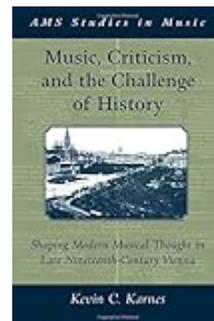




**Kevin C. Karnes.** *Music, Criticism, and the Challenge of History: Shaping Modern Musical Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century Vienna.* AMS Studies in Music Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. xiii + 214 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-536866-6.



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## Fin-de-siècle Vienna and the Future Course of Musicology

For the past century and a half since its founding, the field of musicology has been preoccupied with the question of objectivity—specifically, whether it is desirable or even possible to construct a discourse on music that is as objective and, by extension, as rigorous as the natural sciences. This question, however, has not always occupied the field. A mere two hundred years ago, when the larger arguments over aesthetics fell under the rubric of philosophy, the interpretation of specific musical works was a highly subjective enterprise, as evidenced by the accounts of musical bliss penned by Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck. By the early nineteenth century, under the influence of romantic idealism, a kind of music criticism had emerged that was inherently subjective, with E. T. A. Hoffmann’s florid narrative review of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony (published in 1810) serving as a prime example, and the rise of the popular press soon gave it a broad platform. But as positivist ideologies began to flourish in German-speaking Europe, academic dissatisfaction with the methods of popular musical criticism grew. By the 1850s, scholars in Leipzig and

Berlin began calling for a strictly positivist and objective approach toward the study of the arts and aesthetics—including a new kind of “music science” that focuses on a musical work’s salient features and not its emotional impact.

This is the basis for the specific “challenge” referenced in the title of Kevin C. Karnes’s new book on the early development of musicological thought, *Music, Criticism, and the Challenge of History*. In it, Karnes examines the contributions of three influential proto-musicologists—Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904), Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935), and Guido Adler (1855-1941)—against the backdrop of the turn-of-the-century Viennese intellectual milieu. Though each of these prolific authors has been subject to previous scholarship, Karnes distinguishes himself by focusing entirely on their lesser-known writings from the 1870s through the 1890s, which give personal insights into their own conceptions of musicology while the discipline was still in flux. More specifically, Karnes examines how their musicological writings from that era were influenced by—or responded

to—the positivist epistemologies of the times. Karnes’s examination reveals how, contrary to their reputations, each of these three authors struggled to reconcile the demands of objectivity with their own personal and professional experiences with music.

In his brief introduction, Karnes lays out the intellectual terrain of late nineteenth-century positivism, and borrows Allan Janik’s recent concept of “critical modernism” to illustrate how the three historical figures under discussion “were ambivalent and conflicted with regard to contemporary calls to transform the study of music into a science,” and how they were instead “engaged in a lively search for alternative futures for their discipline” (p. 16). The main body of the book is cast in three sections, with each of the three men under discussion receiving two chapters. The first section focuses on Hanslick, who is perhaps the best known of the three for his prolific career as a music critic for *Die Presse* and, later, *Die Neue Freie Presse*. But Hanslick did not start out as a full-time music critic; early in his career, he was a civil servant in the Imperial Ministries of Finance and Education. This was during the immediate post-1849 period, when the ministry, under Leo von Thun-Hohenstein, was actively reshaping the monarchy’s school system, and Karnes posits that Hanslick used his insider knowledge of the goals and methodological sympathies of the ministry to his own advantage. Following the successful appointment of Rudolf Eitelberger as the University of Vienna’s first art history professor, Karnes maintains that Hanslick deliberately reoriented his own methodological stance away from his earlier subjective idealism and toward a more objective positivist music science. This reorientation paid off: Hanslick received his appointment as docent in 1856, and immediately set about heavily revising his 1854 anti-Wagnerian aesthetics treatise *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* to remove his more subjective utterances.

In the revised second edition of *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, Hanslick emphasized the significance of formalism in music over any discussions of emotional or narrative content. This was a position that resonated within the whole positivist academia, and the acclaim *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* received was ultimately what led to Hanslick’s appointment as the University of Vienna’s first Professor of the History and Aesthetic of Music in 1870. But, as often happens, once Hanslick received tenure, his scholarly interests and his methodological purity began to stray. His subsequent books, from *Geschichte des Konzertwesens in Wien* (1869) to his autobiography *Aus meinem Leben* (1895), interpolate his

reams of subjective music criticism in an effort to narrate what Karnes calls a kind of “living history” of the Viennese concert-going experience over the course of his own lifetime. Karnes asserts that these late books are evidence of Hanslick’s trajectory away from his earlier position that the methods of musicology should mirror those of the natural sciences and—much to the dismay of his positivist colleagues—toward a Hegelian cultural-based approach to music scholarship. This is certainly borne out by the texts; *Geschichte des Konzertwesens in Wien* and its sequel *Aus dem Concert-Saal* (1870) have precious little of the objective and text-based scholarship of *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*. In fact, by showing how Hanslick might have adopted positivist principles out of largely careerist motives only to abandon them again as soon as he received tenure, Karnes seems to be suggesting that Hanslick’s field-defining interest in positivist musicology was actually an intellectual sham—or, at the very least, a passing phase. Such an assertion would have dire—and tantalizing—implications, given academic musicology’s wholehearted embrace of positivism for most of the intervening century.

Karnes’s next subject, Schenker, is especially known today for the style of musical analysis that bears his name, which can best be described as a textual method for reducing a piece of music to its fundamental elements in order to enable direct, qualitative structural comparisons with other works. Schenker’s posthumous reputation for cold analysis turns out to be undeserved; as Karnes observes, Schenker’s analytical methods were always based on criticism, which, he held, “must embrace subjective impression, indulge the hermeneutic impulse, and even probe the depths of the creative mind in his attempts to elucidate the effectiveness and worth of the artworks he considers” (pp. 107-108). Yet while he believed in the subjective nature of the creative impulse, Schenker also wanted to find an objective method for assessing the value of musical works independently from the opinions of music critics—who, after all, could be swayed by such trends as the prevailing Wagnerism of his own time. Thus, in his two dedicated chapters, Karnes focuses on both the hermeneutic and empirical aspects of Schenker’s earlier writings, from the 1880s though the 1900s. The end result is a muddled picture of a confused critic, unwilling to commit to empiricism fully because of its inability to account for the metaphysical significance of a masterwork, yet still using textual analysis to describe music in isolation from both the composer’s intent and the listener’s experience. But perhaps this muddled picture is the most realistic; as Karnes reminds us, since the

analysis on which Schenker's legacy is built is as much the product of Schenker's students as the man himself, and its empirical aspirations have a great deal to do with Karnes's final study subject.

Adler—no relation to Victor—is perhaps the least known of these three individuals, but his legacy looms the largest within the field of musicology. He was one of Hanslick's students in Vienna, and in 1898, he became Hanslick's successor at the university when the faculty was looking for someone with a more solid faith in positivism. Adler's positivist bona fides were first established with his 1885 essay "Umfang, Methode und Ziele der Musikwissenschaft," which is considered to be one of the founding texts of the discipline. Answering the challenge of the Berlin-based musicologist Philipp Spitta, Adler detailed how the methods of musicology and the natural sciences could successfully mirror one another. An academic musicologist who established an elaborate scientific program for his own discipline, and who spent much of his career collecting and editing the musical masterworks of the past would seem to be the poster child for positivist objectivity, yet Karnes shows that even Adler himself should not be painted in black and white. Unlike Hanslick and Schenker—who, Karnes maintains, rejected empiricism because of its failure to account fully for either the experience of the listener or the aesthetic significance of a work, respectively—Karnes's Adler merely suffered from ordinary self-doubt. At the same time that he was forming his positivist agenda, however, Adler was also associated with Siegfried Lipiner's circle, and Karnes maintains that he absorbed elements of its Nietzschean antiscientific outlook. Yet this was just a minor bump in the road; in the aftermath of World War I, Adler's scientific *Musikwissenschaft* became the dominant model, and exerted a great deal of influence for decades to come.

Throughout his book, Karnes does an admirable job of presenting the wide variety of nineteenth-century philosophical undercurrents that might have influenced these three authors. The book is very well researched, and I would single out Karnes's broad-ranging choice of secondary sources for particular praise. Yet this book's relevance is not limited to the nineteenth century, and the themes explored here should be intimately familiar to any musicologist today. Even Karnes's primary source quotations seem as though they were chosen as much for their relevance to the epistemological debates that are currently ongoing within musicological circles as for their elucidation of the past. These quotations also help to humanize the figures under discussion and allow us to sympathize with the confusion they must have felt while

epistemologies were in flux. One such quote, included as a contemporary viewpoint questioning the value of the era's faith in science, has the composer Richard Wagner bemoaning the conflicting advice of his doctors on the medical benefits of sleeping with the window open in a familiarly exasperated way. Hanslick's bending of research methodologies to suit a political funding agenda should resonate with a modern reader as well.

This resonance is more than superficial, however; as Karnes notes in his conclusion, this same quarrel between positivist objectivity and critical subjectivity has resurfaced within the field of musicology in recent years. These debates had been settled in favor of objectivity for much of the twentieth century—reflecting Adler's influence on the discipline—only to be reopened and reargued with the advent of what is increasingly misnamed New Musicology in the 1980s. They have been simmering ever since, with both the critical and analytical sides claiming historical legitimacy. Though Karnes does not strike a resounding blow in favor of either modern camp, drawing a parallel between two eras of disciplinary uncertainty is very clearly the book's secondary intent. Indeed, Karnes seems to be asking, if three of the discipline's titans had such trouble reconciling their musicological methodologies with the demands of objectivity, then what chance can the rest of us have? Given the current state of research on the nineteenth-century intellectual context of the genesis of *Musikwissenschaft*, Karnes's book is a welcome addition to the discipline's methodological discourse—one that should be required reading for first-year musicology graduate students.

Yet while Hanslick, Schenker, and Adler might loom large within the field of musicology, their relevance to broader history is very limited. And this is the main drawback to this otherwise excellent book: the specificity of the subject matter will give it a decidedly niche readership. The text itself should be accessible to scholars from other fields, although Karnes assumes quite a bit of knowledge on the part of the reader regarding the three men under discussion as well as the general history of the musicological discipline into which they fit—including much of the basic orientation included in this review. A reader hoping to learn about Hanslick, Schenker, or Adler for the first time will want to do some background reading before tackling this book. Yet there are no surprises on the historical front: historians working on the period will likely be familiar with all of the secondary sources that Karnes brings to bear. The book's primary sources, which Karnes has translated admirably, are restricted to the more obscure writings by the three main

figures, and the excerpts presented will be of little use to anyone without a vested interest in the underpinnings of musicological methodology. Ironically, for a book that seeks to contextualize three prominent musicologists, the most limiting factor is the way it presents that context: Karnes goes to great lengths to catalog the intellectual factors that might have influenced Hanslick's, Adler's, and Schenker's writings, but since his main focus is on these three individuals, the larger world they all inhabited is reduced to only a few tantalizing glimpses. Other contemporaneous viewpoints, such as the studies on psychoacoustics carried out by Ernst Mach, are brought up only briefly as part of the canvas on which the intellectual portraits of the three main figures are painted. At bottom, this book is more like a biography—or rather, three partial biographies—than a true historical study. Like a composer biography, Karnes has scoured the primary

and secondary sources for environmental clues explaining the genesis of a catalog of works, but stops short of a full discussion of the role those works might have played in reshaping that environment in turn.

This limitation is a real shame, because a book exploring the linkages between the various concepts of positivism and the musical-aesthetic methodologies in flux at the end of the nineteenth century really ought to have as much to say about positivism as it does about musicology itself. With this book, Karnes has made a meaningful but entirely discipline-specific contribution to the broader discourse on aesthetic thought at the turn of the twentieth century. While it is perhaps the most significant contribution that the field of musicology can make on its own, the overarching study on positivism and aesthetics in turn-of-the-century Vienna is still waiting to be written.

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