Becoming Heinrich Schenker

Much controversy surrounds Schenker's mature theory and its attempt to explain musical pitch motion. *Becoming Heinrich Schenker* brings a new perspective to Schenker's theoretical work, showing that ideas characteristic of his mature theory, although in many respects fundamentally different, developed logically out of his earlier ideas. Robert P. Morgan provides an introduction to Schenker's mature theory and traces its development through all of his major publications, considering each in detail and with numerous music examples. Morgan also explores the relationship between Schenker's theory and his troubled ideology, which crucially influenced the evolution of his ideas and was heavily dependent upon both the empirical and idealist strains of contemporary German philosophical thought. Relying where possible on quotations from Schenker's own words, this book offers a balanced approach to his theory and a unique overview of this central music figure, generally considered to be the most prominent music theorist of the twentieth century.

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Music Theory and Ideology

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Acknowledgements

This study was many years in planning, originally beginning as an article that was gradually expanded until it reached book-length proportions. I am no longer sure when early work began, but certainly well over a decade ago. At its outset, Schenker's theory was but one of several topics that concerned me; but during several subsequent periods, particularly immediately preceding this publication, it occupied me especially.

A sizeable body of literature on Schenker's theory and its conceptual foundations already exists, and I have relied heavily upon the work of many colleagues in writing this book. Some are friends with whom I have discussed Schenker at length, while others I know primarily through publications; and much of their work is cited during the course of this book. But since I have not been able to mention them all, I want to thank them here collectively for contributing to my view of Schenker, which would otherwise have been altogether different. Although this book takes a path of its own, it repeats many points covered by other scholars; and to them, particularly those who have dealt with Schenker's history and his work's meaning – a list including (to name only some) Ian Bent, David Berry, William Drabkin, Stephen Hinton, William Pastille, Hedi Siegel, and William Rothstein – I acknowledge my great indebtedness.

In addition, a number of books and dissertations on Schenker have appeared in the relatively recent past, by such eminent scholars as Leslie David Blasius, Matthew Brown, Nicholas Cook, Martin Eybl, Nicolas Meeùs, Eugene Narmour, William Pastille, and Robert Snarrenberg.[1] Although these books inevitably overlap in part with this one, none shares its concentration on Schenker's overall theoretical development; and those that deal with his ideology do so in very different ways. I nevertheless want to acknowledge Nicholas Cook's *The Schenker Project* for its treatment of Schenker as a social, political, and philosophical force, who can be understood only in relation to contemporary (especially Viennese) Germanic and German-Jewish thought. This book had a

[1] Brown (2006), Blasius (1996), Cook (2007), Eybl (1995), Meeùs (1993), Narmour (1977), Pastille (1985), and Snarrenberg (1997).

significant influence on my own, and brought about one important alteration: the brief discussion of ornamentation originally included in the section on synthesis in Chapter 6 (pp. 98–116) has been replaced by a much longer one with a section of its own.

Of the countless articles on Schenker that have been published during the same period, many covering some aspect of his work relevant to the present book have been cited within the text. But one that played a particularly important role in its preparation should be noted here: William Rothstein's extended article/review of the Schenker-related entries in the second edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.[2] Despite its stated purpose, this article provides an unusually knowledgeable and wide-ranging treatment of many of Schenker's theoretical ideas; and I benefited greatly from it.

Joseph Auner and Peter Smith, two former students of mine, now distinguished professors (one specializing in musicology, the other in music theory), read an earlier draft of the entire book and made numerous valuable suggestions for improvement. In writing this final version, I have relied heavily on their advice and owe both my deepest thanks; without their input this book would have been completely different. The three outside anonymous reader reports also had a significant effect on the book, especially on its manner of presentation. I also want to thank those at Cambridge University Press who assisted me, especially Vicki Cooper, the Press's Senior Commissioning Editor for Music and Theater (whom I first met during her graduate-school days at the University of Chicago), who worked long and diligently on my manuscript; and Fleur Jones, for invaluable assistance with various publishing issues. Also to be thanked is Guillermo Brachetta, who provided excellent copies for all of the examples, most of which (including without exception the more complex ones) first appeared in Schenker's own publications.

Most of the earlier work on this book took place at Yale University, where I had the luxury of constant contact with both students and faculty who knew a great deal about Schenker. I especially want to thank several colleagues there: Allen Forte, Daniel Harrison, James Hepokoski, Patrick McCreless, and Richard Cohn. All played an important part – though no doubt largely unknown to themselves – in shaping my ideas on the theorist. The students with whom I worked at Yale, as well as those at the University of Chicago and Temple University, also influenced me immeasurably, especially through participation in numerous classes and seminars on Schenker.

[2] Rothstein (2001).

While at Yale I also had the advantage of working in its wonderful research library, which contained virtually all of Schenker's works in both original editions and translation. I benefited incalculably from this sympathetic environment, where all questions were answered instantaneously by helpful staff members. Among those who assisted me, Susan Eggleston Lovejoy and Karl Schrom deserve particular thanks.

I also want to acknowledge the following publishers and individuals who own copyrights for the various Schenker works and have allowed me to quote copyrighted texts and examples from their lists: Columbia University Press, Georg Olms Verlag, Hellmut Federhofer, Musicalia Press, Pendragon Press, Theoria, The University of Chicago Press, William Drabkin, Yale University Press, and especially Universal Edition.

Finally, I thank my wife Carole Morgan, to whom this book is dedicated. Herself a flutist, she has shared my professional career for many years, holding positions in the music departments at the last three universities with which I was associated. She has also supported me over many years, including those in which this book took form, and has done so in more ways than I can possibly express.

Preface

Heinrich Schenker's mature theory of music occupies a unique position in the history of tonal music. It attempts to explain the pitch structure of a limited portion of this music (a portion that Schenker believed was the only music worth considering) totally and with complete rationality. Nevertheless, there are some distinct peculiarities to the theory, one of the most telling being that it contains an ideological paradox consisting of two apparently independent and opposed philosophical strains: a nineteenth-century Idealist one and a twentieth-century Modernist one. Although both influenced the theory's formation in a critical way, the Idealist one should be considered the dominant one, for it supplied the theory with its basic core – the spirituality of tone. This belief determined not only Schenker's general view of music but his overall theoretical development; and it is probably not too much to say that his mature theory was created largely as an effort to explain how individual compositions could express their spiritual basis and acquire such fundamental Schenkerian concepts as the notion of compositional unfolding, the Ursatz (and its components, the Urlinie and bass arpeggiation), and all the other transformational operations.

This idealist influence was evident in Schenker's earliest theoretical writings, which dated from the opening years of the twentieth century. He initially expressed the idea of tone's spirituality in his first fully theoretical work, the *Harmonielehre* of 1906 (its influence limited, however, to music's harmonic domain); and it was even presaged – if somewhat contrarily – in the earlier "pre-theoretic" article "Der Geist der musikalischen Technik" of 1895. Schenker was not, however, simply content to state that tone was spiritual; he was equally committed to explaining it theoretically. And for that his theory required significant modernist additions, above all the hierarchical and notational features and basic compositional orientation, for all of which it also became famous. In addition, the theory needed a substantial amount of time to reach full development, a span essentially covering the rest of Schenker's life.

Schenker's mature theory, then, including the unusual idealist–modernist mix that underlay it, was completed during his final years and reached full

maturity only in his last publication, *Der freie Satz*. Nevertheless, Schenker seems to have realized – certainly unconsciously but at times with considerable foresight – that his overall development pointed in some sense toward this theory. Although his work always provoked great interest, evident at various points of his development, it can thus be beneficially viewed as evolving toward the final theory. Of course most commentators, myself included, do not view his final theory as the perfect culmination of his entire previous development; yet, as seen in Part II, devoted entirely to his theoretical evolution, there are aspects of this development, and arguably the most important ones, that gain clarity when looked at from the perspective of its completion.

This book was written, then, in the belief that Schenker can be understood only when considered in a dual light: in terms of his overall theoretical development, and also in terms of the peculiar mixture of ideological elements that contributed to his work's character. Both factors, the evolution through which it acquired final shape and the ideology that supplied its necessary background – played essential roles in its development and are absolutely critical if we are to understand it adequately. Indeed, it is difficult if not impossible to see how the theory could have come into existence at all without the presence of both ingredients, its development and ideology.[1]

The conflicted nature of Schenker's theory must thus be stressed even in these brief introductory remarks. On the one hand, it was based on the empirical assumption that musical understanding is derived from close musical observation, and that it depends upon contrapuntal principles that were put together during the tonal period itself. On the other hand, it did not simply accept these contrapuntal categories but extended them to cover ever larger expanses of music, eventually entire compositions. And this necessitated considering music idealistically: as natural, organic, and derived from the "chord of nature," and as consisting of goal-directed

[1] Other Schenker commentators have of course been aware of this ideological split in his work; but while their writings have certainly influenced my own, their tendency has been to emphasize one side of his philosophical position at the expense of the other, as if only one had been adopted or a permanent shift was made from one to the other. This is the case, for example, in Blasius (1996), Karnes (2008), and Korsyn (1993) and (2009), all of whom write about Schenker's philosophical background, though they disagree as to whether it was determined by a change (Karnes and Blasius) or not (Korsyn), by his turn to a more empirical (Karnes or Korsyn) or critical approach (Blasius), or whether it was primarily defined in the later pre-theoretical articles (Karnes), in "Geist" (Korsyn), or in *Kontrapunkt I* (Blasius). I prefer, on the other hand, to see both idealism and empiricism as consistently present throughout Schenker's entire theoretical career, and thus evident in all of his professional writings.

tones with "egos" that allowed for long-range prolongations. For Schenker, then, music depended upon both contrapuntal operations originally established in the eighteenth century, such as basic voice-leading types like passing motion, neighbor relationships, and arpeggiated leaps, as well as listener-oriented psychological processes primarily developed in the nineteenth century, such as mental retention, musical depth, and substitution, all of which incorporated "invisible" features located beneath music's surface.

Schenker's life itself was rather uneventful. He was born in 1868 in Galicia of a Jewish family in the outer reaches of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; and he died in 1935 in Vienna, a prominent but still largely unknown figure, even in musical circles. Yet he was, and remains, a central – if controversial – figure in music theory, both because of the nature of his theory and because of his opinions concerning other general matters, especially music history but including all sorts of things. As for his theory, he claimed that music was totally explicable if its interpretation was directed toward a single dimension, pitch, which he believed – though with some inconsistency – was the sole parameter that could be logically explained once and for all. As for music history, prior to Bach and Handel it represented only a long preparation for the relatively few eighteenth- and nineteenth-century compositions he considered masterpieces, while after Brahms it experienced a sudden decline in a search for new methods that proved hopelessly beyond its true nature.

For Schenker, then, music history revealed a "grand narrative" in developing from relatively primitive beginnings until it attained the tools capable of producing great works, a period lasting only two centuries, after which it underwent precipitous decline. The controversy that surrounded him is thus partly attributable to this attainment–loss view, in support of which his theory could be said to have developed. But this view leaves open two important questions: why this concentration on a small group of works, and why attention to only a single musical parameter? One answer, perhaps, is that, despite obvious disadvantages, both enabled him to say something essential that would otherwise have been missing about the small body of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music to which his attention was directed. Though the theory does not of course tell us everything we would like to know about this music, it does attempt to explain one of its most critical features: how its pitches operate.

This book, then, offers a conceptual overview of Schenker's theoretical development and ideological position, and it attempts to tell how his work aimed to fulfill its admittedly limited yet important role. Despite a

certain amount of information about the theorist's life and character, the focus is thus primarily on the theory itself and on the Schenkerian "mentalité" that supported it (even though it was largely inherited from thinkers outside of the music field itself).

Schenker's specifically theoretical development can be conveniently divided chronologically into two parts, a first phase, beginning in 1903 and leading up to the final theory in about 1920, and a second phase during which the final theory itself took shape, beginning about 1920 and extending until Schenker's death in 1935. The first phase is of great interest in itself, not only because of its relation to the final theory but due to its own particular quality. In fact, many actually prefer it to the later one, not least because it contains an informal attitude toward how music is organized. But since my own interest is primarily with the close ties linking the two phases, this book concentrates mainly on ideas from the first phase that lead to those in the second.

As for the book's readership, it was not conceived for experts alone but also for those musically literate who have only a general interest in the current state of music theory. Three segments warrant particular attention in this regard, all of them containing relatively detailed descriptions of Schenker graphs: Section 7 of Chapter 2 (pp. 33–36), Section 3 of Chapter 7 (pp. 145–53), and Section 4 of Chapter 8 (pp. 165–71) – the first and last treating one graph, the second two. While these pose more technical difficulties than other parts and require a degree of specialized knowledge, they can nevertheless be skimmed over without unduly compromising the larger argument.

A word is in order about the concept of "final theory," which I have used – and will continue to use – with reference to the culmination of Schenker's second phase of development. This began to assume concrete shape only during the 1920s, in the successive issues of *Der Tonwille* and volumes of *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik*, and took on final form only in 1926, when Schenker was in his late fifties and had less than a decade to live. Even at that point, the theory had to await absolute completion until the final volume of *Meisterwerk* in 1930, and its complete presentation did not appear until *Der freie Satz*, published shortly following his death. Moreover, "final," as well as its complement "mature," relates not just to the theory itself but to the highly systematic and self-contained character of the later work, giving it both a chronological and theoretical meaning. For only in the last five or six years of his life, the period for which he is now primarily known, did Schenker's musical vision reach full maturity and the previously mentioned "grand historical narrative" acquire explicitly musical form.

Though the eighty years since Schenker died have left us in a better position to understand the long-range implications of his work, his role in today's musical life remains much contested. This primarily results from three reasons, all stressed in this book: his later theory's overall character, its limited reach, and its ideological underpinnings. For some the mature theory simply tries to do too much and for the wrong reasons, so that they would prefer to ignore it; while others feel that another book on Schenker is unnecessary at this time, when the main focus of musical thought has shifted away from "music itself," Schenker's main interest, to its function within the larger social and political framework, something about which he said relatively little. My own feeling, however, is that both these opinions are short-sighted. Whatever Schenker's limitations, his final theory is important both because it tells us much about what music theory can and cannot be and because it succeeds so well in saying something important about the music it addresses.

Regarding organization, Part I contains two chapters that provide the base for what follows: Chapter 1, a general introduction to Schenker; and Chapter 2, an in-advance view of the mature theory as a whole. Part II, the book's heart, contains six chapters surveying Schenker's major theoretical publications in essentially chronological order. The first of these, Chapter 3, deals with a critical early article, "Der Geist der musikalischen Technik" ("The Spirit of Musical Technique"), written in 1895 before Schenker turned to music theory proper but essential for understanding his theoretical development. The following three chapters, 4–6, address Schenker's first phase as a theorist, treating works published between 1903 and 1922. The first two, Chapters 4 and 5, cover the opening two treatises of his basic theoretical trilogy, *Neue musikalische Theorien und Phantasien*: *Die Harmonielehre* of 1906, Schenker's initial publication devoted solely to theoretical matters; and the two volumes of *Kontrapunkt*, published in 1910 and 1922. Chapter 6 follows with the seven monographs on individual composers (and with one exception, individual compositions), which appeared irregularly between 1903 and 1921, and thus cover roughly the same period as the two previous chapters.

Chapters 7 and 8 of Part II, overlapping slightly with the preceding two, deal with the second developmental phase, from 1921 to 1935. The first treats the two periodical series, *Der Tonwille* (ten issues between 1921 and 1924) and *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik* (three volumes dating from 1925, 1926, and 1930), both of which stem from the decade in which the elements of the final theory were solidified. The second, Chapter 8, deals with Schenker's last publication, *Der freie Satz*, the final

volume in his theoretical trilogy and the culmination of his mature theory, which appeared shortly after his death in 1935.

Part III, containing the final three chapters, drops the relatively neutral perspective of Parts I and II for a more critical tone, giving attention to both the theory's advantages and disadvantages. All three chapters emphasize the final theory, the first, Chapter 9, its ideological issues and the second, Chapter 10, its musical-technical ones, while the final one, Chapter 11, comments more generally on Schenker's position in intellectual history and takes a final look at the mature theory.

The volume's main segment, Part II, thus consists of a historical survey of all of Schenker's main works. It has been shaped by two assumptions that may require some explanation: that Schenker's evolution can be understood as basically consistent and unidirectional, and that it moves toward the final theory. Both are controversial and necessitate simplifying his development, which was by no means entirely undeviating. Indeed, I do not myself feel that a direct line can be drawn between all the ideas expressed in Schenker's early works and those in the later ones, nor that they are in any way equivalent. But I do feel that some concepts expressed in the early works anticipate later ones in a way that seems both powerful and inevitable. It is not, then, that the earlier works completely predict the subsequent ones, but that some ideas introduced there can be viewed as both related to later ones and providing them a sort of prior foundation.[2] These assumptions do, moreover, enable the book to assume a more integrated and straightforward course. And though they cannot be said to tell us the entire Schenkerian story (whatever that might be), they do allow this book to unfold as smoothly as possible by concentrating on the theory's teleology. Nothing essential, moreover, is omitted from Schenker's development; and the result produced, though necessarily incomplete, is not misleading.

An additional advantage to the assumption of goal-directedness is that it facilitates a picture that is consistent with Schenker's own. The theorist always considered that his work – above all when he looked at it in retrospect – was aimed at a definite result. This is not to say that his formulations

[2] Among those who have attacked a teleological approach, Keiler (1989, pp. 273–74) notes the presence of a general "straightjacket" attitude in Schenker studies, prone to accept not only connections between ideas encountered in his early theoretical works and those in the mature ones, but equivalences and identities. In particular he faults Oswald Jonas, who, in editing the English translation of Schenker's *Harmonielehre*, seems to adopt such a teleological point of view, noting the anticipation there of such mature techniques as *Auskomponierung*, *Schichten*, and *Entfaltung*, as well as middleground and background. I avoid this detailed and specific notion of anticipation, however, confining myself to more general concepts readily understood as related to, while not completely anticipating, the final theory.

were preordained, or necessary, or that they resulted in theoretical progress (though he himself obviously thought they did). But if Schenker's own assumptions are accepted, even temporarily, his final theory can emerge as an accomplishment of major, if only partial, musical vision.

An organizational feature requiring comment is the relationship between Schenker's ideological-aesthetic position and his theoretical formulations. Although the entire volume assumes that the two interact closely, this becomes evident only gradually. Thus Part I's general introduction and "in-advance" view of Schenker's final theory almost entirely avoids their interconnection; while Part II's first chapter is devoted largely to ideology, as it treats an article that deals almost exclusively with that topic. Part II's Chapters 4 and 5, however, switch focus by concentrating on the specifically musical-theoretical concepts that resulted from the aesthetic topics presented in the previous one. Ideological matters having been downplayed, they reappear at length in Part II's Chapter 6 (especially Sections 1 [pp. 99–101] and 2 [pp. 101–02] and Chapter 8 (Sections 5 [pp. 171–75], 6 [pp. 175–78], and the close of 7 [pp. 178–80]). The three chapters of Part III use their more critical approach to treat first extramusical issues in Chapter 9, and then musical ones in Chapter 10, while the final one, Chapter 11, deals with both in roughly equal measure.

It should be clear, then, that this book is not a "how-to" treatise on Schenkerian analysis. Several Schenker primers are available for those who wish them, but little information is offered here about how an analysis should be undertaken or notated. In addition, the book was not written by a dyed-in-the-wool Schenkerian. I have been aware of the theorist since undergraduate days, have studied, admired, and taught his analytical approach many times, and published numerous articles related to him both directly and indirectly, but I am by no measure one of his true disciples. I admire Schenker, but I do not think his analytical approach is the only valid one, or that the compositions in his canon are the only ones worthy of theoretical attention. This is not, then, an account from within, but an attempt to provide a sympathetic and even-handed consideration of his work. There are disadvantages, obviously, to being an outsider in Schenkerian scholarship; but in my view these are more than outweighed by the advantages of relative objectivity.

Two features above all distinguish this book. First, it treats Schenker's entire theoretical development as presented in all of the major published works; and second, it examines the impact on his theory of more general, non-musical ideas. It also quotes Schenker frequently. Although this is space-consuming (Schenker was not one always to express himself

succinctly, or stay on a single path), its benefits should be evident, as it allows him to speak of his own work in his own voice. Though this also comes with a downside (Schenker's tendency to view his own theory in a rosy light), I have tried to counter this by taking a skeptical view with regard to much that he says.

Schenker quotations are cited first by their original German page number (in some cases from the second edition), then by page number for the English translation. Italicized passages always correspond with the original; and in cases where translations were not available, I have provided my own. Since the German originals are in some cases more complete than the translations used here, these are all included in an appendix.

One disadvantage of relying so heavily upon Schenker's own words is that there is relatively limited information concerning the relationship of his work to that of other Western theorists, since he was not overly generous in conferring credit on others. I have also restricted the primary sources I have used mainly to those that appeared in works that were published during Schenker's lifetime: the three treatises "by an artist": *Die Harmonielehre*, *Kontrapunkt I* and *II*, and *Der freie Satz*; the seven monographs; and the ten issues of *Der Tonwille* and three volumes of *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik*. This may seem problematic, as Schenker also published numerous articles; and a significant body of previously unpublished material has become available since his death. None of the articles (excepting the one considered in Chapter 3), however, contains information that is vital to Schenker's overall development; and while I do not doubt the significance of the posthumous material, I prefer to treat Schenker essentially as he presented himself: through works made publicly available during his own lifetime and cited in his own writings. Moreover, no recently published material (some of which is nevertheless cited) contains information that would significantly alter the argument presented here.