

Reicha, Antoine (1770-1836): brief presentation of his writings

Antoine Reicha has left behind a substantial corpus of theoretical texts covering numerous fields of musical theory. However, the language and time of writing of these texts, their length (from a few dozen lines to more than a hundred pages), their target, their state of completion, or their nature (autobiographical, theoretical or pedagogical texts, unpublished or published texts) make them a heterogeneous corpus. In addition to these theoretical writings, there are a handful of letters, most of which are kept in the Music Department of the French National Library.

The four French theoretical treatises published by Reicha between 1814 and 1833 after he moved to Paris, made him famous during the Restoration period and are today well known to the musicologists. Although disparaged, the [*Traité de mélodie*](#) (1814) and the [*Cours de composition musicale*](#) (1816), written from both a theoretical and didactic perspective, made him well known and are no doubt linked to his appointment as professor of counterpoint and fugue at the Conservatoire de Paris in 1818. The two volumes of *Traité de haute composition* (1824-1826) et *l'Art du compositeur dramatique* (1833) enabled him to ensure and secure his reputation. These four treatises, covering composition from a systematic perspective (in order: melody, harmony, counterpoint, fugue, forms, lyrical music) testify of the author's methodical thinking.

In addition to this corpus of published writings, there is also the corpus of unpublished works. Most of them were written in German at the beginning of the 19th century, during Reicha's stays in Hamburg and Vienna. They remained in the form of manuscripts until they were published in 2011-2013. This part of the corpus includes three substantial texts: *Philosophisch-practische Anmerkungen zu den practischen Beispielen* (Philosophical and practical observations, with examples), *Grundsätze der practischen Harmonie* (Principles of practical harmony) and *Die Kunst der practischen Harmonie* (The Art of practical harmony – unachieved). The precise circumstances in which they were written, as well as the reasons why Reicha chose not to publish them, remain unknown to us. The discovery of these unpublished texts – notably the *Philosophisch-practische Anmerkungen* et *Die Kunst der practischen Harmonie* – has clarified an astonishing path of thought between the composer's youth and the period that established his institutional recognition in Paris. Indeed, Reicha seems to have settled down between the time of the writing of his unpublished theoretical treatises and those published during his lifetime – a softening no doubt linked more to the institutional context of the publication of his theoretical works than to the age of the composer, if we are to believe the various testimonies of his students who describe him as an iconoclastic teacher. To take the example of the fugue, Reicha indicates in the *Philosophisch-practische Anmerkungen* that the exposition and the final entry of the

subject can be done at any interval - which he applies in his own fugues of the same period - even though he only allows final entries to the fifth in *Traité de haute composition* of 1824. The same withdrawal can be observed between these two texts on the question of the tonality to be adopted in the secondary zone of the exposition of sonata forms (the older one advocating a renewal of tonalities, the other retaining the strict framework of a modulation to the dominant or relative major).

Finally, to complete the corpus, let us mention two unpublished French texts: *Notes sur Antoine Reicha* (text written at Paris around 1824) and [*Sur la musique comme art purement sentimental*](#) (ca. 1809-1813). The composer's autobiography was probably intended to fill dictionaries' biographical notices as some of the anecdotes it contains are regularly found in various nineteenth-century sources. *Sur la musique comme art purement sentimental* testifies the idea that, even though he denies it, Reicha felt the need to philosophize about music to justify his theoretical claims. The theorist's efforts to think about his art often result in repetition, approximation or awkwardness, but they are evidence of the way he appropriated ideas capturing the spirit of Germany or France at that time - one, for example, could think of his reflections on the question of the primacy of harmony over melody.

This massive corpus is of interest to musical theory when being considered as an object of history, even though the composer, contrary to a certain Fétis, did not produce any real historical reflections on the matter. "Lessons", "Observations", "Principles", "Art", "Treaty": the multiplicity of the terminology chosen by Reicha for the titles of his writings - in which "theory" does not appear - reflects the diversity of the fields in which he thinks theory. Between the purely pedagogical approach of the *Grundsätze der practischen Harmonie* or the *Cours de composition musicale*, and the more aesthetic reflections of *Sur la musique comme art purement sentimental*, Reicha's writings reveal a strong tension between what is speculative, and what is practical. It is indeed the case with *Philosophisch-practische Anmerkungen zu den practischen Beispielen*, *Traité de haute composition*, *L'Art du compositeur dramatique*, as well as collections of compositions accompanied by theoretical considerations such as the *Trente-six fugues pour le piano forte* (1805 edition) or *Études dans le genre fugué pour le piano-forte, précédées de quelques remarques instructives sur différentes propositions musicales à l'usage des jeunes compositeurs* opus 97 (c. 1820). These works raise the question of the status of a composition in Reicha's theoretical thinking, which cannot be reduced to a mere example value, but which seems on the contrary to be at the core of the composer's theoretical reflections, which is without a doubt one of the signs of his singularity. The frequent occurrence of the adjective "practical" in the titles of the texts illustrates the redefinition of theory as a broad pedagogical discipline in the study of music at the end of the eighteenth century - a redefinition that Thomas Christensen attributes to Forkel, whose name is mentioned several times by Reicha. Logically enough for this period, the traditional speculative field of the *musica theoria* shaped by mathematics and physics, is only anecdotally present in the composer's writings, through the allusions made at his training in Bonn. On the other hand, grammar and rhetorics are still very much alive, especially in *Traité de*

mélodie, *Sur la musique comme art purement sentimental* and even in *Traité de haute composition*. Finally, one can notice that the treatises published by Reicha himself are those in which the works of his predecessors or contemporaries are no longer solely quoted, but are rather the object of a genuine critical analysis, an approach which will take on an expanding role in the 19th century theory.

The four treatises published during Reicha's lifetime were widely attacked by Fétis in the *Biographie universelle des musiciens*, where a lack of erudition and theoretical aberrations are bitterly criticized - one could think, for example, of the theory of the constitution and sequence of chords presented in le *Cours de composition musicale*. These criticisms failed to prevent the European dissemination of Reicha's treatises. They were translated in German by Carl Czerny between 1832 and 1835 and several Italian and Spanish translations strengthened the theoretician's reputation. The history behind these writings' dissemination in Europe remains to be written, but it seems that various translations and adaptations of Reicha's theoretical works served as teaching material for the Royal Conservatory of Music in Madrid - the first institution of its kind in Spain - from its creation in 1832 until at least the middle of the century.

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For further information :

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Ramón Sobrino, "The Impact of Reicha's Compositional Legacy in Nineteenth-Century Spain: Translations and Diffusion of his Theoretical Treatises", communication donnée au colloque international « Professor Reicha: Practice and Legacy of a Composer-Teacher », Lucques, Centro Studi Opera Omnia Luigi Boccherini / Palazzetto Bru-Zane, novembre 2017 ([résumé](#)).

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