

# HEINRICH SCHENKER

20TH CENTURY MASTER OF MUSIC THEORY

# ABOUT HEINRICH SCHENKER

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- One of the most important theorists in the history of music.
- Achievements have often been compared to eminent thinkers of his same time
  - Sigmund Freud in psychology
  - Albert Einstein in physics



# SCHENKERIAN THEORY

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- A set of regulatory principles that were initially intended to explain the tonal music of the 18th and 19th centuries.
- Synthesis of many traditions
  - Fuxian counterpoint
  - Thorough-bass teaching of C.P.E. Bach
  - Late 19th century harmonic theory

# SCHENKERIAN THEORY

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- A sophisticated explanation of tonality
- And an analytical system of immense empirical power



Schenker, his wife Jeanette, and  
musicologist Anthony von Hoboken

# HEINRICH SCHENKER

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- 1868 - 1935
- Born to a poor but intellectual Jewish family in Poland
- Attended school in Lemberg (now L'vov in Ukraine)
- Had lessons from Chopin's pupil Karl Mikuli
- Gained a doctorate in law from the University of Vienna in 1884
- Attended classes at the Vienna Conservatory, where one of his teachers was Anton Bruckner

# HEINRICH SCHENKER

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- Career was as a practical musician, not as an academic
  - Composition
  - Journalism
  - Teaching
  - Accompanying
- Made most of his living as a piano teacher in Vienna
- Devoted his free time to music theory and analysis
- Wound up with a circle of admirers who made it possible for him to focus on his analysis and teaching

# HEINRICH SCHENKER

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- Schenker's work is not restricted to analysis and music theory
  - Editor of important critical editions
  - Worked in performance practice
- Writings include textbooks, monographs, pamphlets, yearbooks, and critical commentaries

# HEINRICH SCHENKER

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- Major Writings
  - *Harmonielehre* (1906)
  - *Kontrapunkt* (two volumes; 1910, 1922)
  - *Der freie Satz* (1935)
  - A monograph on Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (1912)
- Periodicals
  - *Der Tonwille* (1921-24)
  - *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik* (1925-30)



# SCHENKER AND POLITICS

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- Schenker always stoutly maintained that politics and music should never be mixed
  - The immortality of great music transcended political beliefs
- However, he was hierarchical in his thinking
  - Centrality of German people in European culture
  - Steady decline of culture and political order in Europe since the 18th century

# SCHENKER AND COMPOSERS

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- Admitted only two non-German composers into the pantheon of the greatest writers
  - Chopin
  - Domenico Scarlatti
- He found very little favorable in mainstream modern music
  - Contemptuous of atonal music
  - But he encouraged his private pupils to write in modern idioms

# SCHENKERIAN THEORY: OUTLINE

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- Hierarchy
  - Music is structured of various tonal (melodic/harmonic) layers
  - Over-arching layers hold the large-scale structure
  - Lower-level layers display increasing amounts of ornamentation and embellishment of the large-scale structure

# SCHENKERIAN THEORY: OUTLINE

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- Polyphony
  - Music is fundamentally polyphonic, no matter what the surface texture
  - The layers that compose the various levels of music are polyphonic in nature
  - Even single-line melodies may well display a hidden polyphony

# SCHENKERIAN THEORY: OUTLINE

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- Notation
  - All Schenkerian analysis can be expressed in plain written language
  - Schenker always used language as his primary descriptive tool
  - As an aid, Schenker developed a symbology that repurposes the glyphs and symbols of music notation
    - Graphic analysis, however, in and of itself isn't Schenkerian theory
    - This "graphic notation" was in continual development throughout his career