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Recent Research in the History of Theory: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

William E. Caplin

I am very pleased to have been asked to speak on recent research in the history of theory of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. All of us working in this field are surely proud of the record of accomplishment compiled since the founding of our Society. I would like to review some of the major changes and developments that have characterized our endeavors over the past decade. I also want to consider some topics that have been relatively little explored of late and are thus deserving of our further attention.

I will begin my discussion with the history of harmony, which for most of us, rightly or wrongly, has been the predominant focus of our investigations. And I can think of no better starting point than the founder of modern harmonic theory, Jean-Philippe Rameau. A glance at the bibliography reveals immediately that this great French theorist continues to fascinate scholars today. In fact, the past decade has witnessed a dramatic rehabilitation of Rameau's reputation, which had previously suffered greatly at the hands of Schenker and some of his followers. For it was not so very long ago that Rameau was routinely condemned for having led harmonic theory down a false and dangerous path. Now that the Schenkerian model has gained a secure position within the community of theorists, the impulse to deprecate Rameau has lessened considerably. We are returning to his writings and discovering there a body of thought which, despite its manifest contradictions, is remark-

able both musically and intellectually. Many staunch Schenkerians have even come to acknowledge that a direct line of development stretches from Rameau's theory of the fundamental bass to Schenker's own concept of *Stufen*.

Indeed, identifying "precursors of Schenker" has become almost an obsession during the last ten years or so. We have come to learn that many theorists from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries employed varying degrees of melodic and harmonic reduction within their theoretical systems. Robert Morgan's ground-breaking article of 1978 sketched the broad outlines of this history, and other scholars have filled in many of the details. In particular, Robert Wason has revealed to us a distinct Viennese tradition, which saw Rameau's fundamental bass, as refined by Kirnberger, rationalized into a comprehensive *Stufentheorie*. The pivotal figure here, of course, is Simon Sechter, a theorist little known in North America a decade ago. One aspect of Sechter's theory, which emphasizes a more vertical, harmonic orientation, led to Bruckner's and Schoenberg's *Harmonielehren*; a second, more contrapuntal side of Sechter's approach achieved its ultimate expression with Schenker.

Another theorist, long ignored by most historians of theory, has gained major prominence in the last number of years. I am speaking of that most eccentric character, Georg Joseph (Abbé) Vogler. To be sure, Vogler can easily strike the modern readers as something of a crackpot—he was certainly so consid-

ered by many of his contemporaries. But thanks to the efforts of Floyd Grave, as well as those of Jane Stevens and Robert Wason, Vogler can now be regarded as an important innovator in harmonic and formal theory. Among the “firsts” that we must credit to him are the use of roman numerals to identify harmonies, the description of a conventional chromatic voice-exchange pattern (now called the “omnibus progression”), and the association of melodic character change to the “second subject” within a sonata-form exposition.

Though Vogler worked briefly in Vienna and came to have some influence on later Viennese theorists, he is more appropriately seen as standing at the head of a specifically German harmonic tradition, one that includes the writings of Gottfried Weber, Moritz Hauptmann, Hermann Helmholtz, and Hugo Riemann. Long the primary domain of musicologists in Germany, research into this tradition has in recent years witnessed steady growth on this side of the Atlantic. In particular, the idealist theories of Hauptmann and Riemann have attracted considerable attention—due, no doubt, to the appeal of Hauptmann’s highly systematic approach and to the alternative harmonic viewpoints offered by Riemann’s *Funktionstheorie*.

Let me turn now from the history of harmony to another topic that has received extensive treatment within the last decade. The theory of form, especially as it concerns the sonata and the concerto, has been investigated by quite a number of historians who, dissatisfied with modern analytical approaches, have turned to earlier sources on which to base “historical analyses.” One theorist in particular—Heinrich Christoph Koch—has emerged as the central focus of interest. Among the many fine studies listed in the bibliography devoted to Koch’s categories of form, I would draw your attention especially to the article by Elaine Sisman, which won the prestigious Einstein Award given by the American Musicological Society.

Now, it is somewhat discomfiting to observe that the history of form has been pursued almost entirely by historical musicologists, with little work being done by members of our own Soci-

ety. Perhaps the relative neglect by theorists of issues of form in general helps to explain this phenomenon. And we can only hope that the renewed attention to the theory of form evident in a number of papers at our meeting this year will stimulate our historical interest in this important topic.

As regards the theory of rhythm and meter, the situation is only slightly better. Despite the fact that new approaches to the temporal organization of music continue to appear on a regular basis, only a few of us have explored the ways in which earlier theorists dealt with the many perplexities of musical rhythm. As for the other traditional branches of music theory—counterpoint, melody, and orchestration—their histories have been virtually ignored in recent years.

I want to move away now from my survey of specialized studies, which focus on the history of individual theorists or theoretical issues, and consider what has been done, and what remains to be done, in the area of research tools: that is, the making of bibliographies, translations, and general histories. On the bibliographic front, the most exciting news concerns a major project now in preparation by David Damschroder and David Russell Williams. When completed, their extensive listing and cross-listing of primary and secondary sources should considerably aid our research in and teaching of the history of theory from Zarlino to Schenker.

With respect to English translations of theoretical treatises, the last decade has seen an ever-increasing standard of excellence. The translations of Kirnberger and Koch, produced under the aegis of the Yale Translation Series, are particularly worthy of mention. Nonetheless, major works by Rameau, Sechter, Vogler, and Riepel, to name but a few, remain untranslated into English; and for many of the writings of such prominent theorists as Weber, Marx, Hauptmann, and Riemann we must make do with the outmoded translations issued during the nineteenth century.

Perhaps the most neglected area remains that of general histories. It is unfortunately the case that most of us continue to

rely on Shirlaw and Riemann for our basic introduction and overall view of the history of theory. To be sure, these works were most admirable in their day; but they are inaccurate on many points and in any case are now hopelessly out of date. The situation is beginning to be redressed by the impressive series *Geschichte der Musiktheorie*, whose volumes by Carl Dahlhaus are devoted to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, Dahlhaus's approach is rather idiosyncratic and does not entirely meet the needs of those seeking a more straightforward, factual narrative.

Clearly, then, there is much work to be done. Moreover, new areas of investigation that we cannot even imagine at the moment will surely present themselves in the future. For as the

general field of music theory evolves, as new sets of problems and solutions arise, our conception of the history of theory will change accordingly; we will turn back to familiar theorists and reread them from newly gained perspectives. At the same time, our study of earlier theorists will have the potential itself to inspire novel modes of theoretical thought. As I talk and correspond with members of our Society and learn of the important projects in the making, I am confident that the achievements of the last decade will be surpassed in the coming years, and that if we gather again and celebrate the twentieth anniversary of SMT we will do so with an increased knowledge and understanding of the history of our discipline.

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