Good morning members of the third annual Institute for Advanced Studies in Music Theory, and welcome to New York. We’ve gathered here from around the country, indeed around the world. Twenty-three different states and eight different nations are represented. You are each a distinguished theorist, coming together with your peers not as a passive listener to a select roster of papers, but as true participants and contributors in an interactive think tank. This is an egalitarian community of scholars, an intellectual democracy whose goal is collective exploration, inquiry, and debate. We’re here to challenge, intrigue, and learn from each other through an unfettered exchange of hypotheses, experiments, doubts, and discoveries.

The Institute is celebrating its third year. Our start-up stage is over. The Institute is now a reality. Some people have called it the most important innovation in our field since the founding of SMT over twenty-five years ago. We’re changing the way we interact with each other. We had nearly eighty applicants this year, and Schenker drew even more last year. Our programs for 2004 and 2005 on Form and Rhythm are already set, and the groundwork is being laid for 2006 and 2007 on Chromaticism and Schoenberg. From what I hear, SMT in its own way is trying to clone the Institute as well.

The Institute for Advanced Studies in Music Theory is an independent and privately supported entity that is currently housed at Mannes College of Music. As its Dean, Joel Lester asked me to welcome you all to the school on his behalf, since he’s attending his daughter’s wedding today. He hopes to attend other sessions during the Institute as his schedule permits.

Only the handful of you joining us again from previous years know what the rest of you merely suspect. We’re about to embark on an intense and strenuous journey together over the next four days. During that time, I’ve reserved these early morning meetings for a few thoughts of my own, generally of a lighter nature to ease you into the heavy lifting of the workshops. Please excuse this indulgence. It’s not intended to be self-serving, but rather a way for me to structure this event and set its tone in a personal as well as administrative way. This morning I have a just a few remarks and ground rules about our four day lockdown in this transformational think tank.

The Institute is truly international. Some of your faces are unfamiliar, so I’d like to take a second to introduce a few of the newer members of our community. Would each of you newcomers please stand for a moment as I call your name so others can get to know who you are: Moreno Andreatta from IRCAM in Paris, Tiina Koivisto from the Sibelius Academy in Finland, Thomas Noll from the Technical University of Berlin, Michael Russ from the
University of Huddersfield England, and Michiel Schuijer from the Amsterdam School of Music. Let’s have a warm round of applause welcoming all of these outstanding international scholars as participants in this year’s gathering.

There are two people in particular I wish were here. The first, of course, is David Lewin. From the outset this event was designed to engage David’s remarkable achievement and its progeny in a way that would be truly meaningful to him as well as to us. I corresponded several times with David throughout the fall. This gathering of so many distinguished scholars is ultimately a tribute to him, and despite his great modesty, I know he was deeply honored. We’ll devote our plenary session tomorrow afternoon to sharing our thoughts and reflections about David as a friend, colleague, and teacher, and are privileged to be joined by his wife, June, their son Alex, and our special guest, Milton Babbitt.

There’s one other person I wish were here too in a way, and that’s Kevin Korsyn. Kevin has written a provocative book that I’m sure some of you have read called Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Music Research, and its something I’d like to take a few moments to reflect on. Kevin cites what he calls a “crisis of discourse” in music theory resulting from the increasing institutionalization of our field. This crisis is manifested he says in the paradox of growing fragmentation, fractionalization, and intolerance on one hand, and increasing conformity, standardization, and lack of dialogue on the other. In the face of what Kevin calls the “monologic discourse” of conference papers and articles, he makes a plea for decentering our profession through a more dynamic and interactive mode of discourse in what he calls an “open community of scholars.”

I think Kevin’s diagnosis is largely correct. The old ways of doing business are getting stale and counterproductive. Conferences no longer serve the scholarly function they perhaps once had. They’ve become more like academic showcases or intellectual trade shows rather than sustained learning environments. They have the breadth, but not depth. Professional politics, rivalries, and ambitions consume too much of our scholarly energy. Opportunities for interactive discourse at a sustained and high level are increasingly rare.

Kevin’s critique is on point, but I don’t think it’s a sufficient solution, nor do I suspect does he. Moreover, I fear he’s overlooked one particular remedy staring us right in the face, and that’s the endeavor we’re embarking on today. The Institute is precisely the decentered community of scholars Kevin and so many others seek. Other than my morning chats, there are no real extended monologues here. Our discussions, as Kevin wants, are dialogic and decentered. Our floor is permanently open. We welcome debate, disagreement, and controversy. We tolerate and encourage diversity of opinion. There’s no power structure here, no subtext of academic politics or institutional rivalry, no hierarchies or cliques. Our sole focus is learning, with no hidden agenda. We may not be utopian, but we sure try to be.

Kevin says he “imagines new forms of community among musical scholars, and new types of negotiations among their discourses that can accommodate radical disagreements.” I think we’re the closest thing to that. Kevin says we need “an ethical transformation that will make us more capable of accepting and nurturing otherness.” That’s precisely our mission. Kevin says he wants “free and open discussions in which equality among the participants prevails, and tolerance for individual differences is respected.” I’d say that’s what the Institute is all about.

I’m not so deluded, of course, as to imagine that our long weekend together can singlehandedly overcome the deeper crisis Kevin accurately discerns in our profession. But I do think it’s remarkable that the Institute anticipated Kevin’s critique, and is validated by it. This is just the type of scholarly community that Kevin and so many of us long for. Ironically, it has not
only gone unnoticed in Kevin’s book, but by Kevin himself.

Now let’s turn to a few simple ground rules that I’ll ask you to observe during our time together. First, as you’ve probably gathered by now, this is not a traditional conference. In fact, we want to be as different from traditional conferences as possible. The modality here is dialogue, not monologue. We’re all here essentially as students, and our teachers are our peers. We learn through interaction, and that means we need everyone to be involved.

We’ve come not just to listen to our faculty, but to each other as well. It’s collective discourse, dialogue, and debate we’re after, not soliloquies. It’s neither fair nor in the spirit of things to take up a spot here among so many competing applicants, and then sit back, soak up the camaraderie and quietly enjoy the show. Regardless of your background or expertise in this particular area—and I assure you it can’t be shakier than mine—I’m asking each and every one of you to roll up your sleeves and actively contribute what you know, what you doubt, what you don’t know, what you question, and what you want to know. If you’re shy in front of people, which knowing most of you I truly doubt, I suggest that now’s a good time to get over it.

The second rule is a corollary to the first. On one hand we discourage passivity and bystanding. But at the same time, we also frown on pontificating and grandstanding on the other. In other words, we’re all required to talk, but also to listen. So please don’t sit back quietly all the time, but don’t filibuster or monopolize the floor either. Give others a chance, and keep in mind the red lights and green lights.

One caveat. Transformational theory is fair game here, open to criticism, and even reasoned attack. We don’t want to just slap it, David, and each other on the back. So let’s dig in and not pull any punches. We want to understand this methodology, but also critically assess it in an open and fair way. We want to crank up the discussion, hone in on disputed issues and challenge our premises. But please, no emotional or personal assaults. This undermines our purpose and mode of discourse. We’re here to question, debate, and even provoke, but not to antagonize, belittle, or impugn. So let’s make it hot, but keep it cool.

Finally, I mentioned the word “lockdown” a bit earlier and I basically mean it. In order for the Institute to work right, you each need to commit yourself to it fully while you’re here. That’s the price of admission. What this means is you should eat all your meals together except as noted, be on time to all events, including breakfast and these morning meetings, and direct your entire time and energy toward the whole group.

Stick with the program, don’t pick and choose, sleep late, or wander off with a few old buddies to a bar or Broadway show. Our social interaction here is as important as our mental interaction. We’re strengthening the collegial bonds of our profession, so you need to come to the lunches, the receptions, the banquet, the plenaries, and everything else. In short, nothing is optional. What you want to do is throw yourself completely into this process for 4 solid days so it becomes intense. And this heightened intensity can only happen with a collective infusion of energy from all of us together. If you drop out or pull back mentally or socially, that total energy dissipates for everyone else.

So even though the front doors aren’t locked, they are closed. The Institute’s not a prison, but it’s no vacation either. It’s a communal think tank that requires total immersion. We’re here to accomplish something together, do a job, and you’re each an important contributor to the team. The more you put in, the more we all get out. As you’ll gradually see, staying the course has a cumulative effect. So by the end, you’ll ultimately have the satisfaction of having participated in and created something quite unique that none of us will ever forget.

Now aside from my pep talks, these morning meetings are also reserved for anyone to raise
procedural questions, issues, or problems along the way. We want this to go smoothly, so if something’s on your mind, now would be the time to air it. In addition, please feel free to approach one of our administrative coordinators, Heather Feldman and Eva Sze, both outstanding CUNY grad students who are helping make this happen. Any questions?

OK, so I welcome you all again, and propose we take a short 5 minute break before reconvening in this room to begin our opening plenary session on the evolution and context of transformational theory. As you can see on your schedule in your conference packets, we’ll go all morning and after that we’ll have lunch together upstairs on the 3rd floor. We’ll begin our workshops this afternoon. Don’t forget that tonight after the workshops is the reception at my house, which as you can see on your map also in the packet is only a few blocks away. And as I said before, everyone should definitely come because spending our social time together helps ease the barriers between us so we can think more freely together. There’s also free food.

I’d just like to close my remarks this morning by returning for a moment to Kevin’s book. He ends his critique with a postmodern parable that is a fitting way to kick off our Institute. Three scholars seek out an oracle to discover the essence of music. But the oracle says the truth is, there are no oracles. One scholar says, “what shall we do now?” The other replies, “maybe it’s time to leave the temple.” The first asks, “but what will we do without the oracle?” To which the third responds, “perhaps we could start by talking to each other.” That sounds like a good idea. So let’s do that too.

Reception Speech

If I could please have everyone’s attention for a moment, I’d like to make a brief announcement. Let me welcome all of you to my home, and warn you not to open any doors or cabinets, because they’re crammed with everything we had to stash away to create the illusion that we’re neat. This is the one party we have all year, because it takes about that long for us to clean it up.

For those of you who haven’t met her, my daughter’s name is Tess and her friend’s name is America. Tess studies ballet and piano, and goes to the hardest school in the city so I can’t do any of her homework. My older daughter Sophie also plays piano and is away this summer at the Houston Ballet Academy. Her homework is even worse. If you happen to stumble over a brown dog it’s Lucy, who’s a rare breed called a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever, perfectly suited for Manhattan where we have no ducks. Our Siamese cat, Satchel, is in charge of the entire upstairs. The only person he hates more than Lucy is me, so I doubt you’ll have the privilege of meeting him.

The person we’re all indebted to for this lovely reception each year is my wife Nancy. I’ve not said anything about her at past Institutes, and it’s long overdue. Nancy’s a professional ballet teacher and works with the best dancers in the world from the American Ballet Theatre, New York City Ballet, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Ailey, and all the Broadway shows, not to mention foreign companies like the Kirov, Bolshoi, and Berlin Ballets.

On any given day you can find a number of luminaries in her class, including Barishnykov, Julie Kent, Vladimir Malakhov, and my favorite, Diana Vishneva, who’s probably the greatest ballerina since Makarova. Nancy guest teaches all around the world in distant lands like Japan, Brazil, Switzerland, and Germany. She also knows a great deal about music, since her father was a violinist in the Boston Symphony and her brother is executive director of the Pittsburgh.

So as you can see, I’m very proud of Nancy as a wife, a mother, and an artist and teacher in
her own right. Each year she not only puts up with 50 awkward and out of shape music theorists, but makes our apartment a warm and comfortable place to be. What we both love about the Institute most is the opportunity to personalize it with our own tastes and values, and I couldn’t do this without her. Nancy makes the Institute feel like a home, and it’s that intimacy that makes it special.

So please introduce yourself to her somewhere along the way tonight. There’s no chance she’s going to ask you to explain what a hexatonic pole or voice-leading parsimony is, so you needn’t be afraid of that. So, on behalf of all the members of this year’s Institute, I’d like to present you with this small gift as a token of our gratitude, a book of Degas’s drawings of dancers, two of which are already on our wall. Can we all give Nancy a round of applause?

Other than that, I welcome you all once again to our house and hope everyone has a good time. The food by the way is from Zabar’s, so you’re all official New Yorkers now anyway—maybe even Jewish—at least in body if not mind. If you haven’t done so already, please be sure to make your mark in our guest book over there on the little writing table near the floor lamp so later we’ll know you’ve been here.

And finally, if it’s not too late already, I implore you not to leave your mark in a less palatable way by spilling anything on our brand new and distressingly overpriced furniture, an infraction that would surely jeopardize the likelihood of any further Institutes in the future. Nancy and I enjoy this event enormously, but hey, we’ve got our priorities.

What’s in a Word?

In preparing for this year’s Institute, I found the topic of transformation a little hard to write about in the somewhat lighthearted vein I’ve used in the past. The first year’s Institute on Historical Theory was so new I had plenty to say, and last year’s Schenker Institute was a piece of cake. I do have certain ideas about T-theory, though not many I’m willing to share with people who’ve written articles about it like you. But what I thought I might get some mileage out of is the word itself. Why transformation? Did David just pick it out of a hat?

We’ve heard of transformation before of course, in music and out, but David christened it as the name of an entire approach. So I started thinking about this etymologically, linguistically as a word, what it says and it’s implications. I also wondered why this word might be any better or worse than any other one meaning more or less the same thing. I never got a chance to ask David how he picked this word, but why “transformation?”

David of course didn’t invent the word. He may have been influenced by Chomsky’s transformational grammar, which appeared around 1957, where an input syntactical structure converts to an output via some transformational operation. Chomsky’s deletion transformation, for instance, eliminates certain elements from the input, while his permutation transformation reorders its elements. Chomsky’s transformations operate on multiple syntactical levels from deep structure to surface structure in a Schenkerian sort of way.

Milton Babbitt used the word transformation even earlier in a musical context in his 1946 dissertation, “The Function of Set Structure in the 12-Tone System.” In his opening chapter called “The 12-Tone Set and its Transformations,” he describes inversion, retrograde, and retrograde inversion as musical transformations. Babbitt distinguishes these from transposition, a lesser operation he calls a translation. Translation never seemed to have caught on, and remains available if someone here wants to run with it like David did with transformation.

But even before Babbitt, Schenker used transformation in 1935. In Free Composition he
calls linear progressions transformations of the fundamental line, which he says unfold on
different transformational levels. Schenker also refers to the transformation of the dissonant
passing tone into a structural consonance through the acquisition of harmonic support. Oswald
Jonas later used the term transformation in a footnote to the 1955 edition of Free Composition,
referring to the chromatic alteration of the dominant third in the minor mode. Despite these
precedents though, David’s work is certainly the principle thing musical associated with this
word. So why did he pick transformation?

Let’s consider the alternatives. Transformation basically means change, and there’re a lot of
nice words I could imagine using instead. Even change itself might have worked. I know in one
article where David analyzed Babbitt’s Music for Four Instruments using Boolean algebra, he
comes flat out and calls the different transformations “changes.” I found that refreshing actually.
As far as I can see, transformation theory, pretty much like all music theory, is about how things
change.

I can’t remember whether it was Schenker, Schoenberg, Adorno, or maybe all three, who
said there’re only one of three things that can happen when one event follows another. B is either
the same as A or different from A—these are the two uninteresting extremes—or B is
somewhere in between: it’s similar to A. B repeats some aspect of A and replaces another aspect
of A. In other words, B changes A. That’s what music theory’s all about. What we call structure
is simply similarity, pattern recognition, which is a complex form of repetition. That’s the only
way we have of making sense of anything. Otherwise, everything would either be constantly new
and in that sense unrecognizable, or constantly the same and in that sense undistinguishable. To
Babbitt’s famous remark, “do it once, it’s an accident; do it twice, it’s structure,” I’d merely add,
do it too many times, it’s meaningless.

Calling this stuff change theory instead of transformation theory might have worked, but
that’s pretty blunt and unimaginative, which is the last thing David was. Besides, change theory
sounds like your changing theories instead of advocating a theory of musical change. Plus, jazz
musicians have already taken this word, since they’re busy making changes all the time. So in
the end, change won’t work for us.

The next word that came to mind is that old standby, the all purpose “variation.” Variation
has been around of course for a long time. It’s an extremely useful and important word, with
impeccable musical credentials. Friedrich Neidt used it in his Musical Guide back in 1721, with
a footnote explaining what variation meant because the term apparently was so new at the time. I
think one of the reasons T-theory can be applied to so many different kinds of music is because
it’s really just about variation, and variation is the bedrock of all music. So why not variation
theory instead of transformation theory?

But variation is too old and weighed down with prior associations. It doesn’t sound like a
new theory hot off the press as it was in 1721, but a retread of an old one. Plus it’s not scientific
or mathematical sounding enough either. Even musicologists toss the V-word around like a
frisbee. Theorists need a label that has a clinical, antiseptic ring, like we’re working in a lab.

Variation is too user friendly. It sounds more like a compositional tool than an analytic
technique. It’s something that a composer does to music, rather than something an analyst finds
hidden beneath the surface. We like transformations because you’ve got to dig deep and discover
them the old fashioned way. You’ve got to earn it.

Variation and transformation also don’t swap easily. I can’t imagine the Goldberg
Transformations or Transformations on a Theme by Haydn. We want there to be transformations
in these pieces, but they need to be different from the variations the composer has in mind. So
variation’s out the window too.

The next word I came up with is alteration, as in Generalized Musical Intervals and Alterations. But again, the word’s lugging around a lot of extra baggage. Chromatic alterations have been around since the flat sign was invented. And even though Jonas called them transformations, that suggests that the unaltered form is normative and not a transformation itself, which some of us don’t particularly like about flat signs, tonality, or Jonas.

Besides, finding alterations in music sounds a bit too much like a tailor. I can’t picture Rick explaining Neo-Riemannian alterations in Parsifal, like he’s letting out the seam of Wagner’s pants. By the way Rick, what do you charge for a pair of LP cycles—with cuffs? On the other hand, at one point in Rick’s paper on Hexatonic Poles in Parsifal, he does refer to “having the girth of his investigation taken out a little bit at the waist.”

Anyway, alteration’s out because I came up with a better and more scientific word: mutation. Mutation theory has a nice organic ring to it. It’s also creepy enough to scare away musicologists and composers. But there’re problems here too. Sometimes we like to identify a musical object with a shortened form of the word. So in transformational theory we not only say that X is a transformation, but a “transform” of Y. A note can be looking for, even longing for its inversional partner or I-transform. I just can’t see calling some poor F# a “mutant” like it was the Hulk lurking around in the viola clef somewhere.

Besides, mutation is even older than variation, since the medieval theorists called hexachordal modulations mutations. Back in 1317 Marchetto defined mutatio as a sort of pivot, a change he says in the name of a note with the same pitch. What’s interesting is that he contrasts mutatio with per-mutatio or per-mutation, which is a change in the name of note with a different pitch, showing the link between permutation and mutation. The Latin prefix “per” connotes through, by, or across, suggesting a sort of swap or exchange. Marchetto by the way seems to be the first theorist to use the term permutation in music, which in the long run is a more significant contribution that the older but now arcane mutation. Mutation’s a cool word, but I think probably its day is done.

While we’re on cool though, there’s no doubt that the all-time coolest label in post-tonal theory, maybe even all music theory, has got to be the Klumpenhouwer network. When I first heard this term I had absolutely no idea what it was. For that matter—with all due respect to Henry—I had no idea there was, or even could be an actual person named Klumpenhouwer. Everyone I grew up with had a name like Schwartz, Levi, and Kornstein, or in this crowd, Cohn, Caplin, and Straus—you get the idea—though on one occasion I did become unusually familiar with a girl named Priscilla Humperdinck in summer of my junior year back at Mumford Public High in Detroit.

Anyway, I’m still not 100% sure what a Klumpenhouwer network actually is, and I’m even more mystified how you go about getting one named after you. I’m sure it’s not too easy. The word sounds more like a Klingon fuse box than anything else. I especially loved using it to explain to my ditsy Aunt Harriet in Detroit what this Institute is all about, just to confuse her more than she already is—if that’s conceivable.

By the way, if you haven’t had the opportunity of flashing K-net terminology around your aunt or your dentist or someone in the quote real world who has no idea what we do to begin with, you’re in for a special treat. Whatever else David accomplished, he has immortalized Henry’s surname in a way that surpasses anything else since the Alberti bass.

So far though none of my alternative labels for transformation theory seem to have worked. The last thing I could come up with is really pretty lame and that’s metamorphosis theory. I
know it’s dumb and turns David into Kafka. And given the quantum of music we usually analyze these days, like the succession of notes between two chords, or even within one, it’s pretty hard to call them metamorphoses. They’re really more like mini-morphoses, and I’m sorry but no one wants to call this stuff minime theory.

So, the fact is that transformation really is the best word for this sort of thing after all. It’s got everything going for it: it’s new, scientific, and says it all. It also has a nice short form, transform, which has the added grammatical benefit of being both a noun and a verb. Transformation even has word “form” hidden inside it as a subset, no doubt proving a mystical connection to the topic of next year’s Institute.

But the best thing about this term is that it contains the prefix “trans” from the Latin, meaning through or across, like transportation. It’s like Marchetto’s per, as in per-mutation. The word transformation itself encapsulates David’s breakthrough idea of not just looking at things, but the motion in between them. So really the meaning of transformation is not just change, but moving through something, across a space, like a transatlantic voyage. It’s like that little picture at the beginning of GMIT, showing that an interval is itself a motion or transformation from one note to another.

David’s great icon is the arrow. It points somewhere across a space, transporting us from one place to another. And that’s why transformation does the job. It moves trans-form, or across the form like an arrow. Without demanding semiotic precision, the word itself is a sign, one of Peirce’s iconic representations. It’s linguistic structure encodes its meaning, and it shares a form with its subject. How many words in music or anything else can say that?

Of course, transmogrify also has the “trans” prefix—but that’s got to be a step backwards, along with mutants, minimes, and metamorphoses. And it’s a bit too ghoulish—although after staring long enough at the hyper-hexatonic system, and it’s demonic offspring, the power tower, cube dance, and of course, everyone’s favorite, that old chicken-wire torus—well, I confess for one to feeling somewhat transmogrified.

Anyway, when all’s said and done, I decided that David knew exactly what he was doing when he chose the word transformation. It didn’t just fly out of a hat, or if it did, it was just the right fit. And I guess if you really understand that word and what it means, and compare it to the alternatives, then you probably have a pretty good idea what we’re talking about here. At least that’s how I explained it to my ditsy Aunt Harriet from Detroit—just to confuse her more than she already is—if that’s conceivable.

David Lewin in Memoriam

Welcome everyone to our special plenary session in honor of David Lewin. Even though David isn’t with us, we all know that he is the heart and soul of why we’re here. I know he wanted to come very much, not as the main attraction, but simply as another participant in the larger work of the Institute. Some of us were David’s students, other his colleagues, some just his readers, and others his friends and closer still. But there’s not a person in this room, I daresay in our entire profession, who was not his admirer, and who wasn’t touched by him and his remarkable mind and spirit in a deep and profound way.

We’re privileged to have David’s lovely wife June here with us today, along with their son Alex and Alex’s girlfriend Cathy. We’re also honored to have probably the only other person to fully understand and appreciate the depth of David’s work, our colleague and David’s dear friend Milton Babbitt.
The format of this special gathering will be quite informal, somewhat like an open mic Quaker meeting. I have a short story I’d like to share about the first time I met David, after which I think it would be appropriate to offer Milton a chance to speak. I leave it open to June and/or Alex to share their thoughts, if they would like, towards the end of our session after they’ve had a chance to hear how much David meant to us.

After Milton talks—assuming he has something to say—I propose that anyone who wishes can come up and share whatever they like about David, their personal or professional relationship with him, his work, his influence, what he meant to them, or anything else. I’d just ask that you keep it relatively short, say no more than 5 minutes each, so that everyone has a chance. This session is scheduled to run till about 7 or 7:30, but those who want can stay till 8 or so. You’re on your own for dinner tonight.

Being so wonderfully modest and never wanting to be the focus of anything, I suspect what will transpire is probably contrary to what David would have wanted were he here. And if he was, we wouldn’t do it. But circumstances have unfortunately changed. It’s not out of disrespect for David that we diverge from that agenda, but because we have our own need to express our own thoughts and feelings as a community, pay tribute to one who has meant so much, and achieve greater perspective for both the many gifts he has bestowed, as well as the loss we now sustain. David might not have preferred that were he alive, but I’m sure he would understand it now that he is gone.

In terms of what each of us says, I’d only ask that we be tolerant of the manifold ways in which different people express themselves. Some may be more personal, others more professional. As along as it’s authentic and genuine, to me that’s the only guideline here. As for the order of who talks when, I’d like to leave this open and flexible, so you’ll just have to sense when there’s an opening and defer to each other without a moderator. If that gets too confusing, then I’ll simply call on people who express a desire to talk. I hope this is acceptable to everyone. So let’s begin.

I presented a paper several years ago at a New England conference on minimum aggregate partitions in Babbitt’s string quartets. I was nervous enough, since it was one of my first presentations, but all the more so when I saw David and Bob Morris paired together in the front row like two great danes guarding the academic citadel from newcomers like me.

When you don’t know someone who has a big reputation, it’s pretty hard to act natural. I’ve seen better scholars than I get tongue tied around Carl Schachter, who’s easy for me ever since he asked me about sales at Filene’s Basement. Allen Forte became demystified when he suddenly needed me to help him out of a legal jam. Bob was never a problem actually, since I knew him when his beard was black in the early days at Yale when I was the only law student with the blue mimeos auditing his class. Even Milton himself became a little less scary after we argued about imported beer at a diner somewhere down south.

But David was a different kettle of fish. I didn’t know him from Adam. He was shy and I was petrified. When I finished my paper he asked a question, more like a statement. I nodded my tacit assent. After the session though, hoping to unwind, I instead unexpectedly found myself standing right next to him—at no place other than . . . a urinal.

Someone could write a history of the role of the lavatory in human affairs. It’s occupants suddenly share an inappropriate intimacy, a suspended animation, stepping out the matrix as it were, unplugged momentarily from their normal roles and thrust into an olfactory democracy, an egalitarian world of detached bodily functions, and then just as abruptly thrust back again into the social mix.
Standing alone next to David was like getting unplugged from the matrix. Before those porcelain thrones, the fact that he was a famous theorist and I to the same but inverted degree completely unknown, was suddenly trivial. For what seemed an eternity, our mutual need to relieve ourselves became the great equalizer. We were just two guys staring at the wall. We stood there as brothers performing a frothy duet, a Cagean polyphony of intermittent streams, he the dux, I the comes. Even then I figured David heard contrapuntal dribbles and piddling relationships I could never imagine.

I once argued an important case before the supreme court in New York. I was nervous as my cross-examination of the defendant was about to begin, I a young lawyer, and he a savvy and quite crooked businessman. Sensing my discomfort, the judge benevolently called a 10 minute recess. I found myself at the urinal standing awkwardly next to the defendant himself. Nothing was said. We were out of the matrix: two guys reading graffiti and nothing more. In that moment, I suddenly saw him as a simple human being, someone’s father, and not the evil demon I had summoned in the course of battle. I reentered the courtroom and he took the stand. I was no longer afraid. I knew this man now and saw his humanity. I slew the demon, and won the case.

My reverie with David was shattered by sound of grating zippers. We sealed our pact by washing without a word. The hand dryer was our coda. Then the door flew open. The bubble burst and we reentered the matrix. David resumed his role as the preeminent theorist of our time, the innovator of an astonishing idea that has changed the way we think. And I resumed my own role as a newcomer, a refugee from the courtroom who curiously changed careers in the middle of his stream.

I sat alone in the corner, admiring David from afar, surrounded by respectful colleagues, bushytailed students, and anyone else courageous enough to approach him without suspecting his gentle modesty. I reflected on our moment of urological isography, like a secret only we two shared, which I’ve cherished ever since. I was no longer afraid of David.

Who’s Speaking Anyway?

A few months ago I ate dinner with Charles Rosen. I had given a paper at the New York AMS meeting that afternoon about the salutary influences of Schenker’s legal training on his musical thought, something I seem to have made a minor career of lately. I’ve spent the last year putting myself through the 19th-century German legal education I imagine Schenker received, with the hope that it might make me a sharper theorist too.

Ironically, it was only long after I stopped practicing law that I actually began to study it intellectually. Although the musical payoff is still waiting to accrue, I have managed to become a bit of an expert—at least to the extent that I’ve been appointed a fellow of the Florsheimer Center for Constitutional Democracy and will be teaching a course in Continental Jurisprudence and the Western Legal Tradition at Cardozo Law School next year. It made me feel a bit like Al Pacino. Just when I thought I had gotten out, they sucked me back in.

Although I’ve read all of Charles’ books, I’d never met him in person and had no idea who he was. When I finished my paper, this overweight bald guy lit into me and ranted about all the negative influences law had on Schenker, and presumably by inference, on me as well. It was a triple-barreled attack: anti-Schenker, anti-lawyer, and anti-me. I concluded he must be some crackpot musicologist and fended him off as best I could, searching the room for backup from others who had suffered similar guerilla attacks. Scott Burnham, our panel chair, didn’t throw me
a life-jacket, and later sympathetically confessed that it would have been futile anyway. I was in the grips of vintage Rosen.

Later that evening, by sheer happenstance I found myself at a high-falutin’ dinner party at Richard Kramer’s house along with Scott, David Cohen, and a few luminaries like Maynard Solomon, and of course Charles. I was hoping to meet Sigmund Levarie, whose insightful remarks about Plato had given me and Rick something interesting to correspond about, but he never materialized. It was probably just as well. Charles commandeered the entire event from cocktails though dessert. Somewhere during the entree though, I began to realize that his assault wasn’t personal. This guy’s a walking, talking, opinionated encyclopedia of music and just about everything else. After a few more glasses of red, I actually began to like him in a way, and see him in a charming and almost endearing light.

Rosen is charismatic and very entertaining. He told one joke about a terrorist who hijacked a plane, grabbed a stewardess and demanded, “take me to Detroit.” The stewardess said, “that’s where we’re going.” I didn’t tell Charles I’m originally from Detroit.

Charles is also wise. The high point of the evening came after he entered a prolonged and almost catatonic silence for nearly 8 seconds, and then suddenly burst out in a total nonsequitur, “Paul Valery wanted to find out where ideas came from, so he asked Albert Einstein. Einstein said he thought best while walking in the woods. Valery replied, ‘so you carry a notebook to write down your ideas?’ Einstein laughed and said, ‘no, no, ideas are very rare.’”

Valery on the other hand was famous for jotting down every single idea he ever had in a running notebook, all 29 volumes of them. He called them “acts of the mind,” occupying an intermediate realm somewhere between pure cognition and physical action. Incidentally, this practice of keeping drafts, notebooks, and sketches apparently arose during the Renaissance, not just because paper became more available, but because of the new interest in thinking as a creative process, rather than the older medieval conception of merely transmitting authoritative ideas.

Charles’s story about Einstein reminds me of something Morton Feldman said 25 years ago. I knew Feldman, as well as John Cage, Christian Wolf, Xenakis, Crumb, Earl Brown, Lukas Foss, Reich, Riley, La Monte Young, and a lot of other composers back in the 70’s. It was an exciting time back in those days, because anything seemed possible, musically or otherwise. The boldest experiment had to be tried, and any vestige of convention came under pitiless scrutiny. Xenakis was an unusual man. He was very handsome, but had a terrible facial wound. Half his jaw was blown away in the war. Someone had criticized Xenakis by saying that his music was ugly. Feldman replied, “you should be so ugly.”

Feldman once said you’re lucky if you have just one original idea in your whole life. He knew Xenakis had achieved that, whether you like his music or not. I think Steve Reich, who’s still my close friend and who’ll be at the Institute in 2006, also had an original idea. No matter what anyone says about Steve or his music, I’ll always admire him for his original idea and his ability to see it through.

But Feldman was more of an artist. In fact, he was probably the most artistic person I’ve ever met. Feldman’s idea is harder to describe because it’s more an experience than a principle. Feldman was fond of quoting Clement Greenberg, the great exponent of abstract expressionism, who said, “what counts first and last in art is quality. Ideas and all other things are secondary.” It’s that aspect of Feldman’s music that I admire most: its essential aestheticism, premised upon the fundamental irrationality and uncertainty of artistic creation, that anathema to music theorists. Feldman prioritizes prerogative over principle, intuition over intellect, sensibility over
system, autonomy over artifice, and choice over concept. He enshrines Rousseau’s remark as a credo, “Je ne pa d’systéme.”

Rousseau long ago attacked the mendacity of all systems, transforming their external authority into the internal authority of the self. Feldman insisted on the right to be personal, even esoteric. He composed directly in ink, on the conviction that if one truly concentrates, there’s no need to revise. The result is an improvisatory and fragmentary sound world he called “Webern without the intellectual baggage,” a music more of the ear than the eye, the heart than the mind. Its artistic justification and compositional rationale is not structured compliance or theoretical consistency with an objective and normative standard, but rather the existential act of aesthetic choice and subjective will, a sufficient basis unto itself, embodied in Cage’s insufficiently quoted remark, “they go together, because I put them together.”

I recall an incident that captured Feldman’s profound aestheticism and showed me how deeply rooted it was in his own being. Morty—everyone called him Morty—invited a bunch of us over to his house one night for dinner. I remember the Rauschenberg on the wall that Feldman bought for $16 before either was famous. At some point, he got up and lumbered into the kitchen to make salad dressing. After he had disappeared for about 20 minutes, I followed him into the kitchen to see what he was doing.

On the shelf was a huge collection of tiny vials containing various oils and spices. This enormous guy with coke bottle glasses was hunched over a small mixing bowl, carefully siphoning out minute doses of various condiments, all without a measuring cup, which he stirred slowly into the mix. It felt more like a laboratory than a kitchen. I was struck how much it was like his music, adding a pinch of muted trombone to a snippet of snare drum, followed by a dash of viola pizzicato.

When we eventually sat down to dinner, I was eager to see what Feldman’s concoction would taste like. But when I finally took a bite of Morty’s salad, I could barely taste anything at all. After about 5 more bites, I had some vague, ephemeral sensation of a faint, subtle flavor I’d never tasted before. It’s my culinary memory of Morty’s vinaigrette that captured his aesthetic for me, and my tastebuds that helped me understand his conception of art more than anything else.

When I assess my own creativity in this vein though, in terms of Einstein’s comment about the rarity of ideas and Feldman’s claim that you’re lucky to have even one, I tend to feel I’ve come up short. I find most of the music I write fairly derivative — though I prefer to call that postmodern — and my theoretical work, as well as much other, at times uninspired. Einstein’s right: original ideas are exceedingly rare, and in the end, to quote Valery again, I admire what I can’t do myself.

Maybe the best idea I’ve stumbled across is this Institute. It just seemed to happen by itself, the right thing at the right time. People in our field want to come together in a smaller groups and relate in a more intense and collegial way. For me, that feeling has something to do with the 70’s as well. It’s the same mood we had back then, searching for a greater sense of social interdependence and authenticity. Still, the Institute’s basically just a logistic or procedural idea, not a substantive or artistic one.

But when I ask myself who among us has come up with a truly significant original theoretical idea, it’s not that I don’t admire each of you enormously, but the list gets pretty short. In fact, I probably wouldn’t even include the person I’ve learned most from, Carl Schachter, but it would include Allen Forte and Milton Babbitt. Before that you’d probably have to go back to Schenker and Schoenberg, and then Rameau. But there’s no doubt about one person on the list,
and that’s David.

I was thinking about David and his work when I recently read Foucault’s essay, “What is an Author?” I’m sure you’ve all heard the news that the author is dead and the text is now an interpretative document in the mind of the reader. The fact is, when we analyze a piece of music we really don’t care too much about the composer. We don’t view the score as evidence of someone’s intentions, but as an independent interpretative text of its own. Our focus is on what we can do with the piece, not what the composer did. The piece is an object, divorced from the author, and it basically doesn’t matter who wrote it.

But that’s yesterday’s news. The new news, for me at least, is that Foucault carves out an important exception to the death of the author for someone he calls a “founder of discursivity.” This is a person who discovers an entirely new and different mode of discourse, an original way of looking at things. The examples he gives are Freud and Marx. Founders of discursivity don’t just create a particular text with particular content, they create an operational or procedural mode of discourse that then allows other people to express their own ideas within it. They’re not just authors of their own works, but of new ways of thinking. They’re a little like transformational networks I guess, channelling the discourse in a certain direction, while our lesser work forms interchangeable nodes somewhere within their intellectual circuitry.

David was one of Foucault’s founders of discursivity. He discovered a new approach, a different way of thinking about music allows the rest of us to flow through his network. Like Freud’s idea of the unconscious, Marx’s idea of economic materialism, or Schenker’s idea of the Ursatz, David’s idea of transformation, captured in the icon of the musical arrow, is simple, general, and capable of endless elaboration. It’s like a hammer; you can build what you want. But to come up with that idea, that hammer, as Einstein said, is very rare. And you don’t need a notebook to jot it down when that kind of idea comes along.

For Foucault, founders of discursivity like David are the only real authors left. They define a mode of discourse for the rest of us, who look like authors but are really just speakers in the language they created, users of their hammers, filling in our own nodes connecting arrows in their conceptual network. And as to us, Foucault cites Samuel Beckett, who says, “what does it matter who’s speaking anyway?”

Beckett’s words have increasing resonance in our postmodern, post-authorial academic community. The voice of possessive individualism, the cornerstone of scholarship since the Enlightenment, is becoming outmoded. There’s a medieval scent of a new communalism in the air. And our Institute is at its cutting edge, renouncing intellectual egoism in search of a higher group mind, stirring our thoughts together in Feldman’s salad bowl, utilizing a collective consciousness to create a new taste that none of us could imagine alone, each the anonymous contributor of their own ingredient.

So maybe in that case then the Institute too is itself a mode of discourse. Perhaps it too is a network of sorts, in which we ourselves are human nodes, transforming how we interact as people and scholars. And maybe that makes me a founder of discursivity too. And maybe here at least, without reminiscing about the good old 70’s, we can activate all these different transformations: Rosen’s jokes, Valery’s notebooks, Einstein’s walk, Feldman’s vinaigrette, Rousseau’s credo, Foucault’s discursivity, and Lewin’s arrow, with a dash of Xenakis, a snippet of Rauschenberg, and a pinch of Reich, and whip them all together in a tumbler to discover more about music, spice up our field, and in the end, maybe even transform ourselves.

And then if we’re lucky enough to come up with just one idea along the way, perhaps one original idea we can all call our own, well then in that case, as Beckett said, what does it matter
who’s speaking anyway?

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Banquet Speech

First of all, I’d like to thank everyone who made this event possible—especially the bartender.

There’s a certain irony in my organizing a conference about something as highbrow and esoteric as transformational theory. I feel a little like Rodney Dangerfield when he got out of the hospital. Someone asked him why he had brain surgery and he said, “because my wife thinks I’m dumb.”

I guess if you asked me why I started this Institute, I’d say it’s because I’m dumb, and this is the easiest way for me to get smarter, short of brain surgery.

My brother’s even dumber. He works in a bank. Got caught stealing pens. During the civil war my great grandfather fought for the west.

Actually, I’m not that dumb, just dumber that some of you. Let’s face it, transformation theory ain’t exactly light beer. But at least I’m smart enough to know it’s got more calories. Beyond that though, I’m basically in the Rodney Dangerfield wing of the music theory hospital.

Dangerfield’s most famous line, of course, is “I just don’t get no respect.” The other day I was so depressed I told my shrink I felt like a dog. He told me to get off the couch.

My wife and I were happy for 25 years. Then we met.

I told my wife I was bored with our sex life and it was her turn to make a move. She did. She moved to Florida.

I was poor growing up as a kid. If I wasn’t a boy, I would’ve had nothing to play with. OK, I knew it, one too many.

So last year when I came home from the Institute after being praised by elite scholars like you, I felt pretty good about myself, like I had actually accomplished something. I didn’t write a famous book or land a cushy job, but I earned a little respect. I had become the Barnum and Bailey of music theory, the Diagelev of SMT, Giovanni Bardi of a Manhattan Camerata.

Unfortunately, my moment of glory didn’t last too long. That night, as I was flipping TV channels with whimsy of an impresario, my teenage daughter Tess, who’s not all that impressed by anything I do to begin with, said, “ya’ know, Dad, you’re real a jerk.”

My crash landing was breathtaking. I plummeted back into the brine like Icarus with a pitiful splash within hours after the closing bell. Hell, I thought, I still don’t get no respect. The Institute was ancient history the second it ended. I suffered a relapse back into the Dangerfield ward.

Actually, it’s already starting again this year. When I read my daughter my speech about how hard it is to have an original idea like David, she said, “gee Dad, why don’t you just come up with one of you own—like maybe the Heimlich maneuver.”

So let me say that whatever compliments I might get from here on in, I’m very grateful. But in the long run, and probably even the short, none of this will matter too much. I’ve learned to savor my peaks between the valleys, and thank you for trekking with me up one of the highest. But I’m all too familiar with the rocky terrain. Whether it comes from your kids, could be your
boss or your spouse, sooner or later reality has a sobering way of yanking you back into the Dangerfield ward. And that’s where you’ll find me, in the critical care unit.

And even though we probably don’t appreciate it at the time, that’s probably the best way to get a little smarter too. It’s cheaper than brain surgery—and requires a lot less preparation than the Institute.

**Thank You Speech**

This morning I’d like to take just a few minutes to dispel the gratifying illusion that I’ve accomplished all this on my own, and thank some folks who helped make this extraordinary event possible. First off, I’d like to express my appreciation to Troy Ettert, Heather Feldman, Eva Sze, and Jen Zetlan, who all helped enormously in running this year’s Institute. Please note they’re all talented and promising scholars and musicians in their own right, and in time they’ll likely be sitting where you are. Let’s give them all a well deserved round of applause.

Second, it’s high time to thank our absolutely superb faculty, Bob, Rick, Joe, Henry, John, and Ed. There’s no question that the Institute’s success in attracting outstanding scholars like you is attributable to their intellectual stature and pedagogical skill. They bravely confronted the challenge of leading workshops before an intimidating group of peers, and did it with expertise and finesse.

Beyond that, it’s evident that each of them put a tremendous amount of thought and effort into making this an extraordinary educational experience for us all. I must warn everyone here that as I solicit others of you to conduct future workshops, you’ll be held to the same high standard this remarkable group has set for us today. I’d therefore like to ask the six members of our faculty to please stand and accept our heartiest applause.

Within their ranks, I owe a special debt of gratitude to Rick and Joe. As co-chairs of this year’s faculty, they helped me plan this event from the ground up, selecting the faculty and participants, and making innumerable decisions along the way. Both Rick and Joe are easy and efficient to work with. Particularly for someone like me who debates anything and everything, I discovered why these two are not only outstanding and prolific scholars, but true leaders in our field, both administratively and pedagogically. They know how to run things effectively and how to get things done. We’re all indebted to them. Thanks, Rick and Joe.

Finally, I’d like to express my appreciation to each one of you for coming to the Institute and making the personal commitment that entails. This is a pivotal moment in the history of transformational theory. It’s never been done before, and whatever it means, it means something important, and you helped make it special. David has passed the transformational torch to a new generation of scholars, and the future of T-theory is ripe with potential. It’s our task now to fulfill it.

So to the entire lot of you, I tip my hat for taking the plunge, doing the work, pushing yourself through this, and making it a rich and memorable experience for us all. I hope the Institute has challenged you as a scholar and inspired you as a person. If it has done that, even if only that, then its greatest mission has been achieved.

Short of this loftier objective though, I hope we’ve all learned more about transformational theory too—but maybe then again, let’s hope not too much for our own good. Before we start our final day together, I’d merely like to share two warnings. The first is from William Carlos Williams, who cautions us that even knowledge ceases to be human when it becomes a fetish.

And the second is once again from Paul Valery. Addressing a group of learned physicians,
he inquired, “since you know so much about the organic functioning of the reproductive organs, can you still bring yourself to make love?”

Closing Ceremony

It’s time to bring the third annual Institute for Advanced Studies in Music Theory to a close. This was an incredible experience, and one that I’m delighted not only to have made possible, but to have been a part of myself. I thank you all once again for participating, but more so for contributing to its success. This was a group effort, and we did a good job. Before we disband, I have four matters to take care of.

First, I’d like to remind everyone to fill out your Institute Evaluation Sheet in your conference packet and send it to me in the stamped envelope in your folder. If you enjoyed this experience and were stimulated by it, please take the time and effort to share your reactions and explain why. It would mean a lot to me and the other folks who made this happen.

Second, if you don’t already know, next year’s 2004 program will be an Institute on Musical Form, led by another brilliant faculty of Bill Caplin, Janet Schmalfeldt, Bob Morgan, Scott Burnham, Jonathan Bernard, Warren Darcy, and Jim Hepokoski, capped off with Charles Rosen as our keynote guest. It will be very special and I anticipate more applicants than we’ve ever had before.

Beyond that, we’re also planning the 2005 Institute on the topic of Rhythm and Temporality, led by a distinguished faculty of Chris Hasty, Justin London, Kofi Agawu, and other authorities in that field, plus our special guest that year, Steve Reich. Things are already in the works for 2006, 2007, and even 2008 on topics like chromaticism, jazz, and sketch studies. Each year a different subject will be explored, and other suggestions are welcome. What we need in each case is a core group of scholars working in a particular area of sufficient interest to form a faculty.

Third, I’d like to ask each of you, and especially those from abroad, to go home and tell your friends and colleagues about the Institute, and encourage them to join us in the future. Our purpose is to establish greater communication and collegiality throughout our profession, and to give scholars in all locations a meaningful opportunity to come together. The Institute is a blessing bestowed upon our entire community, and I urge you all take advantage of it and nurture it as long as we can. I also think it offers an escape hatch out of the impasse Kevin diagnoses in his book, and in the end, it may ultimately have a larger impact on the nature of our discourse beyond these 4 special days in June.

The last order of business is to present each of you with your official diploma evidencing your graduation from the Institute, which I will try to do as sanctimoniously as possible, by summoning each of you to come up and walk across the stage. Although we’re all teachers, as scholars we’ve never stopped being students either. So even though it’s corny, we need some rite of passage.

And after that, once you all have diploma in hand and are back in your seat, for those of you who can stay, I’d like to open the floor for anyone to share their thoughts and reflections about this experience and what it meant to them. The Institute is an intensely personal thing, and I’m interested in what you have to say about it. But first, having all survived these past four days in relative tact, it’s time to drop the gavel on these proceedings.

As Director of this noble enterprise, I hereby call the roll of newly admitted fellows into the Institute for Advanced Studies in Music Theory. As I read your name aloud in groups of six,
please come up and walk across the stage to receive your diploma manifesting your participation in the 2003 Institute on Transformational Theory and Analysis, and your affiliation in this august body from this day hence: