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Melodic Metaphors for Dreams in Three Classic Songs from the Disney Catalog

James Bohn

Three of the most-valued songs from the Disney catalog are “Some Day My Prince Will Come,” “When You Wish Upon a Star,” and “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes.” All three songs come from animated feature films created during Walt Disney’s lifetime (1901–1966). Furthermore, all three invoke the idea of dreams or wishing. The melodies of these songs feature delayed resolution or a lack of resolution. Such approaches to resolution are symbolic of the intrinsically unresolved nature of dreams.

In my analysis of the tunes in question, I investigate the melodies in terms of Schenkerian analysis. Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935) was an accompanist, teacher, critic, and music theorist (Pankhurst, *SchenkerGUIDE* [2008] 3). During the nineteenth century, the typical approach to music theory was harmonic analysis. Schenker’s major contribution to music was a system of analysis that focused on melodic features.

To Schenker, the fundamental organizing principle of music is the elaboration of resolved melodic tension. In this system, tension is defined as distance from the tonic, which is the first note (or Do) of any musical scale. This tension is established by an initial arpeggiation or stepwise ascent to a *Kopfton* (head tone). In Schenker, the *Kopfton* is a prominent, structural melodic note, most commonly scale degree three (Mi) or five (Sol), which embodies the concept of tension. This tension can be prolonged through melodic elaboration; that is the use of musical tones that are subservient to the structural melodic line, such as neighboring tones, linear

progressions, unfoldings, or arpeggiations. Ultimately, this tension is resolved through stepwise descent from the *Kopfton* to the tonic. In Schenker, such resolution must occur in the obligatory register; that is, in the same range where the original tonic appears, before the initial arpeggiation or ascent. Occasionally, Schenker allows for substitution of a tone in a structural melodic line in order to express a descent, or express a tone in its proper register.

These melodic formations can be elaborated through embellishments, building a layered structure. A piece of music can exhibit any number of levels from the surface to the deepest layer, the *Ursatz* (fundamental structure). To Schenker, the *Ursatz* is an embodiment of a given piece’s unity.

Perhaps more than any other approach to analysis, reception of Schenker’s approach is strongly divided between supporters and detractors. Followers find the emphasis of melodic concerns to be intuitive and meaningful. Many critics find the *Ursatz* to be inaccessible

to nearly all listeners, and thus non-intuitive. Further criticism of Schenker can be found in the way it ignores rhythm as a musical element, and in the way that it can be characterized by reducing music to common, simplistic formations.

Schenker based his theory on an extremely limited body of music. Fully 80 percent of the musical examples in his book *Free Composition* (1935) are from only eight composers: Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, and Brahms (Pankhurst, 180). Thus, Schenkerian analysis can be characterized as pertaining to a limited body of Western art music. Even so, Schenker can be an effective tool for examining the functions of melodic structures.

One of the most renowned melodies from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), the first feature film to come out of the Disney Studios, is “Some Day My Prince Will Come.” All of the songs from the movie featured music by Frank Churchill (1901–1942) with lyrics by Larry Morey (1905–1971). Part of the dreamy quality of the song comes from its emphasis of the dominant, the fifth note of the scale (or Sol). The prominence of a tone most typically associated with the tension of a *Kopfton* lends the melody an unresolved quality. This unsettled nature can be interpreted as complementary to the idea of dreams; that is the anticipation of an as-of-yet unachieved objective.



Heinrich Schenker, seated, c. 1919 (Oswald Jonas Memorial Collection, Special Collections & Archives, University of California, Riverside Libraries).

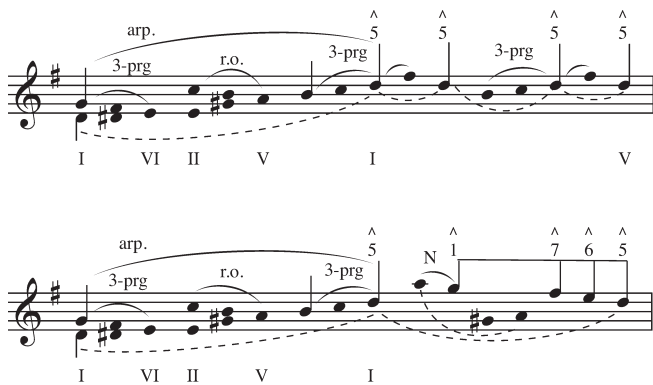


Figure 1. Schenkerian Analysis of “Some Day My Prince Will Come.”

“Some Day My Prince Will Come” begins and ends on fifth-scale degree (Figure 1). The first sub-phrase is an elaboration of the submediant chord. This motif is transposed up a fourth to create the second sub-phrase, which elaborates the super tonic. The first half of the phrase is an arpeggiation to the dominant. The second half of the antecedent consists of a sub-phrase that alternates between root and third of the dominant chord (scale degrees five and seven), which is repeated.

The first half of the consequent is the same as the first half of the antecedent. The second half of the phrase features a linear descent from the tonic down to the dominant, sustaining the tension of the unresolved dominant. There is also an interruption of a register transfer of the supertonic down an octave, elaborated by a chromatic lower neighbor.

While “Some Day My Prince Will Come” features a harmonic resolution at the end of the song, the melody is largely unresolved. Both phrases begin and end on scale degree five. Furthermore, both feature a large-scale register transfer of the dominant up one octave. The second halves of both phrases also emphasize notes from the dominant, with the end of the first phrase alternating between the root and third of the dominant. This consistent melodic emphasis of the dominant leaves the song feeling unresolved in much the same way that a dream is open for resolution by its fulfillment.

The arrangement of “Some Day My Prince Will Come” that appears at the end of the film addresses the unresolved nature of the melody. The end of the song is appended with trombones playing a melodic fragment from “One Song” ending on the tonic.

The choir further dissipates tension by having the sopranos move to the high tonic, and then upwards to scale degree three.

Heinrich Schenker would almost certainly have considered “Some Day My Prince Will Come” to be unsatisfying, due to its lack of melodic resolution. However, such unresolved tension serves as a powerful musical metaphor. Furthermore, the score’s resolution to this tension at the end of the film through the use of the Prince’s melody, “One Song,” serves as a fitting musical summary of the story’s narrative.

“Some Day My Prince Will Come” is a progenitor of a song archetype that is central to the *oeuvre* of the

Walt Disney Company. The wish/dream song instantiates itself numerous times in the company’s creations, from “When You Wish Upon a Star” to more recent works such as *Tangled*’s “I’ve Got a Dream.” “Some Day My Prince Will Come,” however, falls somewhat outside of the archetype in that it invokes the specific dream of the protagonist rather than relating the merits of dreams and wishes on a conceptual level.

“When You Wish Upon a Star” is the strongest exemplar of wish/dream song archetype. The tune, which originated in *Pinocchio* (1940), the Studio’s second feature, was written by Leigh Harline (1907-1969) with lyrics by Ned Washington (1901-1976). The song has transcended the film to become both the quintessential Disney song, as well as the company’s unofficial anthem. Like “Some Day My Prince Will Come,” “When You Wish Upon a Star” features melodic motion that is symbolic of the unfulfilled nature of dreams.

“When You Wish Upon a Star” is comprised of four phrases (Figure 2). The first features a register transfer of the dominant from the first note up an octave to the half cadence that ends the

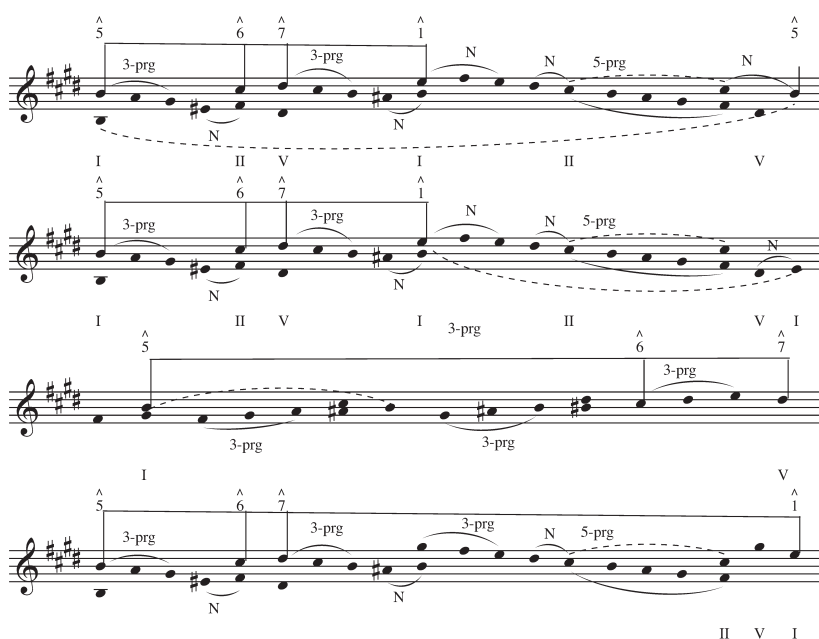


Figure 2. Schenkerian Analysis of “When You Wish Upon a Star.”

phrase. The first sub-phrase consists of a linear ascent from scale degree five to the tonic. The second phrase is identical to the first, save for the end, which is altered to accommodate an authentic cadence. While this resolution is harmonically satisfying, the lower register tonic leaves the phrase unresolved in the obligatory register. The bridge, the third phrase, features a linear ascent from scale degree five to the leading tone, elaborating the dominant, and furthering the tension of the song.

The final phrase of “When You Wish Upon a Star” resolves the melodic tension of the bridge with an ascent from scale degree five to the tonic resolution at the cadence. The end of the first sub-phrase ends here on scale degree three, while the authentic cadence resolves the tonic in the obligatory register, coinciding with the lyrical resolution, “Your dreams come true.” The version of the final phrase presented here is the version sung by Cliff Edwards (1895–1971) and the chorus at the close of the film. The final phrase ends differently in the version of the song from the beginning of the feature.

The conclusion of “When You Wish Upon a Star” from the sung version at the opening of the film changes the final note to a dominant, a full two octaves above the first note of the song. This ending is doubly unresolved due to its settling on an unstable note, as well as the high register of its tone. This lack of resolution allows for a large-scale closure of the melody at the end of the film. While the melody of the song at the end lands on the tonic, a short tag line sung by the chorus is appended with the lyrics, “you’ll find your dreams come true,” settling on scale degree three. This large-scale resolution of the melody over the course of the movie is aided by having both the opening and concluding arrangements in the same key. The ends of both *Pinocchio* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* are musically similar

Figure 3. Schenkerian Analysis of “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes.”

in the sense that the melodic resolution of the song in question coincides with the fulfillment of the protagonist’s dream. Furthermore, both endings land on a high-register mediant, voiced by a choir.

After “When You Wish Upon a Star,” the tune that most closely exemplifies the wish/dream song archetype is “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes.” This tune originates from *Cinderella* (1950), the Studio’s return to single-narrative animated features after an eight-year hiatus. Walt Disney hired the songwriting team of Mack David (1912–1993), Al Hoffman (1902–1960), and Jerry Livingston (1909–1987) to create the tunes. Sung by the film’s protagonist, “A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes” expresses her use of dreams as a means of escapism from a harsh reality. Like “When You Wish Upon a Star,” “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes” coincides lyrical resolution with melodic resolution.

“A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes” features two phrases (Figure 3). The *Kopfton* of each is a mediant approached by an upward leap from the dominant. Likewise, each phrase features a stepwise descent to the tonic, very much in line with Schenker’s theory. However, the end of the first phrase actually lands on the mediant in the low register, with an implied tonic beneath. This resolution is doubly unsatisfying due to both its use of a substitution (the tonic for the mediant), as well as the lower register of its tone. The second phrase, however, not only

resolves in the obligatory register, but it does so coinciding with the lyric “The dream that you wish will come true.”

The coincidental lyrical and melodic resolution in “When You Wish Upon a Star” and “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes” could be attributed to good songwriting. However, these concurrent resolutions function as effective melodic metaphors for the as yet unresolved nature of dreams and wishes. The large-scale resolution of “Some Day My Prince Will Come” within *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and “When You Wish Upon a Star” in *Pinocchio* also function as metaphors for the resolution of dreams. Such large-scale resolutions also provide closure for each film’s respective scores, providing a sense of unity. Finally, the meaningful conclusions of these investigations point to the potential usefulness of Schenkerian approaches to analysis outside of the narrow band of Western art music upon which the system is based.



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