Reicha, Anton

Profile

Not only as composer was Anton Reicha experimental; as a composition teacher he was as independent as he was progressive. This forward-thinking attitude may also be reflected in Reicha’s work as composition teacher and music theorist. Contrary to social norms, Reicha took on numerous women in his private composition classes.

For his theory of composition, he worked out a sophisticated representation of the sonata form, in which he metaphorically labelled both main themes of the sonata “idées mères” (mother ideas), without subjecting them to the hierarchy we, since A.B. Marx until today, have become familiar with and without addressing the specifically female role of the mother as bearer/carer.

He supported female musicians such as Marianne Kirchgessner by composing pieces for them.

Cities an countries

Anton Reicha’s life had been marked by travel and relocation since early childhood. Born in Prague, he grew up in Wallerstein and Bonn and lived in Hamburg, Paris and Vienna before finally settling down in Paris in 1808.

Biography

Since early childhood, Anton Reicha’s life was marked by travel and relocation. He was born in 1770 in Prague, the son of a baker. He left his mother and step-father at the age of 10 in order to live with his grandfather. However he was as unhappy here with his education and training as he had been at home and moved on in 1780 or 1781 to Wallerstein, to live with his uncle, the cellist and composer Josef Reicha. The young nephew was adopted by his uncle who gave him a comprehensive education and musical training. In 1785, Anton Reicha and his uncle moved to Bonn, where the latter had been awarded the post of orchestra director to Maximilian Franz, Elector of Cologne. Anton Reicha played violin and flute in the court Orchestra, continuing to educate himself in composition, against his uncle’s will, by studying works by Handel, Mozart and Haydn. He attended Bonn University with Ludwig van Beethoven, who was also a member of the orchestra, and with whom he became close friends. Whether or not Reicha, like Beethoven, took composition lessons with Gottlob Neefe is unknown.

In 1794 Reicha fled the French Revolution troops and went to Hamburg where he was able to earn a living as teacher of theory, composition and piano. He continued to study privately, reading texts on philosophy and the
natural sciences. He became more experimental in his compositions and worked systematically on composition and methods of teaching composition theory. In Hamburg Reicha moved in the same circles as French refugees who encouraged him to go to Paris as a composer of opera.

In 1799 Reicha followed this advice and enjoyed some success with his instrumental works (symphonies and overtures) and “Scènes italiennes”. However he was not able to get any of his stage works performed in a Paris theatre. Disappointed with this failure, he left Paris in 1802 and arrived penniless in Vienna where he rekindled his relationship with Beethoven and also with Haydn, whom he had met in 1790 in Bonn and again in 1795 in Hamburg. There is no evidence to suggest that Reicha studied counterpoint with Haydn or Johann Georg Albrechtsberger during this time. Success as an opera composer also escaped Reicha in Vienna and he chose instead to concentrate henceforth on instrumental music. Despite not having a regular income, Reicha turned down the offer in 1802 of a position as the composition teacher and music director to Louis Ferdinand Prince of Prussia at the Prussian Court in order to remain independent.

Due to the military preparations in Vienna against Napoleon in 1808, Reicha returned to Paris and settled there permanently, establishing himself – initially at least – as a successful freelance composition teacher, author and composer. Of particular note are his wind quintets which he wrote for a particular ensemble between 1811 and about 1820. They not only secured Reicha’s reputation as a serious composer but also set the standard for wind quintet writing for future generations.

In 1818 Reicha was appointed professor of counterpoint and fugue at the Paris Conservatory and in the same year married Virginie Enaust, with whom he later had two daughters. After his appointment as professor, the influence of his theoretical writings steadily grew. In 1829 Reicha became a French citizen and two institutional honours confirm his prominent position in Parisian musical life: in 1831 he was named Chevalier of the Légion d’Honneur and in 1835 welcomed as a member of the Académie de Beaux-Arts. His compositional output after 1826 appears negligible but nonetheless he left behind an extensive œuvre compiling works in a variety of genres. He died after an eight year-long illness and is buried in the cemetery Père-Lachaise in Paris.

Appreciation

Until well into the second half of the nineteenth century, women were allowed to take part in preparatory composition courses in harmony and practical accompaniment at the Paris Conservatory. However they were not allowed to attend the more advanced subjects, like counterpoint and fugue, for which Anton Reicha held the professorship. Nevertheless, Anton Reicha taught several female composition students privately in all subjects and at all levels; from 1819 Louise Farrenc, his elder daughter Antoinette Virginie Reicha between 1834 and 1836 and possibly also Pauline Viardot (this is suggested in numerous contemporary press articles and secondary sources, however no authentic evidence has yet been found confirming this). It is possible that the pianist Hélène de Montgeroult and the composer Louise Bertin also numbered among Reicha’s students (see Audéon, Ramaud, Schneider 2011, p 48 & Fn. 47).

Within the pages of Anton Reicha’s treatise on advanced musical composition (published 1824-1826), Reicha’s conception of sonata form is particularly interesting in a gender-focused context, due to the metaphorical terms he coined to refer to the different sonata themes. Within the sonata movement (“grande coupe binaire”), Reicha differentiated between two main themes (“idées mères”) to which any number of additional themes could be added (“idées accessoires”). Both “idées mères” figure in the “grande coupe binaire” as primary and secondary themes and again in the exposition in the tonic and modulated keys. However, as the common term for both main themes suggests, there is no further distinction, no dichotomy or hierarchy between primary and secondary sonata theme and no specific characteristics. This is where Reicha’s view contradicts a central aspect of German sonata form theory, valid since Adolf Bernhard Marx who promoted the contrast of character between the sonata topics as an essential feature and as impetus for the development of sonata form.

Within Reicha’s terminology it is significant that, even though both theme names are chosen metaphorically, they are accorded a strictly musical alignment and are related purely to the structural function of “idées mères” and “idées accessoires” within the sonata. This means that the “idée mère” is not presented characteristically opposing an “idée père” and at no other point are male attributes or images of masculinity used as descriptors. Reicha’s concept of “idée mère” does allude metaphorically to the role of mother and thus to the female body and its ability to give birth and bring forth, however not to the socially defined female role or even to differences in
gender.

Also, the differences between “idées mères” and “idées accessoires” are not described in terms of content, character or even metaphorically, but in purely functional and structural terms based on the movement and its themes. “Idées mères” are complete, self-contained and solid sections whereas “idées accessoires” are more loosely joined and often have an incomplete, bridging character.

(Compare as a contrast the teachings of A.B. Marx, who designated the main theme of sonata form as ‘male’ and the characteristically opposing secondary theme as ‘female’ and who further explained these labels with the help of character traits corresponding with the commonly held contemporary views of gender roles.)

In 1806 Reicha composed two works for the blind glass harmonica virtuoso Marianne Kirchgessner, who was visiting Vienna at the time; the melodrama based on the farewell monologue from Schiller’s “Maid of Orleans” and the “Grand Solo” for glass harmonica and orchestra.

Relationships
Early friendships: Ludwig v. Beethoven, Andreas Romberg
Composition students in Paris include Hector Berlioz, Louise Farrenc, César Franck, Charles Gounod, Franz Liszt, Georges Onslow, Henri Reber, Pauline Viardot.
Wife: Virginie Enaust, two daughters, the elder - Antoinette Virginie Reicha (born in 1819) – was also a student of his.
Dedicatee: Marianne Kirchgessner.

Research
Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, musicologists in the field of gender studies have concerned themselves – albeit sporadically – with Anton Reicha’s style of sonata form, more specifically the term “idée mère” as a term to refer to the main theme of the sonata. Questions referring to the historical context and the origins of the metaphor play as important a role as the study of the significance of such a view for the music-theoretical framework of sonata form.

Annegret Huber (2003) acknowledges the broad span of Reicha’s term which includes the fields of anthropology, anatomy and gynecology, embryology, language theory and elementary education, sonata theory and composition, referring also to its many varied contexts and possible interpretations.

Reicha’s theory on sonata form is presented and analysed at great length in Christin Heitmann’s dissertation on Louise Farrenc’s orchestral and chamber works (2004). The theory also serves as a basis for the structural analysis of sonata movements, in evidence in Farrenc’s compositions.

In it, Reicha’s terminology, the views of the compositional elements referred to therein, as well as the musical themes lead us to a chronologically appropriate form of expression and interpretation of music which, with the so-called “school-scheme” of sonata form, cannot be achieved.

Need for Research
Detailed study of all Reicha’s theoretical works, particularly in view of his position regarding women and gender roles, as well as of biographical material is required. Particularly given the backdrop of a seemingly progressive (from today’s perspective) attitude described in the works above, the question would need to be asked whether he expressed explicit views on such topics in his writings.

Authority control
Virtual International Authority File (VIAF):
□ http://viaf.org/viaf/39563060
Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (GND):
□ http://d-nb.info/gnd/118931482
Library of Congress (LCCN):
□ http://lccn.loc.gov/n81018999

Author(s)
Christin Heitmann

Editing status
Editorial staff: Regina Back, (deutsche Fassung)
Martina Bick, (deutsche Fassung)
Meredith Nicollai, (English version)
Translation: Sue Ryall
First edit 27/02/2014
Last edit 10/04/2018

mugi.hfmt-hamburg.de
Forschungsprojekt an der
Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg
Projektleitung: Prof. Dr. Beatrix Borchardt
Harvestehuder Weg 12
D – 20148 Hamburg