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Eisler's *Klavierstücke für Kinder* as *Kompositionslehre*: Composition, Analysis, Pedagogy

ABSTRACT

Background

For Schoenberg and the Viennese School, *Formenlehre* and *Kompositionslehre* were inextricably intertwined: the analysis of the music of the past was the key to the music of the future. This paper takes as its case study a work by Hanns Eisler, who studied with Schoenberg from 1919 to 1923. Eisler wrote a series of educational pieces during the early 1930s: *Klavierstücke für Kinder* Op. 31 (1932–3); *Sieben Klavierstücke* Op. 32 (1932–3); *Sonatine (Gradus ad parnassum)* Op. 44 (1934); and the *Präludium und Fuge über BACH* Op. 46 (1934). Except for Op. 46, which was written for string trio, all were written for piano. This paper will focus on the first in that series — the *Klavierstücke für Kinder* Op. 31, a work which, like the Op. 32 piano pieces, was commissioned by the State Music Publishers in Moscow.

The ‘pedagogical music’ (which is how he described Op. 31 and Op. 32 in a letter to Bertolt Brecht) was intended to confront what he called ‘musical illiteracy’ (*Musikanalphabetismus*) and to address what he perceived in music education as the unfortunate separation of theory and practice. In his preface to Op. 46, the fourth in the series, Eisler called attention to logic (*Logik*) as the goal of such instruction: ‘We know from modern pedagogical studies that a child is not as ‘childish’ as adults believe. Piano pieces by even the finest composers all suffer from the same fault that a bad teacher displays when he communicates with a child by imitating its own manner of speaking. I have therefore attempted to teach the child musical logic by using new, progressive means’ (Eisler 1973; Keller 1991). Furthermore, Eisler advocated ‘a new musical pedagogy’ that integrates the theoretical with the practical, averring that the learning of logic be linked to the learning of an instrument.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

Eisler’s *Klavierstücke für Kinder* Op. 31, comprises two multi-part movements: I. Thema mit Variationen, and II. Sieben Klavierstücke. The published score of 1958 includes a one-page appendix, ‘Remarks on the seven piano pieces’ (*Anmerkungen zu den sieben Klavierstücken*), which is distilled from a typescript found in the Akademie der Künste (Berlin). Whereas the published remarks consider only the second of the two multi-part movements, the typescript addresses both the Theme and Variations and the *Klavierstücke*.

In the ‘Little Composition-Tutor for Children (In practical examples)’ (*Kleine Kompositionslehre für Kinder (In praktischen Beispielen)*), Eisler offers guidance to the teacher who imparts to the student formal and aesthetic insights. The type-

script begins by stating the purpose of the composition: to replace the conventional études with light pieces of a progressive character; to develop a new feeling for style; and to convey the ‘ABC’ of counterpoint and *Formenlehre*. He concludes his preliminary remarks by warning that ‘these pieces not only make new demands on the children, but above all demand a qualification of the teachers’. This paper aims to assess Eisler’s contribution: what can we learn from his analytical commentary, and (how) does it enrich our understanding of Viennese *Formenlehre*?

Methods

This study engages both the history of theory and music analysis: I offer a close reading and interpretation of Eisler’s typescript, using his comments as the impetus for an historically-informed analysis. Since Eisler’s comments necessarily reflect the teachings of Schoenberg, I contextualize the typescript within the broader theoretical and intellectual world of the Viennese School.

Implications

Eisler’s analysis focuses on questions of form and character. Although the title (‘children’) suggests simplicity, his observations are sophisticated: those on the Variations, for example, consider connectives between variations as well as their order and arrangement. While he attends to the contrapuntal workings of his composition, it is his observations on form that are most striking. Highlighting *Spitzennoten* (‘top notes’), he annotates his examples just as Schoenberg does when identifying the principal notes or underlying structure (‘skeleton’). More revealing still is his discussion of *Auflösung* in the middle section of the Andantino: Eisler captures in concrete terms the process of ‘dissolution’ which Schoenberg mentions without illustration or explanation in his *Formenlehre* outline of 1917 (Schoenberg 1994). Using terminology that we associate with the Viennese School (Schoenberg, Webern, Ratz, and others), Eisler brings to the concept a clarity not found elsewhere, the ‘practical example’ of the Andantino serving to illustrate what Ratz called ‘the contrasting function of the middle section’ (*die gegensätzliche Funktion des Mittelteils*) (Ratz 1973). Eisler’s *Kleine Kompositionslehre* is thus a succinct but important document that elucidates some of the central tenets of the Schoenbergian *Formenlehre* project.

Keywords

Form, Structure, Musical Pedagogy, Analytical Theory.

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