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**REVIEW – NICHOLAS COOK, *THE SCHENKER PROJECT*
(OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2007)**

A rising trend in twenty-first century musicology is the contextual examination of music theorists themselves. It is no longer enough that music theory itself is studied – research has moved on to the study of those theorists who first invented (or ‘discovered’) these theories. While there is no shortage of new music theory, such as the New Formenlehre and Neo-Riemannian theory, there is a desire to ascertain not merely how we apply a theory of music to a musical work, but how that music theory came into being and evolved in the first place. This falls under the much wider umbrella of the history of music theory, albeit wearing such new clothes as cultural philosophy, linguistics, politics and legal history.

Cook’s work has been preceded, conceptually, by the excellent Alexander Rehding, *Hugo Riemann and the Birth of Modern Musical Thought* (2003). There is something immediately in common with these texts: they both cover music theorists with fascinating biographies. The bizarreness of Riemann’s ‘moonshine experiment’ concerning ‘undertones’ is paralleled in uniqueness by Schenker’s staunch advocacy of the Austro-Germanic tradition in the face of growing anti-Semitism, providing the musicologist with ample material for intellectual history. It is important, therefore, that other fine theorists – Simon Sechter and Thomas Morley spring to mind – with perhaps less ‘interesting’ lives are not marginalised by this trend. All theorists work within a context which needs to be fully understood in order to evaluate their ideological position. Previously, and particularly the case with Schenker, much of music theory has been understood only phenomenologically and divorced from this essential context.

The Schenker Project adds momentum to a growing field of discourse surrounding the various intellectual contexts of Schenker’s theories. In the first chapter, Cook outlines his fundamental question, ‘What was Schenker’s problem, and in what way might his theory represent his solution to it?’¹ To answer this and other issues, Cook sets out to place Schenker within a broader intellectual context than the musical or the philosophical. He looks to build upon and consolidate the work of Ian Bent, Martin Eybl, Carl Schachter, Wayne Alpern and Hellmut Federhofer, evoking their studies of legal history, politics and Schenker’s publishing correspondence Universal Edition, within the wider context of Cook’s own intellectual history of Schenker.² This strand continues into the second chapter, where Schenker is set against the context of Viennese modernism. Cook defines this using

the visual arts and architecture – most notably, he defines fin-de-siècle modernism in Vienna with reference to Gustav Klimt’s series of friezes, including his depiction of a flat and ornate figure entitled ‘music’ – in order to reconstruct Schenker’s reaction to it.³ Drawing on the references of Bent and Federhofer, Cook demonstrates Schenker to have been one of the first advocates of historically informed performances of early music, tying in directly with his notion of Schenker as the devoted anti-modernist. To this he adds the context of Schenker’s work on music editing and ornamentation – particularly relevant given the critical importance of ornamentation in Schenker’s concept of large-scale forms.

Cook’s analysis of German cultural conservatism in chapter three successfully places Schenker within the context of entrenched German values at the beginning of the twentieth century. His discussion is also substantiated by reference to Schenker having actually read key texts by Spengler and Mann.⁴ Of particular note here is the almost inevitable reference to nature as a legitimisation of a theory of music, which is placed in the context of the nature/ artifice dichotomy: ‘While there was of course a music-theoretical tradition of deriving music from the phenomena of acoustics, for Schenker and his contemporaries the solution must lie partly in the conservative ideology that coded natural as good and artificial as bad’.⁵ For Schenker, therefore, there was more to the appearance of acoustics in his music theory than the simple demonstration that it is possible to find the major triad at the beginning of the overtone series.

Cook saves one of his most remarkable aspects of Schenker’s contexts for the fourth chapter: Schenker’s immigration, as a Galician Jew, to Vienna just as anti-Semitism was reaching its apotheosis. To begin with, it is made clear that Schenker’s involvement (albeit from the tender age of sixteen rather than eighteen) in Wien Universität was not unusual – in fact, around a third of students studying there at the time of Schenker were Jewish.⁶ However, his path differed initially by his refusal to convert to a different faith – a decision normally undertaken to attain the highest career levels – which placed him apart both from the Christians in the upper parts of society and the working-class Galician Jews. That Schenker never belonged to a majority social category, combined with the intellectual aspirations of his father who ‘fled, day and night ... to the beloved library, to his professional journals, in order

to keep abreast constantly of all the new discoveries and progress made within the medical sciences', can be seen as a contributing factor to his unique theoretical output on Austro-German music.⁷

In his fifth chapter, Cook renews the work begun by William Rothstein (1986), documenting the way in which Schenker's own theory was adapted – and in many people's opinion, watered down – to become 'Schenkerian' theory.⁸ This is eloquently summarised as 'beyond assimilation', although I wonder if more attention may have been afforded to the way in which the changes from Schenker to Schenkerian were actually made obliquely, and which could only be fully realised by a side-by-side comparison with the original German. Many of these changes or omissions from Schenker's original text were made with a view to making his theory more 'digestible' to the English-speaking reader.⁹ However, with the benefit of hindsight, these efforts actually worked against rather than for the dissemination of Schenker's theory.

In his recent and incisive review in *Music Analysis*, Kevin Korsyn (2009) finds Cook's knowledge of Hegel to be distinctly lacking, and his bias excessive.¹⁰ This is particularly to be found in the numerous references to Hegel which presume the naïve axiom that his work stems from the dialectic triangle – one which is refuted in *The Hegel Myths and Legends* ed. Jon Stewart (Northwestern University Press, 1996). This is a limitation, certainly, although Cook shamelessly covers himself when he acknowledges at the beginning of *The Schenker Project* that 'Ideally, this book would have been written by someone who combined deep knowledge of Schenkerian theory, German history and philosophy, and eastern European Jewish culture, not to mention the language

skills demanded by Schenker's often convoluted German.'¹¹

All of this material is crucial as, in educating us about the background of the theorist, it affords the reader a renewed critical perspective of the theory itself. Schenker's Ursatz is no longer just the fundamental chord of nature, but the product of a unique theoretical mind which emanated from the bizarre combination of Jewish Diaspora and fin-de-siècle Vienna, topped with an education in Law. His continual references to 'musical laws', arise not as a peculiar turn of phrase, but from his thought process, conditioned at Wien Universität. In fact, the tracing of musical-legal terminology in Schenker points the way to investigating subsequent theorists for similar, although perhaps more inadvertent, 'legal' influences.

Ultimately, Cook's text presents the crowning achievement so far in contextual Schenker studies. His text is always engaging and full of references to point the way for future study. The limitations – which Cook indirectly acknowledges from the outset – should in no way detract from the way in which *The Schenker Project* penetrates the rich context within which Schenkerian theory has been placed hitherto. Whether or not it is necessary to inform the analysis of music with the background of a given theorist, at least we are now able to offer an educated and discriminating opinion. To elaborate on the introduction to Cook's seminal text on musical analysis (1987): if the study of music is the key to man's spiritual and emotional being, then the study of the theory of Schenker – who believed his theories held the key to the understanding of Austro-German diatonic music – is of crucial and unavoidable importance to the advancement of music theory and analysis.¹²

ENDNOTES

¹ Nicholas Cook, *The Schenker Project* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 6.

² Wayne Alpern, 'Music theory as a mode of law: The case of Heinrich Schenker, Esq.' *Cardozo Law Review* 20 (1999) pp. 1459-1511 and 'Schenkerian Jurisprudence: Echoes of Schenker's Legal Education in his Musical Thought' (City University of New York: PhD, forthcoming), Ian Bent, "'That Bright New Light': Schenker, Universal Edition, and the origins of the Erläuterung series, 1901-1910' *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 58 (2005) pp. 69-138, Martin Eybl, *Ideologie und Methode: Zum ideengeschichtlichen Kontext von Schenkers Musiktheorie* (Tutzing: Schneider, 1995), Hellmut Federhofer, *Heinrich Schenker, nach Tagebüchern und Briefen in der Oswald Jonas Memorial Collection, University of California, Riverside* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1985), Carl Schachter, 'Elephants, crocodiles, and Beethoven: Schenker's politics and the pedagogy of Schenkerian analysis' *Theory and Practice* 26 (2001) pp. 1-20.

³ *The Schenker Project*, pp. 100-108. Klimt's 'Music' is also known by the title 'Poetry'.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁸ William Rothstein, 'The Americanization of Heinrich Schenker' in Heidi Siegel, ed., *Schenker Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 192-203. First published 1986.

⁹ The main example of which is the preface to *Counterpoint*.

¹⁰ Kevin Korsyn, 'Schenker's Vienna: Nicholas Cook on Culture, Race and Music Theory in fin-de-siècle Austria' *Music Analysis* 28/i (2009), pp. 153-179.

¹¹ *The Schenker Project*, p. v.

¹² Nicholas Cook, *A Guide to Musical Analysis* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1987).

