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THEORY OF HARMONY. by Arnold Schoenberg,
translated by Roy E. Carter
Faber, 1978 (£22.50)

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Schoenberg's *Theory of Harmony* is a book which has always been known more by repute than by content. With the exception of ideas which have percolated through his other writings and those of his pupils — some, admittedly, of considerable significance — the work has been known outside the German speaking world only in the violently truncated translation by Robert D. W. Adams of 1948.¹ Although Schoenberg's reaction to Adams' work is not apparently recorded, it can certainly be guessed from his attitude towards the model on which it was based: Erwin Stein's 'Practical Guide to Schoenberg's Theory of Harmony'.² Schoenberg had himself prompted Stein's work, realising that the extent of the speculative content of the original would hinder its dissemination amongst a wide public of students and teachers; equally, however, he realised that the severing of practical examples from the fundamental thoughts which lay behind them would completely destroy the essential value of the original. Thus he wrote pointedly to Stein in 1923: 'For my part this "Guide" . . . is an attempt to make even the remaining quarter unnecessary . . . One need only work diligently through, forthrightly taking what little is worth keeping, that way one can leave my entire "Theory of Harmony" alone, unchanged.'³ (The remaining part is actually nearer to a third of the whole.)

It was not until 1971 that an attempt to compensate for these omissions appeared in the form of an article by John F. Spratt, neatly summarising the chief themes of the original.⁴ The present translation was completed at about the same time and submitted for a doctoral degree at Florida State University in 1970; copies have not been made available due to the pending Faber publication. Now, though late, the integrity of the whole has been restored and the work provides a crucial addition to Schoenberg's writings in English, one which will inevitably add momentum to the developing interest in Schoenberg as Theorist.

To those acquainted with Schoenberg's later theorising, the themes are familiar. Especially his hostility towards scholars, aestheticians, theorists (whom he invariably admits never to having read properly): any who pose as formulators of musical laws but are not themselves 'artists', learning by experience and free of a priori assumptions. He makes it immediately clear that he is not concerned with aesthetics, but rather with the acquisition of skills such as those of a carpenter; indeed, he denies that he is writing a 'Theory' in the accepted sense at all, merely providing a systematic presentation. Yet if Schoenberg is at pains to deny the validity of the absolute assumptions on which traditional theories of harmony have been built and to argue that, unlike those of nature, 'the laws of art consist mainly of exceptions' (p. 10), the book is, as ever, full of theorising in the deeper sense of 'searching'. Given the significance of his subject, it inevitably led him to pursue his ideas on 'more complex relationships . . . on the similarities and relationships between artistic creation and other human activities, on the connection between the natural world outside ourselves and the participating or observing subject' (p. 17).

If the style is familiar, however, the work's historical context gives it a unique atmosphere. Here is a teacher and composer who has explored a wide range of harmonic practice within a central tradition, up to and beyond the

'frontiers of tonality', with highly perceptive and creative pupils whose influences he freely acknowledges. Schoenberg was by nature as unable simply to forget the past as to ignore the future and the book therefore occupies a fascinating position in his development; it was, as Wellesz recalls, 'to the conservatives . . . too audacious in its setting aside of authority' whilst 'to others it offered too little advice on "modern" compositions'.⁵ Although Schoenberg had been increasingly preoccupied with new chordal configurations in his own music and that of others, he was unwilling to discuss the subject in any but the broadest terms since 'our lack of distance . . . gives us only a bewildering view?' (p. 407). Equally, however, a conventional theorist would have found little in common with the scope of the ideas which accompany the examples. Given his profound understanding of the 'older music' — which he rightly held to be greater than that of most of his critics — and his instinct for the new, he could concern himself with asking why harmonic conventions were as they were, and what basis the answers might provide for the establishment of new conventions. The material which is only briefly summarised in the first part of *Structural Functions of Harmony*⁶ is here outlined step by step and provides an essential preface to the contents of the later work. Of the numerous facets of interest presented by the *Theory of Harmony*, greatest attention naturally attaches to the way in which Schoenberg approaches the concept of tonality.

At first sight the *Theory of Harmony* would seem considerably removed from *Structural Functions*. Quite apart from its different format and didactic aims, it lacks any reference to the distinctive concept of the later work, that of 'Monotonicity', whereby 'every digression from the tonic is considered to be still within the tonality'.⁷ If, however, this concept is never mentioned, it is implicit in his broadening attitude towards tonality, as well as his regular use of the attendant idea of 'Regions', not as yet given conceptual status, however, nor included in the index. The work shows a crucial transition in Schoenberg's view of 'tonality'. His first definition arises in relation to traditional examples: 'Tonality is a formal possibility that emerges from the nature of the tonal material, a possibility of attaining a certain completeness or closure by means of a certain uniformity.' (p. 27) Soon, however, this definition is applied more broadly: 'A piece may also be intelligible . . . when the relation to the fundamental is not treated as basic, with its telling sequel that 'it may be perhaps that we simply do not yet know how to explain the tonality, or something corresponding to tonality, in modern music' (p. 128). Finally, he can accept the chromatic scale as a basis, although only in the second German edition of 1921 did he really clarify the point in relation to the vogue term 'atonal'. 'The word "atonal" could only signify something entirely inconsistent with the nature of tone. Even the word "tonal" is incorrectly used if it is intended in an exclusive rather than inclusive sense. It can be valid only in the following sense: Everything implied by a series of tones constitutes tonality, whether it be brought together by direct reference to a single fundamental or by more complicated connections.' (p. 432) Thus the principle that had ensured coherence in traditional tonality could also sustain a new tonality.

Schoenberg's observations on harmonic unity focus particular attention on his attitude to Schenker, and the book serves to highlight the similarities and differences in their approaches; their relationship has not been sufficiently stressed in the past. Both drew on the same tradition of harmonic practice and were absorbed in the analysis of the same music; both, faced with the constant enrichment of keys, yet without implying modulation, framed concepts of tonality which were similar in breadth. Although Schoenberg took issue with Schenker's term 'Tonalisation' on grounds of his usage, he freely admitted the parallels in their thinking (p. 428). Yet if their attitudes towards traditional tonality have much in common, their view of the individual chord is crucially different. Whilst all dissonances are ultimately passing for Schenker, for Schoenberg 'there are no non-harmonic tones . . . Non-harmonic tones are merely those that the theorists could not fit into their system of harmony.' (p. 318) This view is a direct consequence of Schoenberg's attitude towards the overtone series: or, perhaps, even the other way about. There is for him no absolute distinction between consonance and dissonance, only one of degree, as in the

overtones. Thus whilst Schenker could see no logical system beyond that of late 19th century tonality, Schoenberg found in it the basis for coherent structure in the future. Perhaps the time will come when his later writings can be so collated as to give us as clear an impression of his view of the new tonality as of the old.

The presentation of Schoenberg's book is worthy of its content. His often problematical mode of expression is made clear throughout and his original terms are always cited where necessary. The translator's preface and the many footnotes provide much valuable information, especially as regards the relationship between the first and subsequent editions. This translation is based on the third, best known edition, completed in 1921 and published in 1922, which included some important revisions reflecting his changing views over the period from 1911 when the first edition was published. The price is in line with that of *Style and Idea*, given three years of inflation, yet without its generous format and print for those hard of sight. This will, however, hardly deter the libraries for whom the tome is chiefly intended.

NOTES:

¹Arnold Schoenberg, trans. Robert D. W. Adams, *Theory of Harmony* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948).

²Erwin Stein, *Praktischer Leitfaden zu Schoenbergs Harmonielehre: ein Hilfsbuch für Lehrer und Schuler* (Vienna: Universal Edition, n.d.). (Stein's preface is dated March 1923.)

³*Ibid.*, p. 3, as translated and quoted in Carter's new edition, p. xiii.

⁴John F. Spratt, 'The Speculative Content of Schoenberg's "Harmonielehre"', *Current Musicology*, Vol. XI (1971), pp. 83-88.

⁵Egon Wellesz, trans. W. H. Kerridge, *Arnold Schoenberg* (Great Yarmouth: Galliard, 1971), p. 48. (This translation first appeared in London: J. M. Dent, 1925.)

⁶Arnold Schoenberg, ed. Leonard Stein, *Structural Functions of Harmony* (2nd revised edition, New York/London: Norton/Benn, 1969; the first edition was published in 1954).

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 19.