
Jan Philipp Sprick, Reinhard Bahr and Michael von Troschke (eds.), *Musiktheorie im Kontext: 5. Kongress der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie, Hamburg 2005* (Berlin: Weidler, 2008). 571 pp. €59.00. ISBN 978-3-89693-515-1 (pb).

For most of the second half of the twentieth century, the discipline of music theory in continental Europe led a largely hidden existence. The educational system in many countries fostered a binary model that clearly distinguished between ‘academic’ and ‘professional’ institutions of higher learning, with universities belonging to the former category and conservatories to the latter. In this context, European music theory found itself doubly isolated. Since its home was the conservatory, it was cut off from the scholarly mainstream of the humanities, including musicology; within its own institution, it was regarded as an esoteric discipline that had only limited relevance for the performer.

The image of music theory increasingly evolved into that of a purely practical discipline, a *Handwerkslehre* or craft that seemed to be more concerned with teaching abstract rules and models in a historical vacuum than with reflecting on actual works of music. This image was not always an accurate representation of facts. Still, even when a music theorist did engage with more than just insipid harmony and counterpoint exercises, the almost complete lack of a publication culture meant that his or her endeavours often went unnoticed by the rest of the world.¹ Thus a situation arose in which modes of enquiry concentrating on the technical dimension of musical works remained for many years at best marginal in continental Europe. Academic musicology only partly filled this vacuum. In continental Europe, as in the United Kingdom, ‘musicology’ can mean more than it is usually understood to mean in North America and has always included traditions that focus on the music itself. Nonetheless, only a minority of European musicologists could claim complete mastery of the skills necessary to conduct an analysis at anything more profound than a dilettante level.

Late in the twentieth century, however, music theory on the European continent started to show signs of a remarkable renewal. Following the models of the Society for Music Analysis in the United Kingdom and the Society for Music Theory in the United States and Canada, national societies for theory and analysis were founded in several European countries: in France (*Société française d’analyse musicale*), Italy (*Gruppo analisi e teoria musicale*) and French-speaking Belgium (*Société belge d’analyse musicale*) in 1989, in the Netherlands and Flanders (*Vereniging voor Muziektheorie*) in 1999, and finally in German-speaking Europe (*Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie*) in 2000. All of these societies have a common goal: to further the development of music theory as an autonomous scholarly discipline in which teaching, research and publication support and complement each other. The youngest of these societies, the

Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie, pursues this goal through, amongst other things, the organisation of annual conferences that centre on a specific theme or group of themes. Papers presented at these meetings are subsequently published in conference proceedings, the titles of which read as successive steps in a process of self-discovery: *Musiktheorie zwischen Historie und Systematik* (2001), *Musiktheorie: Begriff und Praxis* (2002), *Theoriebildung an ihren Grenzen* (2003) and *Desiderate und Defizite musiktheoretischer Forschung und Lehre* (2004).

This process continues with the appearance of the proceedings of a fifth conference under the title *Musiktheorie im Kontext*. The volume originates in a meeting held in October 2005 at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater in Hamburg and includes 39 of the 51 papers presented at sessions that were directly related to the conference theme (papers read at a free session are not included). In their foreword, the editors leave little doubt as to the purpose of the conference: 'A discipline that for a number of years has increasingly gained autonomy in Germany, both institutionally and with respect to content, does well to open up to neighbouring disciplines and to enter into conversation with them. Also – and particularly – in a phase of self-discovery, [it is good not only to] discover commonalities [and] map out borderlands, but to point out dividing factors as well' (p. 9).²

The four subdivisions of the general conference theme 'music theory in context' which are reflected in the layout of the collection – 'music theory and aesthetic experience', 'music theory and composition', 'music theory and cultural context' and 'semiotic and cognitive approaches to music theory' – were clearly devised to facilitate such an interdisciplinary dialogue. They aim at two partners in particular: within the conservatory, an alliance is sought with composition departments; outside the walls of the *Hochschule*, German music theory seeks to engage in a dialogue with musicology. Not only the confrontations between music theory and aesthetic experience or cultural context suggested by two of the volume's thematic subdivisions, but also the focus on semiotic and cognitive approaches, are clearly intended to attract the attention of musicologists; in Germany, the latter field is the exclusive domain of the so-called systematic (as opposed to historical) *Musikwissenschaft*.

The book's attempts at interdisciplinary dialogue are not always equally successful. Composers, it seems, had only a modest interest in participating in the conference: even a heading as explicit as 'Music Theory and Composition' failed to attract the attention of more than two composers; all other papers in this section are by theorists or musicologists. The number of musicologists among the contributors, by contrast, is high, even though they come from a limited number of institutions and even though one institution (Humboldt University Berlin) appears almost overrepresented. Not all of these musicologists, however, strive for interdisciplinary dialogue in an equally active way. Contributions from Hermann Danuser on the poetics of destruction ('abschaffendes Schaffen') from Beethoven to Christoph Marthaler, from Tobias Bleek on György Kurtág's Webern reception and from Simon Obert on musical miniatures around 1910

are instructive and insightful; Danuser's essay in particular makes for a very engaging (and, indeed, entertaining) read. But the theoretical point of these contributions remains unclear, and one is left without a clear idea of how they advocate an openness towards music theory.

At the same time, the editors pride themselves on the volume's international character (p. 10), thus voicing an otherwise largely implicit interest in a dialogue not between disciplines, but between the music-theoretical traditions of different countries. The presence of both German and English texts in the proceedings eloquently testifies to the conference's aim to cross borders. Nonetheless, the success of this aspect of the volume's dialogic ambition warrants nuance. It is telling that almost all contributions from outside German-speaking Europe are by scholars working in the United States. The table of contents lists only one author from non-Germanic Europe (the Belgian Kristof Boucquet), as well as one from Russia (Marina Karaseva). Judged by this volume, then, the internationalisation of European music theory appears to be largely restricted to importing American products, and with a serious trade deficit at that: not only is there no, or very limited, dialogue between different European national traditions, but the dialogue between European and American traditions is also almost exclusively unidirectional. None of the six contributions by American scholars betrays any familiarity with European music theory of the last several decades. The main purpose of some of the American papers even seems to have been to inform the German music-theoretical community of important aspects of, or recent developments in, American theory that are foreign to the German tradition.

This is very much the case for the contributions by Lawrence Zbikowski and Robert Hatten, who were invited by Christian Thorau with the explicit goal of raising the interest of German theorists in cognitive and semiotic approaches to music. Zbikowski explores ways in which processes of categorisation from cognitive science can be made useful for music theory and analysis, showing both how such processes work in our understanding of Jerome Kern's jazz tune 'The Way You Look Tonight' and the impact they have with respect to the solo improvised on this standard by the guitarist Jim Hall in a 1975 live recording. Hatten presents an overview of his writings in musical semiotics from his 1982 dissertation to his 1994 and 2004 monographs and beyond, introducing key theoretical concepts and positioning his work in relation to that of others. Both contributions are highly informative and, in conjunction with Thorau's introductory essay, give a good sense of the field; but neither Hatten's digest nor Zbikowski's case study adds anything fundamentally new to these theorists' previously published work.

A similar transmission of basic information takes place in two chapters by younger American scholars. In a paper on Stravinsky's harmony, David Ewell outlines relevant theoretical work by Arthur Berger, Pieter van den Toorn, Dmitri Tymoczko and Yuri Kholopov but is content to add only minimal personal comments. Aaron Girard's discussion of the early history of music theory as an autonomous discipline at American universities is more immediately the fruit of

original research. Nonetheless, presented in a country where music theory as a scholarly discipline is still young, the paper comes across, perhaps unintentionally, as another illustration of 'how things are done in America'.

This is not to say that contributions such as these are misplaced. German and, by extension, European theorists want and need to be informed about developments on the other side of the Atlantic.³ Just how little American theory has found its way into German theoretical discourse becomes very clear from David Mesquita's paper on Stravinsky's serialism. Mesquita compares the *Agnus Dei* from the 1948 *Mass* with excerpts from the 1966 *Requiem Canticles* and concludes that in spite of their very different technical bases, they sound astonishingly similar. Mesquita is hardly the first to observe that 'Stravinsky always sounds like Stravinsky'. Yet he seems unaware of the various ways in which scholars outside Germany, including van den Toorn, Richard Taruskin and Joseph Straus, have broached the question of how Stravinsky's late works relate to his earlier music. In a world that likes to call itself globalised, it is surprising that different scholarly traditions can continue to exist in such ignorance of, or at least indifference to, one another.

Ironically, the reception of American music theory in Germany is strongest in the work of theoretically inclined musicologists. Markus Neuwirth investigates what the concept of 'expectancy' as understood by cognitive science has to offer to musical analysis, illustrating his position with a consideration of the first movement of Haydn's Symphony No. 53 in D major ('L'Impériale'). Neuwirth's work is still at the embryonic stage, but his command of the relevant literature in English – as well as the immediate analytical application of concepts from that literature – is impressive. Neuwirth makes very clear how openness to other scholarly traditions can enrich German music theory and to what extent the discipline's future will depend on continuing efforts to maintain the dialogue that this volume advocates.

All this does not mean that the German contributions have nothing to offer in their own right. The volume testifies to the vitality of at least three subfields in German music theory that in American music theory lead at best a marginal existence. The first of these is an interest in contemporary European music. This category includes the contributions on Kurtág by Tobias Bleek and Volker Helbling as well as those on French spectral music by Jörn Arnecke and Lukas Haselböck. Another typically German field is the so-called *historische Satzlehre*. This type of historically informed music theory, arguably the most successful aspect of modern German music theory and one that English-speaking colleagues have only recently started to explore, studies the technical fabric of compositions using models presented in contemporaneous theoretical treatises. In this volume, such treatment is represented by Oliver Korte's engaging reading of the *Dies irae* from Brumel's *Missa pro defunctis* through the lens of Monachus's treatise *De preceptis artis musicae*. Finally, only in continental Europe – far away from the full burden of the Schenkerian tradition – does it seem possible to speculate about alternative modes of linear analysis in the way

that Hans-Ulrich Kretschmer proposes with his procedure of 'harmonische Schichtenreduktion'.

While fostering dialogue between and within disciplines certainly creates opportunities for German music theory, the conference organisers' interdisciplinary strategy also imposes a number of limitations on the book. The most obvious of these is disjunction: session themes, with the exception of the one on semiotics and cognition, are so broadly defined that they guarantee an utter lack of coherence. This incoherence has, however, one unexpected side effect: two groups of thematically related papers shine through across the different sections of the book. The smallest of these groups includes four papers addressing pedagogical issues: one by Wolfgang-Andreas Schultz on a course in melodic theory and three on different facets of ear training by Christine Klein, Marina Karaseva and Annette and Guido Brink. The second and much more widely spun thread concerns the history of theory. No fewer than twelve contributions address historical aspects of the discipline from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. Particularly notable are Florian Edler's consideration of the impact of A. B. Marx's liberal political ideas on his music-theoretical writings, Alexander Rehding's fascinating account of the European reception of Chinese music in the eighteenth century and around the turn of the twentieth, Kristof Boucquet's comparison of Schoenberg and Schenker's *Harmonielehren* and Felix Wörner's overview of the influence of gestalt theory on German *Formenlehre* in the early twentieth century.

Another shortcoming of the book is that not all contributors have reworked their spoken papers for print with equal thoroughness; and a text that may have been very effective when heard can come across as unsatisfactory when read. The spoken paper and the written essay are fundamentally different media of scholarly communication which require different modes of articulation. The editors probably insisted on no such reworking and may even have discouraged it by imposing strict guidelines regarding the length of individual contributions. It is not hard to see why they would have done so (apart from the budgetary constraints under which the very economically produced volume apparently came into being): limiting the length of individual contributions is the only way a substantial number of them could be included in one volume. This restriction also has at least one positive side effect: the volume gives an impression of the conference that is not only representative, but also very immediate. Literally conveying what was said at the conference, these really are conference proceedings and not a collection of essays that emerged from a conference. The decision to opt for comprehensive coverage is, therefore, entirely justifiable. Nonetheless, one of its less felicitous consequences is that several contributions are so short that they fail to substantiate the questions they propose.

The inevitable conclusion is that this collection is a very mixed bag, in which individual contributions vary widely not only in content, methodological approach and geographical provenience, but also in quality and editorial finish. This diversity accounts for both the volume's weaknesses and its strengths. Its

principal shortcomings are that the whole is not more than the sum of its parts and that some contributors would have benefited from additional space. The book's main value is that it constitutes an honest historical document of the state of German music theory *anno* 2005; it is a vivid portrait of a young (or rather reborn) discipline in search of an identity that demonstrates a selective openness to other disciplines and traditions.

STEVEN VANDE MOORTELE

NOTES

1. Compare Ludwig Holtmeier, 'Nicht Kunst? Nicht Wissenschaft? Zur Lage der Musiktheorie', *Musik und Ästhetik*, 1 (1997), pp. 119–36, especially p. 120. Exceptions are extremely rare. The only well-published continental European music theorist of the 1970s and 1980s that comes to mind is the German Diether de la Motte.
2. 'Eine Disziplin, die in Deutschland seit einigen Jahren inhaltlich und institutionell zunehmend an Eigenständigkeit gewinnt, tut gut daran, sich auch, und gerade in einer Phase der Selbstfindung benachbarten Disziplinen zu öffnen und mit diesen ins Gespräch zu kommen, dabei Gemeinsamkeiten zu entdecken, Grenzbereiche auszuloten, aber auch Trennendes aufzuzeigen'.
3. It is hardly a coincidence that in the same year as the conference, the *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie*, 2/ii–iii (2005), was also devoted to North American music theory. I am aware of only one similar initiative in the opposite direction: the program of the 2002 joint AMS/SMT meeting in Columbus, Ohio, featured an SMT special session titled 'Music Theory in Germany'. At this session, organised by Thomas Christensen, four German music theorists (Stephan Rohringer, Ludwig Holtmeier, Michael Polth and Oliver Schwab-Felisch) discussed the historical background of recent German music theory.