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*Geschichte der Musiktheorie: Die Musiktheorie im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert. Dritter Band: Frankreich, Belgien, Italien* ed. by Stefan Keym (review)

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**Geschichte der Musiktheorie: Die Musiktheorie im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert. Dritter Band: Frankreich, Belgien, Italien.** Edited by Stefan Keym. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2021. [viii, 443p. ISBN 978-3-534-01212-1. €100]

‘The History of Music Theory’ has moved in leaps and bounds in the last twenty years. Leaving its philological and nationalist origins behind, this field is now often a vehicle for far-reaching and sophisticated methodological and historiographic reflections. Issues such as music-theoretical exchanges with Qing-dynasty China, or indeed the biological racism underpinning François-Joseph Fétis’s theory of music, are no rarity in the history of music theory. This bustling field is ready and eager to connect with other areas of humanistic inquiry on issues such as cross-cultural studies, globalism, and colonialism.

This is the challenge that the *Geschichte der Musiktheorie* faces. Begun in the 1980s, with the backing of the Staatliches Institut für Musikforschung in Berlin, this complex and prestigious multi-volume project was never quite completed. Stefan Keym has now tackled the challenge of adding the tome on France, Belgium, and Italy to the section on music theory in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To fully appreciate the conceptual revisions that went into this new volume—which amount to a proverbial threading of the needle—we need to delve a little deeper into the history of the project, which is laid out in some detail in the series editors’ introduction at the beginning of the volume.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries clearly form the core of this ‘History of Music Theory’—no fewer than three volumes are dedicated to this period. These three tomes form a mini-series within the broader history, and they were originally given into the capable hands of Carl Dahlhaus, the doyen of German musicology in the 1980s. Dahlhaus completed the first of these volumes in 1984, laying the methodological foundations. But he died before he could finish the second volume, dedicated specifically to music theory in Germany during that period. That volume was completed by Ruth E. Müller and published in 1990. The third volume, originally dedicated to France, Britain, and Italy, and assigned to three

authors, remained unfinished. The section on Britain had been concluded in the 1990s by G. Larry Whatley and had languished unpublished for years, while the author of the section on France, Renate Groth, passed away in 2014 before her work was completed. The project seemed doomed.

When Stefan Keym, a specialist in the theory of *transfert culturel*, was brought in to revive the project, he realised that the 2010s were no longer the 1980s, and felt that the conception of the volume needed to be tweaked. His aim was, on the one hand, to be faithful to the original conception of the series, which operated in categories of centuries and national boundaries, while on the other hand also to be mindful of the changes in historical method that had occurred in the intervening decades. The inclusion of Belgium was his editorial intervention, which elegantly moved the series out of a somewhat old—should we say imperialist?—framework that governed the original conception. Always at pains to distance himself from the nationalist historiography of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Dahlhaus had stressed that his conception was not based on the nations themselves but rather on their *institutions*—but it nonetheless remained defined by the ‘great European powers’, an idea that was still prevalent in the 1980s but is much harder to defend now. With this simple change, the book had metamorphosed into an up-to-date conception that acknowledges the liminal spaces in which music theory operates. Without Belgium, after all, there would be no Fétis, no François-Auguste Gevaert (and, arguably, no Jérôme-Joseph Momigny), though traditionally these figures were often, dubiously, subsumed into the murky wider orbits of French culture.

Along with this change of focal nations went a change in the broader organisation of the volume. Whereas previously, those *Geschichte der Musiktheorie* volumes that were dedicated to multiple nations or themes within a given period had been organised as a series of self-contained tracts on a given topic, this tome is

an edited volume with short chapters on specific topics that closely relate to one another. This approach is an integral part of the model of cultural transfer, in which nations do not stand beside each other as discrete entities but interact in lively interchange.

The same gesture of gently pushing the boundaries, at Keym's deft editorial hand, is also palpable in the choices of topics under discussion. Besides the expected coverage of compositional mainstays such as French theories of harmony (by Thomas Christensen on Rameau and the late Renate Groth on the early nineteenth century), theories of tonality (by Marc Rigaudière), and counterpoint treatises (by Felix Diergarten), the collection also contains chapters on theories of harmony in Padua (by Patrizio Barbieri) and *partimenti* (by Giorgio Sanguinetti) and, more intriguingly, on church traditions (Benedict Lessmann), operatic theory (by Arnold Jacobshagen), sonata forms (by Stefan Keym), orchestration (by Peter Jost), and rhythm (by Gesine Schröder). These are welcome and thought-provoking additions, written by an all-star cast.

It is especially gratifying to find fascinating boundary figures such as the Alsatian Jean-Georges (or Johann Georg) Kastner, author of an important early treatise on instrumentation, mentioned on the pages of this volume. And yet, these laudable inclusions rapidly call into question the chosen national boundaries that delimit this volume: can one, for instance, truly discuss nineteenth-century orchestration without at least touching on Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, the Russian composer (and author of an enormously influential treatise on orchestration), who had such a profound impact in France on Ravel and Debussy? Regrettably, Russia falls outside of the boundaries covered by the *Geschichte der Musiktheorie* series.

But the question of Rimsky—or rather, orchestration treatises more broadly—brings us straight to the next query: What exactly do we have in mind when we speak of music theory? The answer is not at all obvious. Traditionally the mainstay of the history of music theory have been treatises. But, to stick with the orchestration example for the moment, how much orchestration do we really learn from treatises? And asking more broadly, how much

theory is unwritten? (Thomas Christensen raised that question in 2016 in his fascinating paper, 'Hidden Texts, Fragile Theory'.) The most pertinent area in which this question is central is the field of *partimenti*, the tradition, originating in Neapolitan orphanages or *conservatori*, of short harmonic and contrapuntal exercises that are studied at the keyboard and are elaborated upon in both performance and composition. They do not form a body of theory in the traditional sense, because none of their rules were written down, but merely passed down the generations in practical teaching—the 'body' of *partimenti* consists in reams of composition exercises, as Robert Gjerdingen and others reconstructed in painstaking detail.

Despite their unquestioned importance, *partimenti* are a relatively new addition to the field of historical music theory, and they deserve to be explained in some detail, here in Giorgio Sanguinetti's compact and elegant chapter. The same is true for a large number of the chapters, whose content is primarily expository. And this is probably a good thing, because many of the figures—with the possible exception of Jean-Philippe Rameau—are simply not very well known in the German-speaking world. In this regard, the contrast between this volume and its two preceding ones is particularly striking. Dahlhaus tended to adopt a **take-no-prisoners approach** in his chapters, and characteristically leapt straight into involved discussions without much introduction. He wrestled with intricate details in the theories of Johann Joseph Fux, Simon Sechter, A.B. Marx, Hugo Riemann, or Hermann von Helmholtz, pointed out internal contradictions, polemicised, and spun thoughts further than their originators dared to tread. In a word, Dahlhaus performed *critique* in the strong sense, and at a very high level to boot. He was enabled to operate at this level because these texts are so much better known to a German readership that he can take the basics for granted. This volume, by contrast, does not have the luxury of this extensive level of prior exposure. The more measured pace, the more expository and explanatory tone that predominate in this third volume seem entirely appropriate for the subject matter. But one longs for the day when a similar level of engagement becomes an option.

And this, finally, brings us to the largest question: What kind of history exactly *is* the ‘History of Music Theory’? Who is it for? What are its goals? (Carl Dahlhaus, famously, proffered an answer that heads the first volume of the *Geschichte der Musiktheorie*). From the selections that were made, we can gauge that the answer for this volume is largely focused on the question of teaching. The history of music theory, as presented here, critically examines the topics and disciplines that composition students during that time and in those nations would have been learning. But is that all there is? Avenues not pursued in this volume include Pierre-Joseph Roussier’s (1770) bold comparativist model of music from the Ancient Egyptians to the present, François-Joseph Fétis’s evolutionary history (with its attendant racist overtones), Jean-Georges Kastner’s various attempts to come to bring together the empirical and the mythological in his explorations of music’s miraculous powers or, Vincent d’Indy’s complex nationalisms—in

a word, the monumental (and often fatally flawed) ambitions that give that period its peculiar political and cultural flavour, very much including its music theory.

Whataboutism is an easy game to play. And it would obviously be churlish to fault the volume or its contributors for decisions that were made for them, long before this volume appeared. They played the hand they were dealt extremely well. As the introduction explains so carefully, the volume is the product of a compromise, and no doubt of much soul-searching. For all that, it is enormously successful. But it also raises the important question of what the ‘History of Music Theory’ stands for in the twenty-first century—and, perhaps just as importantly, what else it *might* be. And in offering answers to both these questions, and in rounding off the *Geschichte der Musiktheorie* project, this volume opens up new avenues for further study, so that the next time round the contributions can build on the solid foundation that this volume provides. This is possibly its most important contribution. Perhaps, then, we can see how some form of intellectual wrestling, either in the sense of Dahlhaus-style *Problemgeschichte* or contemporary Anglo-American cultural history, plays out in the fields of French, Italian—and Belgian!—music theory.

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