

# ALLEN FORTE IN MEMORIAM

MAY 9, 2015

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When I arrived at Yale in 1977, I was about as green as a person could be. I didn't know that music theory was emerging as a separate field of study and that Yale was the place to study it, and I didn't know that the reason for the emergence of music theory and for the centrality of Yale was Allen Forte. As a further indicator of my profound ignorance, it wasn't until my third week that I realized that Allen's last name had only one syllable!

That such ignorance was possible reflects not only on my own sheltered upbringing, but also the general state of scholarly affairs at that time. So much of the infrastructure of music theory that we take for granted had not yet come into being, and the field itself was only then taking its distinctive shape.

The fact that the field took the particular shape it did, sustained by a strong infrastructure, is attributable to a significant degree to Allen. More than any other person, Allen created the field of music theory in its postwar North American incarnation and, through his own work, provided a model of what music theory could and should be, and what a music theorist could and should do.

Allen was a founder and a long-time editor of the *Journal of Music Theory*, still a flagship journal in the field. He helped found and became the first President of the Society for Music Theory. Perhaps most important, he created the Ph.D. program in music theory here at Yale, which has produced so many leading figures in the field, and which continues to do so, well after his retirement and passing. These institutions he built—the journal, the society, the doctoral program—are his enduring legacy to our field, and every one of us is deeply grateful for them.

In his own scholarly work, Allen set the agenda for the field and, like the institutions he created, his influence endures. He was a remarkably and steadily productive scholar. He was also a scholar with an unusual variety of interests, and his vast body of writing entails contributions—often formative and foundational contributions—to at least three theoretical approaches touching on four musical repertoires. First and most important is pitch-class set theory, especially in relation to the canonical modernist music of the early twentieth century, by Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, Bartók, and Stravinsky. Second, Schenkerian theory, especially in relation to the canonic tonal composers from Bach to Brahms. Third, theories of motivic relations, especially in relation to the chromatic music of the late-nineteenth century. And fourth, a sort of freely adapted Schenkerian theory in relation to American popular song.

Allen's most central and lasting contribution, and the one most closely identified with him, is his mapping of the terrain of the pitch-class set. This work remains foundational and influential, and even where his approach has been superseded in certain respects, the questions he asked are still the questions we are grappling with.

In the realm of Schenkerian theory, Allen's contribution was more as a midwife than a birth parent, although in helping to deliver the infant, he shaped it in significant ways. Through his articles and his important textbook, co-authored with Steven Gilbert, Forte did as much as anyone to position Schenker at the center of the newly emerging field of music theory and a rejuvenated pedagogy of tonal theory. Like his achievements in pitch-class set theory, although on a more modest scale, these are lasting contributions to our field.

Although somewhat overshadowed by his work in pitch-class set theory and Schenkerian theory, Allen also produced a substantial body of theoretical and analytical work on the chromatic music of the late nineteenth century. In a series of studies that focus on what he called "the primal importance of the motive," he demonstrated the growing importance of contextual motivic relations and their increasing

independence from the constraints of traditional tonal syntax. For Allen, this body of work spanned the apparent gulf between Schenkerian and pitch-class set theories.

In the final phase of his career, Allen turned his attention to a repertoire that he had known intimately from his younger days, but had never directly engaged in his scholarship: songs by Gershwin, Porter, and other “popular ballads of the Golden era.” Here, his long-standing interests in the linear organization of music, in Schenkerian concepts of structural levels and embellishment, and in motivic elaboration and development, were deployed to reveal previously unknown structural depths in a repertoire that had not previously received careful analytical attention. Recent scholarship on American popular song, and on popular idioms more generally, has evolved rapidly and in ways that do not necessarily show Allen’s direct influence. But in the seriousness and intensity of his analytical gaze and in the sorts of musical qualities toward which he directed that gaze, Allen devised a theoretical and analytical program that scholars continue to follow.

Amid the diversity of his theoretical and musical interests, and the long time span of his career, Allen pursued certain basic intellectual and aesthetic commitments with remarkable tenacity and consistency. He was committed to structure, and especially to musical structures that are coherent, autonomous, internally consistent, and organized hierarchically, with the parts in harmonious relationship to each other and to the whole that subsumes them. Some of these values may seem old-fashioned to a postmodern generation of music theorists, but if you care about the musical repertoires he cared about, and if you care about the constructive aspects of those repertoires (their harmonies, melodies, rhythms, and voice leading), you will inevitably find yourself engaged with the rich and lasting legacy of Allen Forte’s contribution to the field of music theory.

I have spoken about Allen’s institutional and intellectual impact. Now I need to say just a few words of a more personal nature, about Allen’s importance to me as a teacher, mentor, and friend. As Allen’s student, you were expected to master the methodologies that most interested him, and that was

fine, because these were also the methodologies that dominated the field. But Allen was always an extremely open-minded and supportive advisor. He never treated his interests as orthodoxies, and was always open to his students finding their own paths. And, whatever you did, he was fiercely loyal and endlessly supportive—these are good qualities in a mentor! I learned so much from Allen, not only compelling methodologies for analyzing music, but also what it might mean to be a scholar with original vision, pioneering spirit, remarkable tenacity, and amazing productivity. For this grateful former student, Allen has provided an enduring model of what music theory and music theorists are and should be, and also what a teacher, and advisor, a mentor, and a good citizen are and should be. I know I speak for all of Allen's former students and, indeed, for an entire scholarly field he did so much to bring into being, when I say: Allen, we admire you, we are grateful to you, we love you, and we console ourselves here by acknowledging that the work you did and the example you set as a scholar, teacher, and friend will always be with us.