

Arnold Schoenberg, *Harmonielehre* (1911)

Much has been made of the fact that Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) published his *Harmonielehre*, devoted mainly to tonal writing, just after having composed the iconic works of his move to atonality. The writing of this voluminous treatise seems to have answered to financial considerations in part; around 1911, Schoenberg was looking for orchestration work, trying to promote his paintings, and seeking to convert his pedagogical success into a post at the Vienna Conservatoire. But it also represented just one further extension of his already burgeoning literary activity, along with the libretto for his drama *Die glückliche Hand*, [a series of aphorisms](#) published the same year, and his first articles for the Viennese musical press. In all of these writings, Schoenberg tried to cultivate an incisive and idiosyncratic style, directly inspired by Karl Kraus and his satirical review *Die Fackel*.

In undertaking a *Harmonielehre*, Schoenberg was coming up against a tradition little familiar to him. Indeed, in the text itself he flaunts his self-education and admits to a no more than casual acquaintance with his few cited sources: “I am ignorant of all these sources and have to depend on a single source: thinking” (p. 431 in the Roy Carter’s 1978 English translation of the 1922 edition). The book also has a certain generic ambiguity, inherent in the term *Lehre* (both teaching and that which is taught) but lost in the English title *Theory of Harmony* or even *Harmony Treatise*. On the one hand, this is a manual for apprentice composers wanting to train themselves in tonal harmony. Theoretical explications therefore alternate with exercises in practical application (in the voicing of triads in four parts, traditional chorale harmonisation, etc.); this course of teaching concludes with altered chords and exceptional resolutions. The final part of the book, however, opens with a startling piece of advice: “I do not recommend to the pupil that he use modern techniques” (413). Here Schoenberg wants to advance an expanded conception of harmony that, without discrediting “the old theory”, accepts that “Any simultaneous combination of sounds, any progression is possible” (70). Hence his repeated denunciation of “aesthetics”, by which he means a body of judgements of taste erected into a system of rules, putatively universal but really artisanal: the masterpieces continually flout them, and the countless “exceptions” betray their arbitrariness.

The various chapters contain lengthy discourses, and many digressions, expounding some of Schoenberg’s fundamental theoretical tenets: harmony as a balance of opposing forces (dominant and subdominant); “the distinction between [consonance and dissonance] is only a matter of degree, not of kind” (21 – Schoenberg would often refer to this passage in later writings); the “futuristic fantasy” of *Klangfarbenmelodie* (421). The tone is often polemical, with attacks on the prejudice against parallel fifth and octaves, for example, and the notion of the non-harmonic tone: “Either there is no such thing as non-harmonic tones, or they are

not non-harmonic” (309). Schoenberg’s contemporaneous expressionism is also evident when he opposes genius to talent and skill, enjoins the artist to be indifferent to beauty, and makes the true creator a slave of imperious necessity.

Schoenberg’s already controversial reputation did much to draw attention to his book, which polarised critics along the same lines as his music: some dwelled on the amateurism of his theory, others on its philosophical depth. While indeed used as a teaching manual, notably by Alban Berg with his own students, the *Harmonielehre* also served as a manifesto; notably, Schoenberg had it sent to Wassily Kandinsky in response to the latter’s *Du spirituel dans l’art*. The three subsequent editions that appeared within the author’s lifetime (1919, 1922, 1949) testify to its commercial success. The second was a “revised and expanded” edition; besides some light restructuring and rewording, it includes a certain number of additions, mainly in the form of footnotes. Among these are Schoenberg’s famous rejection of the term “atonal” (432), which had come into use to describe his music, and his convoluted interpretation of the reparations imposed on the Central Powers by the Versailles treaty (425). As for its diffusion outside of the German-speaking areas, translations were slow to follow; in 1932, Schoenberg complained to his publisher that the latter had passed up six such opportunities. [An English version](#) appeared in 1948, after the publication of [Models for Beginners in Composition](#) and the writing of [Structural Functions of Harmony](#), two manuals made by Schoenberg for his American students (whose level he regarded as much inferior to that of his first Viennese disciples). [The first complete French translation](#) followed only in 1983, though Arthur Honegger had circulated the original among his intimates as early as 1912 and translated some passages himself.

Though pedagogically obsolete today, this treatise nevertheless offers a true philosophy of the teaching of art as conceived by Viennese modernism, in which the goal is to learn to “listen to oneself” (413). In terms of harmony, it also takes the first steps towards inquiry into the “nature of sounds”, which Schoenberg would pursue through his last years in the form of a theory of coherence and eventually of the musical idea.

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29/10/2024

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Further Reading

Ludwig Holtmeier, « Arnold Schoenberg : généalogie d’une théorie musicale », dans Nicolas Donin et Laurent Feneyrou (éd.), *Théories de la composition musicale au XX^e siècle*, Paris, Symétrie, 2014, vol. 1, p. 23-66.

Markus Bögemann, Ralf Alexander Kohler, « Harmonielehre », dans Gerold W. Gruber (éd.), *Arnold Schönberg - Interpretationen seiner Werke*, Lilienthal, Laaber-Verlag, 2002, vol. 2, p. 420-436.

Andreas Jacob, *Grundbegriffe der Musiktheorie Arnold Schönbergs*, 2 volumes, Hildesheim, Olms, 2005.

To quote this article: Dimitri Kerdiles, "Arnold Schoenberg, Harmonielehre (1911)", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 11/03/2025, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/book/66885>.