

---

CHRISTIAN MARTIN SCHMIDT (*translated by Richard Evans*)

## MUSIC ANALYSIS: NOT UNIVERSAL, NOT ALMIGHTY, BUT INDISPENSABLE

---

Music analysis as a paradigm of musicological research finds itself in a crisis, so it seems. As in literary studies, the time when the focus was on the structural immanence of works appears to belong to the past – albeit a recent past – and the methodological approach of analysis (or decomposition) has been eclipsed by other research perspectives: whether, for example, through the sociological perspective of gender studies, through embracing ‘world’ musics, or through a return to biographical and philological approaches, such as is evidenced in the numerous editions of correspondence currently being prepared for publication in Germany. Conversely – and a cursory glance at both the teaching programmes of [German] universities and conservatoires, as well as the titles of dissertations, confirms this – there has never been a time when analysis was more frequently practised than today: there has never been a period in which more time and effort has gone into the investigation of music’s structural detail and coherence. Clearly there is a difference between the practical presence of an analytical approach and its general or public acceptance. It is also clear that Thomas Kuhn’s model of paradigm shifts is applicable to the current situation in musicology only to a very limited degree, if at all.

There are several reasons for the withdrawal of public esteem from analysis – and tradition, content, form and institutional factors have all played their part. Perhaps one could summarise them in the claim that, on the one hand, too much was hoped for of analysis, i.e. it was burdened with unwarranted expectations, while, on the other hand, its usefulness was rated so low as to downgrade it to the level of a mere practical aid. The latter occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century when musicology established itself as an independent academic discipline, a discipline which defined itself in the first instance in philological terms, and whose outstanding achievements – at least in central Europe – were made tangible in editions of music from the past. This is not necessarily to assert that musicologists of the period did not practise analysis; the unpublished papers of academic teachers of that time, such as those of the medieval specialist Friedrich Ludwig (Göttingen University Musicological Institute Library), demonstrate the high level at which their analytical capabilities could operate (in Ludwig’s case exemplified by the notes he made in his scores of Brahms’s chamber music). Thorough investigation of

works down to the smallest detail was such an obvious prerequisite that it did not invite special comment and was not viewed as a separate branch of the subject entitled to its own place in the academic curriculum. This was the time when the course was set for the future development of musicology and its institutions: the contemporaneous division of professional academic study into the sub-disciplines of comparative, historical and systematic musicology has survived almost untouched in German-speaking countries to this day, in spite of ever clearer evidence of its inappropriateness. As numbers of students increased, music analysis, which in any case found itself split between systematic and historical musicology, was relegated at best to a place in preparatory teaching, in order to go some way towards compensating for what was perceived as a growing incompetence in musical fundamentals. Criticism directed at the literary-humanistic, philological orientation of the discipline, in which the practical, 'hands-on' aspects of music were considered 'unacademic', was countered by pointing out that analysis was covered sufficiently in the conservatoires. In fact, it was (and still is) afforded considerable weight in such institutions, which are concerned with students' practical training – in most cases, less as a path to pure musical knowledge, than as an essential prerequisite to the formal acquisition of a music theory that can be put to practical use.

In central Europe music analysis only awoke from its deep slumber in the 1960s as a direct result of musicology's novel approach to recent and contemporary music. Although up to that point the discipline had limited its purview largely to music composed up to the end of the nineteenth century, involvement with a theoretically sophisticated new music produced an awareness that analysis had to be viewed as a significant, essential element of serious academic study. This insight led to drastic changes in the content of teaching programmes and in the publishing activities of academic musicology. A wide range of analytical publications began to appear. These were by no means limited to the music of the twentieth century, but were driven by an awareness that, even for music of previous periods, especially that of the nineteenth century, there was some serious catching up to do with regard to technical knowledge of form and structure.

However, the variety of objects of scrutiny brought with them a scepticism towards analytical methods that were normative or aimed at establishing general truth, and such methods certainly existed. For example, the one-time highly successful theoretical system created by Hugo Riemann (who had taught at a university, but had never risen to the rank of professor) met with scepticism of this kind; at the same time, its presence hindered the recognition of Schenkerian theory, whose qualities have only been acknowledged in recent years in central Europe. It was taken as read that a string quartet by Haydn could not be investigated using the same analytical tools as Ives's 'Concord' Sonata or one of Ligeti's timbre compositions. Theodor W. Adorno, who could

be called one of the founding fathers of this turn in musicology, indicated such methodological plurality with the proposition that each individual composition required its own particular method of analysis.

By now, the abundance of analytical commentaries created the false impression among some musicologists that one could grasp a composition in its entirety by means of objective data derived from an analysis, that one could capture the essence of an artwork by analysis alone. Warnings, however well informed, about this misjudgment remained unheeded, even when they were repeated again and again (admittedly with a certain one-sidedness) by those figures, considered at the time to be old-fashioned, disdainful of the analytical project. This scepticism can be found in remarks made by Arnold Schoenberg in a letter to Rudolf Kolisch dated 27 July 1932 concerning twelve-note analysis, in which he emphasises music's status as art:

But do you think one's any better for knowing it? I can't quite see it that way. ... But this isn't where the technical qualities reveal themselves, or, if so, only incidentally. I can't utter too many warnings against over-rating these analyses, since after all they only lead to what I have always been dead against: seeing how it is *done*: whereas I have always helped people to see: what it *is*! I have repeatedly tried to make Wiesengrund [i.e. Adorno] understand this, and also Berg and Webern. But they won't believe me.<sup>1</sup>

Even Adorno, sympathetic to analysis as he was, warned against a one-sided overvaluing of analyses: 'Inadequate as is thematic analysis to the content of Mahler's symphonies – [such] an analysis ... misses the music's substance in its preoccupation with procedure ...',<sup>2</sup> he insisted. '[To understand the gestures of Mahler's music] would be to endow with speech the music's structural elements while technically locating the glowing expressive intentions.'<sup>3</sup>

In the meantime, scepticism was increasing with regard to the form and execution of the analyses themselves. All too often it was forgotten that, over and above the presentation of correct factual data (especially in the form of lists or tables), an analysis, like any other musicological presentation, is a literary genre which must take account of its function as the point of disclosure between object and reader. Frequently it was the case that analyses were either so poorly written or so obsessively fixated on their object that even readers interested in the material were frightened off. In this context we should not forget those so-called analytical publications whose authors were unaware that even the most simple listing of structural facts always constitutes an interpretation; this must always be borne in mind when formulating a text devoted to musical analysis. Intending to restrict the interpretative element to the minimum, for instance by concentrating on abstractable facts (e.g. listing the chords making up a progression in a tonal piece, the pitch-class sets of an

atonal work or the row transformations in twelve-note music) does not lead to greater objectivity, but to poverty of content.

The general loss of faith in musical analysis, which has led to the apparent crisis referred to at the outset, is the result, on the one hand, of a realisation that the omnipotence of the approach – in its claim to be able to explain the musical product completely and from every aspect – is illusory; on the other hand, it has been caused by the inability of many analysts to make themselves comprehensible to a broad readership. For all that, this loss of faith has had a salutary effect in helping to reform the analytical discipline. Hence, while it had become clear that analysis could not be made to bear the burden of an all-encompassing examination of the musical work, it was just as evident how impossible it had become to consider the music without detailed analytical involvement.

We can say today that musical analysis is nothing more or less than a rationally orientated approach to music, one which sets in motion an encounter between the analyst as subject and the musical product as object, and whose result is a theory-laden process of learning and knowledge acquisition. There is a reciprocal relationship between the learning process on the analyst's part and the process of accumulating knowledge of the work under examination: as the conscious perception of characteristics of the musical product grows, so does the competence of the perceiver. Thus, for an analysis to be appropriate and competent, August Boeck's *aperçu*, originally applied to philology, has a decided relevance: it is 'the knowledge of that which has been acknowledged' ('die Erkenntnis dessen ist, was erkannt worden ist').

Viewing analytical activity as a learning process, a process of knowledge acquisition, in which the increase in factual knowledge brings about an increase in the analyst's competence, implies that no analytical method, however apt or practical it might be to its chosen domain, can claim general validity. Then the actual make-up of the musical product comes into play: as the object of the analysis, it has a direct bearing on the nature of the insight. We need to stress this very point at a time when musicology has opened itself up to a wide variety of musical products which have their origins in different dimensions of both (geographical) space and (historical) time, and which have formed traditions with quite distinctive modes and standards of expression. For each of these a specific form of competence has to develop, one which allows the differences between the individual products to be perceivable within a relationship that pits the generalities of a tradition against the particularities of the individual product.

The path that has to be pursued to achieve such competence inevitably involves analytical activity, the detailed investigation of the structural make-up of a composition and its interpretation. In other words, the knowledge of how pieces are made is the essential prerequisite to achieving knowledge of what they are.

**NOTES**

1. *Arnold Schoenberg Letters*, ed. Erwin Stein, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 164. Translation taken from this source. (*Arnold Schönberg: Ausgewählte Briefe*, ed. Erwin Stein (Mainz: Schott, 1958), p. 178ff.)
2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler: a Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 3. Translations taken from this source. (*Mahler: Eine musikalische Physiognomik* (Frankfurt: 1960), p. 9.)
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3 (German source, p. 10).