Antonín Reicha (1770–1836)

Around 1800 the compositions of Antonín Reicha (1770–1836) were regarded by some as affected and bizarre. At the same time, however, he was reckoned, in Gerber's words, "among our most important young and promising musicians". Today Reicha is known to music scholars mostly for his theoretical works. These works, which he began publishing in Paris in 1814, brought him a professorship at the conservatory there in 1818. Translations of these writings, including the German translations by Carl Czerny, also soon made Reicha famous as a theorist outside France. Today's performing musicians hold Reicha's chamber music in especially high regard. This is above all true of his wind quintets, works representing the beginning and first high point of their genre, this owing to their fine individual treatment of the instruments, but his works of mixed wind and string instrumentation have also met with interest. Reicha composed most of the works we associate with his name today during the years following his final move to Paris in 1808. His renewed attempts to establish himself as an opera composer in the French capital were no more successful than his first attempt to do so in 1799–1800. As a result of his failures in this area, he was denied a place in the Académie des Beaux Arts until 1835: in Paris one had to have met the challenge of the opera stage to be taken seriously as a composer.

The judgment cited above was based not on Reicha's Paris compositions but on the works he composed in earlier years and began publishing in Leipzig about 1800. Some of his orchestral works from this period remained unpublished. The numerous published works from this period included mainly piano works, chamber music for stringed instruments, and the op. 41 and op. 42 symphonies (cf. the combined reviews in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, Leipzig, 1806–7 and 1808). During these years, from 1800 to 1808, Reicha was living mostly in Vienna, where he taught, composed, and enjoyed direct access to Joseph Haydn. According to his own testimony, Reicha did not receive formal instruction from Haydn but did obtain numerous valuable tips from him. From 1785 on Reicha had lived in Bonn, where he served as a flautist in the Electorate of Cologne Orchestra under the direction of his uncle Josef Reicha and attended the university and received composition instruction from Christian Gottlob Neefe together with Ludwig van Beethoven, who was a violist in the same orchestra. Reicha resided in Hamburg from 1794 to 1798, and it was there that he thought through and developed the philosophy of education which he so successfully employed during later years. His *Obaldi or The French in Egypt*, an opera composed for a French opera company led by Pierre Rode, also dates to his Hamburg years. Reicha had it performed in Paris at the recommendation of French emigrées but had no luck with it on the Paris stage. In contrast, his Symphony No. 1 in E flat major (later published as his op. 41) and other orchestral works enjoyed many successful performances and brought him the esteem of numerous French composers. But this was not enough to secure him a permanent post, and so he left Paris for Vienna.

The orchestral works brought together on this compact disc help us to pinpoint Antonín Reicha's compositional position around 1800. He must have composed most of them before or during his Vienna years. Since the manuscripts are not dated and the first editions did not follow until ca. 1806 (op 41) and 1823 (the overture), a precise dating is hardly possible. These works corroborate the characterization of his music as "bizarre" and "affected" but also as "full of talent" and "of manifold knowledge".

Irmlind Capelle
Translated by Susan Marie Praeder

Reicha and Bonn: A Visionary at an Enlightened Court

When appraising the estate of the recently departed Professor Anton Reicha in 1836, a Parisian notary and his assistant came across a considerable trove of musical manuscripts and prints. Not knowing how to value items which were not fine wine or furniture, they jotted down in Reicha's probate list, "un lot de vielle musique écrite à la main et gravée … ne méritant aucune description" (a pile of old music, manuscript and engraved … not meriting any description). By some miracle, these were not all discarded or sold for scrap, as was often the case with deceased composers not named Beethoven or Mozart. Instead, the unpublished autograph scores stayed in the family and, almost a century later, were donated to the Bibliothèque du Conservatoire de Paris, where they silently slumbered for forty years before being transferred to the Bibliothèque nationale, where they silently slumbered for another fifty. By then, some of those manuscripts, which had been precariously held together with string in the first place, had fallen apart and ended up in separate boxes. (Given their creator's carelessness during his life, they might have already been that way at his death.) Hardly any of these works had been dated, so the few curious scholars who had braved the archive over the years had merely taken stock and given their best guess at these works' chronology and biographical context.

In the run-up to the 250th anniversary of Reicha's birth in 2020, librarians and musicologists gradually began to bring these effects back into order. For the first time, it has been possible to date many of his unpublished works based on their paper and create modern editions so that ensembles and audiences can discover them. The most striking result is a fundamental reappraisal of Reicha's creative output during his Bonn years (1785–1794). While his early works were once considered entirely lost, it has come to light that Reicha was extraordinarily prolific from around 1790, completing at least four symphonies, five or six concert overtures, and many concertos and concert arias.

Even more surprising is the ambitious scale and content of these works. Both of the completely preserved symphonies have performance durations that rival the longest such works he would have known. The concert overtures, which range from eight to eighteen minutes in length, were sophisticated essays in what was for the early 1790s a relatively novel genre. Stylistically, they pair conventional late-eighteenth-century melodic gestures with harmonies and rhythms so advanced that they would not have sounded out of place in 1840s Paris or 1870s Bayreuth. The Bonn works already show innovations, like unconventional meters and a unique approach to counterpoint, that would occupy Reicha for the next fifteen years. Their technical demands on the players are also, by the standards of the time, immense. More intriguingly, they present none of the technical lapses, ineffective instrumental combinations, or uncertain proportions that one would expect to hear in any composer's first attempts at writing for full orchestra. In many moments these works show the same penchant for radically modern sounds, the same tendency to question established musical norms, that would characterize Reicha's personality throughout the rest of his life.

This sudden emergence of a true musical iconoclast in a small German town becomes easier to understand the more one knows about the electoral court in which Reicha's training unfolded. His uncle and guardian, Joseph Reicha, was hired by Elector Maximilian Franz in 1785 to direct the orchestra. Max Franz was the member of a dynasty, the Habsburgs, for whom the patronage of music was a matter of family identity. He stood out even among his siblings for his music collection, which was among the largest in Europe, as well as his ability to recognize talent. Joseph Reicha helped him expand the orchestra by hiring excellent young players, including Andreas and Bernhard Romberg, as well as professionalizing the wind section. By 1790, when Anton joined the Hofkapelle as a violinist and flutist, the court orchestra was considered among the finest, and it was favorably compared with Mannheim. Besides a fine opera house, regular concerts (still a rarity in most places) became a fixture of Bonn's musical life.

Anton Reicha was therefore in an ideal position at an impressionable age to learn firsthand some of the most noteworthy symphonies and other orchestral works from across the continent. Among the 660 orchestral works in the elector's library were nearly all of Haydn's symphonies up to No. 92 and most from Mozart's last decade. New works arrived with extraordinary rapidity in Bonn, sometimes mere weeks after they were on the market. Reicha and his friend Ludwig van Beethoven (who played in the viola section and the occasional piano concerto) passionately discussed the works they played. In his autobiography, he credits this experience with igniting in him a passion for composing: "Through the daily performance of good music, instrumental and vocal, my enthusiasm for this art reached an extreme. Up to then I was just a simple performer, and a completely ordinary musician at that; but suddenly my passion for composition became all-encompassing; it was a veritable fever."

Nevertheless, his enthusiasm was at first kept in check by his uncle Joseph. Anton revered him, remembering him in his autobiography as an "excellent artist" with a "fine sensibility" who "conducted the orchestra with excellent ability." This made it all the more painful that Joseph disapproved of him composing, claiming he "lacked the necessary talent and was wasting valuable time." Anton studied in secret, buying "the best compositional treatises in Germany" and stowing them under his mattress. We can assume that he stole at least a few glances at scores of this music that his uncle had borrowed from the elector's library. Eventually he got tired of the secrecy:

"One morning, I tucked my books under my arm and went down to see my uncle. 'Look,' I told him, 'this is what I bought with my savings. I couldn't go on living if you took these away from me.' He looked over the books and shook his head. 'Keep them,' he replied, 'I can't stop you from wasting your time.'"

By the time he was 21, Anton had already written several large-scale orchestral works. (His claim in the autobiography that his first symphony was performed at 17 is not supported by the evidence.) His uncle's resistance had softened; he even seemed to take a certain pleasure in hearing the orchestra try out this new music. But his reaction to Anton's technical skills was still not without a hint of sarcasm. "During the rehearsals of my first symphony, he smiled constantly. Afterward, he told me, 'Not bad; this symphony could amount to something if it were cleaned up a bit.'"

Joseph Reicha was indeed a fine composer whose cello concertos had once impressed Leopold Mozart, and the influence of his own three symphonies can still be heard in his nephew's works. His judgment of this music as lacking polish seems to stem not so much from a deficit in understanding, than the same aesthetic "generation gap" that is familiar from early Beethoven criticism. Whenever Beethoven violated the norms of whatever genre or form he was composing in, some critics assumed he was simply ignorant of those norms. A famous example comes from his 1790s variation sets for piano, whose tendency to proceed through violent contrast rather than smooth and logical transitions led one critic to the conclusion, "he does not understand how to write good variations."

In each of the works recorded here, Reicha subverts or sidesteps eighteenth-century conventions, sometimes radically so. But the listener is sometimes left wondering whether the composer is aware of just how far he is departing from convention. If the young Beethoven sets up expectations and then dramatically violates them, the young Reicha stakes a claim somewhere outside those expectations and proceeds completely logically.

John D. Wilson

Symphony in E flat major Op. 41

1. Largo – Allegro spiritoso
2. Andante un poco adagio

3. Menuetto. Allegro – Trio
4. Un poco vivo

The reviewer of the *Symphony in E flat major op. 41* regarded it as highly successful, tightly constructed, and unified. Like all Reicha's works from this period, it was published by Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig. Its four movements bear the headings "Largo – Allegro spiritoso", "Andante un poco adagio", "Allegro", and "Un poco vivo".

The first, third, and fourth movements are in the key of E flat major; the second is in the key of B flat major. In its overall form the symphony reflects the norm established by Haydn and Mozart in their last symphonies. The details of the symphony do contain a few surprises but nothing that would have taken away from the overall impression of unity it had for the composer's contemporaries: this was not a work that was labeled as "affected, in order to appear original".

For example, the beginning of the principal theme in the first movement is expanded by a full measure with the eighth-note precursor in the accompaniment. As a result, the theme is in nine measures instead of eight. Moreover, the entry sequence of the wind instruments in the conclusion of the trio is so tightly constructed that there is no time to rest at all and the repetition of the minuet seems convincing. The reviewer in the *AMZ* singled out the C minor middle section of the last movement for special mention: "A somewhat strange, unexpected movement [begins]; it is continued until the return of the theme in various imitations and items of usage allowing us to recognize the good contrapuntist." A "new", self-contained motif is introduced just prior to the conclusion. Along with these details, the symphony is also distinguished by a wealth of variants, skillful, varied instrumentation, and very effective structure. Here we can only agree with Reicha's contemporaries, "Certainly this symphony deserves to be widely known".

Irmlind Capelle
Translated by Susan Marie Praeder

Symphony in D Major, AJR I:17

1. Allegro maestoso
2. Andante
3. Menuetto. Allegro vivace
4. Finale. Allegro vivace

This ambitious four-movement work was probably the first of Reicha's two completely preserved Bonn symphonies to be finished. Its autograph score was for a long time in a dismembered state and preserved in three different boxes, only reunited in 2021. Its first movement contains rich contrasts in its orchestration, an unusual formal outline, and a wide dynamic range. Much like in mature Mozart, we hear a wide variety of different themes in the opening minutes. The development section contains a genuine surprise: Whereas developments in the classical tradition typically contrast familiar material in different ways, here it is built around a completely new theme. (This innovation is usually credited to Beethoven's Eroica Symphony, but in fact Haydn's "Farewell" Symphony, written in 1772, accomplishes something similar. Reicha and Beethoven certainly would have gotten to know this symphony in Bonn while playing in the orchestra.) The first and last movements of the present symphony also contain idiosyncratic recapitulations in which the themes heard in the exposition reappear in scrambled order.

Possibly one of the more unconventional features of this symphony is Reicha's approach to phrase length. Instead of the usual two- or four-measure phrases, he frequently writes asymmetrical

ones in groups of three, five, and ten. Put differently, the melodies often sound like they are stretched a little longer than expected, lending the musical flow an expansive quality.

Beyond this, each of the four movements is full of novel touches and charming surprises. The second movement seems to promise an elegantly Mozartean main theme (in the same key and meter as the second movement of the Prague Symphony); but here it not only keeps modulating to distant keys, it is followed by a dark middle section based on a frenetic tremolo figure. The Menuetto calls for a far faster tempo than usual, approaching the speed of a Beethovenian Scherzo. And the energetic finale, in much the same manner as Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony, contains multiple fugato passages. Above it all is an ebullient deployment of orchestral color in all its varieties. Throughout, Reicha revels in the possibilities of the orchestra, particularly in dialogues between strings and winds, and the fulminant addition of horns, trumpets, and timpani.

John D. Wilson

Sinfonia concertante for Flute, Violin and Orchestra in G major

1. Allegro
2. Andante
3. Rondo. Allegro

The *Concertante for Flute, Violin, and Orchestra in G major* also adheres to a traditional movement sequence (Allegro – Andante – Rondo. Allegro) but exhibits some elements departing even more strongly from the norm. For example, after the orchestral introduction each solo instrument enters with its own new theme. The upbeat flute theme induces the entire orchestra to abandon the downbeat for the upbeat. The recurring melodic phrases in the further course of the movement, though always related to the preceding such phrases, also always produce the effect of newness. The soloists are given opportunities to engage in competition in virtuoso episodes.

The second movement offers an especially clear example of Reicha's skill in submitting a melody to ever new variation and continuation. Here the symmetrical two-part structure serves only as a weak support.

In the concluding Rondo the boundaries between the refrains and couplets blur. At the conclusion a variation sequence on a folk-style theme in eight measures forms the final couplet. The most striking feature of this movement is its chamber-musical design. This design is already hinted at in the two-part beginning with the solo flute and first violin and persists over long stretches of the movement.

Irmlind Capelle
Translated by Susan Marie Praeder

Overture in D major (5/8)

Allegro un poco vivo

At first glance Reicha's *Overture in D major* in 5/8 time seems to have the best claim to the label "bizarre". In his theoretical writings Reicha spoke out against the notion of the sole validity of symmetrical forms in thematic and metrical design. He regarded themes of five and seven measures as equal to symmetrical groupings. He had already displayed his predilection for composite metrical types and the opportunities offered by them in his *Études for Piano Solo op. 30* (Paris, ca. 1800) and *Practical Examples* (Vienna, 1803), which may be regarded as the precursors of his great theoretical works. The flexibility of 5/8 time, allowing as it does for divisions into 3 + 2 or 2 + 3 eighth notes and various other combinations based on eighth notes, represented an exciting challenge for Reicha's art of experimentation.

The overture displays a wealth of rhythmic, melodic and harmonic color and requires a high level of virtuosity from the orchestra. It surely would have met with an unfavorable response from the *AMZ* reviewers had they known of it! Two hundred years later, however, we are more inclined to look for the seeds of future musical developments in Antonin Reicha's compositions. And his works offer us fertile ground for such an undertaking. He was not a composer who blindly followed traditional norms. Rather he submitted them to close scrutiny and went beyond them as he saw fit. In so doing he often pointed far ahead into the musical future – a fact obscured by the Beethoven cult, which has caused us to overlook many a contribution by his contemporaries to the field of symphonic music.

Irmlind Capelle
Translated by Susan Marie Praeder

Overture in D major, AJR I:8a

Few of Reicha's early works seized his imagination at so many stages of his career as the current Overture in D Major, one of whose copies bears the title "Grande Ouverture d'un Concert ou d'une Académie de la Musique." No fewer than three copies of the first version in his hand have survived, the first made in Bonn and two fair copies made in Hamburg. Thirty years later, in 1823, he completely reworked the overture in Paris.

Reicha's pride in the work is not difficult to understand, given its innovations in harmony and rhythm. The 5/8 meter in which the Allegro un poco vivo was composed would return in several of Reicha's subsequent works, most notably in the Trente-six fugues pour Piano (1802–1804). He would vehemently defend this meter in the preface to that work, in which he acknowledged its use in various folk music traditions, as well as in the avant-garde manifesto the Practische Beispiele (c. 1798): "Quintuple meter ... has the same claim on our feelings as the meters of 2/4, 3/4, or 6/8. It is just as able as any other at depicting and painting those affects which only music can express." While this overture seems to be the earliest known instance of European concert music written entirely in quintuple meter, Reicha claims to have encountered even earlier attempts: "People assured me that someone had already tried to write in this meter, and because these experiments were not accepted, a prejudice developed declaring that the meter goes against human feeling. But when I investigated the matter further, I found that these were nothing other than meaningless, tasteless, abortive trifles ... Let no one think that composing in 5/8 time has required greater effort from me than with conventional meters. In fact, I became used to it very quickly, and my daily exercises with it have likewise convinced me that its use could easily become widespread, if the weight of prejudice against it were no longer there."

John D. Wilson

Overture in C major, AJR I:2

The shorter of the two early overtures with slow introductions, the C major is by no means less ambitious than its avant-garde sister work, the Overture in D major AJR I:8a. Like the D major, its slow introduction is far longer and more discursive than any symphonic introduction he would have known. Reicha excerpted its mysterious opening and closing chromatic chord progressions approvingly in an unpublished treatise on practical harmony from the late 1790s as an example of "the manifold twists and turns of harmony, of the various exceptional cases in the connection and resolution of chords, of rapid and surprising modulations, of the many interesting ways that figuration can be realized through harmony, and of the [augmented] sixth chord, which is capable of so many beloved transformations." And the ensuing Presto may indeed mark the beginning of his compositional fascination with overtly contrapuntal writing, especially canon and fugato.