

**Nicholas Cook. 2007. *The Schenker Project: Culture, Race, and Music Theory in Fin-de-siècle Vienna*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 368 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-517056-6 (hardcover), 978-0-19-974429-9 (paper)**

Mark Anson-Cartwright

Volume 30, Number 2, 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1006382ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1006382ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

1911-0146 (print)

1918-512X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this review

Anson-Cartwright, M. (2010). Review of [Nicholas Cook. 2007. *The Schenker Project: Culture, Race, and Music Theory in Fin-de-siècle Vienna*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 368 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-517056-6 (hardcover), 978-0-19-974429-9 (paper)]. *Intersections*, 30(2), 120–123.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1006382ar>

Nicholas Cook. 2007. *The Schenker Project: Culture, Race, and Music Theory in Fin-de-siècle Vienna*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 368 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-517056-6 (hardcover), 978-0-19-974429-9 (paper)

Not so many years ago, few scholars would have said that Heinrich Schenker's theory concerned anything but the structure of tonal music. In this provocative and wide-ranging book, however, Nicholas Cook makes precisely this point: he claims that Schenker's life's work was "not just a theory of music but a theory of society—or to put it another way, not just a theory but a project" (14). Most of the book deals with aspects of Schenker's theory that are generally regarded as distinct from music, including philosophy, politics, and race. Cook is suspicious of such distinctions—especially between music and society—and he passionately defends the notion that music is "one of the dimensions within which social relations are performed" (317).

Despite his focus on social and political issues, Cook is also interested in certain nuts-and-bolts aspects of the theory, and the way scholars use or modify it in their own analytical work. Cook presupposes his readers already know a good deal about the theory and its evolution over a period of more than thirty years. At the end of the book, Cook endorses a pluralist—as opposed to monist or orthodox—Schenkerian practice, one that requires "rethinking the *Ursatz*-dominated synthesis of *Der freie Satz*" (296). While the idea of rethinking or revising Schenker's theory is hardly new, the conceptual framework within which Cook proposes to broaden the practice is both novel and radical.

Cook's main source is Schenker himself. He quotes widely and richly from Schenker's publications, as well as from private documents such as diaries and letters. He uncovers, interprets, and contextualizes all manner of statements made by Schenker—with particular emphasis on Schenker's notorious pronouncements about the superiority of the German "race." Cook balances his narrative with numerous observations about the reception of Schenker's ideas, especially in America, where his following has always been strongest.

In my view, there are at two broad categories of people who conduct Schenker-related research: (1) those who primarily "do" Schenkerian analysis and who are usually called "Schenkerians"; and (2) those who mainly write about Schenker's theory from a historical or philosophical standpoint, but rarely (if at all) use his approach as a tool for analytical research. Admittedly, some scholars do both activities, applying their practical knowledge, for example, to the interpretation and/or evaluation of Schenker's unpublished sketches. Cook explicitly aligns himself with the second group, represented by (among others) Joseph Lubben and Robert Snarrenberg (251). Regardless of Cook's allegiance, there is no denying that he has a firm command of his subject, and an encyclopedic knowledge of the Schenkerian literature. For this reason and others I believe this book deserves serious consideration and repeated study, though I am sure many Schenkerians will bridle at Cook's thesis.

The book is organized topically into five chapters framed by an introduction and a conclusion. In the introduction, we are offered a convenient and richly

informative biographical sketch, although, as Cook states, the book “is not a biography of Schenker” (15). Cook proceeds chronologically at first, but then takes a step back, so to speak, in chapter 4, to examine a topic that was left intentionally undeveloped in the first three chapters: “Schenker’s situation as a Jew from the eastern empire, an *Ostjude*, in a city where a newly virulent form of anti-semitism was developing” (199). Before examining this crucial chapter, I shall summarize the first three chapters.

Chapter 1 (“Foundations of the Schenker Project”) focuses on Schenker’s thinking during the 1890s, when he was active mainly not as a theorist but as a performer, composer, and critic. It is in the role of critic (or aesthetician) that Schenker reveals his views of music and its “evolution.” For most of the chapter, Cook explores Schenker’s 1895 essay “Der Geist der musikalischen Technik” (The spirit of musical technique), and responds to three prior readings of this essay, by William Pastille, Allan Keiler, and Kevin Korsyn. For the reader’s convenience, the essay appears in an appendix in a completely revised translation by Pastille, who had published a different translation in 1988. As Pastille made it known in his landmark article of 1984, the *Geist* essay reveals that the Schenker of 1895 was an “antiorganicist.” More precisely, as Cook argues, Schenker was an unwilling antiorganicist: “Schenker’s problem is not then with music’s organic quality as such, but in seeing how it can be translated into terms of theory” (65).

The title of chapter 2—“The Reluctant Modernist”—resonates with the underlying notion, presented in chapter 1, that Schenker was an “unwilling antiorganicist.” It is natural to think of modernism as diametrically opposed to Schenker’s aesthetics. But Cook finds an interesting, albeit broad, affinity between Schenker and the “second wave” of Viennese modernists (including Karl Kraus, Arnold Schoenberg, and Adolf Loos). The ethical dimension of Loos’s critique of architectural ornamentation—including his famous maxim that a house should be “discreet on the outside, its entire richness . . . disclosed on the inside” (118)—is not so different from the attitude Schenker promotes in the *Ornamentik* of 1908, where he deplores the mechanical (and therefore soulless) fingerings imposed on music by virtuosos such as Hans von Bülow. The ornaments prescribed by C. P. E. Bach (or any master) cannot be rendered through the mere application of “technique,” but must be mediated by the soul of the performer who understands correctly how the tones relate to one another. A performance that displays technique but lacks soul (or spirit) is like a building with an indiscreetly ornamented facade.

Chapter 3 deals with Schenker’s politics—a term that is curiously absent from the subtitle of the book. But that omission can be justified on the grounds that politics, for Schenker, is part of culture. As Cook rightly points out, Schenker’s writing “is deeply imbued by traditions of conservative thought” (140), and “this is conservatism with a small c, political thought in the broader sense of cultural politics rather than the narrower sense of party politics” (140). Most of the writings Cook examines in this chapter are from the serial publication *Der Tonwille* (1921–24), whose nationalist slant is evident in the title of the first article in the first issue: “Von der Sendung des deutschen Genies” (The mission

of German genius). In both *Tonwille* articles, and in his correspondence with, for example, August Halm (who found Schenker's political views intolerable) and his pupil Felix-Eberhard von Cube, Schenker's nationalist, anti-democratic, racist views are plain to see. Yet Cook is careful to distinguish between Schenker's thinking and Nazi ideology. He concurs with Martin Eybl's (1995) view that Schenker's racism was "at least not grounded in racial theory of the National Socialist type" (148). And while it is true that Schenker had sympathy for both Mussolini and Hitler soon after they took power, there is evidence that his sympathy was not permanent. A diary entry for 23 July 1933 (first quoted by Timothy Jackson in 2001) indicates that Schenker felt just as disenchanted with the new regime as his pupil Reinhard Oppel (who, like Schenker, supported Hitler at first).

By the time Cook turns to the all-important topic of Schenker's "situation as a Jew from the eastern empire" (199) in chapter 4 ("The Politics of Assimilation"), he is already more than halfway through his narrative (I think Cook was right to delay this discussion until this point; to have addressed the matter in a desultory way, in earlier chapters, would not have strengthened the book). Nowhere in his writings does Schenker identify himself as a Jew (nor would there have been cause for him to do so); everywhere, he takes pains to identify himself *with* German culture, if not *as* a German. Yet he never converted to Christianity, as so many Viennese Jews of the time (including Schoenberg) did. Conversion, of course, was a means for Jews to gain access to higher positions in academia, law, and the civil service than would otherwise have been possible in late nineteenth-century Austria; on this topic Cook cites the work of Franz Kobler and Robert Wistrich.

Schenker's cultural identity was neither Jewish nor Christian, but a complex blend of features interacting with one another according to a "logic of alterity," which Cook explores in depth in the second part of chapter 4. This "logic" cannot be ignored if we wish to understand anti-Semitism, which, like all forms of ethnic and cultural prejudice, depends upon a simplification or distortion of facts about people's identity. One simplification would be to speak of "Viennese Jewry" without acknowledging the divisions that existed within this "group." Cook also discusses at length the various binary oppositions—some real, some concocted as tools of propaganda—that shaped people's perception of cultural identity in Schenker's time. In the next chapter, Cook states that Schenker's "personal identity [was] constructed through cultural assimilation" (248). But at no point does Cook declare outright that Schenker's complete identification with German culture as embodied in the music of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms was an alternative to religious conversion, the most widely chosen form of assimilation available to him. It seems odd to me that Cook should fail to make this inference.

In chapter 5 ("Beyond Assimilation") Cook elaborates on ideas introduced in chapter 4 by drawing a subtle analogy between Adalbert Stifter's 1857 novel *Der Nachtsommer* (Indian summer) and Schenker's *Der freie Satz*. The novel is a *Bildungsroman* in which the protagonist takes refuge from a storm at Rosenhaus, a country estate owned by a man named Risach. According to Carl Schorske

(as quoted by Cook), Rosenhaus is “the central symbol of Stifter’s social ideal, a Paradise Regained” (251–52).<sup>1</sup> Rosenhaus is thus a literary analogue to the imaginary world of Goethe, Mozart, and Beethoven that Schenker championed and sought to preserve through his writings. Cook pushes the analogy further, claiming that the actual organization of *Der freie Satz* is similar to Stifter’s novel. While Cook notes that Schenker was “an avid reader of Stifter,” he readily admits “it would be absurd to push the comparison too far” (252). The major problem with the analogy, however, is that a *Bildungsroman* generally shows a character learning from experience and maturing over time—usually as a result of a series of failures and chance encounters, such as occur in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, the quintessential *Bildungsroman*. There is no such development in *Der freie Satz*, if only because the controlling force, the *Ursatz*, is described up front, and Schenker does not leave room for the sort of dramatic development one finds in a novel. Rather, it is the evolution of Schenker’s thought over many years that may be said to resemble the narrative shape of a *Bildungsroman*. Although Cook doesn’t explicitly come to this conclusion, the line of thinking he advocates in this book is compatible with it.

If Cook impresses anything upon his reader, it is that one must be careful not to distinguish too sharply between Schenker’s personal beliefs and his theory, between the man and the theorist, or indeed, between statements about “music” versus statements about “the external world” or “society.” After reading this book, teachers of Schenkerian analysis will have to ask some tough questions. Are Schenker’s pronouncements about race or nationality an integral part of his theory? Ought teachers of Schenker’s theory to tell their students about his political views (and not just his Germanic taste in music)? And if they do broach that topic, should they keep it separate from the discussion of theoretical concepts such as the *Ursatz*?

Ten years ago, Carl Schachter—whom, it should be noted, Cook treats with utmost respect in this book—made it clear that he did not think Schenker’s politics was relevant to either the practice or the teaching of his approach.<sup>2</sup> Without a doubt, Schachter holds a pre-eminent place among theorists and commands the respect of Schenkerians and non-Schenkerians alike. Cook presents Schenkerian teachers and scholars with the strongest challenge yet to Schachter’s point of view. It is certainly not the first challenge to Schenkerian “orthodoxy” (and there is really no other word for what Cook is confronting here). But it may turn out to be the definitive one.

MARK ANSON-CARTWRIGHT

<sup>1</sup> Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 288.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Schachter, “Elephants, Crocodiles and Beethoven: Schenker’s Politics and the Pedagogy of Schenkerian Analysis,” *Theory and Practice* 26 (2001): 1–20.