

NICHOLAS COOK, *THE SCHENKER PROJECT. CULTURE, RACE, AND MUSIC THEORY IN FIN-DE-SIÈCLE VIENNA* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) ISBN 978-0-1951-7056-6, xi + 355pp, \$65.

‘Our principal and perhaps only responsibility, I would argue, is to understand—for to understand is not to condone, while to condemn without understanding is futile’ (147). This sentence, already halfway through the book, might be regarded as the thread running through Nicholas Cook’s extensive research into Heinrich Schenker’s theoretical thought. Too often, Schenker’s conservative and reactionary ideas on music have been criticized without attempting any historical understanding of the cultural context in which they developed; however, Cook does not allow himself to be carried away by any polemic, which could create a rather strange mixture when combined with Schenker’s own polemics. Indeed, Cook’s aim is to understand, without condoning, the texts and subtexts in which Schenker dealt provocatively with cultural, race, and political issues. At the same time, the understanding that Cook proposes of Schenker poses inescapable questions—Why do we do music analysis? And why do we do it in this or that way?—to all those interested in music analysis in general and Schenkerian analysis in particular. What is presented is thus a very detailed jigsaw where Schenker and his work are set ‘into a number of distinct historical contexts: these include Viennese modernism, cultural and political conservatism’ (32) and the situation of a Galician Jewish immigrant, revealing thus the numerous resonances within Schenker’s thought of the contemporary culture in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. It is not about direct influences so much as about the reconstruction of the connections between the various contexts.

Cook presents Schenker between two *impasses* at the beginning and at the end of his career. At the beginning the main *impasse* is represented by the problem of defining musical logic, as expressed in the essay ‘Der Geist der musikalischen Technik’ (1895). The essay is famous for the assumption that

the simple analogy ‘between music and organism’, Schenker explains, ‘leads to error, just as it originated in an error.... As a matter of fact, no musical content is organic. It lacks any principle of causation, and a contrived melody never has a determination so resolute that it can say, ‘Only that particular melody, and none other, may follow me’. (36)

Schenker reaches this ‘conclusion’ after discussing the relationship between music and language: even though music

came to be increasingly fashioned after language...the basic principles of language and music are quite different. Music created the *illusion* of an inherent musical logic.... It is in order to articulate this sense of an inherent musical logic, Schenker adds, that we use the term “organic” of those “works to which we can listen without upsetting our own abilities, capacities, and enjoyment” (36)

Cook retraces the journey of this essay through the main scholarly interpretations. The first, of course, to bring this essay to our attention was William Pastille in 1984 in *19th-Century Music*, who stated that ‘the view of musical organicism presented in *Geist* is exactly the opposite of that expressed in Schenker’s later works’ (37). But then in 1989 Allan Keiler ‘rejects the whole idea that there was a fundamental change in view in Schenker’s thinking’ (37). For him the *Geist* essay and its allegedly anti-organicist position was only a way to ‘stand in opposition to ideas of Hanslick and others’ (38).

The third article Cook considers is by Kevin Korsyn for whom ‘Schenker’s anti-organicism...could be considered an extension of Mach’s anti-metaphysical critique’ (39). With the connection to Ernst Mach—with whom Schenker was acquainted—and his idea that ‘experience is nothing but a construct of sensations and there can be no firm distinction between reality and appearances’ (39), Korsyn gives a postmodernist version of the first Schenker, without, as Cook observes, suggesting ‘why Schenker should have adopted, and later abandoned this sceptical position’ (39).

For Cook the situation is rather different; to start with, there is no contrast between Hanslick and Schenker. This does not mean that there are no differences; certainly ‘Schenker’s Leibnizian insistence...on the unchanging nature of musical content... might well be read as a specific critique of Hanslick’s claim in *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* that musical forms wear out, so that what was once beautiful may with the passage of time cease to be so’ (48). However, beyond this, for Cook there is a ‘close link between the basic conceptual framework of Hanslick’s book and Schenker’s essay that one may see Hanslick’s approach as fundamental to Schenker’s thinking, not only in “Der Geist der musikalischen Technik” but far beyond’ (48). Both Hanslick and Schenker view the relationship between the subjective and the objective in similar ways. Music has objective properties which composers manipulate in order to create emotional effects. This can be understood in both Schenker and Hanslick not only as a criticism of ‘Hegel’s view of music as limited to the representation of feeling and hence an inferior mode of knowledge’ (50), but also as the basis for a widespread misunderstanding; that is, that first Hanslick, and later Schenker, thought that music does not convey feelings. Indeed, for both of them, the emotional elements of music, in the subjective response they provoke in the listener, can only be understood through the objective qualities of music, which ‘constitute the proper concern of musical aesthetics’ (50). This idea leads them to a critique of their contemporary music culture: a culture that in Hanslick’s view sees form and content as two contrasting elements of music, whereas in Schenker’s view they are concerned exclusively with formal schemata. So that, when Hanslick writes that

‘in music there is no content as opposed to form, because music has no form other than content’, he anticipates Schenker’s statement in the *Geist* essay that ‘every content...has its own form....

What is called form is an abstraction', and it is on this basis that Schenker says a few sentences earlier that 'it goes without saying that I am also an adversary of the term 'formalism'. (58)

Thus for Cook, if Schenker is an anti-formalist—as also Keiler suggests—he is such in a 'sense that makes Hanslick an anti-formalist too' (58). Both Hanslick and Schenker, in Cook's opinion, propose a formalism against formalists, whose false theories have been determined by the 'forced alignment with linguistic models'. As a consequence of this, for Cook 'the central concern of the *Geist* essay is the disparity of music and words, or maybe it would be more accurate to say the mismatch between music and how it has been theorised' (58). But then

having made his demonstration that musical logic can have nothing to do with the superficial, language-dominated categories of conventional thinking about music, Schenker is quite unable to see a way round his own argument against the possibility of natural principles operating within the human province of art. (64)

For Schenker, music's organicism could exist only 'inasmuch as the composer has *not intended it*' (64); music's organicism is therefore a possibility against the conscious design of the composer, but this is an anomaly that only after the *Geist* essay Schenker stopped considering an anomaly. Behind all this lies the contrast between subject and object: subject, both as composer and listener, and therefore their contingencies, and object as music. Organicism is a quality of nature and nature has objective qualities, exactly like music has objective qualities, but at this stage Schenker still understands the composer as 'he' who manipulates the objective qualities of music; the subjective role of the composer is important to the extent that although he uses music's objective qualities these are 'superseded' by the subjectivity of the composer and his conscious design. It is certainly a controversial relationship between subject and object as envisaged by Schenker, because even though the subjectivity of the composer is the aspect that does not allow organicism in music, the main content of music can be understood only in relation to the objective qualities of music, which, as such, could then present elements of organicism. The answer to this dilemma, in Cook's view,

was almost painfully simple when it came, although it surely required him to set common sense to one side: he ceased to see the idea of music composing itself independently of the composer's conscious volition as an anomaly, and instead viewed it as the definitive attribute of the musical masterworks, the work of genius.... Genius consists in an understanding of this self-realisation [of music], such that the master composers fully intended what they wrote without forcing their music into theoretical formulae, in the manner of the formalists. (65, 66)

This problem, even though Schenker 'apparently' resolves it through his theory of genius—indeed, for Cook, 'Schenker's theory becomes...a theory of musical genius'—has never fully disappeared (65). Cook, in the last part of his book writes of the difficulty for Schenker—the later of the two *impasses* that frame his experience as theorist—

of reconciling ‘two incompatible modes of thought: on the one hand the dialectical thinking...predicated on an interaction between foreground and background; on the other the idealism of a Platonist or Leibnizian type that pervades *Der freie Satz*, according to which ideas are abstract and eternal, removed from the generation and their time’ (295). Cook does not make the link explicit, but I suggest that on the one hand it is possible to consider the interaction between foreground and background as the result of the constructing activity of the composer, the subjective, contingent, and artificial sides of composition; on the other hand one may consider the idealism of *Der freie Satz* as the objective, natural and, as such, the organic side of music. But even in *Der freie Satz*, however, the contrast between subject and object is not entirely resolved. Schenker in fact ‘cannot avoid making occasional reference to the constructive impact of foreground features within the synthesis’ (294), which, at the time of *Der freie Satz* (1935) can be understood in terms of the idealist view as opposed to the more multi-parameter and foreground-background interaction based synthesis of Schenker’s earlier analytical practice in *Der Tonwille* (1921–4). This is for Cook ‘a double mismatch in Schenkerian theory: on the one hand between the monism of Schenker’s theoretical proclamations and the relative pluralism of his analytical practice, and on the other between the monism of Schenker’s analytical practice in the last phase of his work and his earlier, more pluralist practice’ (295).

But this is also the answer to the opening question of Cook’s book: ‘If Schenker’s theory was the solution, what was the problem?’ The problem was the relation between subject and object; a problem which can be recognized in every context against which Cook sets Schenker’s life and ideas. In chapter 2 (‘The reluctant modernist’), when discussing Schenker’s monograph *Ein Beitrag zur Ornamentik* (1903) in relation to *fin-de-siècle* art and architecture in Vienna, Cook highlights a duality between ‘the ideal, enduring content of the music on the one hand and on the other the mechanical means of its representation’ (92), and of course Schenker’s polemics against virtuosos is also part of the duality subject/object. ‘As [Schenker] sees it, performers have obligations, but they also have freedom in terms of the means by which these obligations are to be met, and the issue of freedom becomes one of the dimensions within which both *Ornamentik* and Schenker’s later writing on performance play out the duality between spirit and technique’ (93). In chapter 3, ‘The conservative tradition’, Cook reads Schenker’s thought against the duality of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, a terminology used by Ferdinand Tönnies in his 1887 book *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* and widely discussed by writers at the beginning of the twentieth century. ‘*Gesellschaft* stands for a cluster of concepts including industrialisation, modernisation, capitalism, rationalism, internationalism and anonymity, while *Gemeinschaft* stands for mutual support, cohesion, and organicism—the values of a nostalgically conceived, preindustrial society’ (161). In chapter 4, ‘The politics of assimilation’, the issue of subject-object is then

analysed in relation to the status in Vienna of a Galician Jewish immigrant from the eastern side of the Hapsburg Empire.

In the detailed account of the numerous resonances of Schenker's thought within the contemporary culture of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, there are, however, a few aspects which I think might have been considered more thoroughly. In the discussion of Schenker's project, Cook concentrates mainly on the published work of the theorist; furthermore, when talking about Schenker's publications from *Der Tonwille* onwards the focus is mostly on the more theoretical essays. Even when Cook considers unpublished essays, such as the unfinished text *Über den Niedergang der Kompositionskunst* (1905–6), the attention is drawn to non-analytical essays. Only in chapter 5, 'Beyond assimilation', does he take into consideration, in relation to Schenkerian analyses' reception history, analytical concepts such as synthesis and the different meanings it embodied at different times in Schenker's career. There seems to be therefore a separation between practice and theory, presenting thus only half of the story. For example, Cook is preoccupied solely with Schenker's struggles and attempts at theorizing musical logic from the *Geist* essay onwards, but then he does not consider Schenker's struggles and attempts at analysing musical logic. He discusses and reports from Joseph Lubben how synthesis is understood in different terms in the analyses of the *Kaiserhymne* in *Der Tonwille* and in *Der freie Satz*; but there is little trace of the practical and analytical path that led Schenker to the analytical practice of *Der Tonwille*. The years 1910–1920 are those which might provide evidence of this path, but they are not examined as extensively as the decades before and after. The 1910s, as can be evinced from Schenker's unpublished working material in the Ernst Oster Collection in New York, saw Schenker setting his analytical journey on a path different from the one he had already followed in *Harmonielehre* (1906) and the first volume of *Kontrapunkt* (1910). The Oster Collection contains an early draft of the treatise of a theory of form, with several texts discussing issues of form in various pieces by Brahms, Schumann, and Chopin. It also contains several attempts at harmonic and reductional analyses, and thus in few cases it is possible to follow the 'analytical' history of a piece from the first commentary in the draft of an early treatise on form (around 1913), to the graphic analysis, although an unpublished one, from the late 1920s.¹ The comparison of these materials with the earliest theoretical essays suggests that Schenker's 'struggles' as a theorist started much earlier than his 'struggles' as an analyst. Or, in other words, it seems that only after he started to overcome the theoretical *impasse* of the *Geist* essay

¹ See Antonio Cascelli, *A Study of Schenker's Unpublished Analyses of Chopin in the Oster Collection* (PhD diss., University of Southampton, 2003), and the same writer's 'I Preludi 1, 2, e 15 dell' op. 28 di Chopin: un'analisi in prospettiva metaforica', *Studi Musicali*, 36/1 (2007), 161–90.

did Schenker start his analytically and practically driven journey: only in the 1920s, then, did the two paths fully merge. But of this there is little trace in Cook's book.

Another element which I think is not investigated in full depth is the importance of religious language in Schenker's vocabulary. The discussion of religious influence is limited to the political aspects of assimilation of a Galician Jewish immigrant into the Hapsburg Empire, but I wonder whether something more can still be said; there is in Schenker's thought a religious tension which intersects, but does not necessarily coincide with, the philosophical resonance widely explored in the book. Although we have no precise knowledge of Schenker following Jewish tradition, Schenker's knowledge of the Bible—both First and Second Testaments—is not in doubt, but what values we want to ascribe to this knowledge is not discussed. In addition to this, one should certainly consider the fact that many aspects of post-Enlightenment political language are a secularized transposition, so to speak, of religious language; thus, within this general framework, the figure of the Genius, certainly a relevant topic of German Romantic Idealism and already discussed by Kant—as also Cook reminds us (68)—is the secularized version of the figure of the prophet in the Bible, the man who becomes the transmitter of the word of God, in the same way as the genius is the transmitter of music masterpieces. The reference to the fact that '[Domenico] Scarlatti suffered the customary fate of genius: he was forever estranged from his fellow-countrymen' (241), it is not just a common-knowledge sentence; indeed it is a reference to the Gospel of Luke (4:24): 'no prophet is ever accepted in his own country'. More important, however, is the fact that the two incompatible forms of idealism between which Schenker is almost entrapped are also a typical problem of the Jewish-Christian tradition; it is the conflict between God's omniscience and human contingency and freedom. Considering that for Cook, when investigating the contexts in which Schenker's thought can be understood, 'The point...is not so much one of specific terminology as of the pattern of thinking that lies behind it' (163), I think it would be worth considering an analogous pattern of thinking in religious language. All these further resonances, of course, do not contradict the main aspect of Cook's book, but they would certainly contribute to reveal further that 'Schenker's theory is not, or not simply, a theory in the way that music theorists today commonly understand that word, but an integral element in a much broader programme for artistic, social, and political change' (6).

In its numerous layers of commentary, however, Cook's book is a fascinating cultural *tour de force*, urging musicologists, students and performers to reconsider their own understanding of Schenker and Schenkerian analysis. The starting point for this process is indeed the duality of subject versus object that Schenker faced when he tried first to deny, and later to justify, musical logic. This duality is also the terrain of our own lives; it is part of twenty-first-century identity and racial and political agendas, where objectivity is considered something imposed on our own subjectivity, where

global is opposed to non-global. Cook presents therefore a Schenker much closer to us than sometimes we might imagine; but, indeed, the solution that Schenker proposes—the theory of genius, the monism of *Der freie Satz*—re-establishes a certain distance between us and Schenker. But then the following questions, which one can perceive as a subterranean current through the whole book, emerge inevitably in chapter 5, after Cook has discussed the relation object/subject in what could be considered the reception history of Schenkerian analysis: ‘Are we then to understand Schenker’s theory on his own terms, however flawed or unacceptable we may consider his epistemology, or on ours...? Is it defensible to pick and choose what we want from his work? Can it make sense to adopt his analytical methods while ignoring his aesthetics, political, and philosophical beliefs?’ (301). For Cook,

a knowledge of the context within which Schenker formulated his theory—of its social, political, religious, or philosophical dimensions—is important not just if one is to understand why these particular decisions have been made, thereby taking ownership of them, but if one is to understand that decisions have been made at all; the danger otherwise is of an analytical practice that has all the answers but none of the questions. ...if you have *never* worried about Schenker’s elitist conception of culture, never wondered what Schenker saw as the point of analysis, never asked what Schenker’s project was, then there is an odds-on chance that you are doing analysis because it is there to be done, because it is doable, rather than on the basis of any more critical or personal investment. Analysis can mean more than that. (303)

And it is the recognition of this critical and personal investment both in our experience of analysis and in Schenker’s own experience that reaffirms the dichotomy close/distant I detect in Cook’s presentation of Schenker. For both us and Schenker, analysis ‘is a process inevitably informed by our own experience of the personal, social, and cultural world in which we live, and so [it] becomes a site for the construction of music as socially meaningful. And because the process of signification works in two directions, it is also a vehicle for the feeding back of musical meaning into the world beyond music’ (317). Therefore, the understanding of the ramifications of Schenker’s theory and music analysis into the social, religious and political world of his time, as explored in Cook’s book, reminds us that our own ideas on music theory and our own experience of music analysis are likewise rooted into the social, religious and political world of our time and space.

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