

Music Theory, Cultural Transfer, and Colonial Hybridity

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In this introductory essay, a number of cautionary reminders are suggested for any historian seeking to trace the reception of European music theory outside of its traditional borders. Using a range of examples from Medieval Arabic music theory, Jean-Philippe Rameau's theory of harmony, and Schenkerian theory, it is shown that a global dissemination and absorption of music-theoretical ideas is rarely a straightforward process of import and export. Perspectives drawn from contemporary theories of cultural transfer and postcolonialism offer some suggestive ways to think about the migration of a music theory across cultures as a more dialogical process in which notions of hybridity and agency play important roles.

In dieser Einleitung wird eine Reihe von Zusammenhängen aufgezeigt, die dort zur Zurückhaltung mahnen sollen, wo Historiker*innen versuchen die Rezeption europäischer Musiktheorie außerhalb ihrer traditionellen Grenzen nachzuvollziehen. Es wird gezeigt, dass die globale Verbreitung und Rezeption musiktheoretischer Ideen selten als schlichte Import- oder Exportvorgänge verstanden werden können, wie anhand von Beispielen aus der mittelalterlichen arabischen Musiktheorie, der Harmonielehre Jean-Philippe Rameaus und Heinrich Schenkers Theorie veranschaulicht wird. Perspektiven aus den Bereichen der Kulturtransferforschung und postkolonialer Forschung erlauben es, die transkulturelle Migration einer musikalischen Theorie als einen stärker dialogischen Prozess zu verstehen, in dem die Phänomene der Hybridität und der Handlungsmacht (*agency*) eine wichtige Rolle einnehmen.

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In his *Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore* published in 1760 as an appendix to his *Code de musique pratique*, Jean-Philippe Rameau marvelled at how the ancient Greek diatonic scale seemed to be based on the same principal as the pentatonic scale of the Chinese. Both were generated, he was certain, through a fundamental bass (*basse fondamentale*) of concatenated Pythagorean fifths constituting a "triple" geometric progression (1-3-9). Indeed, Rameau became convinced that this Pythagorean triple progression of fifths underlies all musical systems known to man, whether the ancient Greek octave species or the ancient Chinese pentatonic scale, the heptatonic ecclesiastical modes of the church, and even the major and minor scales of his own day.¹

1 For those curious about the details, here is a condensed description: the alternation of a single fifth in the fundamental bass – G and C – could generate, according to Rameau's theory, the Greek diatonic tetrachord of B-C-D-E, while a conjunctly joined tetrachord (E-F-G A) could be generated by an additional fifth in the fundamental bass of C-F and therefore complete the diatonic collection. Together, the three notes of the fundamental bass (F-C-G) constitute a "triple geometric progression" (1-3-9). That same triple progression, when reordered as C-F-C-G-C, could generate a pentatonic scale of G-A-C-D-E. For an elaboration of these derivations, see Christensen 1992, 182 and 295.

Rameau wondered, how was it that this fecund principle was evidently known and used by musicians around the world and across all history. The only answer he could imagine was that the triple progression must have been common knowledge that was disseminated in deepest antiquity from a single source. Rameau speculated that the triple progression might have been gnostic knowledge originating in Egypt that was known by a few sages such as Noah. Whatever its origins, Rameau surmised that, after the great deluge, Noah must have passed knowledge of the triple progression to his three sons who then introduced it to differing corners of the world, including China and Greece. The “triple progression alone,” he wrote

had fallen in their [the Chinese] hands, and that of the tetrachord had gone into other hands, all of them at different times, by way of some of Noah’s descendants. In effect, it is difficult to see how the progression and tetrachord could have reached in any other way the hands of peoples who provided no ideas of their own by which their authorship could be attributed.²

Of course we may be duly skeptical of Rameau’s fable regarding the ancient global peregrinations of the triple progression. It seems all too redolent of other happy fictions we may read in many Enlightenment narratives that seek to make history conform to certain rationalist conceits, particularly regarding the supposed wisdom and morality of non-Western people.³ Still, it surely must be the earliest story we have of an oriental reception and appropriation of a basic precept of European music theory.

Or is it? The little tale I have told (or more accurately, that Rameau has told us) already betrays some of the contradictions inherent in any history that might tell of a “Western” export of musical ideas to the East. Even setting aside Rameau’s obviously fantastical speculations about Egyptian sages and Noah’s kin, in what way can we call a basic precept of ancient Greek music theory to be the intellectual heritage of the “West”? Greece, we must remember, was a domain of the Ottoman Empire in Rameau’s day and would not have been understood as part of the European West, even as many European nationalists in the nineteenth century worked fervently to trace their own cultural genealogies to Attic roots. Then again, why would we assume that the concept of the triple progression must have been something originating in the West that was exported to China?

One German music theorist and editor, Gottfried Wilhelm Fink, actually suggested just the opposite. Writing in 1831, Fink speculated that the pentatonic scale of the Chinese (a musical scale that, as mentioned in footnote 1, Rameau showed could be easily generated by the triple progression) actually arrived in Europe – particularly the Celtic North – through the great Indo-European migrations that brought Central-Asian “Aryan” tribes to Europe many thousands of years ago. Perhaps it all began, Fink wrote, with Mongol invaders who knew something of Chinese music when they overran Central Asia, thereby transmitting the pentatonic scale to North India or Persia, from which it was then brought to Europe. Then again, perhaps some of this Chinese practice and theory was picked up by Phoenician sailors in unrecorded journeys to the East, which they then disseminated while plying the waters of the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts.⁴

2 Rameau 1760, 227.

3 One thinks of writings such as Montesquieu’s *Lettres persanes* (1721) or Denis Diderot’s *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (1771).

4 Fink 1831, 120ff.

If there is a take away from the respective stories of Rameau and Fink, perhaps it is that ascribing a secure heritage and direct influence of concepts and ideas that were circulating many millennia in the past is a precarious enterprise. This should caution us when speaking of more recent examples of European “influences” that we might identify. For the process of cultural transfer is rarely a unidirectional one of simple import and export.⁵

A good example of this complexity can be seen in a body of music-theoretical literature about which we can establish far more secure provenance. This is the large corpus of Arabic writings on *mūsīqī* from the Middle Ages, where the imprint of Greek music theorizing is clearly in evidence. We know of at least one hundred Arabic texts on music theory between the ninth and fifteenth centuries.⁶ A number of these texts (many of which dwarfed their Western counterparts in scope and sophistication) were priceless repositories of musical thought from ancient Greece that otherwise would have been lost to posterity. Certainly in the ninth and tenth centuries, there was nothing in the Christian world that rivalled the encyclopedic writings of Al-Kindī (c. 801–c. 866), who offered an impressive survey of Greek speculative harmonics, or above all, Al-Fārābī (d. 950), whose “Grand Book on Music” was one of the most expansive treatises of music theory in the entire Middle Ages, brimming with borrowings from Greek writers, and not to be equalled by any Western music theorist until Jacques de Liège in the fourteenth century. It is to Arabic writers such as these that we owe the first transmission of much Greek musical literature to the European West: Euclid, Aristoxenus, Nicomachus, Aristides Quintilianus, Ptolemy.⁷ Thus as is often the case with such intellectual appropriations, the borrowing on one hand is eventually paid back to the donor with the other hand.

This is a good reminder to us that borrowing and appropriation is hardly ever a simple transaction. The process of one culture absorbing something from another inevitably alters that thing in rich and often unexpected ways. This was certainly the case of the Medieval Arabic writer Al-Munajjim (856–912), who was one of the first to attempt a codification (or perhaps, more accurately, the construction) of an Arabic modal system heavily influenced by Greek models. It is symptomatic of much Western orientalism to assume that any reception of Western heritage by the East is always a passive and uncritical one. But this is rarely the case, especially in a specialized academic and pedagogical field as music theory, where we can presume most participants have a high level of professional competence.

One might perhaps express this in the language of postcolonial theory in which the colonized subject may resist – and ultimate even subvert – the imposition and acceptance

5 The notion of “cultural transfer” (*Kulturtransfer*) has become a huge research area of investigation and application among European historians in recent decades. For a pioneering study, see Espagne and Werner 1985. A helpful overview of the program is given in Schmale 2012. For studies of music as a process of cultural transferal, see Kokorz/Mitterbauer 2005 and Celestini/Mitterbauer 2011. For one of the few specific applications of the concept to the domain of historical music theory, see Petersen 2016.

6 See Shiloah 1979; Shiloah 2003.

7 Barker 1984, 610.

of colonial domination through processes of “hybridization,” “ambivalence,” and “mimicry” within a “third-space” of cultural mediation.⁸ As Homi Bhabha has put it:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory [...] may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity.⁹

Postcolonial theory thus might offer us a surprisingly positive and productive model of cultural transferal by which ideas – including those of music theory – may be circulated globally and dynamically engaged by individuals with some degree of agency. (Still, if colonial domination may be read as a kind of cultural transfer, if a particularly violent one, the opposite can hardly be presumed as true.) But whether imposed by colonial domination or absorbed more organically through cultural transfer, theories of music seem always to change when read or applied in new musical contexts, often taking on features and qualities derived from its new context. In this way, the diffusion of a theory in a new cultural ecology is not so much a negative of colonial subjugation as it is a positive of intellectual hybridization. The results complicate as well as enrich and enlarge the theory.

There is perhaps no better example of this phenomenon than the complex history and reception of Schenkerian theory. While this is a story that has been told many times, it will do us well to recall a few salient points. Heinrich Schenker’s writings did not receive widespread dissemination in German-speaking lands during much of the twentieth century. The causes for this were multiple and diverse: there was the complexity of the theory itself and its uneven development over Schenker’s lifetime in various (often unfinished) publications; there were institutional factors in which entrenched and competing pedagogies of music theory (such as Hugo Riemann’s) offered almost impenetrable barriers for the greater dissemination of Schenker’s theories in the conservatories and *Hochschulen*; then there was the repression of his writings as a Jewish author during the Nazi period; and finally there was the post-war repugnance among many Germans for the aggressive nationalism that is found throughout his many writings. The “real” growth of Schenkerian theory, as we know, took place in North America after 1945 when a handful of Schenker’s students and disciples taught, translated, and codified his theory, eventually making it the dominant paradigm of tonal analysis in North America.¹⁰ In the process, American theorists enriched (and some more conservative acolytes might say distorted) Schenker’s theory by developing unorthodox analytic concepts (e.g. the “ascending” *Urlinie* or “dissonant” prolongations), new graphing notations, and simplified pedagogical

8 These terms were developed by critical postcolonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha (1984) and Edward Said (1978).

9 Bhabha 1994, 38. As with cultural transfer, postcolonialism has an intimidatingly large scholarship that inhibits any simple reduction. (See, though, for as helpful an introduction as one might ever find, Young 2001.) While the topic of postcolonialism has already accumulated a large number of excellent publications in the field of musicology (see the helpful bibliographic overview of Bloechl 2016), it has barely begun to touch the area of historical music theory. See, however, the suggestive studies of Agawu 2003 and Perlman 2004.

10 Rothstein 1986. See the article by John Covach in the present issue (<https://doi.org/10.31751/991>).

summaries, while at the same time applying the theory to repertoires that would have made a true Schenkerian blanch (e.g. atonal, non-Western, Medieval, and even popular musics). It has only been in the twenty-first century that Schenker's ideas have slowly returned to Europe and begun to take root in pedagogies of harmony, although its "Americanization" has distinctly shaped the nature of this reception.

The story of Schenkerian theory in North America suggests once again that the transfer of a theory is more often one of cultivation than imposition. History has shown that the brute imposition of some pedagogical paradigm upon any colonial subject rarely takes root. Anna-Maria Busse Berger's recent morality tale of German missionaries in Africa offers a telling example.¹¹ In her fascinating article, Busse-Berger shows how early twentieth-century European theories of Early music and folk tonality, as well as protestant practices of chorale singing, imploded when an "ethnomusicologist missionary" named Franz Rietzsch moved to Tanganyika (in present-day Tanzania) in the early 1930s and attempted to adapt Lutheran church music to the pentatonic system of the indigenous Wanyakyusa people. Rietzsch brought with him strong preconceptions of how Protestant church music might be adapted to the tonal systems of the Africans based on his own study of various German texts of music theory, comparative musicology, and Early music. But despite his concerted and well-meaning efforts, the results, as Busse-Berger documents, were a failure born of inevitable colonial myopia and arrogance.

All this should again be a cautionary reminder that there is no such thing as a simple or "pure" reception of European music theory anywhere in the world. For that matter, we would do well to remember that there is no such thing as a stable and pure object that we can call "European music theory." Much European music theory has itself been influenced by intellectual and musical currents outside of Europe. For all the rationalist precepts of Rameau's theoretical legacy that seems so indigenous to a European Enlightenment, much of his later theory cannot be understood without considering the profound influence Jean Joseph Marie Amiot's reports of Chinese music theory had upon him (that is to say, the story with which I opened this essay).¹² François-Joseph Fétis's theory and historization of Western *tonalité moderne* only makes sense when understood against the background of various oriental tonalities that he studied and reimagined (Arabic, Indian and Chinese, among others).¹³ Even Hermann von Helmholtz, that paragon of empirical Western science, used evidence of non-Western scale systems and tunings in the development of his physiological theories of tonal perception.¹⁴ And this is not even to consider the hybridity of many music theories in European nationalist traditions that have cross-fertilized one another in their own complex networks of cultural transfer. (It is arguably just as precarious to speak of a unified and uniform tradition of music theorizing across European countries in the pre-modern period as it would be to speak of any unified and uniform musical tradition.)

Still, there is no gainsaying that Europe has provided many of the basic theoretical ideas, vocabulary, and pedagogical models that have, *mutatis mutandis*, influenced and even shaped many non-European traditions of music theorizing. We might attribute this

11 Busse-Berger 2013.

12 For the influence of Amiot upon Rameau, see Martin 2009.

13 See Christensen 2019.

14 Helmholtz 1863, 400–403, 432–442.

cynically to the same colonizing factors that have contributed to the spread of Western music across the globe. As the tonal language, published scores, and pianos of Western music spread, virus-like, outside of their European incubator, it is not surprising that the attendant theories, which musicians in Europe have developed to explain, perform, and teach this music, would follow. But to emphasize the point I made earlier about colonial hybridity, few theories remain unaffected by any cultural transfer. The fascination with any story about the migration of music-theoretical ideas across cultures – just as with the migration of music itself – is found in how every culture can take ideas and develop them in utterly unforeseen ways, yet ones that can in turn reinvigorate and enrich them for re-appropriation.

Stories of music-theoretical transmission, then, must be read dialogically, tracing the circulation of ideas in multiple, often contrary directions. Any such study must be sensitive to the ways these ideas, models, and analytic tools may change in the process of transmission and thereby engender ever new hybridizations. This only makes sense given that theories are always answers to specific questions and needs, and those will inevitably vary depending on who is asking the questions. It is hardly anything for us to lament. On the contrary, it underscores the dynamic and vital qualities of a discipline that is necessarily – and thankfully – always evolving and reinventing itself.

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