

Nicholas Cook. 2007. *The Schenker Project: Culture, Race, and Music Theory in Fin-de-siècle Vienna*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Reviewed by Laura Tunbridge

Schenker is dead: long live Schenker. Nicholas Cook states the aim of this book to be to “construct a meaningful relationship” in place of the perceived “cultural chasm” between our world and Heinrich Schenker’s (47). Of course, the impulse to put Schenker into historical context is not new, although, as Cook points out, previous studies have tended to focus on his philosophical precursors rather than include the broader cultural issues also considered here. But why try to cross the “cultural chasm”? It is striking that the appearance of Cook’s book coincides with moves to historicize another icon of late twentieth-century musical scholarship: Carl Dahlhaus.¹ Indeed, Cook takes his title from James Hepokoski’s 1991 article “The Dahlhaus Project.” (There are further echoes: Chapter 1 tropes on the Dahlhausian as “Foundations of the Schenker Project.”) Schenker and Dahlhaus in many ways represent opposing poles—the formalist versus the cultural historian—and their simultaneous reassessment may be only coincidence. (It is worth pointing out that Dahlhaus would have been deeply unhappy about the pairing.) But such events may possibly indicate the consolidation of a generational shift: now that the “new musicologists” have become the establishment, polemics about getting out of/getting into analysis or the supremacy of German instrumental music are being replaced by accounts of Schenker or Dahlhaus as cultural phenomena. After all, there are few more effective ways of neutralizing a methodology than by historicizing it.

How times have changed! The first English translations of Schenker deliberately omitted parts of his commentaries because of their “frankly embarrassing” diatribes about the weakening of German music and society; as Suzannah Clark has pointed out, it would have been very difficult to promote Schenkerian analysis to the academy while insisting that his political views were relevant to its understanding (2007:142). Indeed, the Schenkerism that took hold of Anglo-American music theory in the 1970s and 1980s tended to avoid what were formerly called “extra-musical complications.” Even now, there continues to be a branch of theorists who prefer their Schenker neat. But curiosity encouraged others to seek out those suppressed commentaries and some of the more obscure writings, and a much messier account of Schenker’s project began to emerge. In chapter 1, Cook traces the “strikingly contradictory readings” of Schenker’s early essay, “Der Geist der

musikalischen Technik [The Spirit of Musical Technique]” (1895; included here as an appendix) by William Pastille, Allan Keiler, and Kevin Korsyn, commenting parenthetically that “It’s too bad it doesn’t fit Irving Berlin’s tune: anything you can contextualise, I can contextualise better” (38). While Cook is appreciative of their efforts to position Schenker’s thoughts in the German philosophical tradition, he is wary of their claims about direct influences; the *Nachlass* provides only circumstantial evidence of Schenker’s interaction with the Austrian physicist Ernst Mach (as argued by Korsyn), and Wayne Alpern’s doctoral exploration of resonances between Schenker’s analytical principles and Georg Jellinek’s approach to law is thought to smell in places of a “smoking gun.”

A common problem of intellectual history is how to disentangle what would probably have been common knowledge from deliberate reference. Cook executes a complicated dance around this issue throughout his book (the challenges of which become still more apparent when it comes to assessing Schenker’s familiarity with the Jewish tradition in chapter 4). His initial ploy, in response to Korsyn et al., is to claim a focus on “the connotations of what Schenker wrote” (46). Thus Cook hopes to “re-imagine . . . as far as possible regulated by the historical record” (47), our relationship with the man and his theories—indeed, to argue that these were not only theories, but constituted a “broader programme for action . . . the Schenker project” (208). Cook explains these connotations primarily by providing more cultural background: placing Schenker’s writings within the context of contemporary critical practice in Vienna; comparing his ideas about ornamentation with architectural developments in the city (including what Schenker may have seen every day from his home on Reiserstrasse); or explaining how there was a Viennese history of associating music and society, from seventeenth-century ecclesiasts to Adorno. A lengthy digression about the shared attributes of Schenker’s outlook and the Bösendorfer piano is typical of the general tone:

[T]he comparison not only helps to situate Schenker’s values in their Viennese context but also illustrates yet again, and now in a specifically conservative context, the trait I have repeatedly emphasised of slipping almost instantaneously from the smallest details—whether of editorial orthography or of piano timbre—to the largest issues of cultural identity and society. This trait transcends the distinction . . . between Viennese modernism and conservatism, and draws attention to an aspect of Viennese modernism that tends to be underemphasised in present-day accounts of it. (186)

Cook describes this as “join-the-dots” history (188), and at its best it makes for rich and sophisticated discussion.

For example, the problem of Schenker's "grisly" politics, at least as revealed in his writings, begins with the standard apology that they were "grounded firmly in the musical" (141). That does not make them less pernicious, as Schoenberg, Adorno, August Halm, and even Oswald Jonas recognized; and Cook admits to being swept away by "the hypnotic power of Schenker's rhetoric" (147). Yet to condemn Schenker's writings, according to Cook, "seems otiose, given that [he] died in his bed over seventy years ago—and would almost certainly have accompanied Jeanette to Theresienstadt had he lived longer" (147). Such breezy language notwithstanding, Cook contextualizes Schenker's politics—and his problems of assimilating as a middle-class Galician Jew in early twentieth-century Vienna—better than has been done before. And that is important because, in order to cross the "cultural chasm," Cook advises, our responsibility is to understand: "for to understand is not to condone, while to condemn without understanding is futile" (147). There is a sense, though, in which with this statement Cook can have his cake and eat it: he may reveal more of what is ideologically objectionable about Schenker in the name of understanding (even citing earlier editors' "excluded exclusions"), but still allows us to leave what can be crudely characterised as the "nasty bits" on the other side of the historical divide.

Among them may be the theory itself. There are several pictures in this book: of Schenker on holiday in the Tyrol, of *fin-de-siècle* Viennese architecture, of anti-Semitic brawls in the street. Given that the metalanguage of Schenkerian theory is essentially visual—the graph has become its calling card—it is striking that there are no music examples until the last thirty pages. Even then, with two exceptions, the figures are reproductions of Schenker's sketches from old editions, rather than newly set: adding a historical sheen that may send the reader plummeting back into that "cultural chasm." Is this, in some way, "period" Schenker?

Perhaps it has to be. Cook's final chapter broaches what he describes as the "in some ways most disheartening phase of the Schenker project" (245); but this turns out not to be, as might be expected, his subject's politics or the politics of assimilation. Rather, we move "Beyond Assimilation" (as he entitles his chapter): to the aesthetics of the analytical method itself, specifically the problem of late Schenker—his codification in *Der freie Satz* of the *Urfinie*. It is in the application of his final theory, according to Cook, that charges of an unconcern for empirical reality are most apposite (259). Whereas the unsavoury political implications (and unconvincing musical claims) of earlier writings can be explained away as rhetorical—even as jokes—Cook is ultimately reluctant to "contextualize" away Schenker's graphs (though he does later draw a brief parallel to "the eliminationist tendencies of the

authoritarian regimes which were coming into being in the 1930s” [293]). The challenge in part is that by the time the theory becomes more narrow and schematic, “the social dimension of the theory withers away: we end up not with the Schenker project as [Cook has] described it, but rather with what *Der freie Satz* has traditionally been seen as—a work of music theory, through which are scattered a large number of rather gratuitous remarks pertaining to philosophy, religion, society, or the individual” (268).

Cook’s next move is interesting. He uses the *fin-de-siècle* histories of his earlier chapters to critique the “Americanization” of Schenker in the second half of the twentieth century, during which time his theories became “streamlined,” and there arose an ideologically-freighted notion of “structural hearing”:

The ideal that inspires structural listening is transparency: heard right, a musical composition reveals its structure in the same way as a Bauhaus building. But nothing could be further from the Viennese modernism of Loos, the “discreet” exterior of whose houses concealed rather than disclosed the private spaces that lay within, or of Schoenberg and Schenker, for both of whom truth lay concealed behind appearances. The “better listening” Schenker called for . . . was less a matter of total disclosure than of orientation. (280)

The two distinct traditions of modernism at play here open up the possibility of one final, and these days probably inevitable, interpretative move, towards postmodern approaches to Schenker, “approaches that turn out to be at least as close to the historical Schenker, or maybe I should say one historical Schenker, as the modernist orthodoxy of Schenkerian theory” (281).

It seems likely that Cook would include himself among the postmodern Schenkerians. Yet unfortunately the closing section of the chapter engages with the theory—readings of the theory, and readings of readings—at a level of detail that would probably deter all but the most dedicated of readers. And this points to a contradiction at the heart of Cook’s historicizing project. The “original form” of Schenker’s theories have been demonstrated to be, at the very least, debatable: *Tonwille* or *Der freie Satz*? Yet Cook ultimately argues that the theory has a continuous history, which needs no reconstruction. Earlier I claimed that historicization is often an effective means of neutralizing a theory, but that seems not to be the case with this volume. Rather, contextualizing better is presented as a way to reinvigorate the Schenker project. Cook, rather sentimentally, concludes that analysis must “be understood as imbued with worldly meaning, as drawing its signification from the multiple contexts within which we live, as funnelling our experiences, hopes, and fears into music and back from music into the world we inhabit” (318). Schenker is said to be but one theorist among

many, and the limitations of his theory in terms of repertoire and audience are acknowledged at various places in this book, but the ‘cultural chasm’ between his world and ours is far from closed by Cook’s *Project*. So: Schenker is indeed dead: long live analysis?

Notes

1. See the two recent conferences *Beethoven and Rossini: Crossing Musical Cultures* (Cambridge University, May 2008), which revisited Dahlhaus’s notion of the “twin styles,” and *Carl Dahlhaus und die Musikwissenschaft* (Humboldt University, June 2008).

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