crucial, often difficult questions about why and how music is meaningful to us. His research in music cognition, Schenkerian theory, pedagogy, and jazz analysis is nothing short of groundbreaking—it crosses disciplinary boundaries, plumbs the complexities of musical experience, and does so with preternatural clarity and grace. And his tireless efforts on behalf of his students, his colleagues, and the music theory community made him a model of the scholar-citizen.

[4] Steve was an eager collaborator, and some of his work resulted from joint research projects. He co-authored an article on metaphor theory with philosopher Mark Johnson, and worked with Douglas Hofstadter at Indiana University's Center for

Research on Concepts and Cognition. He was also the driving force behind the Jazz Piano Collective, the group of four music theorists and jazz pianists (and wine enthusiasts) that included Henry Martin, Steve Strunk, and Keith Waters. As a jazz pianist, Steve was versatile and consistently devoted to development and improvement.

[5] Steve Larson passed away on June 7, 2011, after an eight-month battle with brain cancer. But he is still with us; his ideas and his spirit live on in those who were fortunate enough to have known him and his work. This is no more evident than in the nine papers gathered here, drawn from a special meeting of the West Coast Conference of Music Theory and Analysis, organized this past March in his memory by Jack Boss, Stephen Rodgers, Tim Pack, and Caitlin Snyder. Each builds on the foundation he laid.

[6] The papers fall into three strands: Musical Forces, Jazz, and Extensions. The first two of these reflect the areas where Larson made his most significant contributions as a scholar. His theory of musical forces, which receives its fullest treatment in the posthumously-published *Musical Forces: Motion, Metaphor, and Meaning in Music* (2012), explains how listeners hear tonal music through the analogues of physical gravity, magnetism, and inertia. The theory of musical forces generally treats these forces as things that act on a melody from the outside, so to speak. But what happens when a melody counteracts the forces working on it? Can a melody push against the constraints of the environment in which it finds itself? Robert Hatten and Matthew BaileyShea both address these questions in their articles on musical forces and agency. Hatten, whose essay is derived from a keynote address he delivered at the memorial conference, considers the implications of hearing a melody as a subject with its own agential “free will.” What forces must it exert to oppose gravity, magnetism, or inertia, and what energy is required for these agential forces to be sustained? Hatten also brings other physical forces into the mix, which Larson did not discuss, including momentum, friction, and repulsion. BaileyShea likewise infuses agency into the theory of musical forces. Using Mahler’s “Nun will die Sonn’ so hell aufgeh’n” as a point of reference, he proposes three categories of musical forces: the predictable, “non-sentient” forces of Larson’s theory, the forces of a seemingly “sentient” agent, and the unpredictable, non-sentient forces of, say, wind and water. Together, these two papers offer an even more nuanced explanation of how melodies move (and move us), and they set the stage for future research into musical expectation and expression.

[7] The four papers on jazz treat issues of central concern to Steve while providing opportunities to branch off from his scholarship. Steve’s work applied Schenkerian theory to jazz, as first seen in his dissertation (Larson 1987, updated as Larson 2009) and then in several articles. Throughout his writings, Steve maintained the original tenets of Schenkerian theory with its emphasis on the primacy of the triad and classical principles of dissonance treatment and voice leading. Studies in jazz theory since the 1990s have sometimes featured a more generalized application of Schenkerian theory with revisions of its central paradigms. The essays of David Heyer and Mark McFarland note the strengths of Larson’s allegiance to traditional Schenkerian theory and take issue with attempts to revise it to account for the specifics of jazz syntax. In particular, Heyer and McFarland argue that Schenkerian theory in its original form is a precise tool, with a tradition and accepted modes of application, and as such shows how jazz is rooted in the tonality of the common-practice era on which Schenker based his original theory. Henry Martin in his essay compares a traditional Schenkerian reading of Waller-Razaf’s “Honeysuckle Rose” with a reading that reflects a revisionist approach, arguing that each has its strengths and weaknesses. Martin, like Larson, has long been interested in the music of Charlie Parker, and his essay continues with a discussion of Parker’s first recording—an improvisation on “Honeysuckle Rose”—showing the interrelationship of motive and formula. The final jazz paper, by Stefan Love, continues with further analysis of Parker’s music and examines Parker’s strategies for improvising over 12-bar blues choruses. His article takes as its starting point a Larson comment on improvisation as “the real-time yet pre-heard—and even practiced—choice among possible paths that elaborate a pre-existing structure” (Larson 2005, 272), which Love then applies to both phrasing and improvisational formula, extending these concepts into “schemata” that reveal general features of both.

[8] A third set of papers—grouped under the heading Extensions—takes other aspects of Steve Larson’s scholarship as points of departure for explorations of such topics as musical ambiguity and continuity. Gary Karpinski writes of Steve’s fascination with ambigrams, graphical figures that spell out one or more words so that they can be read in two different orientations (often right-side-up and upside-down). At the heart of the ambigram is a visual ambiguity—a single image that can be interpreted in two different ways. Branching outward from the ambigram, Karpinski goes on to offer a personal

reflection on ambiguities of all sorts—from the visual ambiguities of duck-rabbit figures and Necker cubes to the “metric hobgoblins” of Beethoven, Saint-Saëns, and Dvořák that haunt him even after decades of training, and even after he knows how he “should” hear them, to the tonal and metric ambiguities that flummox aural skills students, often without their teachers even realizing the passages are ambiguous. Alison Hood also considers musical ambiguity in her essay on Chopin’s Prelude in G minor, and in the process gives us a compelling demonstration of Larson’s “strict use” of Schenkerian analytic notation—a method he developed with the aim of making sketches that were more consistent and easier to read, and helping students to learn Schenkerian analysis in a more systematic way. Hood uses strict use to plumb the expressive meaning of Chopin’s work—characterized by energetic forward momentum and a strategic deployment of tonal and metric ambiguity—and to provide useful suggestions for how analysis can inflect performance. Keith Waters riffs on ideas from Steve Larson’s article “What Makes a Good Bridge” (2003), where Larson develops the metaphor of “bridge” and enumerates conditions for good bridges in American popular song. Waters extends these ideas to the music of Debussy, and considers how Debussy creates continuity across phrase, harmonic, and formal boundaries in several works, including “Reflets dans l’eau.” Such techniques contribute to the ongoing and seamless quality of Debussy’s music.

[9] We have also added a section called Compositions, which contains scores and recordings of four compositions written in Steve’s memory: a siciliana for piano by Robert Hatten, also featured in his essay; a piano solo by Henry Martin, first performed at a concert surrounding the memorial conference; a choral piece by Tim Pack, heard at a similar concert that weekend; and a song by Stephen Rodgers, which he performed at a remembrance held right after the conference ended. Since performing and composing mattered so much to Steve, it seemed only fitting that his Festschrift would contain works of music as well as works of prose.

[10] Lastly, we include here the first chapter of Steve’s unfinished textbook, *Schenkerian Analysis: Pattern, Form, and Expressive Meaning*. Plans are in place to publish the first several chapters of this book as a sort of primer to strict use and his unique mingling of Schenkerian theory, musical forces, and expressive meaning. May this chapter provide a springboard for those interested in incorporating these ideas into their teaching or research!

[11] As diverse as these contributions may be—written by established scholars and relative newcomers; jazz and classical specialists; scholars with different methodologies, backgrounds, and predilections—they are united by a deep admiration for Steve Larson and his work and a commitment to carrying on his ideas. Our hope is that this volume will generate even more questions and inspire others to continue the conversation he started.

Stephen Rodgers
University of Oregon
ser@uoregon.edu

Henry Martin
Rutgers University
martinh@andromeda.rutgers.edu

Keith Waters
University of Colorado Boulder
watersk@colorado.edu

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Footnotes

1. Many thanks to David Heyer for recording this clip during an advising meeting, and for sharing it with us. Heyer's essay in this volume is derived from his doctoral dissertation, written under Larson's supervision. Astute listeners will note the reference to a dissertation by Alison Hood, another one of the contributors to this Festschrift.

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Prepared by Hoyt Andres, Editorial Assistant