

Review of Schenker's *Counterpoint: Volume I*
by Andrew Schartmann

Written as the second installment of *Neue musikalische Theorien und Phantasien*, Heinrich Schenker's first book on counterpoint (1910) follows the species tradition of Johann Fux; however, whereas Fux provides exercises based on his own *cantus firmi*, Schenker begins by instructing the student in the proper writing of a *cantus firmus*. The volume is thus divided into two parts: the *cantus firmus* as the foundation of contrapuntal studies and two-voice counterpoint in all five species.

The first section describes, in detail, how to write a successful *cantus firmus* and justifies a revised application of the species approach that does not fuse contrapuntal exercises with the art of composition. In support of this view, Schenker cites the harmonic and rhythmic equilibrium of the *cantus firmus*, as well as its severely restricted length, and asks, "Why...continue such monotony for measure upon measure when it does not even contain ingredients for art, that is, composition?" The rhetorical nature of this question exemplifies Schenker's frustration at the state of artistic craftsmanship and musical understanding, which develops into a rather pervasive theme as the work progresses. This attitude yields one notable digression concerning theorists' tendency to group all functional harmonies into three groups (I, IV, or V), which, according to Schenker, "deprives other functions of their independence and thus of their attractive capability of assuming various functions." In light of similar "deficiencies" in the current methods of teaching, Schenker introduces the concept of counterpoint as a universal experiential art.

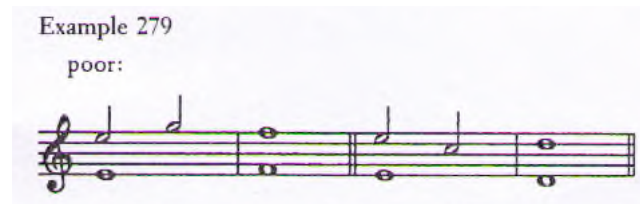
This notion of teaching counterpoint as a hearing-based craft commands great influence over the second section of the book. As in most counterpoint texts, each species is presented along

with its accompanying set of rules and guidelines; however, rather than employing a style-based approach, Schenker asserts that the inherent effect of tones is universal, and thus style-independent. Different solutions are, therefore, not seen as "right" or "wrong", but rather are judged strictly according to the effect they produce. In this vein, examples that pit traditional rules against auditory experience abound, and incidentally provide a nice complement to Schenker's emphasis on justifying general principles rather than simply stating them. The examples are enhanced by excerpts from the repertoire—a rather novel feature in itself—and serve to further demonstrate the boundary between free composition and contrapuntal study.

Aside from the universality of his method, Schenker's approach differs significantly from most in that it does not regard fugue as the pinnacle of contrapuntal study. Instead, Schenker reserves the study of fugue for a discussion on musical form and promises a chapter on the bridges to free composition, so that contrapuntal study will not be seen as an end in itself.

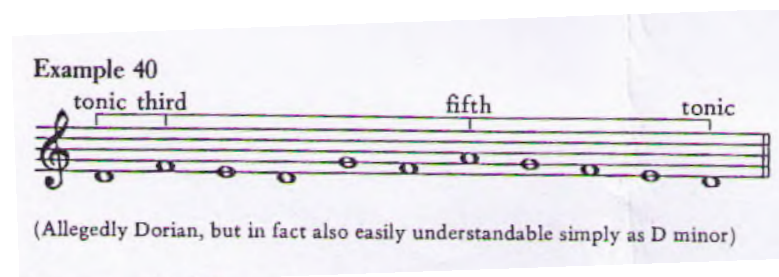
Unfortunately, Schenker's ideology prevents him from extending the concept of a universal craft to music that falls outside of the major-minor duality characteristic of the Western tonal tradition. His view that the aforementioned tonal organization is of the highest order, and thus the only one suitable to so-called masterworks, precludes any detailed discussion of counterpoint in other systems. Nonetheless, the first volume on counterpoint reveals some of the underlying principles of Schenkerian analysis as we know it today, and proposes the idea that counterpoint is nothing more than a theory of voice-leading. This in itself is a significant contribution to musical knowledge, understanding, and culture.

Examples



Schenker's method of teaching counterpoint as an experiential art is perhaps most salient in his discussion of parallel octaves in second species, where he claims that the inclusion of an intervening tone can, under certain circumstances, remove or significantly reduce the impression of parallel motion. In this case, the leap of a third is too small and unassuming to eliminate the effect of the parallels.

Simple and logical on the surface, the significance of this statement—one that echoes Brahms' study of octaves and fifths—goes far beyond the occasional admittance of parallels in counterpoint exercises, and admits the notion that craftsmanship is strictly governed by a common experience. Incidentally, this opens the door to a theory independent of style.



Some of the embryonic concepts that would later come to the fore in Schenker's graphical analyses are ever-present in this work. In this example, Schenker praises Fux's "beautifully constructed" cantus firmus on more than just the simple criteria outlined throughout the chapter. He notes how the cantus is structured in such a way that the triad (D-F-A) is impressed upon the ear; a clear example of Schenker's notion of unfolding (*auseinandergewickelt*).

It is also worth noting Schenker's parenthetical remark, which subtly underlines his unfavorable view of modal systems. It is almost as if he feels the need to excuse Fux's use of an "allegedly Dorian" cantus firmus by indicating that it can be understood, quite simply, as D minor.