Ernst Oster (1908-1977) In Memoriam
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ERNST OSTER (1908–1977) IN MEMORIAM

I first met Ernst Oster in 1956, through Milton Babbitt. We became very close friends, and I enjoyed the relationship for some twenty-one years. Perhaps enjoyed is not the most appropriate term, for to be Ernst's friend meant sharing his troubles. One of these was lack of professional recognition. Only in recent years was he able to function as a teacher within an academic setting. Until that time he was denied access to a world that should have been his natural habitat:

> . . . *I have constant trouble with pupils, of one sort or another. That's how it is if one is a private teacher and does not have a great reputation.* [E.O. to A.F., November 12, 1965.]

A few friends attempted to find him a position whenever an opportunity arose:

> *He is a cultivated and intelligent man, humane, sensitive, and with qualities of graciousness which are all too rare these days. . . . His intimate familiary with Schenker's work and his extraordinary musical intelligence make him the foremost expert in that area of theory, without question.*

The response to this particular effort:

I am sure that Oster should be able to find a position which would be compatible with his special interests and achievements.

Oster did indeed find a position compatible with his special interests and achievements, thanks to Gunther Schuller, at the New England Conservatory. Subsequently he obtained another part time appointment, at the Mannes College of Music. In both institutions he was able to have contact with a far larger number of students than in the past. The appointment to the Mannes faculty was particularly gratifying to him because of his previous negative experience with that school, which had been mainly responsible for the transmission of Schenker's ideas to this country:

But it would look somewhat strange if I should show up, contributing to the scholarship fund of a school that has continuously barred me from teaching there, and more. [E.O. to A.F. after receiving notice of a benefit concert at Mannes, December 1, 1967.]

Uppermost in his mind over the years was the disposition of the Schenker materials that he had rescued in 1939 from the European holocaust. Also very important to him was the dissemination in English translation of Schenker's major work, *Der freie Satz*, a project in which I became deeply involved. Having completed the rough draft of my translation on February 4, 1959, but having had no success in my attempt to find a publisher, I turned the material over to Oster in 1962 in the knowledge that he was the best possible person to continue what, to me, had become an impossible undertaking:

. . . I think it would only be correct if I gave you something in writing as a kind of receipt for your translation; perhaps it should include also for what purpose you'll give it to me. [E.O. to A.F., November 20, 1962.]

Oster believed, with some justification, that certain people were opposed to the publication of the English translation of *Freier Satz*. At one point he wrote a long letter to me in

which he set forth arguments to be presented to publishers in rebuttal of the opposition by these people, who had not done anything to further publication of Schenker's original writings:

> *That it was [Oswald] Jonas . . . who made possible the second edition of D. f. S., . . . that it was you and I and [Robert Owen] Lehman who made the translation possible.* [E.O. to A.F., July 2, 1966.]

(Robert Owen Lehman had given Oster a grant of $4500 in 1963 to support his work on the translation of *Der freie Satz.*)

The difficulty of completing the translation caused Oster considerable anguish. He was especially concerned about the capabilities of persons who might be asked by potential publishers to evaluate the translation. On the matter of judging, he wrote:

> *As a matter of fact, very few people could, such as you, or Milton [Babbitt] or [William J.] Mitchell.* [E.O. to A.F., May 2, 1966.]

The *Freier Satz* project was not, however, the most important task in Oster's opinion:

> *I sometimes really feel that, having all those unpublished analyses available would be almost as important as all of Schenker's published books together.* [E.O. to A.F., October 13, 1966, on applying for a Guggenheim Fellowship (not awarded).]

Certainly no one was as well qualified to edit the unpublished manuscripts. He knew that:

> *But one thing that worries me also is that absolutely nobody, not even you or Milton [Babbitt] can have the faintest idea of how long it all takes.* [E.O. to A.F., September 23, 1968.]

And there was the constant conflict between his teaching responsibilities and his commitment to prepare the Schenker sketches for publication:

> *Editing the fugue of op. 106 could take me a few months of almost uninterrupted work. It has to be done, and if*

I don't do it, who will? [E.O. to A.F., October 11, 1964.]

His work as a teacher, however, was of utmost significance to him, despite his complaints about students' preparation and about their pedagogues:

> . . . *students—if one has them!—with their openmindedness and their desire to learn and their desire for something that rings true. But how does one get students if the older musicians do not know, don't want to follow, and cannot distinguish?* [E.O. to A.F., March 2, 1969.]

Although he was constantly involved in it, his original work often took a secondary position to his other activities—in large part because of the extraordinary physical strain, after 1967, of commuting from New York to Boston each week. It is in this original work, however, that the splendid quality of his mind is most evident. It is a pity that we have only a few published articles. Even a project of relatively modest scale engaged his complete concentration, as indicated by this excerpt concerning his contribution to an Analysis Symposium in this *journal* (on Mozart's D major Menuet, K.576b):

> *So I looked at the piece right away and found that most of it was not clear to me at all. I had jotted down a few notes years ago but they were of hardly any help. So I got stuck with the piece and stared at it last night till about 2 a.m., with the result that things began taking shape in my mind. I find it surprisingly difficult* . . . . [E.O. to A.F., November 5, 1965.]

Oster was a profoundly serious person, one who did not suffer fools gladly. He had an incredible capacity for sustained intellectual activity, even as he passed middle age. He was also aware of his abilities as they compared with those of other persons who were known for their work in Schenkerian analysis:

> *What I do when I work is (of course you know) to constantly listen to the composition: does it sound this way, or that way? No, this is not really in keeping with what the piece sounds like—but what else? And then: Why did the composer write the way he did, what were his motivations,*

what is "the idea"? I don't regret working this way. To me it is the only way of going about it, and: this is the way I have "learned" and develop mentally, and it is the reason why I am "better" than "they". [E.O. to A.F., March 2, 1959.]

When one considers his achievements, his teaching, his work on the Schenker materials, and his special original contributions, there is an impression that the life was a fruitful one, although often unhappy. There remains, however, a certain feeling of bitterness toward those who offered only opposition to his attempts to find support for his work, opposition that sometimes created in him a feeling of helplessness:

I really think I have not much of a chance there: the senior fellowship for which I am applying is "designated as for individuals of already distinguished accomplishments in the humanities." [E.O. to A.F., October 13, 1966 concerning his application to the National Endowment for the Humanities.]

With the death of Ernst Oster an era in the history of music theory in this country comes to an end, an era in which Schenker's ideas gradually received a wider acceptance. Perhaps this in itself may serve as a tribute to the life of a scholar of the highest rank, an individual of already distinguished accomplishments.

Allen Forte
July 10, 1977

Over the, at least, three decades during which Ernst and I were friends, there were times when we spoke at least once a day, and there were periods of weeks, or—occasionally—months when we happened to speak not at all, simply because our conversations seemed to demand an occasion, an event, although our talks would have appeared eventful only to very few, even of our colleagues. For, although the objects of our discussions ranged from "A-sharps" to perfidious editors, whereof two mutually felt they could not speak, thereof two

remained silent. And I early lost all temptation to broach the subject of "contemporary music," particularly of that which meant and means so much to me, perhaps when I heard Ernst discuss contemporary performances (of music of the past) thoughtfully, concernedly, and specifically, for all that I easily could claim exemption from that activity. Or, perhaps, it was when Ernst told me of having taken refuge in the hills around Berlin, in 1937 or 1938, to find the space and privacy to spread out and study the "Figuren und Urlinientafeln" of Schenker's *Eroica* analysis, an activity even more hazardous then than now. Why should I have added to the environmental anguish of his times and places that he ever appeared to be suffering an additional straw of personal and professional discomfort? But when we spoke of music, with the score in front of us, or in front of him at the piano, of that music which meant so much to him, he talked and played with that scrupulous, distinguished, enthusiastic intensity with which he taught and wrote, inspiring others by being anything but overtly inspirational, leading others while assuming none of the postures of the leader.

Although now I shall be obliged to learn from him only by rereading those rare articles, I know I shall continue to learn from him, from those articles and from his example: his presences in his absence.

Milton Babbitt
July 12, 1977

My friend and teacher Ernst Oster was totally uninterested in music theory. He was interested in music. He applied theory (Schenker's theory) to the analysis of musical compositions. Unlike a theorist or a historian (though his knowledge of history was profound), he always focussed upon the specific, not the general. Like a performer or a composer—which is to say, like an artist—he was always most concerned with the individual work and what made that work different from all others. And only an artist of the most authentic gifts could discern the artistic content of a work as did he.

To Ernst, the occurrence of a particular voice-leading

technique in one Mozart sonata could be quite a different thing from its occurrence in another. The important thing was how it was used; it was a question of evaluation. This makes him, I suppose, a kind of "critic"—though the term was one he had little use for. Indeed, the field of music, as customarily compartmentalized, lacks the notion of this sort of critic—the sort, so well known in the field of literature, who reveals the meaning of the art work through analysis. The literary critic does so through an essay, through the written word. But the musical critic is much less satisfactorily served by the medium of words, perhaps because words are so antithetical to the nature of music. At any rate, this medium was a difficult one for Ernst Oster, and he wrote little. But he was the most prolific, most generous, and most giving of "critics" in his teaching. His true medium was the lesson—the "session"—and it was here, seated at the piano with one or more students, that his gifts were revealed and the richness of his insights imparted in the highest degree. And the goal, the point of it all, was not only a heightened consciousness of the work's content (as it is for the literary critic), but was also—as it was for Schenker—a more aware, more enlightened, performance.

It was music that Ernst Oster loved and uncompromisingly served in the most selfless manner. And it was music that he revealed to those fortunate enough to know him. We dwell in a poorer land, now that he is gone.

Charles Burkhart
July 9, 1977

Ernst Oster had the good fortune not only to have extraordinary musical sensitivity and intelligence, but he was also the most dedicated and uncompromising kind of scholar. The strength of his insights and beliefs in the theories of Heinrich Schenker sustained him through a lifetime of many disappointments and frustrations as he worked tirelessly to promote the profound understanding of music that was his.

He seemed to ask little from life but a love for music on the highest level both for himself and for others. Most of his

years were lonely, as Schenker's thoughts were first disregarded and then, to Ernst's great distress, misinterpreted. It is everyone's loss that his audience was always so small, for he was a rare friend of music and a gentle and devoted friend to those who knew him.

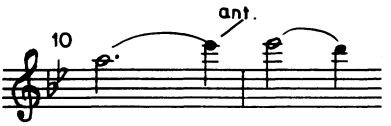
Clemens Sandresky
July 13, 1977

Shortly after Ernst Oster joined the faculty of The Mannes College of Music, he suggested that we get together for an evening to talk over a piece of music. The piece we settled on was Beethoven's beautiful little Bagatelle, Opus 119, No. 11. Ernst agreed with many of my ideas about the piece, but said that he had a few of his own that he would like to discuss with me. His "few ideas" involved virtually every aspect of the Bagatelle, from its form and large-scale tonal structure to the tiniest details of voice leading and of rhythm; we must have spent three hours discussing them. I would like to share one of these ideas with the readers of *JMT* as my contribution to these memorial papers.

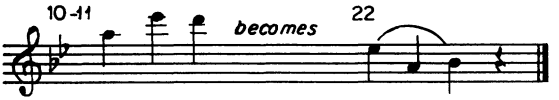
I had mentioned to Ernst that the anticipation on the last eighth note of bar 3 (Example 1) reminded me of a beautiful and little known idea of Schenker's: that anticipations in keyboard music are often intended by the composer to simulate the effect of a vocal *portamento;* in such cases, the performer must use the strictest *legatissimo* touch. A "vocal" style of performance would, of course, be particularly suitable for this Bagatelle, where Beethoven twice writes "cantabile." Ernst agreed, but asked if I had also considered the possibility that the sixteenth-note passage in bar 10 (Example 2a) might be heard as the fantastic elaboration of another anticipation approached by a *portamento.* The goal tone, E-flat^3, arrives before the downbeat, more or less as in the reduction of Example 2b; therefore, it is anticipated. And the passage leading up to E-flat^3, with its strange contour, odd repetitions, and unusual emphases on chromatic passing tones, represents a vocal slide, not merely simulated on the piano, but translated into the idiom of keyboard figuration.

Example 1

Example 2a



2b



2c

To perceive the passage in this way gives a much deeper meaning to the *molto cantabile* that follows and that forms the emotional climax of the piece. And, indirectly, it influences one's conception of the Bagatelle as a whole. For the *molto cantabile* passage gives definition and emphasis to a crucial place in the large-scale melodic structure.* In addition, as Ernst pointed out, the last three notes of the little coda reflect just these climactic bars, whose melodic outline appears in inversion, coming to rest on the tonic (Example 2c).

I am citing this particular insight of Ernst's because it seems to me to typify an important facet of his musical thought. He was not content with a merely correct theoretical explanation of this strange passage; he looked for the compositional idea behind it and for the means the composer used to make the passage sound convincing and beautiful. Ernst brought to the analysis of music an artistic vision so penetrating and so comprehensive that it could bring together in a single focus an element of voice leading (the anticipation), a performance idiom (the *portamento*), the expressive character of the piece (the *cantabile*), the tonal structure, and the form. It was this vision that made his analytic interpretations at once personal and objectively compelling.

Ernst's musical accomplishments were remarkable. He had thought through the possibilities of tonality from the simplest relationships to the subtlest and most complex. He knew countless pieces inside out—had mastered the available source material, had worked out original and convincing ideas for performance, and, most importantly, had arrived at conclusions about compositional issues whose very existence was unknown to most other musicians. These accomplishments represented hard-won victories, for they were achieved in the face of an almost monumental pessimism and of one of the gods' unkindest gifts—a talent for perceiving the problematic and the contradictory that would have brought despair and paralysis to a lesser man. That he achieved so much is truly inspiring.

Carl Schachter
July 10, 1977

*The anticipation of E-flat^3 also has a more direct bearing on the melodic structure, but to explain it adequately would require the format of a full-scale discussion of the piece.

With the death of Ernst Oster we have lost a beloved friend and colleague. Music has lost a valued mentor. Ernst had a rare reverence for his art and imbued his students with the importance of the constant search for the innermost meaning of the music they studied and performed. In a period when the mastery of techniques is more common than penetration, he gave the fortunate musicians who came in contact with him learning and teaching experiences they got nowhere else. One could not fail to be impressed with his seriousness of purpose, his dedication, warmth, and honesty. Ernst loved his students, especially the eager and industrious ones, and took a personal interest in their broader development as artists. He had no patience for those who closed their minds to the teachings of Heinrich Schenker, of which he was a dedicated exponent. His distress over the superficiality of much of the current theoretical training and its reflection in performance, and, more recently, over the ways of the publishing fraternity in his attempts to get important Schenker documents printed, undoubtedly took their toll.

Ernst was devoted to a few friends in whom he confided and with whom he shared art and thought. Always willing to help, seek or give advice when it was needed, he gave generously of himself, with all the humility and sincerity which was characteristic of his nature. We remember him with love and respect, and deeply mourn the loneliness of his passing.

Blanche W. Beck
Sydney Beck
July 14, 1977

It is not an exaggeration to say that Ernst Oster was one of the great musical minds of our time. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have known him for several years, and to have had the opportunity to study with him privately. These studies have had a profound effect on my life: quite naturally the pieces I studied with him have become the backgone of my teaching repertoire; even more importantly, his insights into these and other works have altered my perspective toward music and its structure. I am also indebted to

Ernst for the advice he gave me in preparing two articles for publication.

Ernst was a marvelous teacher. Not only did he have vast knowledge of and about the tonal literature, but he also had the special knack of making one understand exactly why he interpreted a particular detail or larger idea in this or that way. I often left my lessons with quite a different conception of a piece than I had at the beginning, although in some instances the true significance of his ideas became apparent only after considerable thought and work. Above all he taught me that beauty and coherence in music exists at many levels. Details are meaningful in themselves, but their true and artistic significance depends upon their relationship to a larger context.

Ernst was also a very demanding teacher and friend. He set the same high standards for his students as he did for himself, and was clearly disappointed on those occasions when his expectations were not fulfilled. Recently I informed Ernst of a public lecture I was preparing about motivic relationships in tonal music. One of the examples was taken from *Tonwille* and another was a piece that I had studied with Ernst. To my surprise Ernst was a bit angry about this, and in a subsequent letter he expressed disappointment that I would rely so heavily on ideas gleaned from others. At first I thought this rather harsh, since there was much of my own thought involved as well. But then it occurred to me that Ernst was simply prodding me to develop my own ideas to a greater extent. After all, that is what he had done with his life. Although he had spent his entire adult life with Schenker's theories, his greatest insights were his own. That is what made him such a great man.

David Beach
July 12, 1977

I have had the good fortune to belong to a relatively small group of professional musicians who, years after completing doctoral degrees or passing comparable milestones, have continued to regard Ernst Oster not only as their friend but as

their teacher—a teacher whose capacity to communicate ever deeper insights into the masterworks of which he himself possessed such mastery seemed almost boundless.

Ernst Oster's brilliance as a musician and musical thinker was obvious to anyone who followed his work, and especially to those who enjoyed personal contact with him. Apart from his extraordinary natural musical gifts, he had two qualities which, I believe, were largely responsible for his great contribution to musical study.

The first was an unremitting self criticism in his approach to musical problems. He would not compromise and accept an "easy" or obvious solution. Typically, he wrote to me in a letter of March, 1969:

> *"In the past ten or more days I've been working particularly hard on some "problem children," such as [among others] Haydn, Sonata in E-flat, No. 52, development (got it at last, I think, after decades) . . . ."*

It will come as a surprise to many moderately advanced students that something in a piece by Haydn can be completely understood only "after decades"; but so it was to a musician of Ernst Oster's caliber and experience. In teaching, he was never completely satisfied until he accomplished the almost impossible task of *demonstrating* the superiority of a given solution, of showing a given way of hearing to be *necessary* as a result of the compositional premises of the work in question, rather than just "possible"; and he nearly always succeeded magnificently.

The second quality I want to mention, the one most responsible for my personal debt to Ernst Oster as a teacher, is his capacious generosity with his time and knowledge. My correspondence with him spans a period of twelve years, and in the scores of letters that we exchanged I assaulted him with many musical questions large and small. There were hardly any to which he did not send at once the most carefully considered response; and he often added further observations, as they occurred to him, in immediately subsequent letters.

By his own example, Ernst Oster made the analysis of music far more difficult than it is normally considered to be. I hope that in spite of its obvious practical disadvantages his

way of thinking about music will prevail in the years ahead, and that future generations of scholars will derive instruction and inspiration from his published work as I and many of my colleagues have done.

John Rothgeb
July 12, 1977

Because we, my wife and I, loved him so much, we shall grieve so much for him. He was one of the greatest musicians I have known, a marvellous teacher whose classes and lessons were enthralling and moving experiences; he was the true key to the depths of beauties of the great classical literature. He was my most beloved musical friend, to whom I owe the best that I know and understand of music.

We are fortunate to have even a few published articles. In the last years his exhausting teaching schedule at the New England Conservatory and at Mannes left him little occasion to think about musical questions of special interest to him; and he would complain of the enormous amount of time needed to write an article. He felt uncomfortable writing about music, in English, and really believed he could hardly do it, though of course he did it splendidly. There are only the articles on Register, the Mozart Minuet, and the reply to Travis (in this *Journal*); and on the Egmont Overture and Moonlight Sonata (in *Musicology*). When I once mentioned to him an early article in *Der Dreiklang* he brushed it off: "I was a different person then." For in his thorough study of and humility towards the music of the great masters, he could return again and again to, say, a Mozart passage which others might suppose simple, could think about, for years, a problematic Beethoven passage, always looking for the "idea." In this sense, constantly growing, he was always a different person.

For him, the masterworks of the classical repertoire belonged to the supreme achievements of humanity altogether, masterpieces from a golden age, not to be equated with any other music whatever. He was very pessimistic about the future of that music, the real understanding of which may now be in danger of being irretrievably lost; and he couldn't

stand the way most people performed: without understanding, mechanically, impersonally, superficially, with arbitrary "expressiveness." Neither could he, the greatest exponent of Schenker's thought, tolerate the self-styled and pseudo-"Schenkerists," who damage Schenker's cause and musical understanding by dishonestly cribbing from Schenker, by irresponsible "adaptations" and misconstructions of Schenker's ideas. His analyses were works of imagination and art, at one with the music. Voice-leading sketches were only a necessary technicality: one had to go beyond these, to the essential musical idea behind the work, to how the idea was expressed, to the reasons why the composer chose such and such a procedure. These were foremost; and his profound insight into compositional questions bespoke that genius which comprehends genius on the highest level. I shall never forget a lesson on a certain Brahms work, feeling—overwhelmed—to have come as close as ever I might to the technical and spiritual infinitude of greatness in music. A few notes played in illustration possessed a unique, inimitable beauty, and somehow, even his thoughtful silence illuminated.

How often over the years did I go up the stairway to his small apartment, see him waiting by the door with his warm smile, go in, to talk about music, about personal and everyday matters, to laugh and joke (for he had a tremendous humorous side), and maybe later to "go eating," as he called it. Just to telephone and chat was to be reassured that in a hollow, unconcerned world, he was still there. Too painful never to repeat these experiences, more than painful to know that he just isn't there. The inspiration of his being will still be with us, but we shall never approach it.

We look forward to the appearance of his translation of *Der freie Satz.*

A tribute to this great musician and friend might be: not to try to do as he did (we cannot), but somehow to stand for what he stood for, seeking what he sought, mindful of his humility and devotion to his art. This we owe not only to Ernst Oster but to the art of music.

Edward Laufer
July 10, 1977