Reading Schenker's *Kontrapunkt*

by

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Counterpoint. A Translation of *Kontrapunkt* by Heinrich Schenker, 2 vols. Translated by John Rothgeb and Jürgen Thym. Edited by John Rothgeb. New York: G. Schirmer, 1987.

"Presenting material from the past is itself an act of history. It is bringing something before someone, into the presence of someone, making it present in respect of time and place, the here and now: *hic et nunc*."

--"In a practice called troping, poets and composers took to composing new verses to introduce those passages and elaborate upon them, to transform their meaning in favor of contemporary theological values and interests, to actualize them by connecting their meanings explicitly with the ritual meaning of the day on which they were chanted . . . ."

--"Troping was a way of making ancient matter available for active engagement by the members of the community."[1]

* I gratefully acknowledge careful readings by Matthew Brown and Richard Cohn of an earlier version of this review.

[1] Leo Treitler, *Music and the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989):2-3.

Schenker's *Kontrapunkt*, now available in a splendid English translation by John Rothgeb and Jürgen Thym, is, like medieval liturgical tropes and like Leo Treitler's new book quoted above, a work of the historical imagination. It engages contrapuntal theory, a discipline that, in the words of Schenker himself, "has long enjoyed almost the reputation of a musical religion" (I, 12) with both reverence and creative insight, and it actualizes Schenker's own experience of the discipline in terms of his (and our) "contemporary . . . values and interests." In *Kontrapunkt* Schenker relives and internalizes the pedagogical tradition, and he invites us to do the same. The book is both an interpretation of and a contemporary gloss upon received contrapuntal theory, carried out with a mastery and a devotion that cannot help but inspire admiration, even awe. Like the historical works of Carlyle and Collingwood--or in the Germanic tradition, Treitler's favorites, Droysen and Dilthey--*Kontrapunkt* is not for students who are just learning a discipline, but for those who are steeped in their subject and are desirous of reflecting deeply upon it. His reverence for the tradition is manifest less in his well-known polemics--strident as these sometimes become--than in his relentless quest for the natural and psychological basis that he posits as underlying contrapuntal theory, and in his loving and tireless attention to voice-leading *minutiae*. To critique the pedagogical tradition, to render it more internally coherent, and to extend it imaginatively into new realms: these were tasks to which Schenker addressed himself, and for which he was formidably equipped in terms of intellect, musical instinct and, not least of all, personality.

The enterprise that Schenker undertook in *Neue musikalische Theorien und Phantasien*, from its inception in the

Harmonielehre of 1906 to its final consummation in *Der freie Satz* of 1935, is rich in connections to both the past and the future. Given the depth of his own grounding in the Germanic intellectual and musical traditions of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the startling originality of his own musical mind, such connections are hardly surprising. Indeed, nothing is more characteristic of Schenker's endeavor than that in making an exhaustive critique of a theoretical tradition of the past--a tradition that included both harmony and counterpoint, as well as analysis--he reinterpreted the tradition for his own time and that of his successors, and in so doing brought fresh and utterly new insights which revitalized the very music to which he dedicated his life. Hence the well-known paradoxes of his work. Steeped in the thought of the Enlightenment and of the nineteenth century, he couched his theories in the garb of organicism and rationalism; yet those theories are now rightly viewed as constituting the best candidate among tonal theories for interpretation along the lines of twentieth-century empirical thought. Presented in its final form, in *Der freie Satz*, virtually as an *a priori* system built on abstract first principles, his theory in fact represents decades of detailed observation by one of our century's most gifted musical empiricists. Passionately devoted to preserving that which he found most worthy in the musical and music-theoretical past, he has played no small part in shaping that future which has become the musical and music-theoretical present, at least for those of us who inhabit the small world of American academic musical circles.

Schenker's purpose in writing *Kontrapunkt,* the second installment of his larger project, is to set aright the relationship between strict and free composition--an issue already addressed to

some extent in the *Harmonielehre*. To this end, he set for himself two goals: 1) ". . . to draw the boundaries between the *pure theory of voice leading* and *free composition*"; and 2) "to reveal the *connection between counterpoint. . . and the actual work of art* . . . " (I, 10). These complementary aims inform the entirety of *Kontrapunkt*. They provide the *raison d'être* of the book, its constant theme, its music-theoretical platform, and the lens through which Schenker views the tradition that his work sets about to interpret, purify, and extend. In accordance with these goals he devotes the entire book to establishing *strict composition* (i.e., "pure voice leading," or counterpoint) as an entirely pedagogical discipline, based on timeless and abstract principles and utterly removed from the world of composition proper, or *free composition*. While counterpoint comprises a kind of abstract grammar for the behavior of tones, free composition issues from a "psychic compulsion" (I, 13) lacking in counterpoint; it is a matter of art, not pedagogy. And even though "real" composition depends in important ways upon the principles of strict composition, the confusion of the two has hindered both, and *Kontrapunkt* claims to establish their true relation once and for all.

The means through which Schenker attempts to achieve his goals is to probe more deeply than any theorist heretofore into the reasons underlying contrapuntal prescriptions and restrictions and thus to provide a psychological explanation for every technique that he discusses. That is, he posits that there is in the nature of tones themselves a tendency to move in certain ways--a "natural law," as it were, that controls their behavior. (But the concept of "natural law" in *Kontrapunkt* is fraught with difficulties; see below, p. 214.) Schenker perceives this law of tones to be absolute, a notion that he makes explicit when he writes of the "absolute character of the world

of tone, as one discovers it for the first time in the world of counterpoint" (I, 15). A central focus of his critique of the tradition, then, is to uncover this absolute law that underlies contrapuntal principles:

> . . . [A]ll of the contrapuntal rules must be supported by good reasons. This, certainly, is the most difficult matter; and because of the difficulty, it is fully understandable that until now most theorists have avoided providing any basis for counterpoint (I, 12).
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> Contrapuntal theory. . . demonstrates tonal laws and tonal effects in their absolute sense. Only contrapuntal theory is able to do so, and therefore it should do so (I, 14).
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> In this study, the beginning artist learns that tones, organized in such and such a way, produce a particular effect and none other, whether he wishes it or not. One can predict this effect: it *must* follow! . . . Even tones must do what they must do! (I, 14)

Since Schenker's stated goals in *Kontrapunkt* concern his sorting out for the first time the correct relation of strict contrapuntal teaching to free composition, and since this problem is at bottom an *historical* one, we cannot understand how he himself perceived his tasks, nor can we evaluate how successfully he accomplished them, unless we understand *his* perspective on the historical context of the project. That context involves, on the one hand, his view of the historical development of (free) composition,

and on the other, his view of the historical development of the pedagogy of counterpoint.

His interpretation of the history of composition embodies a characteristically nineteenth-century notion of progress that consigns all the music leading up to the period from Bach and Handel through Brahms as merely preparatory to the appearance of real art. Now it is easy enough for us populists to dismiss Schenker's obvious prejudices against medieval and Renaissance music, and to charge him with constructing a self-serving history. But to reject his history out of hand is to deprive ourselves of an original and provocative, if biased, theory of the evolution of Western musical composition. In brief, Schenker believes that after the period of monophony, early experiments in polyphony established the essential and *a priori* nature of the consonance, in comparison to which dissonance was ". . . discovered to be only a derivative phenomenon" (I, xxv). The period of vocal polyphony (i.e., the Renaissance) established norms for melodic flow, voice leading, dissonance treatment, primitive rhythmic organization, and literal imitation. Yet it was unable to achieve the technical means that define true "free composition"--the fertilizing and "composing out" of harmonic sonorities (I, xxvi) and the closely related concept of the "motive," here viewed in the sense of the melodic projection of a harmony (I, 22). What the period of vocal polyphony thus lacked was "unfolded harmonies," "true length" (possible only with the motivic projection of harmonies), and "scale degrees and modulations" (I, 2). "Provided with only a small stock of technical devices. . . composers still meandered along the text from passage to passage and from cadence to cadence, while the compositional genre--already a kind of free composition--did not differ significantly from a type born of voice leading alone" (I, 2).

Accordingly, the actual (free) "composition" of the vocal period is easily confused with strict counterpoint, since, like strict counterpoint, it lacks scale degrees and motivic definition. In Schenker's view, "Counterpoint and theory of composition at that time were an undifferentiated mass. . . " (I, 2).

Equally essential to our understanding of Schenker's aims is his view of the historical development of contrapuntal theory and pedagogy. For just as the music of the Renaissance in effect confused counterpoint and composition, so also did the great pedagogical treatises of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries--or at least the ones of concern to Schenker, principally those of Fux, Albrechtsberger, Cherubini, and Bellermann. To the extent that Schenker quotes relevant passages from one or more of these theorists with respect to virtually every topic that he addresses, from the initial section on the cantus firmus, through those on the five species of two, three, four, and more than four-voice counterpoint, to his own concluding "Bridges to Free Composition," his book is indeed a gloss on the pedagogical tradition. And, filled with admiration though he is for the tradition and these practitioners of it, he continually weighs their works in the balance of his own ideas and finds them wanting. What he must do is to cleanse the pedagogical tradition of the stain of history--for him contrapuntal principles are permanent and timeless, and they thus transcend the individuality of the free composition of any composer or period--and to place that tradition on firm and absolute ground by articulating the abstract, unstated psychological and perceptual principles that undergird the prescriptions and restrictions of his predecessors. In so doing he will achieve his goal of separating strict from free

composition, thereby paving the way for establishing the relation between the two.

Throughout the book his operating procedure for each topic --beginning with the cantus firmus to lay down the relevant principles as he understands them--is to provide his own rational and often original explanation for them, and then to consider the theories of his predecessors on the given topic in terms of his own ideas. One of the most revealing aspects of the book, and one that nicely clarifies its ultimate purpose, is to note how and for what he faults his predecessors. We can divide his criticisms into three related classes: 1) the use of free composition of any period as a model for establishing the principles of strict composition; 2) construing strict composition too broadly and thereby allowing techniques appropriate only to free composition; and 3) failure to provide sufficient reasons for contrapuntal prescriptions and restrictions.

Perhaps the most frequent of these three offenses, and certainly the one that Schenker finds most galling, is that of the authors' deriving principles of strict composition more or less empirically from "free composition"--that is, from actual works of real composers, whether of the "vocal period" or the tonal period. Even in the Introduction (I, 2-4) he cites Albrechtsberger for making the assumption that *a capella* composition in an older style represents strict composition.

As Schenker notes, "Every composition already represents in itself a *free* and never a strict composition!" (I, 4) And further: "It is always a serious mistake, as I have stated repeatedly, to call upon the practice of the masters in free composition to decide problems in strict counterpoint" (I, 273). He draws a clear line

between the cantus firmus (a melody in "the most primitive state" used as the basis for an *exercise* in strict composition) and even the simplest chorale melody (already an instance of free composition) (I, 33-34; also I, 18). Thereafter, he allows hardly a single instance to escape in which one of the authors brings evidence of any sort from actual composition to bear upon the principles of strict composition. Thus he mocks Albrechtsberger for invoking "recent concertos and pieces in the galant style" (II, 43); and he rebukes Bellermann, the theorist for whom this transgression was most irresistible, for bringing into contrapuntal theory evidence from music ranging from "the old masterworks" (I, 32), "composers of the sixteenth century" (I, 183), Goudimel (I, 49) and Palestrina (I, 79, 82, and 273), to a Lutheran chorale (I, 82).

The second category of offenses involves the theorists' allowing musical criteria appropriate only to free composition to influence the principles that they articulate for strict composition, or vice versa. Chief among these is the tendency of the earlier authors to admit scale degrees, which Schenker rigorously limits to free composition, into the realm of counterpoint (see, for example, I, 73-74 and 152-54). Not surprisingly, it is Albrechtsberger who, as a figured-bass theorist and teacher of Beethoven, "has his eye constantly turned toward free composition" (II, 22) and is especially susceptible to the influence of harmony. Albrechtsberger sometimes errs as well by allowing contrapuntal lines to assume a too instrumental, as opposed to vocal, character (II, 72). Bellermann on the other hand, comes in for stern criticism for allowing strict composition to dictate principles for free composition: "*Bellermann* commits the gravest error that can be committed by a theorist, in

that he extends the prohibition [of the 7 - 8 suspension in the bass] to free composition" (I, 273).

A third category involves the inability of Schenker's predecessors to provide reasons for their contrapuntal prescriptions and restrictions. It is this offense for which he most frequently cites Fux--otherwise surely his favorite among the four theorists. The same problem underlies his frequent criticism of Cherubini for being excessively strict but with no apparent reason (I, 205-6, 246-7). That he so faults Fux and others (see also his criticism of Albrechtsberger [I, 45] regarding tone repetition in the cantus firmus) for failing to understand the reasons underlying their principles, and that he is so determined throughout the work to provide explanations of his own bespeaks his faith in his ability to articulate the natural laws underlying contrapuntal rules. It is these newly revealed laws that constitute Schenker's gloss on the tradition, that make "ancient matter available for active engagement" by musicians of the present, and that enable Schenker to sort out history and to claim that, for the first time, he has demonstrated the proper relation of strict and free composition.

How well does Schenker succeed in achieving his two stated goals--defining the boundary between strict and free composition, and establishing the connection between the two? And how well do the absolute laws that he posits to underpin his broader aims stand up? At the outset we can say that his enterprise is in many respects an unquestioned success. He is the first theorist seriously to attempt to separate strict and free composition, and deeply to explore the nature of this separation. To some degree we may agree with Rothgeb, who states in the Translator's Introduction that the theme of such a separation is "followed through so consistently and with

such compelling logic . . . as to require no additional elucidation . . . " (I, xiv). Certainly he hammers away at this theme throughout both volumes, and we can make no mistake about the nature of his claim. But whether he in fact succeeds in clearly separating stict and free composition is open to question, and will bear closer scrutiny below. With respect to his second goal (the demonstration of the relationship between strict and free composition), we all know that one of Schenker's most significant contributions--if not his most significant contribution--to music theory is to articulate precisely how voice-leading principles are realized in actual composition. That not only the final part of the second volume of *Kontrapunkt* ("Bridges to Free Composition"), but in fact the entire book lays the groundwork for his eventual elaboration of this connection will be obvious to anyone who knows his later work, and needs no comment here.

With respect to his proposed absolute laws of counterpoint that buttress his broader arguments, although there are philosophical problems raised by his assertions, the fact remains that the depth and originality of thinking to which the attempt to discover such laws spurred him produced in the book a rich and varied corpus of new musical insights, explanations, points of view, and theoretical terms that render it the century's most signal contribution to the discipline. Of these we may mention the following: a new formulation of the concept of "ideal" tones[2] (I, 112); approaching the

[2]The concept of ideal tones, of course, has precedents in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century German theory. For example, it is central to Christoph Bernhard's figure of "heterolepsis" and to Heinichen's "anticipated passing tone." See Walther Hilse's translation of Bernhard's *Tractatus* in *The Music Forum III* (New

problem of "open" and "hidden" parallels by means of putting them both under the umbrella of similar motion and dealing with individual cases in terms of parallel and non-parallel motion (I, 127-46); detailed and separate consideration of the reasons underlying the strictures against parallel octaves and parallel fifths (I, 130, 134-40); explicit articulation of the concept of mitigating factors that lessen the effect of non-parallel similar motion in three or more voices and in free composition (I, 140-43; II, 27-37); a frontal assault on the whole notion of "exceptions" to the rules of counterpoint (the entire book); interpretation of the neighboring tone and even the suspension ("syncope") as derivative from the passing tone, which thus becomes the fundamental dissonance[3] (I, 179-83, 261-63; II, 86-100); relegation of the *nota cambiata* to free composition (I, 236-48); the explanation of this figure as two interlocking passing motions (I, 236-7); an original explanation of the necessity of downward resolution of suspension figures, even in the absence of scale degrees (I, 263-70); the idea--so crucial for the development of Schenker's analytical theory in the 1920s--of the passing tone in the lower voice of second species three-voice counterpoint creating in effect a new inner voice (II, 57); and, of course, his highly original systematization of combined species in the final section of Volume II.

That Schenker makes his goals clear, and that he brings to his project both a comprehensive knowledge of the tradition that he

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York: Columbia University Press, 1973):118-19; and George Buelow, "Heinichen's Treatment of Dissonance," *Journal of Music Theory* 6 (1962):226-7.

[3]For a detailed critique of this concept, see William Rothstein, "Rhythm and the Theory of Structural Levels," Ph.D. dissertation (Yale University, 1981):19-20. See also the review of the Rothgeb/Thym translation of *Kontrapunkt* by Robert Wason and Matthew Brown, *Music Theory Spectrum* 11/2 (1989):234.

glosses, and an original critical musical mind, is obvious enough. But we have thus far considered his achievements essentially in his own terms, and we have not broached a number of touchy issues that render the book less clean and less absolute than it may appear on a first acquaintance. For it is more difficult to gather his views of strict and free composition, of music history, and of his psychologically based contrapuntal laws into a coherent and consistent package than he would have us believe.

We can approach such issues best by reading *Kontrapunkt* critically and with great care, taking time to question even its most ostensibly obvious assertions, and to focus his disparate comments about diverse elements such as pedagogy, music history, harmonic scale degrees, and motivic content into a comprehensible and unified picture. To do so is not easy: although Schenker's language is hardly elegant, it possesses a certain poetic and seductive power. The ideas and theoretical terms are so instinctively plausible, so physically and psychologically palpable ("boundary" tones, the "compulsion" of the dissonance or of scale degrees, "melodic fluency"), and so forceful (the "law of triadic completeness," the "absolute character of the world of tone"), that we are easily drawn into the theoretical world of his making before we have time really to consider what we are getting into. Although most of us ultimately want to be there, we would profit immeasurably by giving serious thought to what it *means* to be there. If, as Bertrand Russell has suggested, Plato's writing is so *beautiful* that we instinctively believe its content even when we probably should not,[4] so might we say that

[4]Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945):105.

the theoretical edifice created by Schenker's writing is so inviting and so assuring that we settle comfortably into it without thoroughly examining the solidity of its construction.

Let us examine that edifice by synthesizing the principal tenets of *Kontrapunkt* into a concise form. Strict composition is a pedagogical tool devised for the teaching and understanding of absolute tonal laws that have a permanent psychological existence, that serve as a kind of tonal grammar of tonal effect in the abstract, and that underlie actual free composition. Its lines are subject to the limitations of the human voice, although conceived in the abstract (no text is used), and to the restrictions that harmonic scale degrees and motivic repetition (and thus imitation, canon, and fugue) are excluded. Free composition, on the other hand, is distinguished from strict in that it exists at a more sophisticated level, it exhibits a "psychic compulsion toward freer formations" (I, 13), it allows harmonic scale degrees and their prolongation through motivic development (". . . my theory is the first that points to the *scale degree as the generator of [musical] content*"; I, xxxi), and it permits licenses such as instrumentally conceived lines, less strict dissonance resolution and voice-leading restrictions, and the like. In short, the product of strict composition is the *exercise*, that of free composition the *work of art*.

An important distinction obtaining throughout *Kontrapunkt* is that between the natural and the "artificial." We are given to understand that what is provided by nature in music, and is thus its "a priori" element, is the triad, the generator of the consonant intervals (I, xxv, xxx-xxxi). As Schenker states at the beginning of his discussion of two-voice counterpoint:

> . . . [C]onsonance manifests an absolute character, dissonance, on the contrary, a merely relative and derivative one: *in the beginning is consonance!* The consonance is primary, the dissonance secondary! (I,111; see also I, 183-4)

In contrast, the grammar provided by the laws of counterpoint is "artificial"; consonance and the scale degree (the form that the *a priori* of consonance takes in free, as opposed to strict composition) are given by Nature, counterpoint by Art. Although his continual reference to the laws of counterpoint as absolute might suggest to us that they, too, are natural, a close reading of *Kontrapunkt* proves otherwise. Thus in his discussion of three-voice counterpoint in the first species Schenker writes:

> For as we know, scale degrees are subject more to Nature than to Art; they have a course originally predetermined by the former alone, and therefore a deliberate wantonness in the succession of sonorities such as that found in a configuration of strict counterpoint can in no way be reconciled with the essence of a scale-degree progression that is truly in accord with Nature (II,15).

A few pages later, in reference to open and close position, he identifies the former with the overtone series and thus with Nature, but the latter with "the artificial domain of music"--that is, counterpoint (II, 25), which he then refers to as existing in the realm of "a synthetic [that is, man-made] culture such as music" (II, 26).

What then are we to make of the following assertion in the Introduction?

> All musical technique is derived from two basic ingredients: voice leading and the progression of scale degrees. Of the two, *voice leading* is the earlier and more original element. (I, xxv)

If voice leading is the "earlier and more original element," but only the progression of scale degrees is a matter of "nature," we must therefore conclude that harmony is *logically* prior in music, but that voice leading is *historically* prior. The Schenkerian interpretation of musical history thus rests first on the assertion that there are two classes of absolutes in music--a *natural* absolute of the overtone series and its products (consonance and scale degrees), and an artificial absolute comprised of the historically revealed laws of voice leading. But since the historical development of the artificial laws necessarily presupposes the discovery, on the part of composers, of at least the fundamental *natural* laws of consonance, the two must be inextricably intertwined, inasmuch as the principles of counterpoint, if they are about anything, are about the treatment of consonance and dissonance. For "the first principle of the theory of counterpoint [is] 'In the beginning is consonance!'" (I, 112.) And because the historical development of contrapuntal principles *and* the evolution of the consciousness of harmonic scale degrees were gradual and interdependent processes, we must view Schenker's separation of the two as an imaginative theoretical clarification after the fact, just as his separation of strict and free composition is a valuable heuristic tool applied to the pedagogical tradition of counterpoint after the fact.

The distinction involving the *natural* absolute of scale degrees and the *artificial* one of counterpoint forces us to rethink the whole category of "the natural" as Schenker uses it in *Kontrapunkt*. I have suggested above (p. 214) that Schenker's means of achieving his goal of articulating the relation of strict and free composition was to uncover the "natural" laws underlying contrapuntal formations. Certainly his language would lead us to believe that he was revealing some sort of natural musical law, inasmuch as he writes of contrapuntal theory demonstrating "tonal laws in their absolute sense," of certain combinations of tones producing "a particular effect and none other," and of the "absolute character of the world of tone" (see full quotations on p. 205). But, significantly, Schenker never uses the term "natural" when describing such laws. That term is reserved *only* for the overtone series and the scale degrees, despite the fact that phrases such as "the absolute character of the world of tone" lead us powerfully to conceive of a tonal universe given by nature and subject to internal laws." Thus, strictly speaking, his absolute tonal laws of counterpoint are *not* natural laws. Rather, they are *artificial* laws, the foundation of which lies in human artistic psychology. They therefore are not laws of a natural world of tone outside ourselves, as Schenker's language sometimes implies, but the laws of our own musical perceptions and preferences.

But if they are laws of psychology rather than laws of nature, we may well question the degree to which they are "absolute." Even granting that contemporary thought tends to deal with absolutes less than that of Schenker's era, still we may doubt the degree of certainty that he claims for his principles. For if the grammar that is counterpoint bears the absolute quality that he asserts for it, then there should exist discovery procedures whereby

we could determine that event x is grammatical, but y is not. Now some of the laws provide such rigorous discovery procedures: the prescription against vertical dissonance in the first species, or the obligation of the passing tone to continue in the same direction in the second. But, as we all know, most of the principles of counterpoint are stated, both by Schenker and by his predecessors, in terms of "the smoothest and most normal way" (I, 102), "good taste" (I, 290)--that is, in terms, as Robert Wason and Matthew Brown have noted in their review of the Rothgeb/Thym translation of *Kontrapunkt*, of the culturally determined artistic values and tastes of the eighteenth century rather than immutable truths.

The sorting out of Schenker's central categories, such as natural and artificial, pedagogy and composition, scale degree and voice leading, enables us to address related issues in the book one at a time. I shall conclude with a critique of three problems, both methodological and musical in nature, raised by a close reading of *Kontrapunkt*.

1. **The inductive-deductive problem.** Schenker's insistence on the absolute quality of contrapuntal laws leads us to believe that he is working deductively from first principles. He speaks of "tonal effects in their absolute sense" (I, 14), of "eternally valid principles of voice leading" (I, 32), and of "immutable . . . paths of perception" (II, 100). And, as we have seen, he rails against deriving principles of strict counterpoint from free composition, thus bespeaking his opposition to any implication that his work is empirical in nature. Yet in no sense does he build a deductive system in the manner of Descartes or Leibniz or Hegel, or even Rameau, who despite woefully

inadequate logic sometimes at least approximates a deductive argument, or at least a deductive presentation of an empirically based theory. Rather, Schenker proceeds systematically through an ordering of materials already established by tradition, and he superimposes upon those materials the absolutist language of the rationalist philosophy that we recognize as stemming from the philosophical tradition with which he was familiar. He describes truths that even he classifies as *synthetic* with language that is surely *analytic*. The pre-existing pedagogical arrangement of the material enables him to sidestep the issue of where all his observations are coming from--namely, the empirical study of a living musical tradition--in a way that would have been foreign to Fux, who was content to base his principles upon the model of the music of the old masters.

Of course, Schenker never claims to be constructing a deductive system: why should he, since counterpoint is the product of nature rather than art? But his language masks his real methodology. As it must: for an admission that contrapuntal principles are derived empirically from practice would not only call into question their status as absolute and ultimate truths, but would also seriously undermine the first central claim of the whole enterprise--that is, the clean separation of strict and free counterpoint. Here again we have a classic Schenkerian paradox. Schenker undoubtedly realizes, at some level, that contrapuntal laws are indeed empirical. Otherwise, why would he so strictly separate them from the natural law of the triad and scale degrees? Yet given his absolutist turn of mind in matters of art, he must have found the notion of a fluid, give-and-take relationship between contrapuntal theory and practice too threatening, and thus opted to present the

empirically derived principles of his predecessors and himself in an apparently deductive--and absolutist--way.

2. **The historical problem.** The late Carl Dahlhaus, in his recent monograph on the history of music theory, points out the tension in the nineteenth century between what he calls *Satzlehre*, the received model of compositional instruction, largely based on counterpoint, and the cultural value placed upon originality and genius in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.[5] For Dahlhaus a critical question in understanding the history of composition in the nineteenth century is whether composers used the essentially neutral model provided by *Satzlehre* or the individualistic model provided by other composers' works. Schenker's *Kontrapunkt* is a logical outgrowth of the nineteenth-century cultural dilemma identified by Dahlhaus, in the sense that it attempts to legislate a boundary between the two models, thereby preserving the validity of the pedagogical tradition while at the same time liberating the free compositions of the great masters as models for young composers and as objects for our admiration.

3. **Counterpoint and Free Composition: Schenker's Analytic Theory.** If what distinguishes free composition from strict composition is the presence of harmonic scale degrees and the motivic content that they generate, and if counterpoint is simply the grammar that underlies free composition, then we might predict that

[5]Carl Dahlhaus, *Die Musiktheorie im 18. unde 19. Jahrhundert*, Erster Teil: Grundzüge einer Sustematik in Geschichte der Musiktheorie, Bd. 10, ed. Frieder Zaminer (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984):29.

as Schenker progressed from the consideration of strict counterpoint in *Kontrapunkt* to the world of free composition in his later works, he would gravitate toward a more detailed and sophisticated approach to harmony and motive, using counterpoint as an already established basis. Such is hardly the case. For although he did in the dozen or so years remaining to him after the publication of the second volume of *Kontrapunkt* develop an original approach to motivic structure, he did not move substantially beyond the concept of harmony presented in his treatise of 1906. Indeed, as William Benjamin has pointed out, his concept of harmony in effect *shrank* from a model built on the circle of fifths to a contrapuntallly based *Ursatz* that relies primarily on the tonic-dominant polarity.[6]

And where does his greatest and most original contribution to music theory in these years lie? In the development of the concepts of structural levels, and of the *Ursatz*; precisely constructs that extend the notion of *counterpoint* to progressively deeper and broader realms of musical structure. His concept of counterpoint expanded enormously from the short, vocally based exercises based on a cantus firmus, such as we see in *Kontrapunkt*, to a truly prodigious level of abstraction. Thus he in essence exponentially expanded his original abstraction of principles from the vocal model to assume control over a musical terrain that is neither vocal nor in any sense subject to the limitations of length operative in the original model. But what is it that has made this expansion possible? It is the fact that in extending the tentacles of counterpoint to cover entire movements or works he has imported harmonic content into

[6]William Benjamin, "Pitch-Class Counterpoint in Tonal Music," *Music Theory: Special Topics*, ed. Richmond Brown (New York: Academic Press, 1981):31.

contrapuntal structure: both by means of the fundamental tonic-dominant-tonic progression of the *Ursatz* itself, and by means of the concept of contrapuntal transformations on lower structrural levels generating harmonic content. In so doing he has reformulated the concept of harmony, as Benjamin has noted, for now the principles of harmonic succession are reduced to I - V - I, or I - pre-dominant - V - I, and the larger shape of pieces is interpreted as deriving ultimately from contrapuntal processes rather than harmonic ones. Thus, although Schenker's system in *Free Composition* is founded on the triad, and although, as *Kontrapunkt* promised, it integrates harmony with counterpoint, the compromise comes at the cost of counterpoint's calling the shots, and harmony's following in its footsteps. The synthesis that constitutes his great contribution to tonal theory accordingly brings us face to face yet again with the tension that we have already experienced in *Kontrapunkt* between pedagogy and free composition, between grammar and creative compulsion, between exercises without motives and scale degrees, and music with them.

A final tension in *Free Composition* that has its roots in Schenker's earliest work--both the *Harmonielehre* and *Kontrapunkt*--concerns the relation of counterpoint and motivic content. In Schenker's later analytical work there are two logically independent strains--one based on relationships of adjacency and continuity (counterpoint and the *Ursatz*), and one based on relationships of identity and similarity (the *verborgene Wiederholung*). The first strain incorporates not only the principles of counterpoint, as developed in *Kontrapunkt*, but also those limited relics of harmonic progression that remain in the *Ursatz* and its transference to more foreground structural levels. The second strain involves motivic

content, which in Schenker's later system has its origin in the contrapuntally prolonged harmonic scale degree. As we read *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik* and *Free Composition*, we sometimes wonder what really distinguishes the work of genius: the composer's instinctively following the path laid out by the *Urlinie* or the *Ursatz*, or the presence of sophisticated deep motivic relationships? This tension is traceable to *Harmonielehre*, which opens with an extensive discourse on motivic repetition, and to *Kontrapunkt*, where Schenker claims that "our greatest masters," among other historical accomplishments, "recognized the act of repeating a series of pitches as the principle force of all music of all times" (I, 22). Although at first blush this statement is surely jarring in a work on counterpoint, it is consistent with his larger view: if counterpoint is rigorously separated from free composition, then motivic relations, as the property of the creative artist, are indeed free to assume the status that Schenker claims for them. However, in *Kontrapunkt* he was willing to leave motivic relations comfortably to one side while he delved deeply into strict composition. But in his later work, where he subsumes voice leading, harmony, and motivic structure all into a single coherent picture, his attempt to make cross-referential motivic relationships of the same essence as the contrapuntal unfoldings that dominate his structures represents a weak link in his final system. The tension between motivic relations and counterpoint--the tension between relations of similarity and those of contiguity--that is introduced in *Kontrapunkt* becomes a central logical flaw in *Free Composition*.

Not surprisingly, then, the new world that Schenker begins to construct out of his gloss upon and reformulation of the world of counterpoint is neither so absolute nor so inviolable as his prophetic

language would have us believe. Reading him carefully reveals, just under the surface, a network of stresses, gaps, and strains.

Such stresses suggest one final intellectual figure against whom we can play his achievement in *Kontrapunkt*: Ferdinand de Saussure. It has become a commonplace to compare Schenker, the founder of modern tonal theory, with Freud, the founder of modern depth psychology. An equally apt comparison might be made to the founder of modern linguistics. Saussure, like Schenker, attempted to go beyond the diachronically oriented, historical and evolutionary methods of his time to posit a synchronic, structural (or structuralist) basis for his discipline. In a recent detailed gloss of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (which was not actually written by Saussure himself, but compiled by two of his students from lecture notes from the years 1906 to 1911, and published in 1916; it is thus exactly contemporaneous with *Kontrapukt*), the Oxford linguist Roy Harris uncovers the same sorts of stresses and gaps in the *Cours* that I have briefly outlined here with respect to *Kontrapunkt*. Indeed, hardly a page of the *Cours* escapes Harris's reading unscathed. Yet from the outset he happily and unequivocally acknowleges Saussure as the "founder of modern linguistics."[7] And his conclusion contains a tribute in which we could easily substitute, at one level, Schenker's *Kontrapunkt*, and at another his *oeuvre* as a whole, warts and all, for Saussure's *Cours* (for *Kontapunkt* itself does not represent Schenker's ultimate mature theory, as the *Cours* does for Saussure, but rather lays its foundation and serves as a sort of prelude):

[7]Roy Harris, *Reading Saussure* (London: Duckworth, 1987):26.

> [An] apt comparison is with certain types of experiment in engineering, where a structure is submitted to progressively increasing stress until it finally collapses. The *Cours* is text of this order. It takes a very simple structure of explanation, based on just two principles [for *Kontrapunkt* these might might be the separation of strict and free composition, and the relation of the two; for Schenker's later theory they might be the *Ursatz* on the one hand, and motivic relations on the other], and proceeds to pile more and more upon this framework, in order to demonstrate just how much it will bear. One should not be surprised by the eventural collapse, but amazed by its unsuspected strength, and intrigued to see just where it will fracture. That is why there is no substitute for reading the *Cours* [*Kontrapunkt*; Schenker's *oeuvre*] as it stands; and why, as it stands, it remains one of the most impressive landmarks of modern thought.[8]

Rothgeb and Thym's elegant translation has already made, and will continue to make, such reading, both of *Kontrapunkt* and of the Schenkerian corpus as a whole, more of a reality than it has ever been previously. For this we all owe them a debt of gratitude.

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[8]Ibid, p. 237.