

## RECENT BOOKS

### ESCAPE BY THEORY

**H** EINRICH SCHENKER'S *Der Freie Satz*, subtitled *Das Erste Lehrbuch der Musik* (Universal Edition, 1935), is difficult and unfortunately, in large part, repulsive and sterile reading. It is, in the first place, pathological in the most obvious sense; unfortunately its author lays great store by the general, pseudo-philosophical assumptions which form the background of his thought, and these are in the most self-revealing manner the outcome of personal frustrations and fantasies. His megalomania alienates even the patient and open-minded reader by its constant effort, a tendency all too frequent in contemporary German writing, not to convince or illuminate, but to intimidate him. Herr Schenker's obvious self-adulation, the endless polemic against the ignorance, venality, and bad faith of, it seems, all of his colleagues in musical theory, and his contemporaries in music, grow quickly to seem petty and dull. The recurrent note of cultural nationalism—an aggressive Germanism, somewhat stretched in order to include Scarlatti, Chopin, and obviously and above all Herr Schenker himself,—strikes a thoroughly repellent note today, in its insistence not so much on the primacy as on the eternal exclusiveness of German musical culture—of Germanism as such, in Schenker's own definition. This is all, of course, implicit in the subtitle of the book; the reader is never allowed to forget that Schenker, for the first time and quite alone, has made clear the true nature of music, that he alone understands the genius of the masters, in whose closed and inaccessible company he belongs as a kind of supreme arbiter of musical values.

In other words, Herr Schenker demands of his reader a great deal of patience, and a certain amount of tolerance and urbanity. It is true that a serious reader may to a large extent be expected to give this; but it is scarcely avoidable that, after twenty-nine pages devoted largely to this sort of thing, he begin to demand

something a little more serious of Herr Schenker himself. Unfortunately the chapters that follow—comprising, with the above mentioned, nearly half of the book—are precisely the most abstract, profoundly questionable, and obscure part of it, and for this reason serve simply to create new problems and difficulties for the reader. It is this portion in which Schenker establishes his theory of the *Ursatz*, or basic formula, which constitutes the “background” of music, and in which he formulates principles relating to what he calls the “middle ground,” in its various and, according to Schenker, clearly definable planes (*Schichten*). It is not, certainly, the existence of a “background,” or even of a “middle ground” that one would deny; musicians do not need Herr Schenker to tell them that a fully realized work of art is organic and the product of a “conception” in the truest sense of the word—an indivisible impulse, in which all parts contribute to the whole. One can appreciate, too, the immense amount of ingenuity and scholarship which has gone into Schenker’s effort to lay down the formula of the *Ursatz*. This very ingenuity however confirms one’s doubts in regard to what he has achieved. The formula is so attenuated, so inflexible, and so devoid of any dynamic quality that it is quite impossible to regard it as the kind of musical spermatozoon which Schenker conceives it to be; and however ingenious his adductions to it, they produce too often precisely the effect of being in given cases not only far fetched but quite extraneous to the object. It must not be forgotten that a living seed contains not only the possibility, but the determining elements of organic development along a certain predestined line; it is these determining elements, and not the inert ingredients of which they are composed, which indeed make a living organism possible, and which must form the basis for its study as an organism. It is therefore of no fundamental interest, even from the analytical point of view, to find a formula which lies at the basis of, say, the first movement of the *Eroica Symphony*, Bach’s *Passacaglia*, and Chopin’s *E-major Etude*; the interest of these or any other works begins precisely at the point where their individual qualities begin to appear and to grow in an inevitable manner. It is only at this point that organic life may be said to begin; and in a more specific sense it is at this point—

the composer's *conception*—where music begins to exist as such. For this reason, even if one considered Schenker's conclusions as proven beyond all manner of doubt, one could regard them as possessing possibly a certain academic interest, but as fundamentally irrelevant to living music; one would still be obliged to deny categorically their applicability as anything like invariable laws of art. At best they would be merely observable facts, subject to modification at any time.



In the second half of the book, where Schenker discusses the "foreground" of music, the reader fares considerably better, and if he can ignore the author's thoroughly offensive style and manner, may find much even to delight him. It is true that these chapters to a large extent presuppose the earlier ones as their foundation, and this "background" is never wholly lost from view; but here Schenker is in the immediate presence of concrete objects, rather than theories, and his first-rate powers of observation and keen analysis often appear here freed from the megalomania which drives him, in the earlier chapters, towards the establishment of "eternal laws." It would be futile to attempt much particularization in this regard; many of Schenker's observations, especially in the chapters relating to what he calls "Diminution"—the individual features of a musical work, in their relation to the whole design—to "Articulation," and to "Metre and Rhythm," struck the writer as genuinely profound, illuminating, and hence, in the only true meaning of the term, important.

The reviewer does not wish to lose sight of this fact in making general observations which express his quite radical dissent from the values on which Herr Schenker bases his system. He has repeatedly paid tribute to Schenker's analytical penetration and insight, and does so again, acknowledging gratefully that his own conceptions of certain technical and pedagogical problems owe a great deal, by way of clarification and precision, to certain of Schenker's earlier writings. But it is partly for this very reason that he feels the more strongly a fundamental divergence of viewpoint in regard to a system which aims to establish values and criteria which he cannot regard as other than categorically false.

He regards them as false first of all because they are based exclusively on "form"—form taken, in spite of Schenker's protestations to the contrary, not in the all-embracing individual sense, in which form is the complete, fully integrated, and all-inclusive embodiment of the composer's ideas, inseparable from and fully identical with them but in the purely material sense of acoustical logic. Schenker frankly wishes to establish his principles as criteria, not only of the degree of *realization* of a musical work, but of its intrinsic value. The *Urlinie* becomes more than the final essence of musical logic—it becomes a touchstone of genius. It is unnecessary to repeat the reasons, given above, why the reviewer and, he is confident, most of his colleagues, find it quite unacceptable as either the one or the other. "Form" on this plane, or constructed on this basis, seems to him non-existent because the living germ—the musical impulse—is absent; just as form in the abstract, as a point of departure, is in any artistic sense non-existent.

It is inevitable that on this basis Schenker should give an inordinate importance to musical theory. If, as this writer is convinced, musical logic is by its very nature dynamic and concrete, existent as a reality only in the successive embodiments created by the genius and imagination of composers, theory is properly not a code of external laws but a compendium of known and discoverable materials and usage, of practical value to the teacher and student, and in a far more questionable and restricted sense to the mature artist. It is thus strictly descriptive in character, and is useful precisely in so far as it is accurate and complete. It has no reality or significance whatever beyond this; and a theory which pretends to establish "eternal laws" is always suspect—not because there are no eternal laws, but because these are the affair of God, not of man, who can approach them only through the embodiment of a creative instinct in *works*, manifold in aspect and subject only to the limitations of human powers and imagination.

For these reasons such a system as Herr Schenker's is only possible *after* the fact—never before it. It becomes essentially the grammar of a dead language, being based inevitably on the music of a given, strictly circumscribed time and place. In Schenker's

case this is, roughly speaking, the period which nearly everyone would concede to have been the greatest, even though Schenker's company of geniuses, which includes, apparently, Clementi and certainly Mendelssohn, nevertheless excludes Wagner and Berlioz and Verdi. Schenker not only practically ignores whatever is in any sense evolutionary in this period, and treats it as something purely static, but he seems to imply that its greatness was based primarily on its embodiment of certain principles of craftsmanship, and that the art of music can be revived by a re-application of principles which he believes himself to have derived from it. The reviewer is heartily in agreement with Schenker's distaste for a false and destructive historicism which finds in history justification, through false parallelism, for any and every possible idiocy, and for the lack of standards which a too great "catholicity of taste"—meaning in reality a lack of essential conviction—has engendered in our time. But his static theory has little or no relevance to the actual situation of music today, and even takes no regard of the causes—inherent already partly in the music of the "great period"—which have brought it to this situation. This constitutes both its fatal weakness and its appeal for a certain type of mentality. It is all too easy for those incapable of meeting the creative problems of a period like our own, to take refuge in a contempt for the present and its struggle, and a highly specious identification with the great masters of the past, through the false profundities of an analysis which is always excessive and often sophistical.



For it should properly be a truism that analysis, however brilliant and even imaginative, can never penetrate below the surface of a work of art. It is possible approximately—though only approximately,—and valid pragmatically, to demonstrate some of the connections and syntheses that go into a work of genius. The work itself, however—and this is true of the humblest as well as of the greatest—remains still inaccessible and mysterious, and above all unique—a *deed* of which the attempted reconstruction is, and must perforce always be a mere reflection, without content or value of any genuine kind. To a large extent Schenker would admit this. What he seems not to admit is that an art, a culture,

is organically attached to the time and place that produces it, and that even the greatest culture of the past can serve at best as an example and an ideal, not as a model. His motto, "Semper idem sed non eodem modo," is of course in the deepest sense true; it says little however that is definite, since there is no way of establishing theoretically the exact point of divergence between the two categories which it sets up. One can admit gladly that artistic values—since they are human values—are inherent and in the last analysis unchangeable; their living embodiment however must come from within—through the gradual growth and development of a tradition from the means at its disposal; it can never be imposed from without by the adoption of "standards" conceived in a purely static sense, and taken over from a period which, as Schenker himself would have us believe, is closed. The composer of today must, and at his best does strive, as composers have always striven, to embody in his art the qualities of synthesis, of range, of intensity for which he must perforce strive as a human being; he would only face hopeless and inevitable defeat were he to ignore the continuity which binds him to the great period of the past, even if that continuity has been primarily destructive of the older synthesis. It is his task, in fact, to build, as far as he is able, in the spirit of his titanic predecessors, but with the materials, vastly different from theirs, which his time and destiny have put at his disposal.

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## COMPOSERS IN AMERICA

THE present volume, *Composers in America: Biographical Sketches of Living Composers with a Record of Their Works*, by Claire Reis, (The MacMillan Company, 1938) is the logical expansion of her two earlier and briefer works dealing with the same subject.

The phenomenal increase in the amount of music of high aspiration composed in this country during the past quarter century demands closer attention to its nature and the potential means of its performance. Studies of the American composer have tended