Antoine REICHA

COMPLETE PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME ONE
THREE SONATAS, OP. 46
TWO FANTASIAS, OP. 59

Henrik Löwenmark

FIRST RECORDINGS
History has not dealt even-handedly with the composer Antoine Reicha (1770–1836): some of his many achievements have been emphasised at the expense of other, equally important activities. Most unfairly of all, his role as a highly influential pedagogue, theorist and innovator has overshadowed his music. The runaway success of his wind quintets has obscured the fact that he wrote many works, often much more interesting ones, in other genres; and his reputation as a composer mainly of chamber music has resulted in surprisingly little interest being shown in his rich and extensive output for piano. Although important steps have been taken during the last decades – recordings above all, since new editions of, and academic research into, his music are still infrequent occurrences – the picture that posterity holds of him remains incomplete. In his large and admittedly uneven production, there is a wide spectrum of artistic attitudes and approaches, often contradictory. Within this œuvre, one finds dry academic exercises, highly original experiments and works of enormous spirit and playfulness, as well as pieces of considerable depth and weight. Music for piano forms a substantial part of that output – surprisingly, since he was never active as a professional pianist, in contrast to so many of his contemporaries who started their careers as virtuosos performing their own music on the most fashionable instrument of the day.

Born in Prague on 26 February 1770, Antonín Rejcha\(^1\) was only ten months old at the death of his father (who had been released from serfdom only six years earlier), leaving him in the care of a mother and stepfather who did nothing about his education. The thirst for knowledge that marked his adult career was already a potent element in his make-up and so, at age eleven, he took care of his own destiny and fled to his paternal grandfather in Klatovy, a village near the Bavarian border, and then

\(^1\) One occasionally encounters Reicha’s name in this original Czech spelling; during the periods he spent in France as well as his time in Vienna, he gave his first name as Antoine.
continued towards Wallerstein, in Swabia, to his uncle Josef, composer and principal cellist in the private orchestra of the local count. Josef took the boy in and taught him to play the flute, violin and piano; his French wife taught her nephew French and German. In 1785, Josef was appointed principal *Kapellmeister* to the court in Bonn. Anton, of course, moved with his adopted family and before long was playing flute in the electoral orchestra, alongside a fifteen-year-old violist by the name of Ludwig van Beethoven.

Reicha soon began studying composition. In his brief autobiography, *Notes sur Antoine Reicha* (c. 1824), he writes that, when he moved to Hamburg in 1794, he had abandoned all plans of being a musician, although that did not prevent him from giving piano lessons. In other words, he must have developed a somewhat different relationship with the instrument: it never became a vehicle for virtuosic display, nor for obtaining employment from some nobleman or for finding new pupils. Rather, it became a very important vessel for experiment and pedagogical ideas as well as for purely ‘artful’ music. Indeed, the chief distinguishing feature of Reicha’s piano music is its innocent mixture of experimental, advanced, didactic and simple characteristics. There is an almost complete absence of the operatic fantasias and other popular pieces which at the time were flooding a growing market – Reicha seems to have refused to depend on them. And even when he is at his most entertaining, he never flirts with the listener or the performer.

Reicha may not have had the same thorough training in piano-playing as, for example, Beethoven and Clementi; and while he remained a practising musician, his main instrument was the flute, and so he did not have to keep up his pianism. This background may explain some of the ‘flaws’ (strange part-writing, odd doublings, ‘hollow’ sounds and so on) in his piano compositions – his textures are often not as full and rich as those of his more illustrious pianist colleagues. He also recurrently employed unusual pianistic textures, ranging in extremes from advanced solutions and figurations to a certain unidiomatic clumsiness. But these characteristics can be partly explained as the conscious, deliberate endeavour of his searching mind to go beyond the self-evident and conventionally euphonious – it was simply a matter of a very personal style, as with Janáček or Satie, for example. Be that as it may, one moves here in a territory with many strange contrasts and peculiar ways of writing, to which the ear takes time to become
accustomed, even to accept. The same goes for phrasing, form, pauses and harmony, where all sorts of surprises and peculiarities can be found.

Another trait is his sparing use of performing instructions, in contrast with a trend that was on a marked increase among his contemporaries, not least Beethoven. He rarely indicates more than two \textit{ff} or \textit{pp}; there are not many markings of \textit{forte} and \textit{piano} or for \textit{crescendo} and \textit{diminuendo} (signs or words); and indications like \textit{ritenuto}, \textit{calando}, \textit{rinforzando}, \textit{dolce}, \textit{agitato}, \textit{con espressione}, \textit{smorzando}, \textit{poco}, \textit{sempre} and so on are few and far between. Reicha’s view, perhaps influenced by tradition (which, of course, he accepted or rejected as he wished), can be found in the last sentence of the preface to the six piano trios published as his Op. 101: ‘Le grand mérite de l’exécution consiste en ce qu’on sente et devine les intentions de l’auteur, pour l’indication desquelles il n’existe pas de signes’ (‘The great merit in performance consists of how to feel and divine the intentions of the composer, for the indication of which there are no signs’). How well, then, did Reicha play the piano? To judge from the music itself he must have been quite accomplished, but that does not prove much; it simply isn’t known, even if he writes in his autobiography that he was often asked at informal gatherings to play some of the 36 Fugues.

In spite of these considerations, Reicha’s piano music as a whole has a higher musical density, so to speak, than that of Clementi, Dussek and Hummel, since their much larger output contains so many works of more or less routine character and/or in popular style. Here Reicha is much closer to his friend Beethoven in his seriousness of purpose and rejection of the demands of the market.

In preparing this project to record all of Reicha’s piano music (except, naturally enough, for a small number of works which still have to be found), I have divided it into three groups, corresponding as far as possible with the period of origin of each work but more often according to when and where they were published. The problems with dating many of these works are, first, that those manuscripts which still exist have no date of composition and, second, that many, demonstrably or at least probably, were written several years before they were published, by which time he had moved to another city. In a letter to the publisher Artaria in Vienna dated October 1797, Reicha offers a long
list of compositions for publication, including solo-piano and chamber works, some of which in all probability are identical with several pieces printed by Breitkopf & Härtel during his years in Vienna. But since it is hard to date works without any informative indication or comment, my guiding principle has been a combination of the periods in Reicha’s life, the opus numbering and different publishers: Hamburg/Paris, 1794–1802; Vienna, 1802–8; and Paris, 1808–36. When it comes to works in manuscript, stylistic, graphological and in some cases linguistic considerations have determined the placing of individual works in each group.

Another complicating factor is that many of the small pieces that Reicha included in different collections also exist in an alternative autograph version which can be slightly different. Several of them were probably written in Hamburg in 1794–99 but not published until he had settled in Paris, in 1799–1802, or even during the Vienna period. In these cases the location of the publisher has guided my decision on dating.

**Trois sonates, Op. 46**
The three sonatas published as Reicha’s Op. 46 – No. 1 in G major, No. 2 in B flat major and No. 3 in E major – may very well be identical with three of the works listed in the letter to Artaria from Hamburg, which, under the heading *Pour le Piano-Forte seul*, lists, among other things, *Sonates No. 1.2.3 [sic]* and *Trois Sonates pour le Piano Forte No. 1.2 [sic]*. These sonatas are stylistically close to several chamber-music works published by Breitkopf & Härtel c. 1802–4 (for example, the Violin Sonata, Op. 44, the Piano Trio, Op. 47, the Flute Sonata, Op. 52, and perhaps some of the string quartets, Opp. 48 and 49), which most probably correspond to works mentioned in the list. It was not until his Vienna period that Reicha was able to have a larger quantity (almost exclusively chamber or piano works) of his music published – though not one single piece by Artaria, as it happens.

A comparison of the three sonatas of Op. 46 with the four big sonatas (three of them named *Grande Sonate*) which undoubtedly were written in Vienna suggests that

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2 Reicha’s six quartets, Opp. 48 and 49, are the first to be released in the recording of the complete string quartets underway from the Kreutzer Quartet on Toccata Classics: Op. 48, Nos. 1 and 2, on toc0022 and Op. 48, No. 3, and Op. 49, No. 1, on toc0040. Op. 49, Nos. 2 and 3, will follow on toc0061.
the Op. 46 works were most probably composed at an earlier stage, even in Hamburg rather than in Paris. One trait is common to all three sonatas: an obvious admiration for and stylistic dependence on Haydn (and, to a lesser extent, Mozart). Thematic content, traits of character, a delight in surprise, the search for unexpected paths, a rejection of virtuosity and figuration for its own sake – all echo Haydn, not least in how the themes and motifs in each of the two first movements are connected to one another; that is, the monothematic model associated with the revered master. But within the framework of the Viennese classical style, there are many details, highly typical of Reicha, which reveal a different kind of mind at work: unusual textures, surprising harmonic deviations, sudden breaks in the musical flow, swift and unprepared changes of direction, and so on. Reicha both follows in the footsteps of his forerunners and at the same time plays with tradition in a very deliberate and personal manner, as if to show that there are other ways of doing things – he was no simple epigone and inevitably sets his stamp on the result.

The sonatas of Op. 46 are relatively small in scope and, like nine of his ten other sonatas, have only three movements. This pattern contrasts with the four-movement sonata which was then (in the 1790s) being established by Beethoven and, later, Clementi, Dussek and others. On the whole, Reicha is concise and sometimes almost laconic compared with his contemporaries and all three sonatas in Op. 46 are shorter than most of those by Haydn and Mozart. He often avoids establishing a single key for any length of time and instead heads swiftly, sometimes impatiently, onwards – a recurrent feature of his music in general.

Formally, the opening movements are rather discontinuous, displaying some surprising sectional displacements as well as sequence-like and ‘undynamic’ development sections in which the energy is lowered rather than raised. As often with Reicha, the slow movements are short and lyrical and not particularly expressive; if anything, they are more introvert and reflective and, in the Sonatas Nos. 2 and 3, sequential and rhapsodic respectively. The finales are energetic and humorous in character, full of Haydnesque wit, and differing in form: rondo, sonata-rondo and sonata form respectively.
One of Reicha’s idiosyncrasies is his use of more than two themes or motifs in contrast to what had become more or less standard at the time, above all by lesser composers. (Of course, there was no such thing as a textbook sonata form at this time as it was later defined. As Charles Rosen writes in *The Classical Style*: ‘It is, like the fugue, a way of writing, a feeling for proportion, direction and texture rather than a pattern’; that is, the different key-plateaux, tension/relaxation, dissonance/consonance are more important than any given order and number of themes and motifs.) Reicha sometimes also ignores the main theme in the development and often changes the order of the themes in the recapitulation. This approach can create a slightly muddled sense of form, even when the movements are relatively short, and it was sometimes criticised by his contemporaries.

Another very interesting trait is Reicha’s recurring interest in tritonal polarisation: the exposition of the first movement in the G major Sonata ends in D major; in the development, the next, more stable cadence takes the listener to A flat major; at this point the return to G major (the recapitulation) starts – after the expected preparatory dominant in D major. Thus the development has D major as its beginning and end and with A flat major as the pivot. The abrupt and unprepared swift changes from A flat major to E major and C major (in ff) in the development of the first movement of the G major Sonata are quite typical of Reicha – he was one of the earliest and most eager advocates and explorers of mediant harmony – and the full, almost brutal, chords in the recapitulation are another Reicha trait. The second movement, *Adagio molto*, sounds like a deliberate allusion to the slow movement in Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 21 in C major, k467; there is even a clear distinction between solo and tutti sections. This highly condensed movement, with its unusual formal disposition and proportions, shows Reicha’s very personal way of treating familiar material. The finale, marked *poco Presto*, is in part a kind of *perpetuum mobile* rondo with playful rhythmic displacements and surprises in the manner of Haydn but with a clear personal stamp.

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The most original aspect of the Allegro vivace⁴ which opens the B flat major Sonata, No. 2, is perhaps the contrast between the light character of the main theme and the sudden and very surprising change to the pensive secondary theme in F minor, lasting for 21 bars, and functioning as a bridge to F major where motifs from the beginning are used. The thin, not to say hollow, start of the development is also characteristic. In the recapitulation, the main theme comes after the bridge theme (here in B flat minor) functioning as the expected secondary theme – another original touch. By contrast, the way Reicha handles the closing section of the exposition/recapitulation is typical of Mozart. The Andante un poco Adagio⁵, being in a sort of abca form, resembles a slow movement from one of Haydn’s late symphonies: the theme itself could hardly be more Haydnesque, and the texture might easily be imagined as scored for strings in combination with exquisite woodwind parts – and yet the way the sections are put together, the subdued character and some of the pianistic details are very typical of Reicha. There is now and then a somewhat schematic, unorganic strain in his music which can be frustrating – but also fascinating, giving a special quality to several of his slow movements (this one among them), not least because of his personal use of full cadences and pauses between sections, which give the music a certain hesitant, reflective character. The Poco Presto finale⁶ has a folklike theme, emphasised in its F major variant with ‘bagpipe drones’ in the left hand just before the rondo theme returns and then again at the end of the movement – such textures were in fashion (as in, for example, several of Clementi’s and Dussek’s sonatas from the 1790s and early 1800s). This rustic character heightens the contrast with the second theme, with its slightly chromatic and languishing melody. The movement is in the form of a sonata-rondo, but Reicha’s idiosyncratic arrangement of its constituent sections rather obscures the form, despite the brevity of the movement.

The Allegro⁷ which opens the Sonata No. 3 in E major has a more ambitious design than the first movements of the previous two sonatas but likewise contains several motifs that are intercalated. The main theme, though (not least the third bar with its repetition and cadential move from a major chord in third position going to a major (or minor) chord in root position), plays a more important part here and it recurs
in all three movements. A remarkable and original feature in the whole movement, exceptional for the period, is that the second theme, in the exposition, is in A major instead of the expected B major – that is, on the subdominant. Subdominant excursions in first movements in major mode were, when used, reserved for the recapitulation as a feature mirroring or balancing the dominant in the exposition as a way of stressing the return to the tonic. The move away from the tonic takes off already in bar 30 and after excursions via A flat major, D flat major, F sharp minor, D minor and a diminished-seventh chord on F sharp, a bridge and finally a cadence, the second theme arrives. Thus the exposition closes in A major. This and other examples from this period demonstrate how Reicha tried to undermine the prevailing hierarchy of the keys and so prefigured the Romantic period. The next surprise is at the beginning of the recapitulation: instead of the expected main theme come bars 13–25 (from the exposition), directly followed by bars 1–12 – a very characteristic Reicha detail. The Andante un poco Adagio is quite irregular, almost improvisational in its construction. It should be noted that in conformity with the previous middle movements there are no repeat marks, and that it lacks the very clear ABA form of most of the slow movements in the piano sonatas of Haydn, Mozart and their contemporaries. The theme is repeated several times but in different keys reminiscent, despite the general Viennese Classical style, of C. P. E. Bach’s keyboard rondos and slow movements with all their pauses. Like so many of Reicha’s slow movements it is rather quiet and discreet. The finale, Allegro scherzando, with yet another rustic and dance-like theme (varied in the secondary theme in B major) is the most regular of all the movements of Op. 46 – no surprising inversions of sections at all, just a few extra modulating bars in the recapitulation. On the other hand, it has a very strange development – hardly the right word here – consisting strictly speaking of a falling chain of sequences (the dominant/tonic move from the first movement) in all six possible whole-tone steps (perhaps one of the earliest in music-history) from B major to C sharp major (functioning as dominant to F sharp minor), followed by chromatically rising bass and chord sequences. It is no more than 38 bars long but unique, almost mystical. The section ends on a chord in E flat, which is the dominant of A flat minor/G sharp minor, the dominant parallel of E major. The recapitulation starts from here, but
with the very first four bars of the movement in G sharp minor before it continues in E major – a surprise worthy of Papa Haydn.

**Deux fantaisias, Op. 59**
Reicha’s fantasias (nine in total if two small items from his *Practische Beispiele* (c. 1803) are counted) differ among themselves very much but at the same time have some common traits which set them in clear contrast to their contemporary counterparts. They are quite short and concise but their main characteristic is their almost complete lack of the prevailing improvisatory features and patterns: virtuosic figuration, clearly separated parts, swift changes in tempi, loose structures, a freer sense of pulse, cadence-like sections, etc., due to the fact that so many fantasias originated from improvisations. Reicha’s Op. 59 was printed in Vienna around 1805 but it is not unlikely that No. 1 [10] is the fantasia mentioned in the Artaria letter of 1797; furthermore, it shares a key with, and – with its very slow tempo and extreme calmness – has a similar character to, the C major slow movement of the G major Sonata in Op. 46 [2]. No. 2 [11], though, has some points, like the full chords in slow progression, in common with some of the 57 variations in Reicha’s *L’art de varier*, Op. 57, published about the same time.

It is safe to assume that Reicha improvised at the piano as well, but not in public, since he was less interested in ‘free’ improvisation than in something worth writing down on paper. The only one that might be called fantasia-like in a more ‘ordinary’ sense is the first of the two in Op. 59. Ironically, in the unpublished collection *Practische Beispiele* where it was first included, Reicha described it as conceivably a slow movement in a sonata, duo or similar. This first fantasia of Op. 59 is in $\frac{1}{4}$ and there are no bar-lines – an old tradition: it is a feature common in many of C. P. E. Bach’s fantasias, for example. All pauses and all chords with long note-values lack fermatas; everything is written out. The formal scheme is ABA in which the much longer B section consists of smaller parts separated by full or half cadences. This structure, in combination with the very slow tempo, gives the piece a kind of lingering and introverted character. In the middle of the piece there is a falling chromatic sequence pointing directly to Liszt and
Wagner – a reminder of how harmonically daring Reicha could be, although it is equally reminiscent of C. P. E. Bach’s harmonic audacity.

The second of the Op. 59 pieces is perhaps the least fantasia-like of all of Reicha’s fantasies – it is more of a hymn or procession dominated by phrases with big forte chords, partly harmonised in an archaic or modal way, something that Reicha explored and used elsewhere; it is easily imagined as a piece for a wind orchestra. It is also, in general, a calm piece. Two outbursts with fast figurations function as contrasts but do not change the overall sense of almost ritual loftiness; one could easily play the piece as if they did not exist at all.

Henrik Löwenmark was born in Gothenburg and educated at the university there but has long since lived in Stockholm. Since his graduation he has been active as a freelance musician in a multitude of contexts: solo, chamber music, accompaniment and song-coaching, orchestral piano, choir, opera and so on. His interest in Reicha started in the 1980s and in 1999 he began to collect all the piano music not published in modern editions – almost all the extant music. In 2006 he finished his Master’s thesis, The Piano Music of Antoine Reicha, at the University of Gothenburg.

Reicha’s Piano Music in New Editions from Symétrie

The three sonatas, Op. 46, are being published by Symétrie, Lyon, in a modern edition by Michael Bulley. They are the latest in a series, begun in 2014, devoted to Reicha’s piano works. It already includes the three Grandes Sonates, in E flat major, C major and E major; experimental pieces from the collection Practische Beispiele, among them ‘Capriccio’, ‘Fantasia on a Single Chord’, and ‘Mesure composée’ (‘Combined Metre’); the Variations on a Theme by Gluck; and La Chercheuse d’esprit, a collection of thirteen short pieces based on popular tunes. Read more at https://symetrie.com/fr/auteurs/antonin.reicha.

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For two hundred years the piano music of the Czech-born composer Antoine Reicha (1770–1836) – friend of Haydn and Beethoven, teacher of Berlioz, Liszt and Franck – has been buried treasure. Reicha was an important influence on composers of the next generation (indeed, Berlioz was happy to lift a few ideas from him), but apart from an innovative set of fugues his piano works have remained unknown since his own day. Both encompassing Baroque practices and looking forward to the twentieth century, they are full of harmonic and other surprises that show this liveliest of minds at work.

**REICHA Complete Piano Music, Volume One**

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Henrik Löwenmark, piano

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FIRST RECORDINGS