

Why is Schoenberg's Seventeenth Chapter So Hard to Digest?

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This study began as an attempt to clarify for myself what it is that makes the seventeenth chapter of Arnold Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre* so . . . well, peculiar. Since my first readings of this work as a whole, the chapter bearing the title "'Non-Harmonic' Tones" seemed to stand out from those surrounding it, prompting such questions as: What sets it apart from the other chapters? Why am I so uncomfortable with it? Is the material to be taken seriously? I attributed my feelings to such reasons as the vitriolic tone (even though this tone is present throughout the book); the long stretches of prose with no musical examples (even though there are other chapters containing longer stretches); or some degree of disorganization in the argument (even though it is by no means certain that this is actually a characteristic of the section).

These somewhat superficial questions and their mostly unsatisfactory answers which formed the basis for my approach soon gave way to a set of potentially more interesting ones. My dissatisfaction with the organization of the opening section of the

chapter¹ soon gave way to questions concerning how the discourse is structured, while my superficial regard for the tone of the section changed into the more pertinent question of how Schoenberg expresses his ideas, and how this relates to the expression of ideas in any discipline. Finally, my concern over the page-after-page of text with no musical examples yielded to concern over some places where musical examples do appear. What follows is a discussion of structure, rhetorical status, and use of musical examples and some ways in which these factors propel this section of *Harmonielehre*.

The Structure of Chapter 17

In many other sections of the text, the structure is more or less transparent, hence easily outlined; but Chapter 17 seems to resist outlining. This refusal of the text to conform to a shape imposed upon it from the outside should certainly not be construed as an indication of structural inadequacy, but rather of structural idiosyncrasy. One factor which contributes to the structure of the section is the predominance of a semi-dialogical element—*semi*-dialogical because the explicit back-and-forth structure that we find in the dialogues of Plato, for instance, is often submerged in Schoenberg's text. The chapter's first four paragraphs provide an example. In the first, he presents his own case in the form of a paradox:

Harmony, its theory, its pedagogy, is concerned with non-harmonic tones! But non-harmonic matters have as little

¹I will confine my discussion, as much as possible, to the introductory section of the seventeenth chapter, since the change in tone, manner of presentation, etc., between the opening section and the pedagogical section serves to set the introduction off as something like a chapter unto itself. Henceforth, then, all terms such as “the chapter,” or “Chapter 17,” or any such references to the chapter that deals with non-harmonic tones, should be taken to refer to the introductory pages of the chapter, pp. 309-31 of the Carter translation: Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, trans. Roy E. Carter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

place in a textbook of harmony as do non-medical matters in a textbook of medicine.²

In the next paragraph, the opposition's case is introduced by Schoenberg himself, with the formula, "[es] soll sein . . ." ("it is said to be . . .," or, "it claims to be . . ."); and in the following two paragraphs, he simply reiterates the exchange. Schoenberg restates his case, eliminating the paradoxical element, and again speaks for the opposition with the same formula ("es soll sein . . .").

The next several paragraphs maintain this exchange in a slightly modified form. Schoenberg continues to speak for the opposition, but the formula from the previous paragraphs is dropped, and in its place we find other phrases indicating a mock-serious consideration of the other's views. For instance, after providing a concise statement of the opponent's case, he adds a curt "There you have it!"³ After a short interval during which he turns the opposition's evidence against itself, a further and more subtle instance of this kind of ventriloquism occurs:

Thus it is most unclear what such a chord might be in reality, since the faculty for producing coherence, for evoking progressions, is given as a possibility of our technique rather than of the nature of the chord itself.⁴

²*Theory of Harmony*, 309. "Die Harmonielehre, die Lehre von den Harmonien, befaßt sich mit harmoniefremden Tönen! Harmoniefremden Angelegenheiten gehören doch so wenig in ein Lehrbuch der Harmonie wie medezinfremde . . . in ein Lehrbuch der Medezin." Arnold Schoenberg, *Harmonielehre* (Austria: Universal edition, 1922), 372.

³The German has the much more curt (kurz?) "Also!". See *Harmonielehre*, 376; *Theory of Harmony*, 312.

⁴*Theory of Harmony*, 312. "Es ist also höchst unklar, was eigentlich in Wirklichkeit ein solcher Akkord sein soll, da die zusammenhangbildende Fähigkeit, Folgen zu provozieren, sich eher als eine Möglichkeit unserer Technik als seines Wesens darstellt . . ." *Harmonielehre*, 377.

It is as if the author is speaking with two voices, as if he is expressing his own doubts from within the other's position.

The ensuing section drops the back-and-forth strategy used hitherto and focuses upon aspects that might distinguish what is a chord from what is not; namely: (1) the historical development of the system; (2) the treatment of the structures as they are found in the literature; and (3) the influence of the graphic representation of the structures.⁵ Following this, Schoenberg confines himself to stating his own case in rather traditional fashion, at least for a time.

The semi-dialogical element returns, however, when the question of beauty arises:

But now comes an objection capable of knocking down everything I have established: namely, 'such harmonies are not beautiful.' Yes, unfortunately, it is true; they are not beautiful. The unhappy truth is that the great masters themselves have not shied away from writing passages of which the least among aestheticians can so easily declare: They are not beautiful.⁶

This ironic concession achieves its effect in much the same way as did a previously mentioned section in which Schoenberg states his case from within his opponent's territory, so to speak.

The foregoing discussion of some rhetorical gestures serves to introduce a comparison of this chapter to the genre of diatribe. Stanley Stowers aptly summarizes the scholarship on the subject in the first

⁵*Harmonielehre*, 377; *Theory of Harmony*, 313-17.

⁶*Theory of Harmony*, 323-24. "Aber nun wird mir ein Einwand gemacht, der imstande ist, alles zu schlagen, was ich bisher nachgewiesen habe; nämlich, 'derartige Zusammenklänge sind nicht schön.' Und da muß ich sagen: ja, leider, das ist wahr, sie sind nicht schön. Das ist ja Traurige an der Sache, daß selbst die großen Meister sich nicht gescheut haben, Stellen zu schreiben, von denen der kleinste Ästhetiker so leicht behaupten kann, daß sie nicht schön sind." *Harmonielehre*, 391.

chapter of his dissertation,⁷ and since I intend only to draw parallels, I will not rehearse all of the characteristics of the genre.

One striking parallel between the diatribe and Chapter 17 of Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre* is in the area of style and diction. Both the diatribe and Schoenberg's text are characterized by the frequent use of paratactic construction (the omission of traditional connectives), and the stringing together of short, conversational sentences⁸ as we find in the following section:

But what then can we do with the g#? How is that to find a place in the system? As if the system had to be built up by thirds alone! Why not by fifths, which are indeed more immediate than thirds? Why built 'up' in the first place? Perhaps sounds, too, have three dimensions, perhaps even more! All right!⁹

In the diatribe, these features served to make a stronger impression on an audience, perhaps through enhanced vividness. Shock value is also a possible motive for such phraseology: an audience might concentrate on a speaker's artistic use of the language, but use of parataxis and common speech might encourage more attention to the content of what is said.¹⁰

Another factor that contributes to vividness, a factor common to the diatribe and *Harmonielehre*, is the use of audience contact. The

⁷Stanley Kent Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans*, SBL Dissertation Series no. 57, series editor William Baird (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 7-78.

⁸Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter*, 21.

⁹*Theory of Harmony*, 321. "Was ist aber erst mit dem gis? Wie ist das im System unterzubringen? Als ob das System just auf Terzen aufgebaut sein müßte! Warum nicht auf Quinten, die ja näher liegen als Terzen? Warum überhaupt "auf"gebaut? Vielleicht haben die Klänge auch drei Dimensionen, vielleicht sogar mehr! Aber Gut!" *Harmonielehre*, 388.

¹⁰Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter*, 21.

audience may be sympathetic, or it may be hostile, as in the section which follows the preceding quotation:

‘I don’t know what to do with it’ –that doesn’t bother me. You simply have to admit it! . . . Confess: ‘because I don’t know what to do with it!’ Then we shall be good friends. But the pretense must stop.¹¹

Sometimes, this *topos* takes the form of questions or statements from an imaginary interlocutor, as in the earlier quotation dealing with the question of beauty, or in a later passage dealing with passing tones.¹² The purpose of this device seems to be to encourage audience participation, if not in a literal sense, at least in the sense of a close following of the speaker’s argument.¹³

Finally, the dialogical element forms the strongest parallel between this text and the diatribe. As stated before, there are several long sections in the form of (sometimes partially submerged) dialogues between Schoenberg and his opponent. This similarity helps to account for the problems in relating the structure of the discourse to more traditional, easily outlined forms. The back-and-forth structure of some parts of the text parallels the means by which the diatribe’s structure unfolds; the logic of each section does not proceed step-by-step in hierarchical fashion, but by question and answer, statement and reply.¹⁴ Thus, the sections of Chapter 17 that appear to interrupt any kind of

¹¹*Theory of Harmony*, 321. “Mit dem ich nichts Rechtes anzufangen weiß, meinestwegen. Das muß du gestehen! . . . Bekenne, ‘weil ich nichts Rechtes damit anzufangen weiß!’ dann wollte wir gute Freunde sein. Aber die Anmaßung muß aufhören.” *Harmonielehre*, 389.

¹²In this last example, the exchange employs the formula, “Man wird entwenden . . . Ich sage . . .” (“Somebody will object . . . I shall reply . . .”); *Harmonielehre*, 390; *Theory of Harmony*, 322. This closely resembles some formulas which appear in the diatribe (see Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul’s Letter*, 23).

¹³Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul’s Letter*, 21.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

systematic argument and break the flow of the discourse may actually be regarded as interruptions by a fictitious—in the sense of not actually present—opponent.

If the diatribe was a didactic form in the Socratic tradition, as Stowers believes, then our understanding of Schoenberg's Chapter 17 may benefit from the comparison. The reason for his using elements of this form may indeed have been “not simply to impart knowledge, but to transform the students, to point out error and to cure it,”¹⁵ and the demeaning references to the opposition are “not an aspect of real inquiry, but an attempt to expose specific errors in thought . . . so that the student can be led to another doctrine of life.”¹⁶

Problems of Expository Language

But what place does anything that is not either in the spirit of straightforward description or “real inquiry” have in a technical treatise on harmony? Actually, this question betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of what actually goes on in a harmony book—or indeed in the technical literature of any discipline—and the hinge on which this misunderstanding turns is the mostly illusory distinction between demonstration and persuasion.

Stanley Fish has observed that, in order for the activity of demonstration to exist, we must have access to a body of facts that exists independently of interpretation of those facts.¹⁷ Demonstration thus means presenting the facts in an orderly fashion so as to confirm or refute a theory, with the concomitant assumptions of disinterestedness, purity of motive and freedom from bias on the part of the demonstrator. Demonstration defines knowledge, like the facts it observes and describes, as being independent and unmediated by

¹⁵Ibid., 76.

¹⁶Ibid., 77.

¹⁷Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 365.

point of view.¹⁸ It also seems to require, if not a *tabula rasa* for an audience, at least the same freedom from preconceptions on the part of those to whom something is demonstrated. Furthermore, true demonstration requires the use of a language which is also free from preconceptions, presumably after the fashion of mathematics, with its recourse to terms and operators which require only manipulation, not interpretation.

The common idea of persuasion is the use of language to swing opinion. Not present in this definition is the constraint placed upon demonstration, that facts are simply to be exhibited and allowed to speak for themselves. Also absent is the assumption, again present in demonstration, that truth is the goal. Persuasion is allowed the luxury of twisting facts in whatever way the persuader prefers, a state reflected in Strepsiades' lines, "So teach him both kinds of logic: the better, such as it is, and the worse, which can defeat the better with improper methods; or at least by all means teach him the worse kind." (Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, lines 882-885).¹⁹ Persuasion is thus generally regarded as tainted, characterized by manipulation of facts through the manipulation of language.

Now the question arises: do we ever have access to a body of facts in such a way as is assumed in the definition of demonstration? More importantly, are we ever able to do anything with these facts without imparting our own biases into them, thereby giving them some additional content, or even depriving them of some? For demonstration to be possible, the demonstrator must be able to operate with no set of beliefs or opinions about that which is to be demonstrated. Fish has shown that it is never possible to function in this way; there is always a set of beliefs already in place.²⁰ Perhaps more to the point is the

¹⁸Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 474.

¹⁹*The Works of Aristophanes in Three Volumes*, trans. Benj. Bickley Rogers, Loeb Classical Library (London: Wm. Heinemann, 1927), 344. I have used my own translation in order to clarify what is obscured by the versification in Rogers' translation.

²⁰Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 365.

recognition that, in any discipline, the terms we use in our theoretical explanations to describe *why* are only distinguished from the terms we use to describe *what* by the way we think about them.²¹ We never have recourse to a “neutral observation language,”²² an unbiased means of simple description, since “description can occur only within a stipulative understanding of what there is to be described, an understanding that will produce the object of its attention.”²³ Thus the question of the difference between observation and theory, between demonstration and persuasion, turns out simply to be a question of what we believe we are doing. It turns out that in either case we are manipulating interpretations rather than facts.

The question posed at the beginning of this section, the question of what place a chapter like Schoenberg's Chapter 17 has in a book on harmonic theory, now shows itself to be the wrong question. The question should rather be: Why doesn't this sort of discourse appear more often in such texts? The answer would seem to be that authors may not be aware of the intensely rhetorical nature of their own texts. Perhaps they believe their task is to demonstrate rather than to persuade, hence the prevailing clinical tone of many works in music theory.

Schoenberg's Musical Examples

²¹Paul K. Feyerabend, “Introduction to vols. 1 and 2,” *Realism, Rationalism and Scientific Method: Philosophical Papers, Vol. I* (Cambridge: University Press, 1981), x, n3. See also Feyerabend, “Consolations for the Specialist,” in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), 224-25.

²²A term used by Thomas Kuhn in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University Press, 1970), 125.

²³Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 353.

A significant component of any attempt at persuasion is the support adduced for the argument. In the part of Chapter 17 in which the question of beauty is addressed, two excerpts—one from the music of J. S. Bach, one from the music of Mozart—serve to illustrate Schoenberg's points. The first, Example 232 from *Harmonielehre*, is taken from mm. 14, 41 and 43 of Bach's Motet No. 5, *Komm, Jesu, komm* (misdocumented in the text, according to Carter²⁴):

Example 1. Schoenberg's Example 232 from *Harmonielehre*

Bach, Motets.

Arnold Schoenberg. *Theory of Harmony*. Ed. and trans. Roy Carter. Copyright (c) 1978 Faber and Faber. Used by permission.

The portion of the text in which this example is situated is one of the most heavily ironic passages in what is already an ironic chapter. In addition to the comments quoted above, Schoenberg claims to have been troubled by the fact that even the greatest composers have written ugly chords such as these; there is an implicit reprimand of Bach for disregarding his education, using his imagination and putting himself above the theorists by producing such sounds.²⁵

Schoenberg later quotes Bach's music in his Example 234, this time in the larger context of three full measures from the motet, and here the tone of the surrounding text is not quite so ironic. His

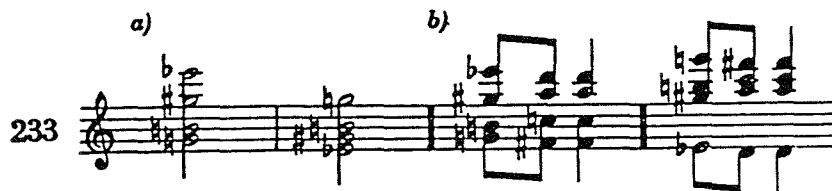
²⁴*Theory of Harmony*, 327, n1.

²⁵*Harmonielehre*, 392; *Theory of Harmony*, 324.

requotation guards against the hostile reader's forgetting the points he began to make when he first made the quotation, and it also enables the emphasis of further points concerning the irrelevance of the passing origin of the sounds. He concludes that Bach must have considered the sounds beautiful, since he could have avoided the sounds if he had wanted to. At the very least, they will not be considered as musical shortcomings on the basis of their sound.²⁶

In his Example 233, Schoenberg refers to two versions of a chord from the development section of the first movement of Mozart's Symphony No. 40:

Example 2. Schoenberg's Example 233 from *Harmonielehre*



Arnold Schoenberg. *Theory of Harmony*. Ed. and trans. Roy Carter. Copyright (c) 1978 Faber and Faber. Used by permission.

Again, the surrounding text is ironic (but less so than in the case of the Bach example, discussed above), and contains references to the opinion of the theorists that, “with his talent, such writing really wasn’t necessary.”²⁷ I shall return to the matter of this necessity momentarily.

Several questions pertaining to the use of such examples arise, the first being that of the propriety of conceiving of these musical entities as chords and citing them as such. What is behind this question is the idea of the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of music, and which

²⁶*Harmonielehre*, 396-97; *Theory of Harmony*, 327-28.

²⁷*Theory of Harmony*, 325. “. . . was er bei seinem Talent ja wirklich nicht nötig hätte.” *Harmonielehre*, 393.

of these dimensions should receive priority. It seems that Schoenberg preferred the priority of the vertical, at least for the purposes at hand in this chapter of *Harmonielehre*. Even though he often speaks of the mutual influence of harmony and melody,²⁸ we still find references to “mere voice-leading, which might be, to a limited extent, a secondary task of harmony teaching.”²⁹ Bearing his attitude in mind, we might well ask whether it is appropriate to quote these phenomena as chords, since citation in this form ignores the contrapuntal origins and dependent natures of the sonorities. Schoenberg thinks to exonerate himself from this charge by giving us a “context” of three measures in the Bach example and one-half measure in the Mozart. This does not change the accompanying citations of the sonorities with equalized voices, however. In the Bach quotation (such as it is), the chords are given the value of a quarter note, but in the score, some of the notes are given longer values while others indeed have the quarter-note value (see Example 1 above). On the other hand, the Mozart example presents an appoggiatura of an eighth-note’s duration inflated to the value of a half note (see Example 2). These citations *clearly* ignore important contrapuntal aspects of the “chords” they supposedly cite; some of the tones in the Bach example are *plainly* of greater weight than others, and the notes of the appoggiatura in the Mozart example are *obviously* dependent on the notes of the sonority which they precede. Thus, in putting the notes of these passages in this equalized form, has not Schoenberg effectively purged them of any reason for existence?

The problem with the foregoing discussion is that it ignores an important aspect of Schoenberg’s thought, and it is here that I return to the idea of musical necessity. It appears that he thinks of voice leading in a way that resembles the description of motion in Zeno’s paradox of the arrow.³⁰ That is, in order for an object to be in motion, it must at

²⁸For example, see *Harmonielehre*, 27ff; *Theory of Harmony*, 26ff.

²⁹“[denn daraus lernt er] bloß Stimmführung, was, in beschränktem Maße, eine Nebenaufgabe der Harmonielehre sein könnte.” *Harmonielehre*, 9.

³⁰Aristotle, *Physics*, VI, 9, 30.

any instant be in a particular spot. Where it is now depends on where it was a moment ago, and where it will be a moment from now depends on where it is at this moment. The resemblance of Schoenberg's opinions on voice leading can be seen in the following excerpt from Chapter 17:

We can dismiss as accidental the fact that such and such a man was passing below when a tile fell from the roof (although even that is not necessarily accidental, but can be predetermined). However, we can no longer dismiss as accidental the fact that he who is passing just at the decisive moment is the one hit by the tile; for if the tile falls (perhaps by chance), then it is no longer by chance, it is rather entirely in conformity with law that he will be hit, and no one can expect it to be otherwise. Hence the cooperation of two chance occurrences can produce something completely predictable, completely in conformity with law. Now we should consider yet another point: that the tile fell is accidental only, if at all, relative to the misfortune it produced. But not in itself. For its falling was the necessary consequence of two causes: on the one hand, the carelessness of the person who should have made it secure, and on the other, the law of gravity. Moreover, the fact that the man was passing below is no accident: he had to go this way for some reason; and, since he was walking at a certain tempo, he who previously was so far away from the scene of the future misfortune had to be there just at the decisive moment.³¹

Here we have an expression, in the form of an extended metaphor, of Schoenberg's belief in the contingent nature of each musical moment. Every musical action a composer takes will have consequences; what happens in moment y depends on what happened in moment x, just as

³¹ *Theory of Harmony*, 310. I will not quote the German, since I am here dealing with the thought contained in the text rather than the manner of the thought's expression.

moment *y* helps predetermine what will happen in moment *z*. Each “independent” voice moves from point to point; some points are more important than others, and some less important points precede, hence determine, the more important (as in the Mozart example). Many voices sounding together may produce a sound that is the result of more and less important points, and the resulting sound may be more or less important than the sounds which precede or follow it. The composite sound is the sum of all of these determinate and determining points, these “independently moving voices.” But what is independent (of the other voices) has been shown to be dependent (on its own previous activity). Thus Schoenberg has provided a virtual deconstruction of the concept of independent voices. From such a point of view, it is not at all against musical sense to cite portions of music in the way he does.

A related question—perhaps a less practical one—is what bearing the notion of musical context has on citation. Examination of this question easily brushes up against the further question of the similarity of musical context to literary context, or, to put it in Derridean terms, the musical mark to the grammatological mark. It is worth considering whether the musical mark/work “cuts itself off from [the sender/composer] and continues to produce effects independently of his presence and of the present actuality of his intentions.”³² Often this appears to be the case; it may well always be the case. We might posit a continuum of effects, some closer to the composer’s intention (such as the performer’s interpretation of a work—a French pianist performing Moussorgsky so that it sounds like French music), and some farther from it (using a Bach two-part invention to help sell cars). Analytical articles dealing with a musical work are probably not part of the composer’s intention, nor is inclusion of musical excerpts in a treatise on harmony. It nevertheless is the case that the moment from the Bach motet quoted in Example 1 prompted aspects of a section of Schoenberg’s text, just as did the two eighth notes from Mozart’s fortieth symphony prompt aspects of a section. The kind of use to which these excerpts are put in *Harmonielehre* may have been farther

³² Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” *Glyph* 1 (1977): 177.

than the farthest thing from their minds, but we still have Bach and Mozart speaking to us from within the Schoenberg text.

But there may be a reciprocal effect: the effect of the quotation on the music. For example, I will never again listen to the development section of Mozart's fortieth without thinking of the treatment those two chords receive in *Harmonielehre*. I will make every effort to hear the two appoggiatura chords that Schoenberg cites in the way that he cites them: as minor-major seventh chords; and I will do this no matter how I feel about the appropriateness of the citation. I will listen to this piece in this special way, in spite of my knowledge that every other work in the Köchel catalogue has similar sonorities to which I will not attach a similar significance. After all, the fortieth has the chord that appeared in Schoenberg's book!

This effect of citation on music is similar to a related phenomenon in literary studies:

A literary text is a texture of words, its threads and filaments reaching into the pre-existing warp and woof of the language. The critic adds his weaving to the Penelope's web of the text, or unravels it so that its structuring threads may be laid bare, or reweaves it, or traces out one thread in the text to reveal the design it inscribes, or cuts the whole cloth to one shape or another. In some way the critic necessarily does violence of [sic] the text in the act of understanding it or of interpreting it. There is no innocent reading, no reading which leaves the work exactly as it is.³³

To bring this closer to the subject at hand, there is no way to cite a musical example which does not in some way "violate" the original. Whether or not we take the view that such examples, divorced from their original context (whatever that may mean), continue ever thereafter to hurtle through the universe like comets and collide with

³³J. Hillis Miller, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard, 1970), viii.

new contexts – this study, possibly – it may indeed have been impossible for Schoenberg to quote Mozart and Bach in any way that left the works exactly as they were.

Just as the questions which prompted this article formed the basis for the questions which are actually addressed, I hope that the questions here addressed will produce more, and better, questions. The matter of expository language, for instance, could form the basis for a study of the history of literary style in the genre of the harmony treatise. The matter of musical excerpt quotation could form the basis for a study of the metaphysics of presence in music. I hope for a much more direct result, too, however: to promote a greater appreciation for Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre* from a literary standpoint. As a technical treatise it will always be peculiar; for one reason or another, it may not always be very useful for the study of harmony. But as a work of literature it deserves much more attention than I can give it here, and as a means of understanding Schoenberg's thought, it is indispensable.