Schoenberg fundamentals

Fundamentals of Musical Composition by Arnold Schoenberg. Faber, 7 gns

The teaching of composition reflects the structure of music itself. A book about composition is defined by its author's experience and attitudes. Ideally the composer's book of instruction (if he feels impelled to provide one) should be derived in equal parts from his personal relationship to traditional music (and the teaching of it) and his own experience and discoveries; that is: a combination of the old made new, and the new. The literature of this kind is small and few books come to mind. Vincent d'Indy's two-volume treatise fulfils many of the conditions proposed above. Messiaen's book deals only with his own work, and Hindemith's books are marred by somewhat dubious attempts to make everything fit to his own rather mechanistic theories. Important contributions to the understanding of the structure of music by theorists like Tovey, Schenker, Ratz, or Neumann are valuable for the composer's understanding of his craft but are not directly intended as volumes of instruction.

Schoenberg published three books of technical instruction in his lifetime. The most important of these was the first: *Harmonielehre*, completed in 1911 and most significantly dedicated to the memory of Gustav Mahler. The writing of this book corresponds to the years of Schoenberg's most dynamic musical innovations: *Five Orchestral Pieces* and *Erwartung* in 1909, *Pierrot Lunaire* in 1912. It also comes at the end of his teaching in Vienna of what was his most talented class (it contained Alban Berg, Anton Webern, and Hanns Eisler). The *Harmonielehre* is not obsessed with the past. It is an extraordinary synthesis of speculation and experiment and, at the same time, a revolutionary new method of harmonic analysis, not based on the concept of dissonance and consonance as opposites (as the structure of the words implies) but evaluating harmonic movement as strong or weak (in a physical, not an aesthetic sense) according to the movement of the bass and the number of notes in common between two adjacent chords. Although this approach was not entirely unprecedented (it is anticipated in the theories of Hugo Riemann), Schoenberg developed the idea systematically so that he could control very complex harmony where others were content to give non-functional names and hope for the best, on the somewhat over-optimistic theory that anything combines with anything if it is not a tonic, dominant, or subdominant. He also succeeds in removing *angst* from the student, by substituting permutational exploration of all possibilities of combination, modestly evaluated as 'better' or 'worse', for the pseudo-artistic harmony exercise where good taste in figured-bass realization or the stylistic discipline of chorale harmonization, while obviously valuable, too often result in mystification and a feeling of the impossibility of it all and not in a deepening of understanding of functional harmony.

Models for Beginners in Composition was written in 1942 and *Structural Functions of Harmony* in 1946. By comparison with the *Harmonielehre*, these works are obsessed with tradition: the tradition of German classical and romantic music. Characteristically, Schoenberg avoided any reference here to his 12-note works, with the exception, perhaps, of a passing quotation. He was trying to formulate a theory of composition teaching which, in its objectivity and concrete nature, corresponded not so much to his present or immediate past but to the Viennese classics and possibly to his own revitalization of classical prototypes in middle period, tonal, and 12-note compositions.

Gerald Strang and Leonard Stein have now edited *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, which Schoenberg left incomplete at the time of his death. It closely relates to the two books mentioned above and was in fact written at the same time (from 1937 to 1948). According to Rufer's catalogue of Schoenberg's works, it was written in German (as indeed the date it was begun would suggest) and translated by his brother-in-law Rudolf Kolisch. This information conflicts with Strang's preface to the present volume; he writes:

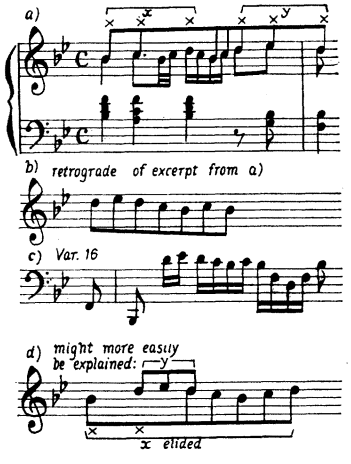
> From the beginning the book was conceived in English, rather than in Schoenberg's native German. This created many problems of terminology and language structure. He rejected much of the traditional terminology in both languages choosing, instead, to borrow or invent new terms . . . I have chosen to keep some of the flavour of Schoenberg's English construction, when it is expressively effective, even though it may be at variance with the idiomatic.

I can cast no light on this total contradiction between experts who must surely be in touch with each other. It is no trivial matter. Whereas Schoenberg's 'expressively effective' English presents no difficulty of comprehension in his essays (*Style and Idea*) or for that matter in this posthumously edited *Preliminary Exercises in Counterpoint*, the present volume presents real problems of unravelling complex linguistic confusions and pulling together sentences from various parts of the page, which often belie the expensive and tasteful presentation of the volume. Much thought has been given to terminology, sometimes clarifying the issue, sometimes obscuring it. Usage is not completely consistent in either English English or Los Angeles English. A typical example is the word *Durchführung* (literally, *leading through*), customarily translated as 'development' when referring to the development section of the sonata. Now Schoenberg rightly objected to this translation: (*a*) because *Durchführung* refers to the fact that the music modulates to remote regions; and (*b*) because there is frequently more genuine development in exposition and recapitulation than in the so-called development section. Strang in a footnote proposes that the terms 'elaboration' and '*Durchführung*' are used interchangeably throughout the book, and justifies this by juxtaposing 'development (in the sense of growth, maturation, evolution)' with what he says does happen—'Motive-forms are adapted, varied, expanded, condensed, recombined and recondensed.' This is all very subtle and throws a number of other unexplained words into an already considerable muddle. Again, is the ugly term 're-transition', explained as 'returning to the tonic', necessary?

The book as a whole suggests a certain atmosphere

of desperation. In a revealing letter, included as an appendix, Schoenberg writes: 'in my three years' contact with university students . . . I have realized that the greatest difficulty for the students is to find out how they can compose without being inspired.' He adds: 'The answer is: it is impossible. But as they have to do it, nevertheless, advice has to be given.' Teaching students of the University of Southern California compared with teaching Berg, Webern, Skalkottas, or Eisler may explain the limitations of the present volume. But even so, the richness of thought, the characteristic systematization and clarity, and the thought-provoking *aperçus* remain. A footnote proposes: 'the real purpose of musical construction is not beauty, but intelligibility'. One can almost hear the tone of voice in which that statement was made.

Without doubt the most fascinating aspects of the book are the numerous music examples in the text. Each chapter deals with a problem of construction, progressing from the structure and function of the Motive, to Simple Themes and in the second part to the building of these into Ternary Forms, then Minuets, Scherzi, Themes with Variations and finally the large forms: Sonata and Rondo; this last section prefaced by the extraordinary sentence: 'Larger forms may consist of larger parts, or more parts or both.' Schoenberg has composed music examples to illustrate the points he makes and some of these are quite extended compositions. They make fascinating reading, and the analytical texts from Beethoven's piano sonatas and other classics are predictably apposite and often brilliant. But they are not without their idiosyncracies, especially when it comes to anything to do with retrogrades, which Schoenberg was naturally over-keen to establish as historically legitimate. For example, in the illustration below from the Brahms-Handel variations perhaps it would have been possible to use the harmony note D in the analysis of the theme as opposed to the less important and passing C; then the derivation of the variation would be perfectly clear forwards rather than backwards.



The question remains whether aspiring composers as opposed to uninspiring and uninspired undergraduates will want, or indeed will benefit, by systematic teaching of the kind which this book exemplifies. I wonder whether learning to build up musical sentences, 'implying an inherent harmony' in a prototype model manner, is necessarily a liberating force for a composer. There can be no doubt of the value of detailed analysis and the learning of specific characteristics and functions of sections and forms. Nowhere else, for instance, is elimination (rather unfortunately called 'liquidation' in this volume) so penetratingly discussed. But many, and for the student the most rigorous, aspects of this system are already covered by the study of academic fugue. To impose a second system of homophonic composition, equally limited in its references, seems to risk the danger of swamping the spirit of fantasy and the ability to make arbitrary connections which are essential for the aspiring composer. The latter half of Schoenberg's creative life suggests a perpetual conflict between his highly personal and forceful imagination and an ambivalent and slightly didactic attitude to tradition: the music of the past which had nurtured him. Many of us others have felt and feel a similar conflict. But the question remains whether it is always a productive conflict and whether it is something which should be passed on.

ALEXANDER GOEHR

Essential Bruckner

The essence of Bruckner: an essay towards the understanding of his music by Robert Simpson. Gollancz, 38s

Bruckner's symphonies have had a long hard struggle in this country before taking their rightful place at the centre of our musical life. As with Mahler, the trouble has been that English musicians between the wars failed to realize the uniqueness of the composer's aims and methods, and condemned him according to inapplicable standards. They approached a Bruckner symphony, at one of its rare performances, from the familiar standpoint of the German tradition, unthinkingly expecting it to follow much the same processes as one by, say, Brahms; and they interpreted their inevitable shocked bewilderment as being due to the composer's incompetence instead of to their own wrong preconception. Today, growing familiarity with Bruckner's symphonies is gradually revealing the futility of this approach; and now here at last we have the authoritative book we have been waiting for, one which can set us all on the right road, as it gets expertly to grips with the *actual* aims and processes of the music and explains their uniqueness in relation to the tradition.

Robert Simpson's claim to present 'the essence of Bruckner' is no idle one. Comprehensively elaborating a half-insight of Tovey—the only important English musician before the present time to catch a glimpse of Bruckner's greatness—he expounds the fearsome problems, the magnificent successes, and the occasional catastrophic failures of a composer who set out to write symphonies on the newly-created vast time-scale of Wagner; and he makes clear just how Bruckner adapted sonata-form, or re-created it, to fit this new time-scale. Dr Simpson writes as a composer, and this gives him a fundamental advantage over the mere critic which is manifest throughout the book. Apart from the introductory chapter, 'Emergence', and the closing one, 'Reflections', the main body of the volume consists of thorough-going analyses of each of the symphonies in turn; and in these we are presented with the *process* of composition—with what at any stage Bruckner's problem was, and how he solved it, successfully or unsuccessfully.

To quote a passage about a successful one, in the initial stages of the Allegro of the first movement of no 5: 'The previous appearances of B flat at the beginning and at bar 23 have not been sufficiently