

Prophets of the Decline: The Worldviews of Heinrich Schenker and Oswald Spengler

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In 1923, Arnold Schoenberg wrote a scathing critique of the Viennese music theorist and critic Heinrich Schenker. This critique would later appear in his *Style and Idea*, under the heading of “Those Who Complain About the Decline.” In it, Schoenberg puts Schenker into the same ideological camp as the contemporary cultural historian Oswald Spengler:

The main thing impressing the decline or downfall of our art and culture on all these Spenglers, Schenkers, and so forth, has been an awareness of themselves as totally lacking in creative talent. A natural and very simple reaction to such findings would have been contempt for themselves, not even for others comparably impotent. For that to happen, though, their realization would have had to be clear and conscious. But such people are outstandingly good at suppressing everything of the kind; their self-preservative instinct triumphs, everyone else can decline, so long as it helps *them* to get to the top and stay there. Nowadays, according to such prophets—the only ones ‘with honour’ in everybody’s country—the creative disposition no longer exists; what does exist, plentifully, is critical trash such

as themselves, and these are the only ones still to have ideas, to possess creative gifts, even—the only geniuses, then! So there are no more geniuses, only critics. But if the latter are geniuses after all, then geniuses *do* exist; if they are not, then there is no reason to give them credence, for anyone knows as much as non-genius! The difference between the two kinds of person lies precisely in what they know or don't know: secret science. . . .

At least I never praised Spengler, but I am genuinely sorry for what I have said about Schenker. I so enjoy paying due tribute, or tempering criticism by dwelling on whatever there is to praise—but I almost believe that here I am in the wrong, and that this case calls for action with a firm hand, or even, perhaps, foot.¹

Leaving aside the strengths or weaknesses of Schoenberg's own arguments and opinions, his comparison of Schenker's ideas with those of Spengler does raise some interesting questions. For some readers, the first might be simply: Who was Oswald Spengler, and what are the essential concepts embodied in his writings? Beyond this, we might ask whether Schoenberg's comparisons are apt. Schoenberg's evidence for the similarity of thought between Schenker and Spengler is grouped around the following related issues: (1) The cultural and artistic development of the West is in decline, due to the fact that the "creative disposition" of that culture no longer exists; and that (2) There are no more geniuses. Assuming that Schoenberg's sense of the ideological kinship of the two men was at least a marginally common viewpoint in the 1920s when both Schenker and Spengler were active, it would be instructive to determine whether this conception is accurate, and to what extent. Finally, since Schenker's ideas about music were situated within the cultural currents of the Germanic world during the first thirty-five years of the twentieth century, of which Spengler was an influential part, we might also ask whether there are any further

¹Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 203-4.

similarities and differences between the two thinkers that are worth exploring. We might then get a clearer sense of how Schenker's theories were influenced by the period in which he lived. I will examine each of these issues in turn in what follows, although it should be noted that I will not attempt to untangle the question of direct influence between the two writers.²

The Decline of the West

The reputation of Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) largely rests on his massive two-volume work, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, published in 1918 (vol. 1) and 1923 (vol. 2). It was subsequently translated into English by Charles Francis Atkinson and published in 1926 and 1928.³ In this work, Spengler attempts to give an exhaustive description of the structures and dynamics in great cultures as they move through time. His only other major work, *Der Mensch und der Technik (Man and Technics)*, published in 1931, is a brief overview of a similar

²There is, to my knowledge, no documentary evidence to suggest that Schenker was familiar with Spengler's writings, or vice-versa. My personal opinion is that, due to the general currency and popularity of Spengler's books in the German-speaking countries following World War I, Schenker could hardly have been unaware of his contemporary, particularly since other notable figures of the time (such as Schoenberg) were able to make the comparison to fellow musicians in full expectation that the context would be understood. It is probably less likely that the reverse is true, since Schenker's books would not have had as broad an appeal to non-musicians of the period. It would also be foolish to suggest that Schenker's ideas were borrowed from Spengler, since the first discussions of Schenker's ideas on music were published well before the publication of the first volume of *The Decline of the West* in 1918, although the public debate about the book may have had some effect on Schenker's later works. While nothing definite relating to influence has been discovered, it is my hope that a comparison of the two men's ideas will result in a clearer understanding of the environment in which Schenker's writings were received and will provide an introduction to the works of an important twentieth-century figure whose ideas are not familiar to the majority of American musicians.

³Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926-28).

philosophy applied to the periods before the rise of a great culture.⁴ This work, though interesting on its own, is more or less an extension of ideas worked out in the earlier volumes.

One might get a good sense of the importance of *The Decline of the West* to post-War Germany by examining all of the criticism, both constructive and otherwise, that appeared in the 1920s by specialists in every field of study imaginable. Charles Francis Atkinson, in his Preface to *Decline*, remarks that over four hundred such treatments appeared in print during this period.⁵ The *Decline* was criticized for numerous inaccuracies or statements for which Spengler provided no evidence, but the sheer weight of material drawn from so many different intellectual disciplines as well as the assertiveness, suggestiveness, honesty and perceptiveness of his larger vision has given the *Decline* a durability beyond other, similarly-directed works of its time. Furthermore, it seemed to strike a chord with the German-speaking world following the defeat of the Kaiser in World War I; the war had thrust larger issues of man's destiny and role in history onto the public stage, and Spengler's work provided a spiritual/historical celebration of the grandeur and dignity of Western Culture, a justification for the tragedies that had befallen them, and a way to view the future with courage. Its effect was startling; nearly 100,000 copies were printed in the 1920s, remarkable for a work so dense and complex.⁶

The Decline of the West is difficult to read, not only because of the encyclopedic nature of its subject matter, but also because of the philosophical underpinnings which supported Spengler's other ideas. In fact, no part of the lengthy work was free from these underpinnings. One only needs to take a passage at random from the book in order to realize that a great deal of philosophical groundwork was required:

⁴Spengler, *Man and Technics: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Life*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976).

⁵Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 1:x.

⁶Ibid., 1:ix.

And now it is the manhood of the style-history that comes on. The Culture is changing into the intellectuality of the great cities that will now dominate the country-side, and *pari passu* the style is becoming intellectualized also. The grand symbolism withers; the riot of superhuman forms dies down; milder and more worldly arts drive out the great art of developed stone. Even in Egypt sculpture and fresco are emboldened to lighter movement. The *artist* appears, and “plans” what formerly grew out of the soil. Once more existence becomes self-conscious and now, detached from the land and the dream and the mystery, stands questioning, and wrestles for an expression of its new duty. . . .⁷

Compelling prose, but what does it mean exactly? Reading the excerpt in the context of the preceding and succeeding paragraphs clarifies the ideas, but one gets the sense that there is a great deal more beneath the surface that must be explained. What, for example, is meant by “manhood of the style-history” or “grand symbolism” or “existence” being “self-conscious” or “out of the soil.” These are not just metaphors, but concepts that Spengler fleshes out as he goes. In fact, ten or so of the twenty-five chapters in the two books, comprising nearly three hundred of the nine hundred and fifty pages, are devoted primarily to defining concepts and ideas, as opposed to showing the practical application of these ideas. The rest of the chapters apply these concepts to everything from mathematics, music, art and the natural sciences to law, race, political history, economics, religion and language.

The Central Themes of Decline: Parallel and Organic View of Culture

Despite all this complexity, however, there are a very few compelling ideas that stand at the heart of *The Decline of the West*. One of these is the *parallel and organic view* of culture. For Spengler, it

⁷Ibid., 1:206.

was of primary importance to detach history from a haphazard identification of causes and effects in order to describe events and their meanings. This process he called the *Systematic*.⁸ He argued that this type of reasoning was only applicable to a scientific study of *Nature*, and not to the workings of *History*. Objects of study such as history and life-processes are temporal and organic and do not lend themselves to a *Systematic* approach. Spengler called the contrasting approach *Physiognomic*:

All modes of comprehending the world may, in the last analysis, be described as Morphology. *The Morphology of the mechanical and the extended, a science which discovers and orders nature-laws and causal relations, is called Systematic. The Morphology of the organic, of history and life and all that bears the sign of direction and destiny, is called Physiognomic.*⁹

In the above sentence, we encounter the word *Morphology*. Under this term, Spengler gives us his most important contribution to cultural history. He argues that Cultures have a shape, an organic Morphology, and that this shape can be described. Furthermore, it is this type of description that is the most appropriate for historical study. Thus:

What gives this fleeting form-world meaning and substance, and what has hitherto lain buried deep under a mass of tangible “facts” and “dates” that has hardly yet been bored through, is

⁸Ibid., 1:100. Words that are not normally capitalized but are in this paper, reflect Spengler’s usage, which tends to mean that the term has been given a slightly different or expanded meaning from the normal usage.

⁹Ibid., italics mine. Spengler uses a number of dichotomies such as these to illustrate various facets of his ideas. Besides Physiognomic/Systematic, we have Time/ Space, History/Nature, Destiny/Causality, Incident/Cause, Form/Law, Being/Waking- Being, Plant/Animal, Cosmic/Microcosmic, Blood/Intellect. Each of the first terms are related to each other as are each of the second terms. The terms are all expanded in great detail, although all are different approaches to the same type of relationship. The discussion of these terms provides much of the richness of Spengler’s philosophy, but is a little outside the framework of this paper.

the *phenomenon of the Great Cultures*. Only after these prime forms shall have been seen and felt and worked out in respect of their physiognomic meaning will it be possible to say that the essence and inner form of human History as opposed to the essence of Nature are understood.¹⁰

And what metaphor does Spengler use to illustrate this inner form? Naturally, the *organic metaphor*:

Cultures are organisms, and world-history is their collective biography. Morphologically, the immense history of the Chinese or of the Classical Culture is the exact equivalent of the petty history of the individual man, or of the animal, or the tree, or the flower. For the Faustian vision, this is not a postulate but an experience; if we want to learn to recognize inward forms that constantly and everywhere repeat themselves, the comparative morphology of plants and animals has long ago given us the methods. In the destinies of the several Cultures that follow upon one another, grow up with one another, touch, overshadow, and suppress one another, is compressed the whole content of human history. And if we set free their shapes, till now hidden all too deep under the surface of a trite “history of human progress,” and let them march past us in the spirit, it cannot but be that we shall succeed in distinguishing, amidst all that is special or unessential, the primitive culture-form, *the Culture* that underlies as ideal all the individual Cultures.¹¹

This, then, is the program that Spengler follows in his books. He identifies a handful of Cultures¹² and then shows how all of them have exhibited the qualities of a life-span: a birth or awakening, a

¹⁰Ibid., 1:104.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Western, Classical, Arabian, Russian, Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, Mexican, Japanese.

strengthening to maturity, a full display of powers, and a decline and death. This is not just a limited metaphor for Spengler; he elaborates each phase of the Culture's life-course, indicating how these phases have their own individual dynamics and essentials, which can be seen in each and every case.

This leads me to the second aspect of the parallel and organic view of culture. For Spengler, because every culture has a life-course and goes through a series of identifiable stages, it follows that one could compare different Cultures to show how each manifested a particular phase of the life-course, with the differences only reflecting the unique identity of a given Culture:

I hope to show that without exception all great creations and forms in religion, art, politics, social life, economy and science, appear, fulfill themselves and die down contemporaneously in all the Cultures; that the inner structure of one corresponds strictly with that of all the others; that there is not a single phenomenon of deep physiognomic importance in the record of one for which we could not find a counterpart in the record of every other; and that this counterpart is to be found under a characteristic form and in a perfectly definite chronological position. At the same time, if we are to grasp such homologies of facts, we shall need to have a far deeper insight and a far more critical attitude towards the visible foreground of things than historians have hitherto been wont to display; who amongst them, for instance, would have allowed himself to dream that the counterpart of Protestantism was to be found in the Dionysiac movement, and that English Puritanism was for the West what Islam was for the Arabian world.¹³

With this powerful tool, Spengler is able to show how events from various spans of history were motivated by the same underlying

¹³Ibid., 1:112. In some sense, this argument that the true events of history lie under a confusing and chaotic surface, or *foreground*, is very similar to Schenker's postulation of an *Ursatz* existing behind the musical surface and giving it coherence and meaning.

principles. He is able to identify and track the life-span of a Culture through all of its phases. And, in the case of the Western Culture, he is able to *identify its future course by comparing it with other manifestations of the same model, other Cultures, and show how its particular imperatives will give the general model a unique expression.* In other words, he felt that he could predict how and when the Western Culture would meet its end.

Music as the Ideal Medium of the Western “Soul”

According to Spengler, just as each Culture manifests the same ideal *morphology* that allows it to be compared to others, so also does each Culture have a particular quality or essence that gives it a unique character and makes it distinguishable from other Cultures as a unit. This Spengler calls the “soul” of the Culture, another organic metaphor, and its manifestation is the “prime symbol.” Unlike many other historians, who believe that, for example, the Western Culture evolved from the Greeks and Romans,¹⁴ Spengler felt that Cultures, though alike in form, were completely unique in having their own prime symbol which motivated all their artistic, scientific, and social developments. Spengler then went on to identify, in general terms, the prime symbol for each Culture, and much of *The Decline of the West* centers around an attempt to show how this symbol, combined with the structure of the life-course, motivated the output of the Culture:

Henceforth we shall designate the soul of the Classical Culture, which chose the sensuously-present individual as the ideal type of the extended, by the name (familiarized by Nietzsche) of the *Apollonian*. In opposition to it we have the Faustian soul, whose prime symbol is pure and limitless space, and whose “body” is the Western Culture that blossomed forth with the birth of the

¹⁴This is still the preferred approach to European History taught in America today; the ancient-medieval-modern structure which Spengler criticizes implies that the Greeks and Romans are the immediate forebears of the West because, among other reasons, the two Cultures have the same geographical location.

Romanesque style in the tenth century in the Northern plain between the Elbe and the Tagus. The nude statue is Apollonian, the art of the fugue Faustian. Apollonian are: mechanical statics, the sensuous cult of the Olympian gods, the politically individual city-states of Greece, the doom of Oedipus and the phallus-symbol. Faustian are: Galilean dynamics, Catholic and Protestant dogmatics, the great dynasties of the Baroque with their cabinet diplomacy, the destiny of Lear and the Madonna-ideal from Dante's Beatrice to the last line of Faust II. . . . [T]he Faustian is an existence which is *led* with a deep consciousness and introspection of the ego, and a resolutely personal culture evidenced in memoirs, reflections, retrospects, and prospects and conscience.¹⁵

The above excerpt also shows that each manifestation of a Culture, its arts, sciences, political forms, etc., must contain and be motivated, first, by the prime symbol, and second, by the particular stage of the Culture to which it belongs.¹⁶ Therefore, Spengler saw disparate culture-forms of the same period as more closely akin than similar culture-forms in different periods. (In other words, a piece of music and a piece of sculpture from the Baroque have more in common than a piece of sculpture from the Baroque and a piece of sculpture from the

¹⁵Ibid., 1:183.

¹⁶Ibid., 1:205. The style, like the Culture, is a prime phenomenon in the strictest Goethian sense, be it the style of art or religion or thought, or in the style of life itself. It is, as "Nature" is, an ever-new experience of waking man, his alter ego and mirror-image in the world-around. And therefore in the general historical picture of a Culture there can be but one style, *the style of the Culture*. The error has lain in treating mere style-phases—Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque, Rococo, Empire—as if they were styles on the same level as units of quite another order such as the Egyptian, the Chinese (or even a "prehistoric") style. Gothic and Baroque are simply the youth and age of one and the same vessel of forms, the style of the West as ripening and ripened. . . . [I]n reality, even a masterpiece of strictest Renaissance like the court of the Palazzo Farnese is infinitely nearer to the arcade-porch of St. Patroclus in Soest, the interior of the Magdeburg cathedral, and the staircases of South-German castles of the eighteenth century than it is to the Temple of Paestum or to the Erechtheum.

Mycenaean age.) As a result, Spengler's discussion of the history of a given Culture weaves between different disciplines as one or the other becomes more prominent or representative.

Of course, Spengler discusses Western music at length in his books, and he argues that, like all the other disciplines, music is a reflection of the Western soul. In fact, Spengler remarks that music is the ideal medium for expressing the Faustian ideal of a striving toward infinite space:

In our case the impress [image of the soul] is a musical one; the sonata of the inner life has the will as first subject, thought and feeling as themes of the second subject; the movement is bound by the strict rules of a spiritual counterpoint, and psychology's business is to discover this counterpoint.¹⁷

His "theories" of music can rarely be compared directly to Schenker, since their goals were different. Many of Schenker's forays into music history are for the purpose of showing the development of the treatment of voice-leading and the scale-step¹⁸ or of illustrating his theories, such as the composing-out of the *Ursatz*, etc. Spengler, on the other hand, is interested in showing how music reflects the soul of the Culture and how it manifests various phases of the Culture's lifestyle. For example, in a description of the seventeenth century, we read:

Thenceforward, the great task was to extend the tone-corpus into the infinity, or rather to *resolve it into an infinite space of tone*. Gothic had developed the instruments into families of definite timbre. But the new-born "orchestra" no longer observes limitations imposed by the human voice, but treats it as a voice to be combined with other voices—at the same moment as our

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 1:305.

¹⁸Heinrich Schenker, *Counterpoint: Volume II of New Musical Theories and Fantasies*, ed. John Rothgeb, trans. John Rothgeb and Jürgen Thym, vol. 1 (New York: Schirmer Books, 1987), xxv-xxx.

mathematic proceeds from the geometrical analysis of Fermat to the purely functional analysis of Descartes. In Zarlino's "Harmony" (1558) appears a genuine perspective of pure tonal space. We begin to distinguish between ornamental and fundamental instruments. Melody and embellishment join to produce the form of the fugal style, of which Frescobaldi was the first master and Bach the culmination. To the vocal masses and motets the Baroque opposes its grand, orchestrally-conceived forms of the oratorio (Carissimi), the cantata (Viadana) and the opera (Monteverdi). Whether a bass melody be set against upper voices, or upper voices be concerted against one another upon a background of basso continuo, always sound-worlds or characteristic expression-quality work reciprocally upon one another in the infinity of tonal space, supporting, intensifying, raising, illuminating, threatening, overshadowing—a music all of interplay, scarcely intelligible save through ideas of contemporary Analysis.¹⁹

Consequently, the comparison between Schenker and Spengler seems more appropriate at the level of ideology and philosophy, rather than their respective theories of music. It is true, however, that both men are concerned with showing the inner essence of a piece of music, which remains unchanged from piece to piece, and which is legitimized by a metaphysical archetype. In this sense, Schenker and Spengler show themselves to be children of the nineteenth century, with its holistic spirit and its search for unifying causes.

Analogies to Schenker's "Genius"

Two other, related concepts are worth mentioning at this point. Both seem to come close to the subject of "genius" as expounded by Schenker. The first is Spengler's discussion of the different ways that

¹⁹Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 1:230-31. The above excerpt shows that Spengler was not just marginally familiar with the world of music. Many of his insights are as worthy of study as those of any professional musical scholar.

groups or classes manifest the soul of their Culture. This concept is in some sense the counterweight to the unifying elements of *prime symbol* and *morphology* in Spengler's theories. On the one hand, Spengler distinguishes by class, asserting that the uneducated classes will reflect the more universal symbols of humanity as a whole, while the educated classes will reflect most clearly the particular symbol of their Culture:

In all high Cultures, therefore, there is a *peasantry*, which is breed, stock, in the broad sense (and thus to a certain extent nature herself), and a *society* which is assertively and emphatically "in form." It is a set of classes or Estates, and no doubt artificial and transitory. But the history of these classes and estates is *world-history at highest potential*. It is only in relation to it that the peasant is seen as historyless. The whole broad and grand history of these six millennia has accomplished itself in the life-courses of the high Cultures, *because* these Cultures themselves placed their creative foci in Estates possessing breed and training, and so in the course of fulfillment became trained and bred.²⁰

It is easy to see why a late twentieth-century reader might find this viewpoint somewhat distasteful; of course, we see a very similar attitude in Schenker's writings and such things were obviously very much in circulation in the 1920s.

On the other hand, Spengler also distinguishes by group, within the *Estates* as it were. Spengler felt that some groups, such as nobility, politicians, and businessmen, manifest the *prime symbol* by *living* it, as it were. In some sense, this means that they are not conscious of the *soul* of the Culture, but play it out in the course of their activity. Other groups, such as the priesthood, artists, and educators, manifest the *prime symbol* by *working with* it. These groups are conscious of the *soul* of the Culture, and give expression to it directly:

²⁰*Ibid.*, 2:331.

Every nobility is a living symbol of *Time*, every priesthood of *Space*. Destiny and sacred Causality, History and Nature, the When and the Where, race and language, sex-life and feeling-life—all these attain in them to the highest possible expression. The noble lives in a world of facts, the priest in one of truths; the one has shrewdness, the other knowledge; the one is a doer, the other a thinker. . . . So mighty is this onset of a symbolism that at first all other distinctions, such as those of country, people and language, fall into the background.²¹

This dual nature of society, according to Spengler, gives rise to many of the tensions in the particular life-span of the Culture. Furthermore, as the first group, the men-as-history, decline in significance, the Culture itself begins to lose its vitality. This very same aristocratic spirit can be found in the writings of Schenker when he rails against the evils of democratic governments.²²

The second concept related to the issue of genius is the contraction of the possession of the *prime symbol* in the final phases of a Culture (called Civilization by Spengler). Spengler contends that as a Culture enters its final phase, its *soul* atrophies and fewer and fewer people are moved by it. Instead, they simply work with the hollow forms of the old Culture, without understanding its essence. As a result, accident and chaos tend to increase because there is no sure motivating force behind the culture:

It is this extinction of living inner religiousness, which gradually tells upon even the most insignificant element in a man's being, that becomes phenomenal in the historical world-picture at the turn from the Culture to the Civilization, the *Climacteric* of the Culture, as I have already called it, the time of change in which

²¹Ibid., 2:335.

²²Schenker, *Counterpoint: Volume II of New Musical Theories and Fantasies*, ed. John Rothgeb, trans. John Rothgeb and Jürgen Thym, vol. 2 (New York: Schirmer Books, 1987), xiii.

a mankind loses its spiritual fruitfulness for ever, and building takes the place of begetting. Unfruitfulness—understanding the world in all its direct seriousness— marks the brain-man of the megalopolis, as the sign of fulfilled destiny, and it is one of the most impressive facts of historical symbolism that the change manifests itself not only in the extinction of great art, of great courtesy, of great formal thought, of the great style in all things, but also quite carnally in the childlessness and “race-suicide” of the civilized and rootless strata, a phenomenon not peculiar to ourselves but already observed and deplored—and of course not remedied—in Imperial Rome and Imperial China.²³

Here we begin to see a familiar theme: the modern world is losing its spiritual essence and is falling apart from every direction. Spengler’s view of the decline of the West is based on the comparison of its life-course to other, extinct Cultures, and he argues that this course is inevitable and irreversible. Having come at last to common ground, and with the above discussion as background, let us now turn to a comparative study of the philosophies of Schenker and Spengler.²⁴

²³Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 1:359.

²⁴Ibid., 1:106. Here it might be helpful to give a lengthier excerpt describing the general course of a Culture:

A Culture is born in the moment when a great soul awakens out of the protospirituality of ever-childish humanity, and detaches itself, a form from the formless, a bounded and mortal thing from the boundless and enduring. It blooms on the soil of an exactly-definable landscape, to which plant-wise it remains bound. It dies when this soul has actualized the full sum of its possibilities in the shape of peoples, languages, dogmas, arts, states, sciences, and reverts into the proto-soul. But its living existence, that sequence of great epochs which define and display the stages of fulfillment, is an inner passionate struggle to maintain the Idea against the powers of Chaos without and the unconscious muttering deep-down within. It is not only artist who struggles against the resistance of the material and the stifling of the idea within him. Every Culture stands in a deeply-symbolical, almost in a mystical, relation to the Extended, the space, in which and through which it strives to actualize itself. The aim once attained—the idea, the entire content of inner possibilities,

The Decline of Art and Culture

The first viewpoint identified by Schoenberg as being common to both men is that the cultural and artistic life of the West is in decline, that whatever there is of art or culture in the twentieth century is a sad remnant of what once existed. Is this comparison apt? The answer, from all that we now know of Spengler's writings, is a qualified yes.

Certainly Schenker's remarks about the decline of music at the turn of the century are well-known. He derided the modern composer's lack of insightful and technical facility, and he rejected the new musical styles:

Indeed, we no longer have *any* technique! Today's generation even lacks the ability just to understand the existing technique of the masters, which would be required as the first step toward any kind of progress. In comparison with works of our own masters, today's compositions have to be considered musically too simple, even *far* too simple and too primitive! Despite heaviest orchestration, despite noisy and pompous gestures, despite "polyphony" and "cacophony," the proudest products of Richard Strauss are inferior—in terms of true musical spirit and authentic inner complexity of texture, form, and articulation—to a string quartet by Haydn, in which external grace hides the inner complexity, just as color and fragrance of a flower render mysterious to humans the undiscovered, great miracles of creation.²⁵

fulfilled and made externally actual—the Culture suddenly hardens, it mortifies, its blood congeals, its force breaks down, and it becomes *Civilization*, the thing which we feel and understand in the words Egyptianism, Byzantinism, Mandarinism. As such they may, like a worn-out giant of the primeval forest, thrust their decaying branches towards the sky for hundreds of thousands of years, as we see in China, in India, in the Islamic world. It was thus that the Classical Civilization rose gigantic, in the Imperial age, with a false semblance of youth and strength and fullness, and robbed the young Arabian Culture of the East of light and air.

²⁵Schenker, *Counterpoint*, 1:xxi.

Carried over to the practical realm, Schenker believed that the problem with modern theorists and musicians was that they were not sufficiently aware of the foundation of musical technique, which “can be traced to two basic elements: the voice leading and the degree-progression [*Stufengang*].”²⁶ More than this, he rather characteristically observed that no music theorist before him was fully aware of the contributions of both of these elements. When the concept of the *Ursatz* and its implications had been fully developed, during the writing of *Der Tonwille* (1921-1924) and certainly by *Der freie Satz* (1935), this too became one of the essential elements found in the music of the masters from 1700 to 1900.

Schenker’s attention to the deep structure of music was not simply a continuation of the nineteenth-century predilection for finding the hidden plan behind the surface. He was also reacting to specific developments in the performing world of his time. As Nicholas Cook points out in his 1989 article “Schenker’s Theory of Music as Ethics,” Schenker observed that performers of his time were missing important connections in the music by focusing too much on the individual moment and on ungrounded displays of virtuosity:

Schenker’s method suppresses foreground contrast so as to stress the large-scale continuity of the music—the connections that, as he said, performers of Mozart’s works failed to convey.²⁷

Furthermore, this trend tended to be passed down to students, who would be unaware of an essential side of music and would transfer the lack of awareness to deficient performances and compositions. Schenker’s criticisms were mainly musical in nature and not simply an offshoot of a prevailing standpoint for holism in society, although both aspects undoubtedly contributed to the final product.

²⁶Ibid., 93.

²⁷Nicholas Cook, “Schenker’s Theory of Music as Ethics,” *Journal of Musicology* 7 (1989): 417.

It is, of course, natural that Spengler, coming from a different academic perspective and with a different set of goals, would give different reasons for the decline of art and culture. Spengler clearly was concerned with a larger framework than that of music theory, but even given these broader brushstrokes, the end result is surprisingly similar:

What is practiced as art to-day—be it music after Wagner or painting after Cezanne, Leibl and Menzl—is impotence and falsehood. Look where one will, can one find the great personalities that would justify the claim that there is still an art of determinate necessity? Look where one will, can one find the *self-evidently necessary* task that awaits such an artist? We go through all the exhibitions, the concerts, the theatres, and find only industrious cobblers and noisy fools, who delight to produce something for the market, something that will “catch on” with a public for whom art and music and drama have long ceased to be spiritual necessities. At what a level of inward and outward dignity stand to-day that which is called art and those who are called artists! In the shareholder’s meeting of any limited company, or in the technical staff of any first-rate engineering works there is more intelligence, taste, character and capacity than in the whole music and painting of present-day Europe. There have always been, for one great artist, a hundred superfluties who practised art, but so long as a great tradition (and *therefore* great art) endured even these achieved something worthy. We can forgive this hundred for existing, for in the ensemble of the tradition they were the footing for the individual great man. But to-day we have only these superfluties, and ten thousand of them, working art “for a living” (as if that were a justification!). One thing is quite certain, that to-day every single art-school could be shut down without art being affected in the slightest.²⁸

²⁸Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 1:293-94.

These words could almost have been written by Schenker himself; it touches also on the other, related, viewpoint mentioned by Schoenberg, and that is the lack of geniuses in the modern era, which in Spengler means a lack of people imbued with the living symbol of the Western Culture. Schenker's laments about the absence of geniuses in the twentieth-century are, of course, well-known. So, while we do not know whether Spengler would have agreed with Schenker's music-theoretical ideas (or vice-versa, for what there are of them in Spengler), it seems that Schoenberg had a pretty good case when he lumped Schenker and Spengler together as prophets of the decline.²⁹

There are differences other than theoretical between the two viewpoints. For one thing, Schenker's period of masterworks is considerably narrower than Spengler's. For Schenker, the great composers all lived between the time of J. S. Bach and Johannes Brahms. His opinion of music before Bach was largely that it had not "gotten there" yet; his discussion of the history of music of this period consisted of determining when elements of the Classical and Romantic style that he found significant had been developed.³⁰ Spengler, on the other hand, though he personally liked the chamber works of Beethoven better than any other music, at least tried to view music of the earlier periods on its own terms. In one sense, Medieval plainchant was not as advanced as the Classical symphony, because the latter was the product of the so-called High Culture phase, when the imperative of the Culture's soul comes to complete expression. On the other hand, the early phases of a Culture contain the purest and strongest general awareness of that soul, and the explosion of art-forms in the Gothic period was more epochal in its way than the inevitable working out of those forms that followed. This respect can be seen in numerous descriptions of the Medieval period, of which the following is an example:

²⁹Ibid., 1:230. Schenker's view of the role of the individual, the genius, in the tonal period is implicitly affirmed by Spengler here when he says that around 1600 "we pass from the super-personal Form to the personal expression of the Master."

³⁰Schenker, *Counterpoint*, 1:xxv-xxx.

Imitation stands nearest to life and direction and therefore begins with melody, while the symbolism of counterpoint belongs to extension and through polyphony signifies infinite space. The result was, on the one side, a store of “eternal” rules and, on the other, an inexhaustible fund of folk-melodies on which even the eighteenth-century was still drawing.³¹

To be fair to Schenker, though, neither writer was necessarily trying to understand the music of the early West on its own terms, but through what it could say about the issues of interest to the author (the development of voice-leading, degree-progression, and the *Ursatz* for Schenker, and the fleshing-out of the Culture phases for Spengler).

The other, perhaps more important, distinction between Spengler’s and Schenker’s view of the decline was their response to it. Schenker seemed to hope that, by publishing his books, he could exert some influence on the course of musical development, or at the least refuse to yield to the contemporary trends by vigorously defending the music of the past. Furthermore, he hoped to provide teachers and theorists a solid foundation for putting students on the right path in composition and performance, such that the next generation would not make the mistakes of the former.³² Spengler, though he was critical of the modern era, was more concerned that people be aware of the state of things than that they try to change them. In fact, because of his theory of the life-course of a Culture, he felt that the changes that were occurring were inevitable, and that one should simply live with them with full awareness of the processes at work. (Spengler, of course, included art and music as areas in which the overall trend would be felt.) At the very end of *The Decline of the West*, he turned to the question of a response to the events of the day:

For us, however, whom a Destiny has placed in this Culture and at this moment of its development—the moment when money is

³¹Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 1: 229.

³²Schenker, *Counterpoint*, 1:xxxii-xxxiii.

celebrating its last victories, and the Caesarism that is to succeed approaches with quiet, firm step—our direction, willed and obligatory at once, is set for us within narrow limits, and on any other terms life is not worth the living. We have not the freedom to reach to this or to that, but the freedom to do the necessary or to do nothing. And a task that historic necessity has set will be accomplished with the individual or against him.³³

Spengler, then, does not advocate a return to the past, since for him this is impossible, but a grim acceptance of what has been lost, and a willingness to take up what is left to us.³⁴ If Schenker in his more fatalistic moments felt that the tide of change was too overwhelming, he nevertheless did not ever subscribe to Spengler's view in this regard.

Further Relationships: Organicism, Dynamics, and Metaphysics

Finally, I discuss three other similarities between Spengler and Schenker which may help to show the connection between Schenker's ideas and those of his contemporaries in the 1920s. The first has already been mentioned above, and it is the biological or organic metaphor. This metaphor was increasingly coming under attack and would give way ultimately to a positivistic one, but its appeal was still felt in the 1920s. It might seem, at first, that Spengler's views are at variance with Schenker's on this point; after all, *Nature* for Spengler was the object of the scientific approach and has little to do with the historically-minded artistic creations of the West, while *Nature* for

³³Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 2:507, 223:

And yet it is precisely in this problem of the end, the impressively sudden end, of a great art . . . that the organic character of these arts is most evident. If we look closely enough we shall have no difficulty in convincing ourselves that no one art of any greatness has ever been reborn.

³⁴This is the point on which Spengler has been accused of fostering fascism, since in the political realm he believed that the symbolic force of the Culture-soul would be replaced in the period of Civilization by pure power-politics, and that the strongest force would and should have its way.

Schenker is the source of the major triad and, through it, the *Ursatz* and impetus for musical composition. However, Spengler's term *Nature* is not the obvious one to compare to Schenker's *Nature*. Both men use the biological metaphor, Spengler to explain the span and development of a Culture (and its music), and Schenker to explain the span and development of musical tones. In *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik I*, we read that:

Music is the living movement of tones in the nature-given tonal space, the compositional unfolding of Nature-given chords. The law of life—motion—which, as procreation, transcends the boundaries of individual existence is also carried by man into the chord that Nature has commended to his ear. Everything in music depends on this movement, this procreative force.³⁵

In their own areas of concern, then, both writers reflect an interest in metaphors of life, time, and procreation.

In a similar way, Spengler and Schenker were both interested in the dynamic properties of the objects they studied. Schenker, of course, is justly praised for his development of the concept of prolongation, by which "the chord, as a harmonic concept, is made to unfold and extend in time."³⁶ Tonal music, then, according to Schenker, has a mechanism for transforming what is essentially a static device, the chord, into a temporal force which, when combined with other such prolongations, results in temporal directedness.

Spengler also felt that this was a key concern for Western Culture as a whole. With reference to music, he wrote that:

Western man is in a high degree historically disposed, Classical man far from being so. . . . We have before us a symbol of

³⁵Heinrich Schenker, *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik I*, trans. James Stewart (Munich: Drei Masken Verlag, 1925), 12.

³⁶Idem, *Harmony*, ed. Oswald Jonas, trans. Elisabeth Mann Borgese (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), ix.

becoming in every bar of our music from Palestrina to Wagner.³⁷

One of the innovative features of each man's writings was the emphasis on this quality of dynamic motion. Schenker felt that the harmonic theory initiated by Rameau was too static a conception and ignored the importance of voice leading, while Spengler argued that the view of history as a succession of events linked by cause and effect was similarly limiting.

The third similarity is somewhat more general, and it is an appreciation for the metaphysical power of music. This is a viewpoint that was carried over from the nineteenth-century, but it was applied with much success in the 1920s to grand *Ur*-theories like those of Schenker and Spengler. An excerpt from each author's works dealing with this subject will serve as sufficient commentary on this issue. First, from Schenker:

The sum total of my works present an image of art as self-contained, as growing of itself—but, despite all infinitude of appearance, as setting its own limits through selection and synthesis. It is my fervent wish that mankind may ultimately be permitted to be guided through the euphony of art to the noble spirit of selection and synthesis, and to shape all institutions of his earthly existence, such as state, marriage, love and friendship, into true works of art according to the laws of artistic synthesis!³⁸

And now from Spengler, who also shows a common bond with Schenker in his love of rhapsodic writing!:

In precisely this resides the ineffable charm and the very real power of emancipation that music possesses for us men. For

³⁷Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 1:97.

³⁸Schenker, *Counterpoint*, 2:xx.

music is the only art whose means lie outside the light-world that has so long become coextensive with our total world, and music alone, therefore, can take us right out of this world, break up the steely tyranny of light, and let us fondly imagine that we are on the verge of reaching the soul's final secret—an illusion due to the fact that our waking consciousness is now so dominated by one sense only, so thoroughly adapted to the eye-world, that it is incapable of forming, out of the impressions it receives, a world of the ear.³⁹

With this brief overview of Oswald Spengler and a comparison of his views with those of his contemporary Heinrich Schenker, I hope to have stimulated some interest in this fascinating figure and in the light that a more widespread study of his writings might bring to Schenker's thought, as well as music scholarship in general. We can see that these two men are linked by their search for an ordering force that underlies artistic production, a force which they both related to the organic metaphor. They are further linked by their belief that the source of the creative impulse is in the hands of a particularly highly-trained and highly-talented social class, and that the decline of music is in proportion to the decline in importance of this class. It is these beliefs to which Schoenberg is understandably reacting, due to his place as a musical "progressive" of the time.

It should also be remembered that while Schenker and Spengler are ideologically similar, their approaches are different. Schenker's proof for the decline of music is founded upon the observation that his musical deep structure and its compositional importance is no longer at the center of most new music. For Spengler, the proof is based on a comparison of Western musical development with that of other cultures and other times. Because of these methodological differences, it is clear why Schenker would actively seek to reverse the decline by setting forth his theories as a guide to composers and performers, while Spengler would consider the decline as inevitable and irreversible.

³⁹Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 2:8.