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## SMT 1997 Plenary Session: Introductory Remarks

Joseph N. Straus



KEYWORDS: Society for Music Theory, diversity

ABSTRACT: The Society for Music Theory celebrates its twentieth anniversary amid the growing diversity of our field. Six of our most distinguished members have been asked to talk about what has interested them most in the past ten years, since our tenth-anniversary celebration in 1987 at the Eastman School of Music.

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[1] We are here to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the founding of our society. Back in 1977, in Evanston, Illinois, several hundred far-sighted scholars gathered at a meeting of the American Musicological Society to declare formally that music theory was a distinct discipline and merited its own institutional structure. Some of those most integrally involved in our founding, like Wallace Berry, have sadly passed away. Others, like Allen Forte and Richmond Browne, are still very much with us, to our great benefit. And still others, like Maury Yeston—it was Yeston who suggested the name “Society for Music Theory” at that founding meeting—have gone on to other and probably more exalted spheres of endeavor.

[2] People sometimes say that, in the old days of our society, music theory was about Schenker and sets and precious little else. I think that is demonstrably false. Look at early issues of *Music Theory Spectrum* or programs of our first few conferences and you will find a range of topics and approaches that may surprise you. This was a reasonably pluralistic endeavor from the very beginning.

[3] Nonetheless, it is certainly true that our field has expanded dramatically in the past decade, in the kinds of music and musical issues we talk about and the ways in which we talk about them. When we met ten years ago at The Eastman School of Music to mark our first decade, speakers summarized the state of research in reasonably distinct areas, including Schenkerian theory, nineteenth-century analysis, history of theory, atonal and twelve-tone theory, computer-related issues, and pedagogy. There were also catch-all sessions on interdisciplinary directions and new research paradigms, but for the most part, it was possible then to divide the field into a manageably small number of identifiable subspecialties.

[4] That is no longer true. The field is much more diverse now, concerned with a greater variety of musics and musical issues. This is apparent not only in our journals, which have themselves proliferated, but also in the hybrid nature of the research interests of so many among us. People now routinely combine disparate interests and approaches in productive hybrids, living happily with fingers in several different pies.

[5] As a result, this session will be organized differently from the one ten years ago. Instead of striving for coverage of

specific research areas, we have invited six of our most distinguished colleagues simply to talk about whatever has engaged them in the music theory of the past decade. As we follow these six individual journeys through the past ten years of music theory, I think we will get a sense of the richness and strength of our field, and of some of the challenges that await us.

[6] I think we will also get a sense that, amid all our justly-celebrated diversity, we remain united, as we were twenty and ten years ago, in our shared concern with issues of musical structure. We are interested in how music has been and might be put together and how it has been and might be most richly, compellingly, and enjoyably construed. And I think that sense of pleasure in music—in making, apprehending, and talking about music—will emerge vividly in what follows.

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