

HEINRICH SCHENKER'S CONTRIBUTION

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THE recent death of Heinrich Schenker has brought renewed attention to the name and achievement of one of the remarkable figures of the contemporary musical world. It furnishes the occasion for a consideration of his contributions to musical theory, both in their intrinsic aspect, and their significance as symptoms of the musical temper of the present time. For although Schenker remained bitterly hostile to all that is contemporary in music, his work and his ideas nevertheless embody very clearly certain aspects of contemporary musicality which here surely find one of their most striking expressions.

The very fact that this work takes the form of musical theory is in itself symptomatic, as Schenker would have been the first to admit. For at its cornerstone lies the thesis that, owing to the hopeless desuetude into which the art and technic of composition have fallen, nothing but a body of fresh and sound theory, based on the actual practice of the masters, can save it or, indeed, since it is apparently beyond salvation, permit hopes of its renewal. It is this fresh and sound theory which Schenker has attempted to furnish, both as a writer and as a teacher; and however much one may dispute certain implications in his thesis as stated above, there is no question that to a very real extent he has succeeded in contributing to it, even if one must reject some of his doctrines, and precisely some of the most important and striking among them, as forced, untenable and essentially sterile in tendency.

It is of course impossible, in the space of a short article, adequately to treat such a vast and complex mass of theoretical material in the detail which it deserves and indeed demands. The

following remarks are intended therefore only to give an indication of the general character of his work and to come to some conclusions regarding it.

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At the basis of Schenker's teaching lies the most important possible goal—that of effecting some kind of *rapprochement* between musical theory and the actual musical thought of the composer. It should be hardly necessary to point out, at this late date, the vital necessity of some such *rapprochement*. The older theory of harmony, virtually a compilation and standardization of the purely practical teachings of earlier days, consisted in little more than a systematic catalog of "chords"—and what was a chord but the simultaneous sounding of any two or more notes, regardless of their syntactical significance? That the harmony books catalogued only the simplest of such phenomena does not in the slightest alter the fact that fundamentally the conception went no farther. While distinctions were made between "harmonic" and "non-harmonic" tones, and the number of possible chords limited by professorial fiat, such distinctions and limitations were patently arbitrary and often contrary to actual usage, and in any case no substitute for the real task of discovering the true order beneath what was assumed to be merely conventional, and therefore sanctified by tradition. There even exist harmony books which dogmatically assert the inferiority of certain cadence formulas, on the ground that the masters used them *less frequently* than others of different structure!

For the "chord" as fundamental harmonic entity Schenker substitutes the "Stufe," literally translated as "degree," but perhaps best rendered in English by the simple word "harmony." According to this conception a harmony becomes a far more real and sometimes a very complex affair, governed in its definition and its boundaries by what is actually heard in listening to a piece of music. It may be roughly defined as a complete unit, formed as often of many "chords" as of a single one, or frequently consisting not of chords at all but of single notes, or traits of melodic character. This is a far more significant discovery than it seems. Most theoreticians of the older school would presumably ana-

lyze the opening measures of *Die Walküre* as a tonic triad in D-minor, regardless of the B \flat in the first measure, and the fact that the harmony takes the form of a scale figure rather than a "chord." But Schenker's theory carries this same principle much farther, and conceives harmonic events in the largest possible sense, grouping them into a hierarchical order of which musicians of instinct have always been aware, but which had never before been adequately formulated. They also lay the basis for a more adequate conception of the really guiding principles of musical structure.

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The concept of the "Stufe" led Schenker to two others, of similar importance. The first of these he calls "Tonikalisierung" or "tonicalization"; the second "Auskomponierung" which may be translated as "harmonic elaboration" or "development." "Tonikalisierung" defines the processes whereby a harmony is intensified and brought into relief through the introduction of features which give it the significance of a quasi-tonic. The process is quite familiar, but the conventional classification of such intensified harmonies together with true modulations is obviously false, and Schenker's new conception here again contributes immeasurably to the clarification of musical theory, by establishing a distinction which corresponds more closely to the true relationship between form and harmony, as they are perceived in the course of listening to a musical work.

The boldest of Schenker's new harmonic conceptions, and one which takes him eventually beyond the limits of harmony as such, is that of "Auskomponierung"—a term which is used to designate the various means by which a harmony or even an interval is elaborated, given extension or development, and above all, brought to life by the infusion of musical content. Literally the term means "composing out," and the principle is one which, like those already mentioned, is easily recognizable in its smaller aspects. Schenker himself gives, as a very simple example of this, the opening measures of Chopin's B-minor *Prelude*, which embody the tonic triad in living material; but in his later and more speculative work he gives the principle in-

finite extension. It is this extension of the principle of "Auskomponierung" which forms the basis of what is most problematical in his work. We will return to these questions later; suffice it for the moment to stress the interest and importance of the principle itself, and to pay homage to the admirably clear thinking which formulated it.

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The above principles are expounded in Schenker's *Harmonielehre*, a book which, in spite of some features that still remain problematical, is certainly unsurpassed and perhaps unequalled in its sphere. The second part of his magnum opus, of which the *Harmonielehre* forms the first, is devoted to the problems of counterpoint. Here Schenker offers less, perhaps, that is strikingly new, and there is more material—chiefly in detail—with which this writer is inclined to disagree; but the central conception, at least from a theoretical and in the deepest sense pedagogical standpoint, is admirably clear and just.

What Schenker has done, briefly and crudely stated, is to "clean up" the current conceptions of counterpoint and place them on a more intellectually and pedagogically tenable basis. Counterpoint is here conceived for almost the first time in two centuries, as the systematic and logically developed study of the fundamental problems of voice-leading, considered in themselves and without reference to the other elements of the musical language. In his view this is the only tenable approach to a real understanding of these problems; to consider (as is almost universally the case in current methods of teaching), the study of counterpoint as in any sense a study of composition is as futile as to regard the highly simplified exercises of a beginner in a foreign language, as literature. He therefore rejects as superficial both the empirical and the specifically historical approaches to counterpoint, and devotes himself to the consideration of the facts of voice leading in and for themselves, with a result that is very close to the principles of counterpoint originally formulated by Fux in the early eighteenth century. The whole is as masterly an apology for adherence to tradition in this branch of study, as one could expect to find. While there is here and there an ar-

gument that seems a little sophistical, or a piece of analysis that seems over-refined, the general effect is one of sound and expert reasoning and of successful application.

The most questionable portion of the book is his argument against the attempt to revive the "modes" of the medieval church as a basis of musical syntax. His objections to the erstwhile mania for exoticism, folk-lorism and archaism are sound enough, Heaven knows, though the violence and bitterness of his polemic sound rather strange at a moment when this particular tendency has for the most part been left behind. But the essence of this problem lies far deeper than a question, merely, of musical syntax. While recognizing the deeper psychological issues Schenker nevertheless attempts to solve the problem by means of theory alone. With admirable courage and candor he attacks it at its most difficult point, by analyzing examples of quasi-modal usage from the works of the greatest masters. The conclusions are interesting: Beethoven's *Dankgesang* is not in the Lydian mode at all, but gains its quasi-modal effect from the (in Schenker's view) forced and unsatisfying avoidance of the fourth degree of its scale, while Bach's settings of "*Gelobet seist Du, Jesus Christ*" prove, in spite of certain admirable features, how the instincts of even a great master may be sidetracked at moments by false teachings. It is easy enough to follow the logic of Schenker's argument. But unfortunately he asks us to choose between theories which, for all the clarity, sincerity, and verve with which they are advanced, remain purely speculative; and on the other hand, the actual deeds of the greatest masters. For the musician of instinct there can of course be only one possible choice, and Schenker's attempt to establish a dogma which shall have the effect of a genuine criterion, demonstrates in this case very clearly the oft proved fact that the essence of great art is something so infinitely delicate that it is likely always to remain an unfathomable mystery. Schenker's harmonization of the chorale in question, which he offers as the correct one, is precisely that which any reasonably competent musician would make. Only Bach's versions, as a comparison shows with devastating clarity, happen to be actual deeds of a man of supreme genius, and as such carry us to a realm of far more profound

musical reality. And the history of music, like history of other kinds, consists of deeds and not of theories.

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The last twenty odd years of Schenker's life were devoted principally to the study of the more abstruse and speculative problems of musical form, studies which were embodied first of all in a series of analyses or "Erläuterungen" of classic works and which culminated in his still unavailable treatise on form, entitled *Der Freie Satz*. In these works he carries the conception of *Auskomponierung* to its farthest possible conclusions in the principles of the "Ursatz" and its embodiment the "Urlinie," the principles through which he has become best known. These terms are somewhat misleading since they seem to define as primary conceptions, at the beginning of a composers' musical thought, structures which can be laid bare only after painstaking analysis. It is doubtless far from Schenker's intention to imply that the series of seven notes which he finds ultimately at the basis of the first movement of the *Eroica* symphony were in Beethoven's mind as the origin of the work; he presumably intends rather to deduce them as its ultimate background.

An adequate definition of the "Urlinie" and an exposition of the means by which Schenker deduces it from a given work would be manifestly impossible within the space of a short article. Sometimes his methods are logical and incontrovertible; too often, however, they seem arbitrary and speculative in the extreme, dictated by the impulse to find confirmation for an *a priori* assumption, even when one must admit that this assumption was arrived at only after years of painstaking research. Every composer is aware through his own experience of the reality of a "background" in his musical construction that goes beyond the individual traits of melody and harmony which constitute the most immediately perceptible features of his work. He is conscious, that is to say, of a type of movement which takes place gradually and over large stretches, and which embodies itself in the need which he feels, say, at a given moment, for such and such a high note, or for this or that particular harmonic or melodic intensification. This is in a very real sense one of the

most essential features of the composer's impulse and is far more than a part of an impulse towards "design" in the usual sense of the word. But the composer, too, will recognize the fact that musical line is, in its full significance, an extremely complicated affair, and that a single note may be fraught with a hundred implications and embody a hundred relationships within a given work. Most intelligent musicians, moreover, will realize that a musical impression is an integral thing, and that the various terms in which it is described and analyzed are, however useful and necessary, abstractions of a decidedly approximative nature. This holds true, ultimately, of Schenker's work just as fatally as of the older systems which formed the basis of the training of the composers themselves and which governed a large part of their speech about music.

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There are two fundamental objections, therefore, to such a conception as Schenker's "Urlinie" and "Ursatz". The first is that it is far too primitive as a description of the actual events which constitute a musical work, or the sensations and apperceptions that constitute the ultimate comprehension of that work. With an arrogance that is all too characteristic he makes the claim, on the title page of his treatise on the *Eroica* Symphony, that the latter is "Zum erstenmal in ihrem wahren Inhalt dargestellt" "presented for the first time in its true content!" The reader may follow him through pages of analysis, some of it brilliant, some of it over-ingenious, and if he is thoroughly familiar with the text of the symphony he will find it comparatively simple to "hear" it in the manner laid out by Schenker. But if he is musically gifted and really familiar with the work, the chances are that he will already have learned to hear it in its larger features, and that Schenker's analysis can at the very best do no more than illuminate certain points of detail. At worst it presents the music to him at second hand, and interposes a dogmatic and ingeniously conceived scaffolding between the hearer and the work as the composer himself heard it, thus interfering with his direct reponse which is the only possible basis of real comprehension. In any case there is no possible substitute

for a highly evolved musical ear and a robust musical instinct, and if he is possessed of these he will certainly find Schenker's description all too insufficient. He will conclude that the true content of the *Eroica* lies in the text of the work as conceived by Beethoven, and that there can be no adequate approach to such a work except through the accumulation of years of constantly more profound, but always direct experience of the music in its entirety, an experience for which there can be no substitute and to which there can be no short cut. And while knowledge is a most essential element in this experience, he will find that the only dependable source of knowledge lies in those elements of which the composer himself was aware.

This brings us to the second objection, and one which is equally vital for the time in which we live. It is perhaps a more fundamental objection than the first, since it concerns, above all, such conceptions of music itself as lie at the basis of Schenker's work. It is in essence the Alexandrian or *ex post facto* conception which envisages creation as the painstaking and meticulous embodiment of principles that were once vital and in process of development, but whose very definiteness and, so to speak, formula-bility proclaim either their insufficiency or their exhaustion. A culture which no longer can grow through its own vitality will end by gnawing the bones of its past; for the past can be kept alive only through vital growth into a present, in which the creative impulse is still alive and the ultimate criterion no artificially cultivated set of judgments based on analysis or research, but the living response of sensitive and exacting minds. It is precisely when Schenker's teachings leave the domain of exact description and enter that of dogmatic and speculative analysis that they become essentially sterile.

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Nevertheless it remains true that the contemporary composer faces problems of extreme difficulty, in regard to the materials of his art as well as to the spiritual questions which are so vital and so fateful today. The solution however lies exactly where it has always lain—in clear and honest musical thought in addition to creative power. This is more difficult, possibly, to achieve in

our day than it has been at various times in the past, when a living tradition came to the aid of the composer and, by setting a tangible standard, put a premium on clear musical thinking and good workmanship. Today the composer is thrown back on his own integrity, and can, so to speak, find artistic salvation only in the dictates of that integrity, clearly understood and religiously followed. In such a manner, under the leadership of really powerful personalities, it is not wholly inconceivable that new values might arise, and a new tradition be created. It is certainly hardly conceivable that Schenker's proud boast should be fulfilled, and a revival of the older tradition take place in Vienna, under the standard of the "Urlinie" and "Ursatz." That tradition has already, so to speak, developed away from itself, and is not to be revived by an adherence to doctrines derived from esoteric interpretations of the musical Scholiasts. A far more exacting discipline—that of the directly perceiving and spontaneously co-ordinating musical ear—is demanded of the musicians of to-day and tomorrow, if they are to be equal to the tasks before them. And they will derive much profit and help from the clear and profound conceptions in Schenker's earlier works, just as they will turn away from the 'Talmudic subtleties and the febrile dogmatism of his later ones.



DESIGN FOR ACT II OF MALIBRAN

By FREDERICK KIESLER

This American opera, by Robert Russell Bennet
and Robert Simon, was presented at the
Juilliard School in March 1935