

Cambridge University Press  
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PART I

Theory

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1 | Introduction

The highest triumph, the proudest joy in hearing a work of Art is to raise and enhance the ear, as it were, to the power of the eye. Think of a broad and beautiful landscape surrounded by mountains and hills, full of fields and meadows and forests and streams, full of everything that Nature brings forth in beauty and variety. And then climb up to a spot that makes accessible to the eye the entire landscape in one instant: how there, encompassed by the wandering gaze, the joyful, tiny paths and rivers and villages and forests and everything that lives and does not live are interconnected! So too, located somewhere high above the work of art, there is a point from which the spirit clearly overlooks and overhears the entire work, all of its paths and goals, the lingering and rushing, all variety and boundedness, all dimensions and proportions. Only he who has found this high point – and from such a perspective also the composer must unfold his work – can honestly say that he has “heard” the work. But there exist, in truth, only a few such hearers.

Schenker (1990), p. 103

These words close one of Heinrich Schenker’s earliest essays, “Das Hören in der Musik” (“Hearing in Music”), published in 1894, some three years after he began his Viennese musical career as composer, essayist and reviewer. The passage is remarkably prescient, anticipating the basic idea of Schenker’s mature theory to such an extent that one is inclined to see his entire theoretical evolution as a response to its challenge: to find a way of hearing and representing music like a landscape, simultaneously and as a whole. This meant looking at it from a visual “high point,” from an all-embracing, bird’s-eye perspective that allowed its overall pattern to be instantaneously surveyed. Or, shifting the focus from listener to work, it enabled compositions to display their overall coherence.<sup>1</sup>

The present book traces Schenker’s development toward this goal, focusing on both the theoretical particulars of his theory and the key ideas, aesthetic

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the idea of a comprehensive overview, two other points in this passage are significant for Schenker’s development: the landscape view is obtained only through spirit (*Geist*) and achieved only by a limited number of people.

and ideological, that helped shape it. It thus offers a conceptual history of Schenker's work in terms of the musical and extramusical concepts that determined it. Though the quote opening this chapter is essentially visual in nature, it encouraged Schenker to formulate principles of musical organization that were different from, and much more specific than, those found in the visual arts. The quote, moreover, forms part of an internally consistent ideological framework that developed before Schenker's theory began taking shape and helped lead him toward it.

## Ideology

Since ideology, as a conceptual framework through which experience is filtered as part of a more orderly overall picture, is often viewed with suspicion, some explanation of its stress here seems appropriate. Distrust of ideology stems mainly from the negative meaning it acquired through association with Marxism, within which it has consistently been understood as a source of "false consciousness" that distorted normal conceptions of material reality by turning them upside down, rather like a camera obscura. Yet ideologies can also be consensual and pervasive, and they can exist in forms that reflect general social and intellectual positions rather than specifically political ones. In addition, they are held with various degrees of emphasis, professed or unacknowledged, conscious or unconscious, rigid or flexible. In this more general sense, ideology exists behind all forms of thought, including Schenker's.

Indeed, Schenker was surprisingly encompassing, rigid, and open in stating the ideology behind his work, to whose underlying assumptions he was unequivocally inclined. He seems to have been unusually conscious of the close connections between his musical ideas and those pertaining to other matters, as he consistently justified the former by referring to the latter. Not surprisingly, then, a number of scholars have examined the conceptual roots of Schenker's musical thought; but they have also often identified a single predecessor or intellectual movement as his primary source.<sup>2</sup>

While I do not doubt the importance of particular intellectual currents in shaping Schenker's world view, I prefer to see him as someone with a wide range of intellectual interests, unattached to any single influence. A thinker

<sup>2</sup> For example, Clifton (1970), Barford (1975), Solie (1980), Pastille (1985), Korsyn (1988), Pastille (1990b), and Snarrenberg (1997).

embracing a broad sphere of concerns, some conscious and others not, he held ideological views that were also commonly held by a number of non-musical thinkers of his time. These profoundly influenced the shape of his musical thought, despite being drawn from a variety of different fields – philosophical, literary, legal, and others. It thus seems difficult to me, indeed impossible, to pinpoint a single source for his ideology, parts of which were shared by numerous contemporaries and forerunners. Indeed, Schenker's ideology was for the most part set before he turned to theory proper; yet it was essential, its aesthetic and philosophical principles providing a critical nexus for his subsequent musical purposes.

The fact that Schenker studied law was thus clearly important in the formulation of his musical theory.<sup>3</sup> Yet the law of Schenker's time shared many basic assumptions with other disciplines and formed but one part of a larger intellectual mix. Many of the most critical legal ideas – for example, the significance of human interaction, a balance between unity and diversity, the interrelationship of parts within a collective whole, a belief in teleological historical development, and a single cause behind all events – had their source in the overall intellectual tradition of his time.

As mentioned, it is difficult to imagine Schenker's theory as having come into existence without this larger intellectual background, which served to encourage his development of an entirely new conception of musical organization. No previous theorist offered such a synoptic view of music that included both the particulars and internal workings of its construction. Indeed, simply to have envisioned such a detailed explanation of music, even if primarily limited to pitch alone, would count as an extraordinary achievement; but to have realized it in such an all-encompassing manner was truly remarkable.

## Life and character

This section traces the major events in Schenker's life, as well as his personal manner, raising questions about his upbringing and personality relevant to his theoretical development. Perhaps most surprising, however, is how unlikely it was that someone with Schenker's background could ever formulate such a complex and innovative theory of music. Though he is now widely recognized as the foremost music theorist of the twentieth century, by both those who approve of his work and those who do not, he began life

<sup>3</sup> The significance of Schenker's study of law has been impressively documented in Alpern (1999).

as an improbable candidate for this role. Born in 1868 in Wisniowczyk, in Galicia (now Poland), of largely non-musical Jewish parents (his mother could play the piano, but his father was an impoverished physician), Schenker was raised in very simple circumstances in an outlying and culturally deprived region of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He attended school first in Lemberg (now L'viv), then in Brzeżany. He was nevertheless able to study piano with the Chopin pupil Karol Mikuli, who at that time lived in Lemberg, and he relocated to Vienna at 16 in 1884 (without family) and remained there for the rest of his life. The purpose of his move to the capital city was not to study music, however, but in conformity with his father's wish that he study law at the University of Vienna. He thus completed eight semesters of law courses between 1884 and 1888 and received his law degree there in 1890.

Schenker's shift to music theory was initially tentative. In 1887 (his twentieth year, the year of his father's death) he concurrently enrolled at the Vienna Conservatory, where he studied piano with Ernst Ludwig, harmony with Anton Bruckner, and composition with Johann Nepomuk Fuchs. But he left the Conservatory without a degree in order to begin a career in Vienna as a freelance composer, pianist, reviewer and feuilletonist. Only in the early twentieth century, after he had given up both composing and reviewing entirely, did his interests turn to music theory. But from this point on he pursued it actively for the remainder of his life, teaching it, along with piano performance and music editing (for which he became quite active), in order to earn his living.

Significantly, then, Schenker's theoretical concerns appeared only after he himself no longer composed, and after the "common-practice" period of tonality had ended (or at least could no longer be considered "common"); as a consequence his theoretical work, while entirely devoted to tonal music, was developed in a sense outside the world of tonality.<sup>4</sup> In addition, he was, and always remained, an outsider in the Viennese musical establishment. He never held an official musical position in it, nor really belonged to it properly in any way. Rather, he worked privately, always in difficult financial circumstances, existing through what he earned from piano lessons, critical work, and the kindness of wealthy disciples.

With this background, Schenker hardly seemed destined for musical fame. Yet despite his isolation from the centers of Viennese musical power, certain aspects of his life and personality did support his theoretical ambitions. First, he was a gifted and successful pianist, who during the 1890s had frequently accompanied well-known soloists, including the Dutch

<sup>4</sup> See Morgan (2002), p. 252.

baritone Johannes Messchaert. Jeanette Kornfeld Schenker (née Schiff), herself a musician formerly married to his friend Emil Kornfeld, also played an essential role in Schenker's professional life. Leaving her husband in 1910, she provided Schenker with various kinds of critical aid and, becoming his wife in 1919, eventually also became, due to his failing eyesight, both amanuensis and editor. Schenker also possessed a strong, even formidable character, which enabled him to pursue his theoretical interests without concern for the difficulties in his way. He was in addition extremely charismatic, enjoying close association not only with students but with a number of well-known contemporary musicians, including the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler.

Schenker was also fortunate in attracting a number of gifted students committed to spreading his ideas. Several, including Hans Weisse, Oswald Jonas, and Felix Salzer, immigrated to the United States during the 1930s, where they established themselves as important figures who contributed significantly to his fame. Other pupils, notably Anthony van Hoboken, made financial contributions that helped defer expenses connected with his publications and established an Archiv für Photogramme musikalischer Meister-Handschriften in his name, located at the National Library in Vienna. Yet despite his growing fame in North America and the British Isles, Schenker remained a surprisingly marginal figure in Germany, Austria, and elsewhere in continental Europe. He had a number of prominent European students, however; and during the 1930s, Schenker institutes were established in Hamburg and Vienna, but both abruptly closed when the Nazis came to power.<sup>5</sup>

Other personal traits help explain why Schenker was such a prominent yet controversial figure, and perhaps also why detractors have reacted so negatively to his work. One can accept or reject, for example, Rameau's *basse fondamentale* without doubting the importance of his idea in musical thought or central position within Western musical history. But Schenker is different. One reason may be, to borrow a well-known distinction, that he was a "hedgehog" rather than a "fox": someone who held unreservedly to a single overriding belief.<sup>6</sup> Like most hedgehogs, Schenker had ancillary interests; but in our age, in which individual theoretical ideas, if united at all, tend to be lumped together in a sort of bricolage, his single-mindedness

<sup>5</sup> The information about Schenker's life and character is primarily derived from Hellmut Federhofer's biographical essay in Schenker (1985) and Ian Bent and William Drabkin's "Schenker Documents Online," both of which are extremely valuable.

<sup>6</sup> The "hedgehog-fox" distinction was reintroduced into twentieth-century thought by the cultural historian Isaiah Berlin (1953).

distinguishes him. Indeed, Schenker's belief in his own cause amounted to a sort of mania; and this has no doubt affected his wider acceptance.

Schenker was also remarkably polemical in nature, a trait to which he gave expression in virtually everything he wrote. While, like many others, he defended his right to state his opinions in whatever manner he wished, this quality represented such a pervasive part of his personality, and assumed such virulent forms, that it seems virtually impossible to separate it from the work's content. Indeed, his boldly stated opinions and negative assessments of others seem to place his very motivation into question, and contribute as well to his unpopularity.

In addition, this unalloyed belief in his own project formed part of Schenker's inability, especially in later years, to accept his work simply as a theory rather than as verifiable fact. Yet theories, even those widely accepted, necessarily go beyond the facts upon which they are based, making them susceptible to future revision and even complete rejection. Yet Schenker believed – and consistently stressed – that his final theory provided music with ultimate truth, producing an absolutism evident not only in his musical views but in those concerning essentially all topics about which he expressed himself.

That Schenker lived in Vienna and did his theoretical work there is also significant. By the time he relocated there, Vienna had become a center of modernism, encouraging everything new in European art and ideas. This allows us to view his work within a larger intellectual context. As Carl E. Schorske, among many others, has shown, the city was ripe for innovation as the nineteenth century waned, and enjoyed the presence of many modernist pioneers in the creative arts, including Arnold Schoenberg in music, Hugo von Hofmannsthal in literature, Gustav Klimt in painting, and Otto Wagner in architecture and design.<sup>7</sup> All contributed to the development of modernism, altering our idea of art and what it could achieve. Though many questions about modernism remain, there is little doubt that it was characterized by such things as dynamic change, individualism, innovation, and self-awareness. Schenker, despite his deeply conservative opinions and interest in theory rather than composition, fits well within this environment. His manner of viewing music was decidedly revolutionary, offering a radically new conception of how the art was organized.

Perhaps the Viennese figure most resembling Schenker in total conviction of his own accomplishments was neither an artist nor theorist, but the psychiatrist Sigmund Freud. Like Schenker, he was Jewish and born outside

<sup>7</sup> Schorske (1981).



of Vienna (in Moravia), though he moved to the city in 1859 when he was only three years old. He too studied at the University of Vienna, in his case medicine, graduating in 1881. And Freud was equally convinced of his own worth: that his view of the human psyche represented a total explanation of the human mind; that his thought, though largely intuitive, was omniscient; and that his avoidance of scientific method, as normally applied in his discipline, was completely justified.<sup>8</sup> Both Freud and Schenker were certain that their work was totally coherent, and that they alone, solitary figures in disagreement with the leadership in their field, were capable of solving puzzles that had previously been unsolvable. Brooking no opposition, they tended to attract adherents who believed in them unquestioningly, convinced that they alone had managed to transform the past.

The point here is of course not to evaluate either Freud or Schenker, but to note the degree to which they resembled one another. Their association, then, stems not so much from the nature of their ideas (though their mutual concern for structure and subsurface explanation is notable), as from the manner in which they viewed their ideas. Both were certain they had discovered absolute truth.

There is no doubt, certainly, that Schenker's belief in his infallibility formed an essential part of his make-up, both as a music theorist and as a human being. His authoritarian disposition, moreover, complicates the holding of an unbiased view concerning his theory. Many believe that Schenker's disposition is in his case so exaggerated as to make the question of objectivity beside the point: the theory simply should be rejected. Though this is understandable, it seems highly injudicious. And that is why I have largely reserved consideration of Schenker's controversial aspects until Part III of this book, focusing first upon his musico-theoretical ideas, their development, and their sources. Schenker's theory should not be dismissed out of hand, but considered as far as possible in its own terms; for, in my view, it has a decidedly positive dimension.

## Schenker's revolution

A major question about Schenker concerns the extent to which he himself forged a radically new theory of music. The biologist Richard C. Lewontin, among many others, has recently reminded us that scientific development

<sup>8</sup> See Crews (2011), pp. 17–19.

is oversimplified when viewed solely in terms of the “great individuals” who shaped it. Advances did not come about simply because occasional thinkers with special ability produced epoch-making changes.<sup>9</sup> Gravity, for example, would have been discovered had Isaac Newton never lived; and Darwinism (Lewontin’s main concern), or something very much like it, would have developed even without Charles Darwin. Indeed, to stick with Darwin, natural selection, his most central assumption, was conceived simultaneously by his contemporary Alfred Russel Wallace. And far from being a lone genius, Darwin was supported as much by “entrepreneurial fitness” as scientific acumen. He belonged, moreover, to a network of evolutionary thought that reached back to Kant’s *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* of 1786, and that joined together such diverse thinkers as Denis Diderot, Erasmus Darwin (Darwin’s paternal grandfather), Herbert Spencer, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, and Gregor Johann Mendel.

Can something similar be said of Schenker? Certainly he did not develop in a theoretical vacuum, for his work owes much to well-established theoretical conventions.<sup>10</sup> In his case, however, I think the answer must be negative. Despite Schenker’s widely shared intellectual background, his musical theory depends upon numerous principles that are fundamentally different in both general conception and procedure from those preceding it.

It thus seems highly unlikely that Schenker’s mature theory, given his intellectual environment, would have emerged without him, in the way that Darwinian theory might have done in the absence of Darwin himself. This is not to claim that Schenker had no forerunners, but only that the particular musical solutions he developed for the problems he confronted – the concepts of large-scale reduction, prolongation, and graphic representation – were largely unprecedented. Even if a similar music theory might eventually have appeared, it is difficult to imagine anything like it emerging until well after World War II, thus well after Schenker’s death.

<sup>9</sup> Lewontin (2009).

<sup>10</sup> To name a few of the most important: early diminution theory, which supplied a model for a primitive sort of prolongation; sixteenth-century theory of musical figures, which assumed a distinction between the musical surface and a more fundamental structure; and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century functional tonal theory, which presented musical explanations that often depended upon “hidden” factors (such as “implied” harmonies, tonal transformations, and expanded conceptions of the *Stufe* in the work of Simon Sechter). For more on this, see Morgan (1978).