Friedrich Ernst Fesca (1789–1826)



Friedrich Ernst Fresca

Together with Louis Spohr (1784–1859), George Onslow (1784–1853), and Ferdinand Ries (1784–1838), Friedrich Ernst Fesca belonged to a generation of symphonists who have been neglected, quite understandably but wrongly so, in the annals of music history and in performance practice. Most of their symphonies were published during the period between the time Beethoven's seventh and eighth symphonies (1813) became known and the gradual spread of the success of Schubert's "grand" Symphony in C major after 1839. Although the symphonies of Fesca, Spohr, Onslow, and Ries were highly praised by their contemporaries, these works vanished from concert programs after 1840. The public had elevated Beethoven's symphonies to the evoluative norm by which all subsequent works of the genre were measured. As a critic of those times accurately observed in 1829, "If these tone poems by other composers approximate Beethoven's symphonies too closely, then they are only too easily charged with being imitations; but if they are too far away from them, then they as a rule are not appealing". It is therefore hardly surprising that thoroughly individual formal designs and original personal styles were not recognized in keeping with their importance.

Friedrich Ernst Fesca was born on 15 February 1789. The boy grew up in surroundings favorable to music. His father, Johann Peter August Fesca (1756–1811), by profession a civil servant in the Magdeburg city administration, played piano and violoncello and participated actively in Magdeburg's middle-class music culture. Mariane Fesca, née Podleska, the composer's mother, had enjoyed the benefit of voice training under Johann Adam Hiller in Leipzig at the end of the 1770s and had gone on concert tours with him through Europe prior to her marriage in 1784. The young Friedrich Ernst received instruction in piano and voice from his parents. The young Friedrich Ernst is said to have been able to play shorter pieces on the piano during the fourth year of his life and to repeat same of the songs sung to him by his mother. His training as a violin virtuoso under Lohse, known to us only as the concertmaster of the Magdeburg Theater Orchestra, began in 1798.

Beginning in 1798 he received instruction in violin from a Magdeburg orchestra concertmaster by the name of Lohse about whom nothing else is known. Already two years later, when Fesca was eleven years old, he made his first public appearance as a violinist in a concert in which his aunt Thekla (by then a married woman, Thekla Battka) performed. He evidently performed with success because from then on his education as a musician was continued seriously and systematically. He received instruction in music theory and composition in succession from Johann Friedrich Zachariae (1753–1807), Johann Heinrich Rolle's successor as choirmaster at the Old City School, and from Friedrich Adolph Pitterlin (1769–1804), the music director of the Magdeburg National Theater.

Fesca debuted as a violin virtuoso in his hometown already at the age of eleven and subsequently appeared in concerts presented there by the Freemason lodge. He received his initial instruction in theory from Johann Friedrich Zachariae at about the same time and later continued his study in this discipline under Friedrich Adolph Pitterlin; both men were influential figures in Magdeburg's music world. It was evidently during this time that Fesca begin composing string quartets. This fact can be inferred from a statement by Louis Spohr. When Spohr visited Magdeburg during one of his concert tours in 1804, and accepted an invitation for a "round of music with Mr. Chamber Secretary Fesca", he praised a quartet by the elder Fesca's son. In his journal he stated that it "is elaborated very well and attests ta great talent". Although Spohr was less convinced of Fesca's capabilities as a violin virtuoso (according to his journal entry, he lacked "a skillful, regular bowing, therefore also a good tone and clarity of the passages"), he invited him to participate in his second Magdeburg concert on November 10, 1804.

In 1804 Fesca met Louis Spohr, who was five years his senior, and Spohr invited him to perform with him in a concert in Magdeburg on 10 November 1804. After Pitterlin's death the sixteen-year-old Fesca moved to Leipzig in June 1805 in order to continue his education under the Thomaskantor August Eberhard Müller (1767–1817), who acquainted him with works such as the cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach. Müller had served as organist at St. Ulrich's Church in Magdeburg during 1789–94 and may have been known to the Fesca family from these years. He now held the post of music director at the Church of St. Thomas in Leipzig, where he had succeeded Johann Adam Hiller on his death in 1804 (thus making him fourth in the line of succession following Johann Sebastian Bach).

As it seems, Müller did not have much more to teach Fesca, who performed in public as a quartet instrumentalist already during the same year. His violin playing was characterized by a "beautiful tone, sureness, and energy, together with pleasant tenderness and skillfulness", and on 6 October 1805 he debuted as a violinist with his own Violin Concerto in E minor (unfortunately no longer extant) at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig. The review written by Friedrich Rochlitz, the editor of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, certified that a "lively mind, rich in ideas and powerful" was in evidence in the concerto. Rochlitz, who later became Fesca's first biographer, nevertheless also advised that Fesca still lacked "firmed leading, a solid stance – in short, strict unity". As a violinist, however, he was so sure of himself that he was accepted as a member of the Gewandhaus Orchestra.

But his time there was short: when Duke Peter Friedrich Ludwig von Oldenburg heard him as a soloist in one of the concerts presented by Müller at the St. Thomas School, he hired him for his *Kammermusik* at the beginning of 1806. At the time this chamber ensemble of seven members was assigned the task of performing the court concerts in the ducal palace. While in Oldenburg Fesca also availed himself of the opportunity to distinguish himself as a soloist: on 24 March 1806 he again performed a violin concerto of his own.

Political circumstances, however, brought Fesca's Oldenburg activities to an abrupt end. During the course of 1806 King Louis of Holland, a brother of Napoleon, occupied East Friesland and the Duchy of Oldenburg. The duke had to flee and did not make his way back to his residence city until

the following year. The situation continued to remain uncertain, and the duchy was annexed by France in 1810.

In view of these imponderabilities, it is not surprising that Fesca began looking for a job that would promise more security. He found such a post as the solo violinist in Jerome Bonaparte's court orchestra in the Kingdom of Westphalia in Kassel, which had been established by Napoleon in 1807. The earlier ducal orchestra from Braunschweig, Louis Spohr's earlier home, farmed the core of the orchestra, and it was complemented by musicians from inside and outside the region. The busy Johann Friedrich Reichardt was hired as music director, but when he resigned from this post in Kassel after not even a year of service, efforts were made to obtain the services of the by then famous Beethoven from Vienna. Fesca took advantage of a trip to his native Magdeburg to establish contact with Kassel. He was granted permission to perform at the court, was hired, and soon came to be regarded as "the best violinist in Kassel", as the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* of Leipzig reported of him in 1810.

Already in 1810–11 the first symptoms of the lung ailment that forced him to withdraw from public performance for almost two years become apparent. During the subsequent year he made up for his absence with an all-the-more substantial round of activities. During the 1812/13 concert season he not only performed on various occasions as a soloist, presenting concertos by Spohr, but also witnessed the premiere of his first two symphonies. In the meantime he had also established himself as a composer of string quartets in Kassel's middle-class quartet circles.

By then his financial circumstances were also so solid that he had the means to marry Charlotte Dingelstadt, the daughter of the hornist Johann Heinrich Dingelstadt, in May 1812. The marriage produced four sons, and the second eldest son, Alexander (1820–49), later made a name for himself as a pianist and composer. Friedrich Rochlitz, Fesca's first biographer, termed the Kassel years the happiest years in Fesca's life.

Once again, however, political events required Fesca to find a new line of work. After Napoleon's Russian military campaign had failed in 1812, his whole power base in Germany, including the Kingdom of Westphalia ruled by his brother, was under threat. Already at the beginning of 1813 the court in Kassel undertook preparations to flee, if such an eventuality became necessary. The Battle of the Nations near Leipzig in October 1813 sealed its fate. Jerome fled before advancing Cossack troops, and in November, the Prince Elector, who had been forced to flee in 1807, made his return.

The royal court orchestra was disbanded, but Fesca had mode arrangements for himself. Already in the late summer he had established contact with the grand ducal court theater in Karlsruhe and had successfully engaged in discussions about his candidacy for the recently established post of solo violinist. He used the time remaining until his assumption of the new post in April 1814 for a trip to Vienna to visit his younger brother Carl August and in order to make his compositions known to the public and publishers in the Danube metropolis. He performed in private chamber circles with string quartets and string quintets, evidently with success, as Louis Spohr, who was also in Vienna at the time, reported in his memoirs, "Fesca [...] had made great progress both as a composer and as a violinist. His quartets and quintets, presented by him purely, completely, and with taste, met with a very favorable reception in Vienna and with a good response among the publishers there". Indeed, during the following years works by Fesca were published for the first time by the Vienna publishers P. Mecchetti and S. A. Steiner. These works included his Symphony No. 1 op. 6 in 1818. On his return to Karlsruhe, Fesca quickly advanced from the post of solo violinist to that of concertmaster.

Already in 1816, however, his lung ailment again made itself manifest. Fesca found it necessary to request a leave of absence; his request was granted, and his leave began in the summer of that year. His illness did not prevent him from composing, and during these summer months he wrote his third

symphony. Fesca not only carried out his duties in the court orchestra, but also, insofar as his health allowed him to do so, performed as the conductor of the concerts of the *Museumsgesellschaft* middle-class concert society. Already in 1817 he was regarded as "the shining star not merely of our orchestra but of the whole of music here", as Alexander von Dusch, the librettist of Fesca's opera *Cantemire* and the Karlsruhe correspondent of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, put it.

As a composer Fesca had finally established himself in the public arena. His works henceforth were published by the renowned Leipzig houses of Peters, Breitkopf & Härtel, and Hofmeister and usually received very positive reviews in the music press. No less a figure than Carl Maria von Weber was occasioned by Fesca's string quartets to pen some fundamental statements about Fesca's compositions in a lengthy essay.

In the spring of 1821 Fesca's illness again erupted with such a vehemence that he had to fear for his lite. Once again, however, he recovered, but was so weak that he could no longer discharge his duties in the court orchestra. A series of spa stays in Baden, Koblenz, and Bad Ems during the subsequent years could not halt the worsening condition of his health. He died on May 24, 1826, at the age of thirty-seven.

Symphonies

Symphony No 1 in E flat major, op. 6

1. Andante – Allegro
2. Andante con moto
3. Menutto. Allegro
4. Finale. Allegro

Fesca composed his Symphony No. 1 in E flat major op. 6 at the very latest in the summer of 1812 but probably some time before and perhaps during the years 1810–11, when illness forced him to refrain from concert appearances. The premiere was held on 18 October 1812 in a concert organized by Fesca himself. A very well-intentioned report appeared in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*; on the basis of this symphony the reviewer prophesied him a dazzling future as a composer: "What stricter criticism would perhaps have to remark here and there in detail does not in general deprive the work of its value; and a composer who is so successful with his first symphony certainly gives the most well-founded hope of becoming what others, in the same stage, already thought they were – a master."

The "stricter criticism" alluded to in the review would probably have found fault with the most striking fact that the first movement of the work openly pays homage to a model, namely, to the corresponding movement from Mozart's Symphony KV 543 in the same key. Both movements have in common a slow introduction of strong harmonic stamp and an allegro part maintained in dancy 3/4 time. The orchestral tutti following the presentation of the primary theme is very similar in the two symphonies. In one point, however, Fesca is considerably more radical than Mozart here (and in the following movements): he practices the principle of *durch-brochener Satz*, of "filigree composing", taken over more from Haydn than from Mozart, the principle of instrumental alternation within phrases and formal units, on what was then an unprecedented scale. The primary theme of the first movement, for example, not only is repeated immediately in the woodwinds after its first sounding in the strings, this in keeping with the practice of the times, but also, so to speak, is "fragmented" instrumentally into its component motifs until the entry of the orchestral tutti: some of its parts are repeated with variations in the strings, while it is heard in its entirety in the woodwinds. Fesca again takes up this method in modified form (to be specific, in the distribution to high and low levels instead

of to the winds and strings) for the secondary theme, which is recognizably dependent on the primary theme, before the closing group, as a powerful orchestral tutti, concludes the exposition. The development section is largely dominated by a fugato with a subject derived from the head of the primary theme. The recapitulation taking over the exposition largely without modification is followed by a short coda strengthening the principal key of E flat major.

The principle of "filigree structure" also stamps the compositional technique of the slow second movement in A flat major. The initial theme of this movement employs the orchestral blocks of strings and winds as a structuring device: it is hardly imaginable as a melody line in an orchestral group.

The principle is employed in a manner similar to the first movement in the trio of the third movement, but here the motif employed recognizably draws on elements from the primary theme in the first movement. This third movement, a minuet, is remarkable insofar as the key of the main part strangely shifts between C minor and E flat major.

Only the finale, in form a peculiar mixed form combining sonata and rondo, refrains from the extensive use of "filigree structure". Its primary and secondary themes are closely interrelated, and in their continuous flow are typical rondo or rondo-couplet themes. Fesca nevertheless upgrades the movement symphonically through renewed use of contrapuntal compositional methods in the middle part and a concluding intensification in the manner of a coda.

Symphony No 2 in D major, op. 10

1. Poco Adagio – Allegro molto assai
2. Andante con moto
3. Scherzo. Presto
4. Finale. Allegro molto assai

When exactly Fesca composed his Second Symphony cannot be determined for certain. In any event, its composition occurred between 1809 and 1813, during his Kassel years, and its first documented performance took place in Kassel during the first half of 1813. With this symphony Fesca continued the success obtained by his first symphonic work shortly before in Kassel. A report about its performance stated, "It corresponds completely to the expectations created by Mr. F.'s first symphony, and at the same time is shorter and more pleasing". Compared to Fesca's first and third symphonies, the second symphony is indeed a work of more limited dimensions and produces a "pleasing" tone in the slow introduction of the sort that is seldom to be found in the symphonic music of those times.

Immediately after the opening chord an extended wind cantilena creates a subdued mood that has little in common with the harmonic groping and seeking which, in keeping with the generic norm, tend to be proper to introductions. The other movements remain true to the character of the work expounded in this way, and it is thus that Fesca lends the work a unity in extraordinariness. Harmonically, the first and second subjects of the first movement are both built on a simple cadential motion. In the first case a violin figuration beginning liberatingly after rhythmic congestion and a melodically memorable sixth interval is involved, and in the second case the foundation is formed by a filigree contrast line developing in the interplay between strings and winds which, however, is not detrimental to the character of swift nimbleness stamping the whole movement. The compatibility of the two themes is underscored by their simultaneous presentation during the course of the development section. The recapitulation is slightly abbreviated over against the exposition in its transitional parts and assumes the simultaneity of the two themes in the second-subject region, thus documenting the fact that Fesca was aware of the problem of simple thematic restitution in the recapitulation.

Although the second movement (*Andante con moto*, A major, 6/8 time), exhibits the typical outline of the sonata-form movement without a development section typical of slow movements of those times, the first subject has a character reminiscent of a romance and in complete contrast to the emotional-symphonic character of the grand adagio (and a second part from which the second subject is derived). Here too Fesca remains true to the basic tone of the symphony introduced at the beginning of the work.

The *Scherzo Presto* in D minor corresponds no less to this with its melancholy *perpetuum mobile* character. This movement is one of the most original and Forward-Iooking movements in the whole of Fesco's symphonic music inasmuch as its elegiac elegance anticipates the attempts of the second half of the century to lend the scherzo new expressive regions beyond the Beethovian type.

The finale also displays innovative elements. It neither corresponds to the pre-Beethovian rousing-finale type, usually a rondo or a sonata rondo in 2/4 time, nor fulfills that important function allotted to the last movement within the framework of a finale-oriented symphony such as is represented, for example, by Beethoven's third, fifth, and ninth symphonies. All that recalls the rondo form is the short resumption of the initial theme before the beginning of the development section. In somewhat of a contradiction to the continuously motoric 6/8 rhythm, it operates largely with contrapuntal means without, however, bringing in a fugue proper. Even the conclusion of the work holds in store an element of surprise: Fesca does without a thunderous coda and instead has the motion continuum gradually fade away in the filigree texture in the strings to descending wind chords before two succinct orchestral beats set an abrupt end point.

Symphony No 3 in D major, op. 13

1. Poco Adagio – Allegro molto
2. Adagio ma non troppo
3. Scherzo. Presto
4. Finale. Allegro molto

Fesca composed his Third Symphony during the summer of 1816. Three years later it was published in a part edition. The first documented performance was held in the Gewandhaus in Leipzig on November 25, 1819. The reviewer of this performance, writing in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, may have nicely summed up his impression with "It is certainly the most successful among the three [symphonies] published to date" but also thought that it was his duty to indicate that the work was composed, "many noisy passages notwithstanding, not in the genuine symphonic style but more in the quartet style with a thousand little, extremely difficult details, tossing around of the modulation at every moment". It is difficult to decide whether this objection was founded on the symphony itself or is not rather to have originated in Fesca's reputation as a composer of string quartets of extraordinarily complex compositional design. George Onslow, who, like Fesca, was known to the music public primarily through his chamber oeuvre, met with similar responses to his symphonies a decade later.

Fesca moves much closer to the ideal of the "great symphony" set by Beethoven reception as the norm in his third symphony than in his second symphony. The introduction is shorter than the introduction in the preceding symphony; after two unison wind beats and a four-measure string period, amid the employment of suspension dissonances on the dominant A heightening the tension, it explores the harmonic surroundings of the main D major key. The first subject of the first movement appears with manifold embellishments but can be traced back to a care consisting of the descending fourth from the subdominant G to the main tone D. It is thus that it may be said to follow the principle of thematic economy so characteristic of Beethoven's symphonies. The second subject, it too stamped structurally by the fourth interval, is presented in filigree between the winds and strings. It interrupts,

even if only episodically, the raging flow of the eighth continuum urging on unstoppably until this point. (The motion geared to the technique of violin playing in this continuum may have been one reason for the nineteenth-century critic's abovementioned admonition.) The closing group enters with a blaring wind fanfare, and the development section obtains completely new aspects from the thematic material: the four-tone main motif is combined amid continuous modulations with its ascending inversion, and the second subject appears in a minor version of elegiac reserve. The recapitulation and coda pay proper due to the events of the development section insofar as the combination of the main motif with its inversion forms the point of departure for a powerfully effective concluding intensification.

The second movement (*Adagio ma non troppo*, G major, 3/4 time) follows the formal model of the sonata-form movement without a development section much more schematically than the corresponding movement in the second symphony. Nevertheless, its lyrical, wide-ranging melodicism, harmonically varied avoidance of cadences, and economically and just as effectively employed *sforzati* outbursts correspond to the type of slow movement for full orchestra in a way drawing less on classical models than on operating methods of later generations of composers.

The beginning of the *Scherzo. Presto* (fourth ascent in the trumpets and horns) creates the impression of an answer to the beginning of the first movement (fourth descent in the winds). The main body of the movement seems to carry to the extreme Beethoven's scherzo technique consisting of the employment of fast tempo for phrasing contrary to the meter and striking in effect. It is of racing velocity (and Fesca prescribed this pace exactly in his metronome marking.) In contrast, the trio, through-composed without repetition, has a string part hurrying melancholily on its way, dissonant wind chords over drumrolls, and shreds of melodic fragments in the oboe and prepares in the manner of an intermezzo for the scherzo recapitulation.

Fesca's whole symphonic ambition is rendered apparent in the *Finale. Allegro molto*. With its 639 measures it must number among the longest concluding movements in the symphonic literature of those times. As in the first two movements, Fesca also continues along the formal lines of his second symphony in the finale: all that remains of (sonata-)rondo originally prescribed by the generic norm for the finale is the repetition of the main theme before the beginning of the development section. But the extended length of the movement offers opportunities for orchestral development such as had not been employed previously by Fesca. The complex with the first subject, a triumphal march in its thematic physiognomy, is an intensification extending over seventy measures successively unfolding the instrumental and dynamic potential of the orchestra. In addition to its formal function of the modulation to the dominant, the transition contains a choral episode in the clarinets and bassoons modulating to remote keys. The lyrical passages from the area of the second subject are repeatedly punctuated by heterogeneous passages such as mysterious string tremolandi in *pianissimo* or inserts of the beginning of the main theme in *fortissimo*. In this way the second subject and closing group are blended into a formal unity.

Overtures

Overture in D major, op. 41

Andante – Allegro molto assai

Overture in C major, op. 43

Andante – Allegro vivace

The Overture in D major op. 41 and Overture in C major op. 43 number among Fesca's last compositions. He probably wrote the former work during the first months of 1825 and the latter during the final months of the same year. Although the generic designation suggests concert overtures, they were not intended as such. As Fesca communicated to Oberhofmarschall von Gayling in Karlsruhe in connection with op. 43 on 27 January 1826, they were a "contribution to the entr'actes at the court theater". This means that the overtures were to fill in the intermission between two acts of a theater piece. The generic designation "overture" for the two works is nevertheless not incorrect because they correspond in form to the then current type of the concert overture, which was a sonata form with a relatively short development section. Fesca may also have reckoned with the possibility that they might find use in concert performance – which was also actually the case, as all sorts of different performances document, for example, in the *Euterpe* music society in Leipzig in October 1832 and in February 1833.

Overture from the opera *Cantemire*

During the last ten years of his life Fesca did not compose any more symphonies either because the Karlsruhe music world offered no opportunity for the performance of new symphonies or because he took to heart Carl Maria von Weber's recommendation in the abovementioned essay and also tried his hand at composition for voice. Fesca increasingly turned to vocal music after 1818, composing various sacred works as well as the two operas *Cantemire* (1819) and *Omar und Leïla* (1822). The overtures to these two works suffice to show that he was also capable of composing in keeping with the dramatic occasion. The wild impetus of the *Cantemire* overture takes into account the gloomy action of the opera (a rescue action evidently oriented toward the libretto of *Fidelio* with the important difference that here the loving woman kills the tyrant), and no less so the exotic fascination of the *Omar* overture fittingly prepares for the scenery of on imaginary Orient. The two opera overtures proved to be Fesca's most enduring orchestral works. While performances of his symphonies are no longer attested after 1840, the *Camtemire* overture was still being performed in Stuttgart, Frankfurt, Berlin, and Leipzig during the 1840s. As far as can be determined today, the last performance took place at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig on November 15, 1855. The overture to *Omar und Leïla* enjoyed similar popularity. II was performed in Koblenz during the 1840/41 season, in Cologne in 1843/44, and in Berlin during the spring of 1844.

Overture from the opera "Omar und Leïla"

Andante – Allegro

In the autumn of 1822 Fesca composed the romantic opera *Omar und Leïla* as his op. 28 to a text by Ludwig Robert, who was Rahel Varnhagen's brother. In keeping with the exotic and fairy-tale subject of this work, Fesca endeavored to create an instrumentation, melody, and harmony that would lend his overture a foreign air. A beginning in trombone style, string tremolandi, and a somewhat disconnected motif almost hovering in the air in the woodwinds, a just as isolated trumpet signal without any harmonic basis at all – all these components lend the overture a stamp qualifying it as an early contribution to musical exoticism in Germany.

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Translated by Susan Marie Praeder