

THE ROLE OF HEINRICH SCHENKER

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ORIGINALLY the function of the theorist was to systematize the manifold musical experiences of his own times and make them accessible as a discipline. In most cases the composer himself was the medium to formulate the musical materials of his age for the use of the young musician. This eminently practical function of theory made for clarity and precision. Music was a practise, and its ablest practitioner, the composer, was the logical person to go to for a clear understanding of that practise. There were of course theorists whose efforts were not directed to this purpose. These gentlemen pursued their activities within that dusty mid-region of abstruse reasonings which we in latter days have unfortunately come to regard as the proper sphere for theorists. But these proceedings did not enter into nor disturb as yet the close rapport between theory and practise. This equilibrium has nowhere been so admirably manifested as in the musical culture of the eighteenth century; and Philipp Emanuel Bach's *Versuch über die wahre Art das Klavier zu spielen* is perhaps the purest example of the vital discipline of those days.

By the middle of the nineteenth century however, it is evident that the delicate and organic relation of theory to practise had gradually ceased to exist. Theory became more and more refractory and lost the transparency that once enabled the apprentice to pass simply and naturally from precept to application. One could trace historically this deepening cleft between theory and practise but that would be a study in itself. It suffices for our purposes to indicate the fantastic cancerlike growth of theoretical speculation that took place once the divorce was complete between theory and the body of living music that constitutes its real subject matter.

Under the vicious guidance of such "theory" every important element of technic was sapped of the vital nourishment that even the merest discipline must afford the student. Harmony—that powerful keystone on which every factor of musical construction must come to bear was reduced to an aggregation of chord-connections, starting with the simplest and working up systematically to the more complex. Naturally there was always room for still more complicated chord-connections to tack onto the scheme. Ultimately it resembled a sort of harmonic tape-worm whose monstrous growth was supposed to parallel the developing resources of harmony. Form likewise became a pitiful little patch-work, and the music of Haydn and Mozart was commended to the student for the dexterity with which the seams were joined. The delicacy and precision of their profoundly organic forms was assumed to be mere "formalism," and Beethoven, since the organic in his forms is inescapable—even to "theorists"—was set up against them as the "man who freed music." It is obvious that these successive deposits of fallacious theory had the effect of forming a "vile and loathsome crust" about the body of music that made access to the vital problems of technic extremely difficult if not impossible. If a Brahms could say that his studies suffered unbelievably for this very reason, how baffling must these same obstructions be to the lesser gifted!



The responsibility then, that faced musical thought at the end of the nineteenth century was of crucial importance. The threefold range of the problem made a solution as difficult as it was pressing. There was first of all the necessity of restoring to musical theory the consciousness that its starting point and its terminus too, are strictly *ex post facto*, after the fact of artistic creation. Proceeding on this basis there was then the really Herculean labor of clearing away the accumulated mass of error. Finally there was the task, essentially constructive, of evolving from artistic facts a body of valid technical principles that would furnish the student and the musician at large with an insight into the workings of musical creation. That was the scope of the task. And if according to Blake great

things are done when men and mountains meet, then the mountain in this case may surely be said to be the historical responsibility of the task as we have just outlined it,—and the man born to meet this responsibility Heinrich Schenker.

In times of great outer confusion and crisis there are many who attempt to rise to the occasion. In the realm of ideas and of art however, the crisis is always less apparent. And so we may say that at the beginning of the twentieth century a huge mountain filled the musical horizon, and that strangely enough, its existence was absolutely ignored. Schenker's vision was unique in that it pierced through the excited confusion of his times, through all the glittering prospects that a new period of modernity and "progress" seemed to hold forth. Under those circumstances his isolation was only too natural. Here was a man who insisted on seeing mountains and meeting them, while every other theorist worked in the midst of a thick kaleidoscopic jelly that filled the eye so pleasingly and assumed so very readily every possible shape that a new theory might wish it to assume.

From the very beginning Schenker worked with a definite sense of the responsibility before him. Coming to Vienna as a youth in the late '80's he attached himself with an eager and vital reverence to the music of those masters whose memory is so intimately bound up with that city. A wonderful instinct, an intensely alive apprehension of classic music guided Schenker through the theoretical mazes of his time. Brahms said of his earliest writings (criticisms in some newspaper) that only young Schenker knew how to write about music. When it came to preparing his first work (the *Harmonielehre*, 1906) this solidly rooted basis in the actuality of classic music guaranteed the vitality of his approach. With the *Harmonielehre* the nature and course of all his future activity were clearly defined. In Vienna today Schenker is still engaged in rounding out a lifework that for cohesiveness and integrity is equalled only by the achievements of those men of genius to whose creations he has devoted all his energies and gifts.

But it was more than a question of possessing this or that musical and intellectual gift. A vigorous and subtle mind, a

wonderful ear, an amazing comprehension of the inmost thoughts of the composer, these Schenker possesses. With these qualities alone he would have made invaluable contributions to the task before him. But they would have remained contributions and no more. Schenker however, saw to the very core of his problems, and brought their solutions to a definiteness and a depth that make his work a landmark in the history of music. What fundamental quality is it then that welds all the elements of his vision into an intense whole? What sets it so far above the plane of the mere *aperçu*? The answer to this lies in a very profound and deep-rooted attitude towards the realities of musical creations. Stated barely, this attitude may seem rather obvious, but that is far from the case. His position consists in the belief that the configuration of harmonies, melodies, phrases, etc. that go to make up a musical form can neither be regarded as a series of adventitious or arbitrary events, nor strung on the thread of some preconceived schema. *These events must obey their own laws*; and to bring these laws to light is the task of the theorist.



Schenker from the very first carried with him this intimate conviction. It is the conviction that directed, deepened and extended the scope of his work. The fact that there were no grounds in previous theory for such a belief, the fact that the motive power of his tremendous activity was solely in his deeply-rooted and inexpugnable belief that all the detailed occurrences in a master-work could be related organically, does not in any way impair the objective validity of his conclusions. In just that same way a faith in the order of nature made possible the growth of science. It can easily be seen that such a faith, far from satisfying itself with any interposed and traditional theories, goes directly to the facts, absorbs them passionately and vehemently, and forges every idea, as William James put it, in the teeth of these same irreducible and stubborn facts.

Schenker's *Harmonielehre* is the first important fruit of his faith. Throughout this book a wonderful balance is maintained between the detailed facts as they exist in the music of the mas-

ters, and the general laws that are embodied in them. An intensely vivid apprehension of harmonic forces at work, their biologic functioning as it were, gives the book a concreteness, an immediate applicability in the field of composition that makes it a worthy successor to Bach's *Versuch*. Every further development of Schenker's is implicit in the *Harmonielehre*. With this instrument he cleared the ground and provided for himself the solid basis that was to make possible a series of works so organically interdependent, so concatenated, that each may be said to be required by the preceding and make necessary the following one. The clarity of purpose with which Schenker had dissociated the intrinsic problems of harmony from the extraneous considerations of voice-leading that had hitherto cluttered up its study, indicated naturally and inevitably the nature of his following work, the *Kontrapunkt*. Here the discipline of voice-leading was all the more vital for having been confined to considerations strictly inherent in itself.

Having forged a comprehensive discipline for the student by means of these two primary instruments, Schenker could now turn his attention to the master-works in their entirety. A series of analyses follow here, comprising the third, fifth and ninth symphonies of Beethoven, his last five piano sonatas, the works of Haydn, Mozart, and Brahms. These studies carried him to a deeper and deeper consideration of the underlying laws that govern the articulated structure of musical forms. It is an amazing experience to follow the course of his analyses, to trace the progress of the problem that they set themselves; from the early ones with their concern for surface phenomena, to the later ones that preoccupy themselves more and more with the underlying tensile forces that bind these surface phenomena together. *Der Freie Satz*, Schenker's latest work (now in process of publication) stands to resume all the principles of form that analytical studies have furnished him. In this way he rounds out his life-work, and brings to a complete consummation an activity that has proceeded from each separate element of musical creation to their highest synthesis.

It is beyond the scope of this article to present Schenker's theories in their actuality. To glibly extract his conclusions

from the attendant considerations and experiences that he is summing up, would do more harm than good. I have hoped to indicate here the import rather than the content of Schenker's work. It is one that vitally concerns us today. Thirty years ago Schenker raged against the utter confusion that characterized almost every artist and theorist of his time. His voice was scarcely heard. Now we are just beginning to realize the extent to which the decaying culture that aroused his prophetic wrath has been responsible for the noxious disarray of the last decade. If we in our day hope to emerge from this confusion and build a solid musical culture, then a vital revaluation of the music of the past must surely be its foundation-stone. Schenker's work has created an invaluable instrument towards this revaluation. I say *towards* advisedly, for such a revaluation is complete only in the light of the actual creative experiences of the near future. In the meantime those avenues of knowledge that do exist are not to be avoided. Heinrich Schenker's life-long and deeply religious consecration to the music of the masters is one of the fundamental sources of knowledge and discipline in our day.