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Viennese Harmonic Theory from Albrechtsberger to Schenker and Schoenberg by Robert W. Wason

Review by: William Caplin

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## REVIEWS

Robert W. Wason. *Viennese Harmonic Theory from Albrechtsberger to Schenker and Schoenberg*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984.

Reviewed by William Caplin

A revolution in thought—a change in paradigms, as Thomas S. Kuhn would say—redefines the set of problems and possible solutions available for current and future research within a given discipline. Such a revolution is often accompanied by a reinterpretation of the historical development of that discipline: earlier ideas, which had been long neglected, are revived and lauded as important antecedents of the new paradigm, while precursors of the old paradigm are depreciated along with the histories generated under its influence.

The establishment of Riemann's *Funktionstheorie* (theory of harmonic functions) as a paradigm for German music theorists provides a case in point. Riemann not only produced theoretical treatises propounding his new view but also wrote a major history of theory, wherein he reproached many earlier theorists, including Kirnberger and Vogler, for having betrayed the achievements of such neglected "free thinkers" as Daube and Koch, whom he saw as major anticipators of his own views. And Riemann's successors have continued to characterize theorists from the eighteenth and nineteenth century as progressive or conservative according to whether they are seen to advance or retard functional thinking.

The Schenkerian revolution in North America has also resulted in a profound reappraisal of the history of tonal theory. Schenker himself initiated this revisionist attitude by reaffirming the significance of the figured bass theorists, especially C. P. E. Bach, while roundly condemning Rameau and his followers for leading harmonic theory down a false path. Lately

historians have been stressing Schenker's own indebtedness to theoretical thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, the direction taken by many historians of tonal theory in recent years was tellingly revealed when the Program Committee for the 1979 Annual Conference of the Society for Music Theory put together a session of relatively disparate papers (including one by the author of the book reviewed here and one by the present writer) under the heading "Precursors of Schenker."

Robert W. Wason's *Viennese Harmonic Theory from Albrechtsberger to Schenker and Schoenberg* is the latest and most distinguished product of the new historical approach stimulated by the Schenkerian paradigm. The author observes, accordingly, that current North American harmonic practice is highly indebted to Schenker's theory; in addition, however, he points to the continuing influence of Arnold Schoenberg, as transmitted by his numerous American students during the thirties and forties. Both theorists were reared within a specifically Viennese theoretical tradition, whose roots extend back to Fux in the early eighteenth century. Thus, as stated in the preface to the work, "the history of Viennese harmonic theory is a chapter in the history of *our* thinking about music" (p. ix).

Wason begins his study by examining the dominant role played by figured bass theory in Vienna during the first half of the nineteenth century. Most Viennese theorists were church musicians with a professional stake in preserving contrapuntal principles of composition and musical thought; figured bass was not merely a pedagogical tool, but a living tradition. Whereas the theory of harmony initiated by Rameau had been accepted in Germany and France in some form or another during the preceding century, it was still largely resisted in Vienna. Wason demonstrates that the treatises of Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, which are representative of Viennese figured bass theory at the beginning of the century, contain no evidence whatsoever of Rameau's harmonic thinking.

If the Viennese were not inclined to give up the older figured

bass approach, they nevertheless could not avoid being exposed to foreign influences promoting the new harmonic theory. A brief stay in Vienna by the contentious German theorist Abbé Vogler was especially influential, particularly in respect to chromatic harmony. Wason reveals that Vogler most probably should be given credit for being the first theorist to describe a version of what is currently called the “three-step sequential omnibus” progression, which features an enharmonically closed circle of minor-third related regions prolonged by means of chromatic voice exchange.

Vogler’s emphasis on a conception of chromaticism independent of diatonicism had a major impact on such early nineteenth-century theorists as Joseph Drechsler and August Swoboda, the latter being, as Wason points out, “the *only* Viennese theorist to attempt to deal with chromatic modulation to keys outside of the diatonic *Verwandtschaft*”—that is, to related keys derived from the scale degrees of the initial scale (p. 27). But such concepts ran against the prevailing Viennese tendency, as exemplified by Emanuel Aloys Förster, to understand all chromaticism as arising through alterations of diatonic structures. Curiously, the two opposing viewpoints represented by Vogler and Förster were never reconciled by subsequent Viennese theorists. Rather, a foreign influence of another kind—Kirnberger’s theory of fundamental-bass progression (itself derived from Rameau)—stimulated Vienna’s most important nineteenth-century theorist, Simon Sechter, to develop a *Stufentheorie* (theory of scale steps) that proved foundational for all harmonic thinking in Vienna during rest of the century.

Sechter’s theory of harmony forms the core of Wason’s study. He shows that Sechter revived and “rationalized” Kirnberger’s use of the fundamental bass, a procedure for explaining the progression of harmonies, and one that had previously played no role in Viennese harmonic theory. Sechter believed that harmonic progressions are not arbitrary, but rather are controlled according to the intervallic relation of their funda-

mental basses (roots). Progressions by fifths or thirds (and their inversions) are admissible, whereas stepwise progressions are forbidden. In order to account for the appearance in music of chords whose fundamental basses are related by step, Sechter develops two different approaches (both of which are highly indebted to Kirnberger and also suggested in a rudimentary way by Rameau).

The first approach recognizes the presence of “intermediate fundamentals,” non-sounding harmonies that stand between the two stepwise-related chords and thus create progressions by combinations of fifths and thirds. The second approach involves what Wason terms an “extension of the fundamental,” whereby certain chords are understood to be subordinate harmonies arising through contrapuntal techniques such as passing motion, voice exchange, and suspension. Sechter also explains chromaticism, tonicization, and modulation as further extensions of the fundamental. Indeed, Wason sees Sechter’s system of chromatic progression—which, following Viennese tradition, is rooted securely in his system of diatonic progressions—as the most original aspect of his theory.

Sechter’s two approaches to the problem of stepwise progression represent significantly different sides of his thinking. Wason characterizes the first as the more “harmonic,” because it generates additional fundamental bass notes; the second is more “contrapuntal,” and reflects the continuing influence of eighteenth-century thought on the Viennese theorist. Just how these two approaches ultimately evolved into the highly divergent positions of Schoenberg and Schenker at the beginning of the twentieth century is related by Wason in detail. Along the way, he shows how theorists in Vienna responded to the growing prominence of contemporary German thought, as represented by Hauptmann, Helmholtz, and Riemann.

The “harmonic” side of Sechter’s theory was initially expanded by his most illustrious and devoted student, Anton Bruckner. “Without Bruckner,” Wason notes, “it is questionable whether Sechter’s authority in theoretical matters would

have survived much beyond his death” (p. 67). Bruckner employs the intermediate fundamental more extensively than Sechter, often taking it to ludicrous extremes. That Bruckner goes further than his teacher by legitimizing the ninth chord as a fundamental harmonic structure further attests to the student’s “vertical” approach to harmony. Wason convincingly demonstrates that this tendency toward verticality reflects the continuing influence of the eighteenth-century theorist Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, as transmitted from Vogler to Johann August Dürnberger, Bruckner’s first teacher of harmony.

Sechter’s “contrapuntal” side, his extension of the fundamental, is initially developed by Karl Mayrberger into “an extremely sophisticated notion of ‘passing chords’ ” (p. 88). The manner in which Mayrberger distinguishes between consonance and dissonance even begins to suggest Schenker’s more comprehensive notion of *Stufen* (scale-steps). Josef Schalk’s “Law of Tonality” marks a more advanced stage in the extension of the fundamental. Wason discusses a number of highly chromatic passages, drawn from Wagner, in which Schalk identifies the presence of a single tonality rather than the kaleidoscopic series of modulations that most theorists of his day would have seen.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Viennese harmonic theory broke out of its relatively isolated position and began to exercise an important influence on German theorists working in Munich, a city that had had important cultural connections with Austria throughout the preceding century. Wason shows how a synthesis of Viennese fundamental bass theory and German functional theory was effected first by August Halm and then more systematically by Rudolf Louis and Ludwig Thuille. Again, it is Sechter’s “extension of the fundamental” that is decisive in these theorists’ approach. Louis and Thuille’s concept of “interpretation-dissonance” (*Auffassungsdissonanz*), in which subordinate harmonies are understood to be dissonant structures in relation to the controlling fundamen-

tal, reflects “an understanding of the possibility of levels of dissonance which makes one think of Schenker” (p. 130).

In the final chapter of his work, Wason discusses together the harmonic theories of Schenker and Schoenberg, placing them firmly within the Viennese tradition that he has so thoroughly presented in the preceding chapters. The evolution of Sechter’s extension of the fundamental reaches a climax in Schenker’s theory of *Stufen*, which represents an even more abstract notion of scale degree than that developed by his predecessors. And “the movement towards more ‘harmonic’ interpretation initiated by Bruckner was completed by Schoenberg, whose notion of ‘harmony’ essentially reduces to his theory of root progression” (p. 142). The author concludes by noting that the conflicting positions represented by Schenker and Schoenberg are far from being reconciled and continue to inspire controversy among music theorists today.

The appearance of this concise volume establishes Wason as the leading historian of modern harmonic theory currently active in North America. The author displays a prodigious understanding of the subject matter and presents his findings in a consistently interesting way. Wason knows how to select the most important issues of a given theorist’s output and to evaluate their significance within a broad historical perspective. The work contains no padding and no gratuitous summaries of theoretical positions; instead, description is deftly mixed with interpretation in a lively, unpedantic style.

Since Wason’s study will most likely become a standard reference work in courses on the history of nineteenth-century harmonic theory—taking its rightful place alongside the histories of Riemann and Shirlaw—the author might consider making some changes in future editions that will help the student reader. In particular, he might provide greater background information on such topics as Hauptmann’s dialectical interpretations, Riemann’s theory of harmonic functions, and Kurth’s “Romantic Harmony,” all introduced early in the book with-

out any context or explanation. He might also reconsider his hostile attitude toward Riemann and his supporters, which is strikingly incongruous with the balanced view adopted for all the other theorists treated in the study. Indeed, I am tempted to question whether Wason's persistent Riemann-bashing is a remnant of some party line that the author himself may no longer truly endorse. Surely the Schenkerian paradigm is by now sufficiently established and secure to permit Riemann's contributions to be treated with greater objectivity, especially in light of their powerful influence, to which Wason repeatedly refers. Indeed, it is to be hoped that Wason himself will someday apply his considerable knowledge and expertise to the writing of a more comprehensive history of harmonic theory, one that reexamines the other major national traditions, not only in their own terms but also in relation to each other and to the Viennese tradition that he has so excellently set forth in the present study.

Heinrich Christoph Koch, *Introductory Essay on Composition*. Translated, with an Introduction, by Nancy Kovaleff Baker. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983.

Reviewed by Nola Reed Knouse

This latest volume in the Yale University Press Music Theory in Translation series is a work to be welcomed by all students of eighteenth-century music and music theory. Koch's *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Composition*, published in three volumes in 1782, 1787, and 1793, is divided into parts discussing harmony, counterpoint, the "inner nature" and origin of a composition, and melody. From this last part, entitled "The mechanical rules of melody: The way in which melody is connected with respect to the mechanical rules," Baker has translated section 3 ("The nature of melodic sections") and section 4

("The connection of melodic sections, or the structure of periods"). These two sections form the most original and most widely influential portion of Koch's treatise.

This translation is to be welcomed not only for Koch's importance but also for Baker's fine scholarship. She has taken a masterpiece of German music theory and translated it into English in a style which is clear and understandable for twentieth-century readers without losing the eighteenth-century flavor so essential to the original. While writing in twentieth-century English, she has carefully avoided introducing twentieth-century musical concepts, and in most cases she has avoided using words which carry unwanted specific connotations to musicians today. Moreover, Baker's fine introduction contains sufficient detail to provide an excellent overview of Koch's work, both for the student new to Koch and for the scholar desiring a review. Throughout the translation her footnotes clarify Koch's points, explain his references to other portions of the treatise, and provide information about the musical examples. The quality of Baker's work has done justice to the value of Koch's treatise.

In order to produce clear and coherent English, Baker often restructures Koch's sentences. Most often she divides one long sentence into two or more shorter ones, eliminating the multiplicity of subordinate clauses which characterize Koch's literary style. One example:

Der Gebrauch der Variationen über einen kurzen Andante-oder Adagiosatz, der gewöhnlich aus zwey Theilen bestehet, deren jeder acht bis zehen Tacte enthält, und der oft einen Anhang hat, welcher zwischen jeder Variation als Ritornell vorgetragen wird, ist die dritte Einkleidungsart oder Form des Andante.

becomes:

The third design or form of the andante shows the use of variations on a short andante or adagio passage. This usually consists of two sec-