

# ZGMTH

Zeitschrift der  
Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie

Christensen, Thomas (2003/05): The History of Music Theory. ZGMTH 1–2/2/2–3,  
143–150. <https://doi.org/10.31751/201>

© 2003/05 Thomas Christensen



Dieser Text erscheint im Open Access und ist lizenziert unter einer  
Creative Commons Namensnennung 4.0 International Lizenz.

This is an open access article licensed under a  
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

veröffentlicht / first published: 01/04/2005  
zuletzt geändert / last updated: 01/12/2008

# The History of Music Theory

Thomas Christensen

Until fairly recently, the history of music theory in the United States was a subject that lay largely in the domain of historical musicology rather than music theory. Historical texts of music theory seemed of interest less, perhaps, for any intrinsic intellectual or aesthetic value than as practical resources to aid musicologists, particularly for the decipherment, transcription or performance of early music. Given the positivistic bias of American music theory in the third quarter of the twentieth century that emphasized the development of autonomous models of analysis and theorizing, the study of historical texts of music theory was rarely given a high priority.

With the maturation of music theory as an academic discipline in American universities over the past twenty five years or so, however, there has been a virtual renaissance in the historiography of music theory among American music theorists, with a growing concern to understand the genealogy of our profession and the work we carry on. Indeed, the study of historical music theory texts can arguably be credited in a few cases with having spawned a number of original research programs (particularly so with the case of Neo-Riemannian theory). No longer simply a sub-component of musicological research to aid in the transcription of, say, Medieval mensuration or Baroque ornamentation, the study of historical music theory has come into its own as a scholarly discipline vital to understanding the origins and ontological basis of music theory as practiced today. Recent research can also be seen as an effort to bring music theory within the broader field of cultural and intellectual history.

It is of course impossible to list in this short essay—let alone to offer any summary—the vast literature on historical music theory published by Anglo-American authors in the past few decades. The following can only suggest some examples and point to resources for further bibliography.

Until recently, there was no single overview that English-speaking theorists could turn to for a history of music theory except a translation of Riemann's 1898 *Geschichte der Musiktheorie* (which was translated into English in two parts by Haggh, 1962, and Mickelsen, 1977). However, in 2002, a comprehensive history of music theory finally appeared in English: the *Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, edited by Thomas Christensen. Drawing together individual essays by 32 largely American or British scholars, "CHWMT" offers a synoptic survey of topics in Western music theory organized less chronologically than conceptually around a triad of theoretical traditions first outlined by Carl Dahlhaus: "speculative," "regulative" and "analytic." While obviously unable to

compete in either depth or breadth with the multi-volumed *Geschichte der Musiktheorie* that will be familiar to German readers (sponsored by the Berlin-based *Staatliches Institut für Musikforschung*, and still on-going after 11 volumes in print), the *Cambridge History of Western Music Theory* does contain an up-to-date and comprehensive bibliography of primary and secondary writings on music theory that readers of this essay might wish to consult on any given subject, and offer essays on a number of topics that do not appear within the volumes of the Berlin project.

The editor of this essay has also written a kind of philosophical prolegomenon detailing many of the philosophical and historiographical problems that the writing of any history of theory entails suggesting a hermeneutic solution (much of it an elaboration and response to the writings of Carl Dahlhaus) (Christensen, 1993). The same author's introduction to CHWMT (and partly reprinted in Giger and Mathiesen, 2002) picks up on this topic and attempts to explain the contents and organization of the ensuing history within this hermeneutic framework.

A still useful bibliographic contribution to the topic of historical theory, if somewhat outdated, is Damschroder and Williams, 1990, offering exhaustive listings of both primary and secondary literature on music theorists from the 16<sup>th</sup> through early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with many useful cross references. (A planned companion volume of bibliography covering earlier Renaissance and Medieval music theorists is presently being completed by Matthew Bensusala, and should be available shortly.) Finally, American scholars have contributed to the growing use of the internet to help make available scholarly editions of historical music theory texts in searchable electronic data bases. The pre-eminent such institution in America is the "Center for the History of Music Theory and Literature" at Indiana University under the leadership of Thomas J. Mathiesen. So far, "CHMTL" has made available over a hundred carefully-edited Medieval and Renaissance Latin texts available on line, and their ever-growing inventory of texts is now expanding to include theory treatises in French, Italian, and English.

For music theory of antiquity and the Middle Ages, a large number of translations and commentaries of classical texts have been produced recently in English that are of such high quality and with such elaborate scholarly apparatus, that they would be of value even to scholars fluent in Greek or Latin. Towering above all others is the work of Andrew Barker and his monumental translations and copious annotations of virtually all the most important surviving Greek texts on music theory (Barker, 1984–87). Thomas Mathiesen's general survey of Greek theoretical writings (Mathiesen, 1999) is the best single source now available for that topic. Also of value are the translations of Aristides Quintilianus (Mathiesen, 1983), Boethius (Bower, 1989), and a trio of important early Medieval treatises (Babb, 1978). (Each of these volumes, incidentally, appeared under the editorship of the late Claude Palisca of Yale University, who was one of the leading pioneers of historical music theory in the United States.) Individual studies of Medieval music theory that might be singled out for their sophisticated analysis of theoretical issues embedded within cultural and intellectual contexts are Cohen (2001), Fuller (1981), and Berger (2005).

The complex problem of mode has received extensive treatment by Harry Powers, whose monumental, panoptic entry on “Mode” in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music* remains the most thorough and authoritative study of that topic in any language, although a forthcoming study by Charles Atkinson offers a more focused discussion of mode as understood and practiced in the Middle Ages (Atkinson, forthcoming).

In the field of Renaissance music theory, there are again a large number of translations and monographs which might be recommended. Cristle Collins Judd’s book on Renaissance modal theory (Judd, 2000) is noteworthy, for among other reasons, as one of the first attempts to analyze music theory texts as a part of broader print culture. (More specifically, Judd shows how the incorporation of printed examples in a text often complicates—and even undermines—the theoretical arguments of the author by intruding aurality within a visual medium.) Peter Schubert’s study of Renaissance compositional theory also offers valuable scholarship with an innovative pedagogical aim (Schubert, 1999). And in Palisca 1994, one finds a collection of that scholar’s most famous and influential articles on a variety of topics related to Renaissance music theory. Finally of note is the valuable translation of Gaffurio’s *Theorica Musice* by Walter Kreyzig (1993), as well as individual articles by Sarah Fuller (1996) on Glarean and Harry Powers (1992) on Aron, the latter work responding to a well-known polemic between Carl Dahlhaus and Gustav Meier on the problem of reifying mode in Renaissance polyphony.

Concerning music theory of the Baroque and Classical periods, a number of excellent monographs on individual theorists have appeared, including studies of Lippius (Rivera, 1974), Rameau (Christensen, 1993), and Vogler (Grave, 1987). Aside from the biographical monograph, there are a large number of recent studies that focus more on particular theoretical issues or delimited historical periods. Among these might be singled out Penelope Gouk’s brilliant study of magic and natural science in 17<sup>th</sup>-century English music theory (Gouk, 1999), Paul Walker’s comprehensive history of fugal theory (Walker, 2000), Joel Lester’s user-friendly survey of 18<sup>th</sup>-century compositional theory (Lester, 1992), and the same author’s pioneering study tracing the emergence of the tonal (transposable) major/minor key system (Lester, 1989). This last topic was also the focus of a valuable article by Harry Powers (Powers, 1998), which he offers as a “supplement” to his famous “Mode” entry in the *New Grove*.

Issues of melodic theory and form in 18<sup>th</sup>-century theoretical thought have received considerable attention in some American literature. Notable are the writings of Stefan Eckert on Riepel (Eckert, 2000) and Robert Gjerdingen on the analysis of galant music (Gjerdingen, forthcoming), the latter drawing from a panoply of mid 18<sup>th</sup>-century theoretical sources. Leonard Ratner’s book, while somewhat outdated now (Ratner, 1980) still is of value for the historically-sensitive analysis of late 18<sup>th</sup>-century music, and it has inspired a generation of newer scholars considering the rhetoric and semiotic codes of the classical style using terminology and concepts drawn from coterminous literature.

Music theory from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries has enjoyed particular attention by Anglo-American scholars in recent decades. Arguably the first theorist to receive extensive historical treatment on these shores was Heinrich Schenker. This should not be surprising given his importance to the development of American music theory. Pre-

dictably, these first studies consisted of translations and commentary on his sophisticated analytic theory. But beginning with Slatin (1967), Morgan (1978), and Pastille (1985), closer attention was paid to the roots of Schenker's ideas, locally within the intellectual context of fin-de-siècle Vienna, and more broadly, in traditions of musical analysis and harmonic reduction. More recently, research has focused on the language and rhetoric of Schenker's writings (Keiler, 1989; Cook, 1995; and Snarrenberg, 1997), the epistemological basis of Schenkerian theory (Korsyn, 1988; and Blasius, 1996), and even the ideological aims of his publication projects (Bent, 2005). This suggests that the same kinds of cultural hermeneutics that have so characterized much Anglo-American musicological research in recent years is also being applied to texts of historical music theory. It is in this vein that one may read Jairo Moreno's recent study of the language and epistemological conceits of four major theorists—Zarlino, Descartes, Rameau, and Weber—using models drawn from Foucault's archeology of knowledge project (Moreno, 2004). Many of the individual articles of Brian Hyer and Thomas Christensen on topics of historical theory likewise attempt deeper cultural excavations of the theory texts they treat (Hyer, 1994; Christensen, 1996). Hyer's brilliant entry on "tonality" for the *New Grove Dictionary* (and reprinted in Christensen, 2002) is one of the most cogent discussions concerning the historical meaning and reification of this elusive concept.

Hugo Riemann—whose theories have enjoyed a remarkable renaissance among more formally-minded music theorists in the United States—has also received renewed attention (Harrison, 1994; Rehding, 2003). Other noteworthy monographs that might be mentioned are Lee Rothfarb's study on Ernst Kurth (Rothfarb, 1988) and Robert Wason's study on Viennese harmonic theory in the long 19<sup>th</sup>-century (Wason, 1985). Of utmost value are Ian Bent's richly-annotated translations of notable excerpts of 19<sup>th</sup>-century music analysis (Bent, 1994). These two volumes ought be read in conjunction with Bent's comprehensive survey of historical systems of analysis (Bent, 1987) which was derived from his much praised entry "Analysis" in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music*.

Much of the most innovative and interesting work in American history of music theory is not found in the monograph, but in collections of essays by multiple authors that treat a particular topic in the history of music theory. Among the most important such collections may be mentioned Judd (1998) on tonal organization in early music, Bent (1996) on "Romantic" music theory, and Clark and Rehding (2001) on the historical invocations of "nature" by music theorists. More general collections of essays related by the theme of historical music theory are found in Matthiesen (2002) and Hatch and Bernstein (1993). Special mention might be made of a small annual periodical devoted to topics of historical music theory entitled *Theoria* produced at the University of North Texas. Now in its tenth volume and under the new leadership of Frank Heidelberg, *Theoria* promises to emerge as one of the leading forums for the dissemination of historical research in music theory in the coming years.

## References

### *General histories, bibliographies, and resources*

- Bensuala, Matthew. *Music Theory from Antiquity to the Renaissance: A Bibliography and Guide*. Stuyvesant, NY. Forthcoming.
- Christensen, Thomas. 1993. "Music Theory and its Histories." In *Music Theory and the Exploration of the Past*, edited by David Bernstein and Christopher Hatch. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 23–51.
- . Ed. 2002. *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Damschroder, David, and David Russel Williams. 1990. *Music Theory From Zarlino to Schenker: A Bibliography and Guide*. Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press.
- Riemann, Hugo. 1962. *History of Music Theory, Books 1 and 2: Polyphonic Theory to the Sixteenth Century*. Trans. Raymond Hagg. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- . 1977. *Hugo Riemann's Theory of Harmony, with a Translation of Riemann's "History of Music Theory," Book 3*. Trans. William Mickelsen. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. "Center for the History of Music Theory and Literature," at Indiana University (Director, Thomas J. Mathiesen). <http://www.music.indiana.edu/chmtl>.

### *Music Theory of Antiquity and the Middle Ages*

- Atkinson, Charles. *The Critical Nexus: Tone System, Mode, and Notation in Early Medieval Music*. New York: Oxford University Press. Forthcoming.
- Babb, W. trans. 1978. *Hucbald, Guido, and John on Music: Three Medieval Treatises*. Ed. Claude Palisca. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Barker, Andrew. 1984–89. *Greek Musical Writings*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Berger, Anna Maria Busse. 2005. *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory*. California: University of California Press.
- Bower, Calvin, trans. 1989. Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius. *Fundamentals of Music*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Cohen, David. 2001. "'The Imperfect Seeks its Perfection': Harmonic Progression, Directed Motion, and Aristotelian Physics," *Music Theory Spectrum* 23/2: 139–169.
- Fuller, Sarah. 1981. "Theoretical Foundations of Early Organum Theory." *Acta Musicologica* 53: 52–84.
- Mathiesen, Thomas. 1999. *Apollo's Lyre: Greek Music and Music Theory in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- . Trans. 1983. Aristides Quintillianus. *On Music in Three Books*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

*Music Theory of the Renaissance*

- Fuller, Sarah. 1996. "Defending the Dodecachordon: Ideological Currents in Glarean's Modal Theory," *JAMS* 49: 191–224.
- Judd, Cristel Collins. 2000. *Reading Renaissance Music Theory: Hearing with the Eyes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kreyszig, Walter, ed. 1993. *The Theory of Music by Franchino Gaffurio*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Palisca, Claude. 1994. *Studies in the History of Italian Music and Music Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Powers, Harry. 1992. "Is Mode Real? Peitro Aron, the Octenary System, and Polyphony," *Basler Jahrbuch* 16: 9–53.
- Schubert, Peter. 1999. *Modal Counterpoint, Renaissance Style*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*Music Theory in the Baroque and Classical Eras*

- Christensen, Thomas. 1993. *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eckert, Stefan. 2000. "Ars Combinatoria, Dialogue Structure, and Musical Practice in Joseph Riepel's 'Anfangsgründe zur musicalischen Setzkunst.'" Ph.D. Diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook.
- Gjerdingen, Robert. *The Craft of Eighteenth-Century Court Music: A Treatise on Various Schemata Characteristic of the Galant Style*. Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate Press. Forthcoming.
- Gouk, Penelope. 1999. *Music, Science and Natural Magic in Seventeenth-Century England*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Grave, Floyd K. and Margaret G. Grave. 1987. *In Praise of Harmony: The Teachings of Abbé George Joseph Vogler*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Lester, Joel. 1992. *Compositional Theory in the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 1989. *Between Mode and Keys: German Theory 1592–1802*. Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press.
- Powers, Harry. 1998. "From Psalmody to Tonality." In *Tonal Structures in Early Music*, ed. Cristle Collins Judd. New York: Garland Press, 275–340.
- Ratner, Leonard. 1980. *Classical Music: Expression, Form, and Style*. New York: Schirmer.
- Rivera, Benito. 1974. *German Music Theory in the Early 17<sup>th</sup> Century: the Treatises of Johannes Lippius*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press.
- Walker, Paul Walker. 2000. *Theories of Fugue from the Age of Josquin to the Age of Bach*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.



*Music Theory in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*

- Bent, Ian. 1994. *Music Analysis in the Nineteenth Century*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2005. "‘That Bright New Light’: Schenker, Universal Edition, and the Origins of the Erläuterung Series, 1910–1910." *JAMS* 58/1: 69–138.
- , and William Drabkin. 1987. *Analysis*. London: Macmillan.
- Blasius, Leslie. 1996. *Schenker’s Argument and the Claims of Music Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Christensen, Thomas. 1996. "Fétis and Emerging Tonal Consciousness," in *Music Theory in the Age of Romanticism*, edited by Ian Bent. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 37–56.
- Cook, Nicholas. 1995. "Heinrich Schenker, Polemicist: A Reading of the Ninth Symphony Monograph." *Music Analysis* 14: 89–105.
- Harrison, Daniel. 1994. *Harmonic Function in Chromatic Music: A Renewed Dualist Theory and an Account of its Precedents*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hyer, Brian. 1994. "‘Sighing Branches’: Prosopopoeia in Rameau’s ‘Pigmalion.’" *Music Analysis* 13/1: 7–50.
- Keiler, Allen. 1989. "The Origins of Schenker’s Thought: How Man is Musical." *Journal of Music Theory* 33: 273–298.
- Korsyn, Kevin. 1988. "Schenker and Kantian Epistemology." *Theoria* 3: 1–58.
- Moreno, Jairo. 2004. *Musical Representations, Subjects, and Objects: The Construction of Musical Thought in Zarlino, Descartes, Rameau and Weber*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Morgan, Robert. 1978. "Schenker and the Theoretical Tradition: The Concept of Musical Reduction." *CMS* 18/1: 72–96.
- Pastille, William. 1985. "Ursatz: The Musical Philosophy of Heinrich Schenker." Ph.D. Diss. Cornell University.
- Rehding, Alexander. 2003. *Hugo Riemann and the Birth of Modern Musical Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rothfarb, Lee. 1988. *Ernst Kurth as Theorist and Analyst*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Slatin, Sonia. 1967. "The Theories of Henrich Schenker in Perspective." Ph.D. Diss. Columbia University.
- Snarrenberg, Robert. 1997. *Schenker’s Interpretive Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wason, Robert. 1985. *Viennese Harmonic Theory from Albrechtsberger to Schenker and Schoenberg*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press.



*Selected Thematic Volumes on the History of Music Theory*

- Bent, Ian, ed. 1996. *Music Theory in the Age of Romanticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, Suzannah, and Alexander Rehding, eds. 2001. *Music Theory and Natural Order from the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Collins Judd, Cristle, ed. 1998. *Tonal Structures in Early Music*. New York: Garland.
- Giger, Andreas and Thomas Mathiesen, eds. 2002. *Music in the Mirror: Reflections on the History of Music Theory and Literature for the Twenty-First Century*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.
- Hatch, Christopher and David Bernstein, eds. 1993. *Music Theory and The Exploration of the Past*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.