

## Heinrich Schenker

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Long after his major writings on harmony, counterpoint and analysis began to appear, Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935) remains one of the most important and influential theorists in the history of Western music. His achievements have often been compared to those of eminent thinkers of his age working in other fields, e.g., his Viennese compatriots Sigmund Freud in psychology and Albert Einstein in physics. His influence, modest (though not negligible) in his own lifetime, has grown steadily since the middle of the last century and shows no signs of abating. Already a paradigmatic figure in North American universities by the 1970s, he has since exerted a powerful influence in British and, more recently, European academic circles. Indeed, the interest shown in his life's work is, in some respects, comparable to that of some of the twentieth century's leading composers, and in this respect his reputation as a theorist is unequaled.

That which is called "Schenkerian theory" is a complex set of regulatory principles that were initially intended to explain the tonal music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; it is at the same time a synthesis of many traditions, embracing Fuxian counterpoint, the thorough-bass teaching of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and late nineteenth-century harmonic theory. It is at once a sophisticated explanation of tonality, but also an analytical system of immense empirical power. Schenker's ideas and work touch on, or have implications for, virtually every topic addressed in this volume.

This chapter includes a synopsis of Schenker's life and works, an explanation of the rudiments of his theory, remarks on its historical background, and a survey of its reception both as a pedagogical tool and as a basis for further investigation of a wide range of music.<sup>1</sup>

### Life and writings

The few sources for Heinrich Schenker's childhood and adolescence suggest that he came from a poor but intellectually supportive Jewish family in Galicia (Poland),

1 Related aspects of Schenker's theory are discussed in numerous other chapters in the volume. In particular, see Chapter 3, pp. 89–90 (on Schenker's epistemology), Chapter 22, pp. 703–10 (on implications of Schenkerian theory for the analysis of rhythm and meter), and Chapter 23, pp. 741–42 (on Schenker's broader views of tonality).

attended the Gymnasium in the capital city of Lemberg (L'viv in present-day Ukraine) and completed his schooling in Brežžany, where he also had music lessons from the celebrated Chopin pupil Karl Mikuli. After taking the *Matura* examinations, he enrolled as a law student at the University of Vienna in 1884, gaining a doctorate in law there six years later. In his last three years at university, he also attended classes at the Vienna Conservatory, where his teachers included Anton Bruckner.

After graduation, Schenker embarked on a musical career which included composition, journalism and accompanying. He gave up composing while in his early thirties, after realizing that he would never be able to equal the achievements of the masters whom he admired above all else, and for most of his life he earned a living as a piano teacher in Vienna, devoting himself in his free time to music theory and analysis. His publications were financially supported by friends, and by people whom he taught or with whom he shared thoughts on music, and this enabled him to abandon his work in music journalism and to write in a more serious way from the early years of the twentieth century until the end of his life.<sup>2</sup>

His published work includes critical editions, a treatise on ornamentation, and commentaries for facsimile editions of composer autographs. But it is by his detailed analyses of music and the working out of a comprehensive theory of tonality – the two types of writing commingle in textbooks, monographs, pamphlets, yearbooks, and critical commentaries – that he has become widely known. Schenker's analyses exemplify, over a broad range of the literature and in considerable detail, a view of music that has gained sufficient esteem in North America (and more recently in parts of Europe) to establish itself as one of the foremost approaches to musical structure.

Although Schenker is best known for a highly specific view of music, and a method for describing how music behaves, his writings cover a broad range of approaches and embrace editorial technique, performance practice, and criticism. A theoretical project, built around the four-volume *Neue musikalische Theorien und Phantasien*, spans a thirty-year period yet shows a remarkable degree of consistency. The first three volumes in the series are based on the traditional disciplines of harmony and counterpoint: *Harmonielehre* (1906) and a two-volume *Kontrapunkt* (1910, 1922). The fourth volume, *Der freie Satz* (1935), was initially conceived as the third volume of *Kontrapunkt* but marks a more radical break with the traditional study of the contrapuntal species with reference to a *cantus firmus*; it is more a book about analytical method than composition technique.

The texts devoted primarily to the analysis of whole pieces include a monograph on Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (1912) and the periodical publications *Der Tonwille* (1921–24) and *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik* (1925–30). Though *Tonwille* and *Meisterwerk* are largely devoted to small- to medium-length studies, sometimes of short keyboard

2 To date, the fullest account of Schenker's life is contained in the opening chapter of Federhofer, *Heinrich Schenker, nach Tagebüchern und Briefen*, pp. 1–47.

pieces or sonata movements, they also contain longer analyses of three major works from the Classical symphonic repertory: Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (1921–23), Mozart's Symphony in G minor, K.550 (1926), and Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony (1930). Two of these are, in effect, Beethoven symphony monographs which, together with the book on the Ninth, constitute a trilogy on the symphonic output of the composer he esteemed above all others.

As it was primarily as a piano teacher that Schenker earned a living, one should not be surprised to find his work addressed as much to practical musicians as to the world of scholarship. The majority of his longer essays include detailed suggestions on performance; these invariably follow, and are derived from, the analysis of the score, sometimes supported by the evidence of the sources. Schenker frequently stated that an inspired performance of a work could only be obtained by way of following its compositional growth from the background to the foreground. It is clear, from his extant remarks on performance, that this did not amount to an "analytical" style of playing, whereby elements of a structural "background" are brought out crudely. (The opposite is closer to the truth: foreground dissonances require greater weight than the consonances from which they are derived.<sup>3</sup>) Schenker's long-projected *Kunst des Vortrags*, never completed but recently brought out in English translation as *The Art of Performance*, expresses concerns as much in tune with his earlier writings as with the later theoretical formulations.<sup>4</sup>

If Schenkerian analysis entails a profound and detailed understanding of the relationship of the notes of a piece to one another, then an essential condition of an analysis is an accurate text of the piece. This was a problem of life-long concern: in the days in which the texts of musical works were overlaid by editors with additional dynamic and articulation marks, and when the notes themselves were often changed arbitrarily, the understanding of a work could begin in earnest only after it had been established what the composer had actually written.<sup>5</sup> (In this activity Schenker was assisted by his pupils Otto Erich Deutsch and Anthony van Hoboken, both of whom followed distinguished careers as musicologists.) The search for the best musical text, a salient feature of the *Erläuterungsausgaben* of Bach's Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue and four of Beethoven's late sonatas, extends to Schenker's other editorial work, his commentary on a facsimile reproduction of the "Moonlight" Sonata, and the essays on Mozart's G minor Symphony and Beethoven's *Eroica*. With Beethoven and, to a lesser extent, Haydn, an additional measure of the composer's purported intentions was sometimes provided by the transcription and interpretation of sketches. The practical texts

<sup>3</sup> Referring to the Bach C major Prelude, he wrote to a pupil that "the dissonances . . . should always be played *louder* than the consonances"; see Drabkin, "A Lesson in Composition," p. 247. See also Rothstein, "Schenker as an Interpreter of Beethoven's Piano Sonatas."

<sup>4</sup> Recent studies in this field include Burkhart, "Schenker's Theory of Levels"; Schachter, "Twentieth-Century Analysis."

<sup>5</sup> This matter is treated briefly in *Tonville*, vol. III, pp. 24–25 and vol. VI, pp. 38–40, and at greater length in the essay "Weg mit dem Phrasierungsbogen" in *Meisterwerk*, vol. I.

include a commentary on ornamentation in eighteenth-century music, an edition of the complete Beethoven piano sonatas, and a two-volume selection of keyboard works by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach.

The parsing of this prodigious *oeuvre* should not, however, obscure the fact that, for Schenker, many aspects of music – theory, analysis, performance, manuscript study, and the preparation of editions – were interrelated and hence discussible in an integrated format. For contemporary musicians outside the academy, e.g., concert pianists and piano teachers, the *Erläuterungsausgaben* were his most important contributions to the literature of music, providing in an integrated format an authoritative text of the music, an analysis, commentary on the autograph score and other primary textual sources, remarks on performance, and discussion of the secondary literature. Their musical insights were recognized by performers with no particular theoretical ideology.<sup>6</sup>

Where not accompanied by the musical text, a typical analytical essay nevertheless includes some or all of the following: observations on the text of the piece (including, where relevant, alternative readings in the autograph score and early sketches), suggestions for performance that arise from the analysis, remarks on modern editions and arrangements, and a survey of the secondary literature. As Schenker's stature as a theorist grew, and he became more convinced of the rightness of his views on music, he became less concerned with attacking the writings of other scholars. The Ninth Symphony monograph (1912) was expressly concerned with the opinions of earlier commentators, as its subtitle makes clear;<sup>7</sup> but the *Eroica* essay (1930) mentions only two studies peripherally concerned with the work's structure, and does so only briefly.

In both his published writings and private communications, Schenker decried the mixing of politics with music; the immortality of great music was itself proof that political beliefs had little to do with musical values. Yet the notion of hierarchy, of a strict ordering of the tones of a composition, is so thoroughly consistent with his deeply conservative outlook on life and culture that it is difficult to uncouple his theory entirely from two of his most consistently expressed ideological stances: (1) the centrality of the German people in European culture, underscored by their preeminence in music, and (2) the steady decline of culture and political order in Europe since the late eighteenth century, ultimately resulting in the complete demise of musical art by the beginning of the twentieth century. Schenker admitted only two foreign composers into the pantheon of German music, Chopin and Domenico Scarlatti. Although he encouraged his private pupils in composition, he found nothing favourable in either mainstream modern music or the tonally accessible jazz and popular music of his time.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Paul Badura-Skoda, "A Tie," in which Schenker's analysis of the Piano Sonata in A $\flat$ , Op. 110, is championed, three-quarters of a century after its publication, as "a monument of precision and insight, by far the best analysis ever made of one of the last Beethoven sonatas" (p. 87).

<sup>7</sup> *Eine Darstellung des musikalischen Inhaltes unter fortlaufender Berücksichtigung auch des Vortrages und der Literatur* ("a representation of its musical contents, together with a running commentary on performance and the critical literature").

He reserved his harshest polemics for the atonal composers, yet made no qualitative distinction between the work of contemporary composers as stylistically diverse as Debussy, Strauss, Schoenberg, and Hindemith.<sup>8</sup>

That *Der freie Satz* is not only his *opus ultimum* but also a posthumous work – it was published some months after his death in January 1935 – has had important consequences for our understanding of Schenker's work. Although it is the text on which his reputation is based, and remains the basis of explanations of his theory and of the analytical and graphing techniques that arise from it, it would be a mistake to regard it as the definitive formulation of Schenkerian theory. For one thing, it is generally reckoned as incomplete, especially with regard to the discussion of form, metrics and rhythm, and style and genre. Second, the earlier writings, though they are formatted differently and use terminology in a different way (especially the words *Urfinie* and *Zug*), shed a great deal of light on Schenker's analytical technique; they are sometimes preferred to the later writings, whose insights can sometimes seem tangled inside an elaborate theoretical web. This means that a single account of Schenker's contribution to music theory is an illusory goal, even if *Der freie Satz* remains the largest repository of his analytical work and is probably the best vantage-point from which to view it.

### Outline of the theory

If one were to attempt to reduce Schenker's understanding of music to a single concept, "hierarchy" would perhaps be the best choice. For Schenker, music – great music – is tonal, and hence a composition is governed ultimately by its principal chord, the tonic triad; all other harmonic functions are subordinate to the tonic, and analysis must always make a distinction between essential and passing harmonies. Similarly, the notes of a melody can be described as either essential or transitional. Moreover, the notion of essential versus passing, of harmonic versus non-harmonic, applies not only to the surface of the music but informs the deeper levels, too: a harmony might be essential at one level but transitional at another, a passing note at one level might be the start of an important "linear progression" at another.

<sup>8</sup> Only two modern works were subjected to analysis by counter-example: a passage from Stravinsky's Piano Concerto and the whole of Reger's Variations and Fugue on a theme of Bach, Op 81. Both appear in *Meisterwerk*, vol. II.

Schenker's polemics proved an embarrassment to his disciples, many of whom were forced to flee Nazi Germany in the late 1930s. After 1945, Schenker's ideological position was untenable to a German nation trying to come to terms with the horrors it had recently perpetrated, and for a long time afterwards the offending passages from his texts were excised from later editions and translations of his writings, or relegated to an appendix. The more virulent parts of his published work, above all the sections of *Tonwille* and *Meisterwerk* devoted to miscellaneous "thoughts on art and its relationships to the general scheme of things," have until recently been ignored altogether, though some writers have argued that Schenker's polemics are inseparable from his theory; see Cook, "Schenker's Theory of Music as Ethics"; "Heinrich Schenker, Polemicist"; Bent, "Schenker e la missione del genio germanico."

Example 26.1 *Harmonielehre*, Example 153: Analysis of aria "Buß und Reu" from Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system consists of a treble staff and a bass staff. The treble staff contains a melodic line with various intervals and accidentals. The bass staff contains a harmonic accompaniment. Below the staves, the Roman numerals 'Fis-moll: V - I - IV - VII - III . -' are written. The second system also consists of a treble staff and a bass staff, with similar notation. Below the staves, the Roman numerals 'VI\*(IV) V - I' are written. The asterisk on VI\* indicates a specific harmonic function.

I shall outline the essentials of Schenker's theory using four further concepts: *Stufe*, *Schicht*, *Prolongation (Auskomponierung)*, and linearity. Additional terms will be introduced in relation to these.

### *Stufe*

This term is often translated as "scale degree" or "scale step," expressions that have a melodic connotation. But *Stufe* is a harmonic concept, one which provides a means of distinguishing important harmonies from transitional ones (*Durchgänge*); thus it provides a means of assigning different values to what might otherwise appear to be instances of the same chord. It makes an early appearance in Schenker's writings – in the *Harmonielehre* of 1906 – and represents an important milestone in his development of a hierarchical view of musical structure. In discussing the ritornello of an aria from Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* (see Example 26.1), Schenker showed how only one of two C# major chords could be understood as a true dominant of F# minor, a "V. Stufe":<sup>9</sup>

At \* we see the appearance of a complete triad on C#, which could represent the dominant harmony ("die V. Stufe"), but the listener would have been directed most specifically by the rhythm of the falling fifths I-IV-VII-III etc. to viewing this triad as merely a passing configuration of three voices; even if we were to ignore the fact that the inversion of the fifths supports this view, and that there is no need to invoke a V here since one appears *ex officio* in the very next measure, there is no question of it having the weight of

<sup>9</sup> *Harmonielehre*, p. 187; see also Federhofer, *Akkord und Stimmführung*, pp. 66–67.