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Robert P. Morgan

*Becoming Heinrich Schenker: Music Theory and Ideology*

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### **Matthew Arndt**

Robert P. Morgan's *Becoming Heinrich Schenker: Music Theory and Ideology* "offers a conceptual overview of Schenker's theoretical development and ideological position, and it attempts to tell how his work aimed" "to explain the pitch structure of a limited portion of [tonal] music . . . totally and with complete rationality" or "to explain what tonal music is and how it works" (xv, xiii, 15). The book adheres to two premises. First, Morgan assumes that "Schenker's evolution can be understood as basically consistent and unidirectional, and that it moves toward the final theory," a "highly systematic and self-contained" theory whose "absolute completion" is represented by *The Masterwork in Music*, volume 3, and whose "complete presentation" is represented by *Free Composition* (xviii, xvi). Second, he assumes that Schenker's theory "contains an ideological paradox consisting of two apparently independent and opposed philosophical strains: a nineteenth-century Idealist one and a twentieth-century Modernist one" (xiii). As for previous studies, "their tendency has been to emphasize one side of his philosophical position at the expense of the other. . . . *I prefer*, on the other hand, to see both idealism and empiricism as consistently present throughout Schenker's entire theoretical career" (xivn1; emphasis mine). Moreover, while "a number of scholars have examined the conceptual roots of Schenker's musical thought . . . they have also often identified a single predecessor or intellectual movement as his primary source. . . . *I prefer* to see him as someone with a range of intellectual interests, unattached to any single influence" (4; emphasis mine). Is the phrase "I prefer" merely a rhetorical device for Morgan to position himself? I submit, rather, that the book's argument is indeed based on Morgan's preference, his ideology.

Part 1 introduces and gives a précis of Schenker's final theory; part 2, the heart of the book, traces the development toward this theory; and part 3 gives a critical assessment of the theory and its ideology. Never before has anyone surveyed "Schenker's entire theoretical development as presented in all of the major published works" (xix). Morgan weaves together twenty-six

works over almost four decades, with frequent new translations. The result is impressive and enjoyable, and the reader gains a new appreciation for the depth and gradual unfolding Schenker's thinking about music. Morgan puts Schenker in the company of such innovators as Charles Darwin and Isaac Newton, and given the feat of cogitation that he traces in Schenker's work, there is a bit of truth to this characterization.

Also like Darwin, Schenker is not just a thinker with a particular ideology but an ideological icon. There is Darwin himself, and then there is Darwin as appropriated in the polarized debate over science and religion. In a similar way, there is Schenker himself, and then there is Schenker as Morgan describes him, a "genius" that "many musicians have turned against" in the debate over the "music itself" and its "larger social and political framework" (204, 13, xvii). Morgan's conception of Schenker's theory, colored by its role in Morgan's ideology, is not the same as "Schenker's conception of it" (205). The differences come into focus through an examination of Morgan's premises.

Morgan claims that the theory presented in *Free Composition* is self-contained, yet *Free Composition* represents just one of three theories in *New Musical Theories and Fantasies*. Morgan argues that concepts from the earlier volumes, such as that of the *Stufe*, are transformed into "components of a comprehensive conception," such that *Free Composition* supersedes the earlier volumes (160). But many elements of Schenker's theory of free composition can be understood only with reference to his theories of harmony and counterpoint. For example, Schenker (1956; 1979, 11) claims that "as long as the fifth determines the natural sonority—and that will always be so—a voice-leading technique based upon the fifth, as nature requires, cannot lead to any diatony other than the diatony which our art has exhibited up to the present day." All that Schenker has established to this point is the initial composing out of the *Naturklang* by means of descending stepwise motion counterpointed by an arpeggiation through the fifth. But there are five diatonic modes in which such a composing out is possible (*diatonic* in present-day parlance), not just the major and minor modes that Schenker alludes to. Schenker's (1978; 1954, 55–76) claim is explicable only in light of his argument for rejecting the other modes in *Harmonielehre*. For another example, Schenker (1956, 46; 1979, 15) says that "it will not do to make the *Ursatz* the first and only source of strict counterpoint and curtail, therefore, instruction in strict counterpoint." Morgan overlooks this intertextuality because he assumes that Schenker's theories are exclusively concerned with music from "the 'common-practice' period of tonality," for which the major and minor modes and the "contrapuntal principles that were put together during the tonal period itself" are givens (16, xiv). But Schenker describes above how diatony and voice leading will "always" have to be; his claims are unrelated to a particular period.

Morgan also glosses over the distinct, complementary focuses of the three volumes of *New Musical Theories and Fantasies* by characterizing the final

theory as concerned “exclusively” with “pitch structure” (11). But Schenker never uses the word *structure* (*Struktur*), and I know of only one time that he uses the word *pitch* (*Tonhöhe*), in a discussion of temperament in *Harmonielehre* (1978, 105; 1954, 82). Moreover, Schenker (1979, 5) says that “music is never comparable to . . . architecture,” as the term *structure* would imply. This objection is not a quiddity. The use of the term *structure* reflects a broader American abandonment of Schenker’s organicism in favor of scientific imagery (Snarrenberg 1994, 49). Morgan’s assumption that Schenker is concerned with pitch structure leads him to find contradictions where they do not exist. For example, concerning Schenker’s well-known analysis of Bach’s Prelude in C major from the *Well-Tempered Clavier* book I, Morgan writes, “There is an inconsistency in this graph: on the one hand, the Urlinie tone d<sup>2</sup> is suspended with f<sup>1</sup> over the bass C . . . ; but on the other, the bass C appears with e<sup>1</sup> and begins an arpeggiated prolongation of e<sup>1</sup> to c<sup>2</sup> . . . , in which case d<sup>2</sup> is only a dissonant upper neighbor to c<sup>2</sup>” (33–35). Schenker’s graph presents a simple unfolding, where in a chord or series of chords there is “a connection from the upper to the inner voice” and back again “or the reverse” (Schenker 1979, 50). In the Bach, the upper voice connects to the inner voice F–E and then back to the upper voice D–C. The situation is as Schenker illustrates in *Free Composition* (example 43b4), except originating from sixths instead of thirds. Although Morgan illustrates a similar unfolding in his précis of Schenker’s final theory, his explanation of it is inaccurate; he suggests that somehow the “two chords combine to create a more background line forming a linear progression” (22). Morgan does not recognize this kind of unfolding because it does not involve the elaboration of a fixed pitch structure; it involves a true “transformation” of the voice leading (Schenker 1979, 25).

Morgan assumes that Schenker is concerned with pitch because he does not recognize the full scope of Schenker’s conception of the tone. To be sure, he acknowledges the “core” of Schenker’s theories as “the spirituality of tone,” but he misrepresents this notion (xiii). For example, Morgan draws a distinction between “the biological nature of tones,” discussed in division 1 of *Harmonielehre* and associated with “music’s actual materials (tones, motives, and tonal system),” and “harmony’s spirituality,” discussed in division 2 and associated with the *Stufe*, “an ‘ideal’ harmonic entity that, though represented by a normal triad, is not identical to any actual triad in the music” (66–67). But for Schenker (1978, 197; 1954, 152), “Die Stufen sind vielmehr identisch mit jenen Quinten, welche wir bereits im §16 als die grundlegenden . . . Pfeiler und Grundtöne des Systems kennen gelernt haben” (The Stufen are rather identical with those fifths which we have already gotten to know in §16 [in division 1] as the foundational pillars and ground tones of the [tonal] system). Morgan further misrepresents *Stufen* when he writes, “There seems little doubt that [Schenker] preferred to view the Ursatz as contrapuntal. . . . The Ursatz, then, is better conceived as the *source* of Stufen, but not as having

Stufen itself” (211). But Schenker (1956, 173; 1979, 111) writes, “Stufen are present even in the Ursatz itself. These Stufen are the strongest of all, since the Ursatz assures the coherence of the work.” For another example, Morgan suggests that for Schenker tones must “behave in a certain way and no other” and that consequently “composers must obey the tonal urges of tones, which are beyond all individual intention” (xiii, 17). But for Schenker not every tone has its way, and the artist is not a yes-man to each and every tone. The tones all scramble for a place in the sun, and the artist, the tone wrangler, must shepherd them to their appointed lot, according to his “intention” (Schenker 1987, 1:14). And there are several other similar misrepresentations of concepts.

Morgan claims that the theory presented in *Free Composition* is *complete*, yet the section on form is widely regarded as a sketch at best. Morgan argues that this section—like Schenker’s claims about rhythm, drama, meaning, and affect—“do[es] not . . . belong to the final theory proper” or “lack[s] theoretical weight, regardless of what Schenker himself may have believed” (14, 204). More specifically, he points to the problem that “all associative relationships, unlike the syntactic ones Schenker primarily addresses, resist strictly Schenkerian explanation, whether thematic, harmonic, or tonal” (209). This is circular reasoning: the section on form is not part of “the Schenkerian theory proper,” because it is not Schenkerian (212).

Turning now to Morgan’s second premise—that Schenker’s theory is related to an idealist, modernist/empiricist ideology—what exactly are theory and ideology, and how are they related? Morgan tells us that ideology is “a conceptual framework through which experience is filtered as part of a more orderly overall picture” (4). That sounds rather like a theory. Indeed, Morgan himself has trouble distinguishing ideology from theory in his terms. Morgan characterizes the relation between Schenker’s ideology and his theory variously as one of identity (e.g., “the theory *is* a necessary mix of idealistic and modernistic *components*”), inclusion, support (e.g., “Schenker’s mature theory, *including* the modernist-idealistic mix that *underlay* it”), and determination (e.g., “specifically musical-theoretical concepts that *resulted from* the aesthetic topics”) (12, xiii, xix; emphasis mine). Ultimately, Morgan’s distinction between Schenker’s theory and his ideology boils down to a classification of his theoretical claims as either idealist or modernist/empiricist.

Leaving aside whether modernism and empiricism are equivalent, does Schenker really have an empiricist “scientific orientation,” as Morgan claims (222)? For his part, Schenker (1994–97, 3:8) says, “*My theory*, extracted as it is from the very products of artistic genius, *is and must remain itself art*, and so can never become ‘science.’” But Morgan cites Schenker’s “later stress on musical hierarchy, theoretical notation, and the empirical observation of actual music,” or “the theory’s reliance on logic and empirical verifiability” (43, 222). As for *hierarchy*, Schenker never uses the word. The notion that hierarchy is a hierarchically superior notion for Schenker, so to speak, is another misconception arising from the American abandonment of Schen-

ker's organicism.<sup>1</sup> As for "theoretical notation," Schenker's notation is notoriously unsystematic; a symbol frequently means one thing in one case, another in another case. As for empirical observation or verifiability, the content of a masterwork is an "idea," and as such it is not empirically observable or verifiable: "It is impossible to present in specific and perceptible forms all the events which occur through the miraculous rapport of fundamental structure with foreground" (Schenker 1979, 27; 1994–97, 1:1). It can be perceived only by the "genius" (Schenker 1979, 3). Morgan does not recognize the particularity of Schenker's concept of the genius; he finds that it is "consistent with the view of romanticism" (71). Schenker, however, distances his view of the genius from that of "*Romantiker, der, mit sich beginnend u. schließend, in eben diesem circulus vitiosus die Majestät der Sache verletzt*" (the *Romantic*, who, beginning and ending with himself, precisely in this *vicious circle violates* the majesty of the object).<sup>2</sup>

It is not surprising that Morgan has trouble distinguishing ideology from theory, given his vague definition. What is a little surprising for a book on the relation of Schenker's theories to his ideology is that he engages hardly at all with the literature on this topic, let alone the literature on the theory of ideology. For example, Morgan dismisses Robert Snarrenberg's attempt to "retur[n] us to the humanist roots of Schenker's approach" in *Schenker's Interpretive Practice* as "revisionist" (195), not recognizing that Snarrenberg (1997, xviii) was writing against a scientific revision of Schenker's work. In another example, Morgan acknowledges Nicholas Cook's 2007 *Schenker Project* and says that it "had a significant influence on my own, and brought about one important alteration: the brief discussion of ornamentation originally included in the section on synthesis . . . has been replaced by a much longer one with a section of its own" (x–xi). The section in question is less than two pages (102–3) and does not cite Cook. Cook makes one substantive appearance in the book: "Until Nicholas Cook's recent book on Schenker appeared, the 'Geist' article was consistently misinterpreted as being inconsistent either because of its anti-organicism or (in at least one case) because it supported organicism, and thus idealism. For it harbors elements of both" (57). Apparently we are to infer that Cook's view is consistent with Morgan's view, that Schenker's "idealism and empiricism both remained prominent throughout his theoretical career," but there is no citation of Cook, and Cook never ascribes empiricism to Schenker (57).

Along the same lines, although the book "quotes Schenker frequently" (relative to other authors), the frequency is not adequate for explaining and interpreting Schenker's concepts, particularly given that the book is "not con-

**1** "Schenker's graphs came to be read as spatial things and not temporal processes, a transformation effected in part by substituting the opposition of *higher* and *lower* levels for Schenker's opposition of *earlier* and *later* layers" (Snarrenberg 1994, 49).

**2** Heinrich Schenker, journal entry dated December 6, 1916, Oswald Jonas Memorial Collection, Special Collections and Archives, box 2, folder 5, p. 527, University of California, Riverside.

ceived for experts alone" (xvi). For example, Morgan's précis of Schenker's final theory has only one graphic depiction of a piece of music (and there are no score excerpts); all the other examples are abstract illustrations of concepts created by Morgan himself. For another example, Morgan claims that Schenker is "unclear" on the issue of interruption and that it "contradicts a basic assumption of the theory," but he offers not a single quotation from Schenker to substantiate his claims about interruption, even though Morgan himself recognizes it as "not only . . . one of the most crucial aspects of his theory but also one of its most controversial" (207).

Morgan's book culminates in some commonsense consideration of the practical question: what do we *do* with Schenker's theories, given their ideology? For Morgan, Schenker's theory "tells us something critical" about "a group of standard common-practice works," but it cannot be accepted at face value, because the ideology rejects all other music, so the theory must be altered to preserve a degree of its depth while allowing for greater coverage (225). He usefully distinguishes three strategies for doing so: "The first . . . simply applies Schenker's theory to his own repertoire . . . but with the theory reinterpreted in axiomatic terms. . . . A second type . . . attempts to accommodate a wider range of triadic music. . . . The third type . . . attempts to deal with post-tonal music" (216–17).

But for Morgan, such an extension of Schenker's theory is more than just the constant process of adaptation that attends all theories; it entails a disintegration of values: it "retains the theory's modernist husk but renounces its idealist core," depriving it of the hope of "musical truth" (211). The disintegration of values is a trope of modernity, which simultaneously idealizes and distances itself from the past. To this extent, Morgan and Schenker are in sync. And just as we can adapt Schenker's groundbreaking theories to our own, so the reader is rewarded by adapting Morgan's unprecedently exhaustive but skewed account of Schenker's theories.

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**Matthew Arndt** is assistant professor of music theory at the University of Iowa. 