Interaction between the various branches of the arts has been increasingly explored over the last few years. The phenomenon is not new, for example, a relationship between music and architecture can be traced back hundreds of years. One of the most fascinating cases involves a Renaissance composition, Guillaume Dufay’s *Nuper rosarum flores*; this motet has nourished decades of discussions among musicologists on whether it could reflect the architectural proportions of Santa Maria del Fiore, the Florence cathedral.¹ Moreover, one of the first things always mentioned by musicologists about the twentieth-century composer Iannis Xenakis is that he was an architect and an engineer, as if his background could help explain the structures of his musical works.

Magnar Breivik’s *Musical Functionalism*, was published by Pendragon Press within the series Interplay, which is devoted to interdisciplinary perspectives on music. Breivik’s text is representative of the enduring interconnections between music and architecture mentioned above. Breivik addresses functionalism, and applies this idea to the musical thoughts of Arnold Schoenberg and Paul Hindemith. Breivik’s aim is to

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reach a better understanding of functionalism both in itself and as a significant aspect of
the two composers’ work. He discusses functionalism in architecture through the works
of different architects and movements active between the last decades of the nineteenth
century and the first half of the twentieth century, including the work of Adolf Loos
(Brno, 1870 - Vienna, 1933), Louis Henry Sullivan (Boston, 1856 - Chicago, 1924), the
Staatliches Bauhaus founded by Walter Gropius (Berlin, 1883 - Chicago, 1969), the
international Arts and Crafts design movement (which flourished between 1860 and
1910), and the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) of interwar Germany. This well-
documented frame drawn by the author is essential to the interdisciplinary approach of
the book and proves useful to readers proficient in handling musical concepts but less
familiar with architecture.

The overall subject of the book is the musical thoughts of Schoenberg and
Hindemith, but because the relationship between architecture and music is central to
Breivik’s purpose, the first chapter is for the most part dedicated to architecture. From
the various positions expressed by different personalities, the author synthesizes three
main features of architectural functionalism: the material’s specificity; the form of the art
object; and, finally, its function. The author then applies these three characteristics to the
domain of music as “1. The functional treatment of the chosen material; 2. Functional
design; 3. Focus on the work’s intended function.”

At first glance, the structure of the
book appears solid and clear to the reader, since Breivik plans to discuss each of these
three features in the subsequent three chapters. Hence, in the second chapter, opened by
two paragraphs on the crisis of tonality and on Theodor W. Adorno’s reading of the
musical material, Breivik identifies the motif as the basic material in Schoenberg’s
thought, whereas in Hindemith this role is played by intervals.

The third chapter discusses the concept of musikalischer Gedanke (musical idea) as
a catalyst for the form in Schoenberg’s music, while the concept playing the same role
for Hindemith’s music is vision. In this chapter, Breivik claims that “Le Corbusier
strongly believes in identification of human beings with basic forms,” meaning,
perhaps, that the proportions of the human body underpin many of the Swiss architect’s
most famous works. Following this reasoning, Breivik asserts that the recognisability of
musical form is crucial to functionalism. In his view, a trained composer should perceive
the form “as a gestalt recognizable in itself.” Hence, the increased use of standard
musical forms during the Twenties can be seen as the desire of composers to create new,

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2 Magnar Breivik, _Musical Functionalism: The Musical Thoughts of Arnold Schoenberg and Paul


4 Ibid., 198.
but still recognizable, works, demanding active listening from their audience. That is why in the fourth chapter, dedicated to the discussion of the function of music, Breivik writes about the importance of active listening in Schoenberg and the idea of active performing in Hindemith. Unfortunately, this argument is totally unclear in his formulation mainly because when Breivik discusses active listening and active performing, he does not efficiently restate the importance of the recognisability of form in le Corbusier, but bases his reasoning on the ideas of Neue Sachlichkeit, partially changing his point of view. Some concluding remarks, labelled “Coda” by the author, end this book.

The strongest part of the book is the opening. The initial chapter is thorough and represents a good introduction to functionalism in architecture; it also sheds light on sources not easily accessible to English-speaking readers. In fact, Breivik makes extensive use of scholarly literature in Norwegian, among other sources, such as the work of cultural historian Welche Findmal and the professor Signe Horn Fuglesang. Furthermore, the discussion of functional material in Schoenberg and Hindemith is clear. The central point is the material’s own will. This can be explained in Aristotelian terms, admitting that material contains both the matter (the potential) and the form (its actualisation). The architect, as well as the composer, must then be aware of each material’s unique features and elaborate it according to its specificity. Breivik supports his claims with a compelling use of two subsidiary concepts to which the composers under investigation give special consideration, i.e. truthfulness, which replaces the idea of Romantic beauty, and craftsmanship. The latter concept plays an especially crucial role in enabling the composer to make the most of the starting material thanks to his or her technical skills. The solid theoretical and educational output of Schoenberg and Hindemith reinforces the claim that craftsmanship was very important for both.

Unfortunately, despite the author’s intentions, not every aspect of the book is blessed with the same level of clarity. The third and fourth chapters should be devoted to form and function respectively. The author does not, however, develop a linear discussion, jumping from Sullivan, to organicism, to Hanslick and others in a very disorienting way. He continues to waver between the concepts of form and function, without clarifying the nature of their relationship. This imprecision, along with the scattering of important concepts throughout the book (e.g. Schoenberg’s musikalischer Gedanke), results in a confused presentation. The author never embraces a specific definition for form and function, so it becomes hard to follow his discourse and be convinced by his interpretation of musical examples.

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The case of Hindemith is particularly problematic. After having claimed the importance of form (traditional forms especially), Breivik states that for the German composer the “so-called theory of form consists of lifeless schemata,” mainly because Hindemith wanted to find some scientific proof that would describe the form.\(^6\) Schoenberg accepted that the form has several actualizations in every single composition, but finding the logic behind a single composition was not enough for Hindemith. He was searching for more general parameters, but it seems he never discovered what he was looking for. Hence, what is form for Hindemith? Breivik says the composer is led by a vision, basically an epiphany, a sudden and fleeting moment in which the composer can see his work. But Breivik does not explain how the composer moves from this vision to the complete form. Surely, craftsmanship is an essential element, but where does the composer use his skills? Breivik, vaguely, says there are several elements ruling Hindemith’s form, like motivic development, rhythm, or special proportions such as the golden ratio. The author restates the only important element of form is its recognisability. But this is a loop that brings the reader again to the question: what is form for Hindemith? What should the listener/performer be looking for in order to achieve an active role?

This lack of direction, in my opinion, is reinforced by a general absence of dialogue with the rich and manifold secondary literature on these two composers. Breivik focuses on sources and authors generally considered contemporary to Schoenberg and Hindemith, such as Adorno or Hans Heinz Stuckenschimdt’s account of his experience at the Bauhauswoche in 1923. Breivik also discusses the Carl Dahlhaus essay “Musical Functionalism” (1978), but modern musicological scholarship is barely touched. Among contemporary scholars, Magnar Breivik first names Wallace Berry, whose essay *Structural Functions in Music* (1987) investigates the relationship between musical structure and its expressive effect. Berry states that function cannot be separated from expression because both of them unfold at various levels of musical structure. The other contemporary musicologist referenced is Mark Delaere, who argued, in *Funktionelle Atonalität: Analytische Strategien für die frei-atonale Musik der wiener Schule* (1993), that functional atonality used by the Viennese school is an antithesis to triad-based functional tonality. Nonetheless, after having briefly presented these theories, Breivik barely mentions Berry or Delaere in the rest of his work.

This lack of dialogue leaves the reader with the impression that Breivik is one of the first authors to address the idea of functionalism in music, which is not the case, and this causes imprecision, ambiguities, and misunderstandings. For instance, one of the most original contributions to this topic is Holly Watkins’s, “Schoenberg’s Interior

Designs.” Discussing Loos’s and Schoenberg’s ideas, Watkins reaches conclusions that differ considerably from Breivik’s. In her opinion, the two friends (both were from Vienna and formed a close relationship in their early years) were concerned with challenging the ideas of the bourgeoisie of the time, but in two very different ways, so that Schoenberg’s first production is not at all influenced by Loos. According to Watkins, it is to “[Schoenberg’s] twelve-tone music and Loos’s residential designs that we should look, rather than to atonality and the rejection of ornament, for a more significant convergence of musical and architectural aims.” That is, the ideas of the two can be reconciled only in Schoenberg’s late period; proximity with the functionalist idea can be detected in Schoenberg’s work only when he makes use of the dodecaphonic system.

What you can infer from Watkins’ essay is a very simple and effective point: in his harmony manual, Schoenberg explains that the ornaments of music firstly introduce dissonance, and that they are therefore crucially important in order to achieve the emancipation of the dissonance. When Schoenberg formalized his dodecaphonic method, he solved the dissonance-consonance dichotomy, providing a musical world where the idea of ornament was much closer to the one Loos had in his writing Ornament and Crime.

Basically, what Watkins really does differently from Breivik is to use her terminology in a convincing way. In her essay, the word Functionalism indicates only the aesthetics pertaining to architecture. Then, she identifies a thematic in this aesthetics shared by Loos and Schoenberg, namely their attention to inner and outer space. She makes use of the architecture of Villa Müller by Loos as an example of “outside plainness” and “inside hidden intricacy,” able to protect personal intimate life from outside chaos. In Schoenberg’s work, this dichotomy plays a role only on a metaphorical level; nevertheless, through the example of Schoenberg’s Die Jakobsleiter, Watkins demonstrates that Schoenberg “attempts to incorporate the multiple directions of row presentation […] into an all embracing ‘two-or-more dimensional’ musical space” and more precisely “[t]he equivalence of forms of presentation […] creates so much variety that unity […] remains essentially hidden. The depth of serial structure is less an attribute of twelve-tone musical space per se than a byproduct of the split between auditory and compositional reality.”

She draws clear connections between the material, the form and the performance practice through a functionalist aesthetics without stressing the functionalist idea. The struggle of the reader to follow the reasoning in

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8 Ibid., 126.

Breivik is mostly caused by the application of the word functionalism to many different levels, from a specific aesthetic to a generic kind of sociological function. This is why it is a real pity that Breivik does not consider the precision used by Watkins to handle such a complex topic.

Probably this confusion of definition and usage of the word functionalism is also what underlies the lack of references to other theorists and musicologists. Before Breivik, functionalism has been applied to music in very different ways. Probably the most well-known figure in this regard is Hugo Riemann, mentioned only twice by Breivik, without a thorough discussion of his seminal theory that has a prominent role in the discussion of functional harmony. Riemann’s theory is a pillar to functionalism applied to music, enlightening generations of scholars on the internal and technical aspects of the construction of form.\(^\text{10}\)

One additional approach to functionalism is to investigate the social function of music, a methodology very widely applied to musicology and introduced by the ethnomusicological work of Allan Parkhurst Merriam.\(^\text{11}\) This point of view began with architectural functionalism as well, but moved away from it quite quickly in order to develop a social perspective, rather than a musical analytical method, as Riemann did. Breivik’s indecision between these two perspectives, namely an analytical approach along with a sociological perspective, delivers a confused book.

Furthermore, the book occasionally suffers from inaccuracy. Breivik need not have included lengthy quotations in their original languages, since most of the time he does not question the existing translation. Most important, the index contains only names and surnames, while it would have been useful to have an index of ideas and of the compositions cited under the composers’ names. Even concerning Schoenberg and Hindemith, a list of the compositions discussed is not provided, leaving researchers without a valuable tool.

In conclusion, this book leaves the reader confused. If the lack of dialogue with contemporary musicological literature is a major problem, on the other side Musical Functionalism has well-informed sections on functionalism in architecture. It can be considered a resource for any musicologist who wants to approach the topic without having specific training in architecture and for everyone who cannot directly access Norwegian literature on the topic, but nothing more than that.


For Further Reading:


