

Antonin Reicha and his 36 Fugues for Piano

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Until the early 20th century, the teaching of music composition essentially consisted of a thorough study of counterpoint.¹ Nowadays, fugues are still heard in student's auditions, exams and competitions; they are loved by some and feared by others. Those performed are almost exclusively by Bach, probably due to Schumann's rule "let the Well-Tempered Clavier be your daily bread."² Nevertheless, there were other contrapuntal and fugue masters, such as Pachelbel, Sweelinck or Frescobaldi, to name but a few. I would like to include the name of Antonin Reicha (1770–1836) among them.

Born in Prague into a family of musicians, Reicha settled with his uncle at the age of fifteen in Bonn. While playing in the orchestra of the prince-elector, he met Beethoven, his future friend and rival. Both young men dreamt of escaping to the musical capitals of the day. Beethoven intended to study with Mozart in Vienna, but after Mozart's death in 1791, only the elderly Joseph Haydn was left among the great living composers. Beethoven was the first to settle in Vienna in 1794; Reicha followed years later, after sojourns in Hamburg and Paris. During these peregrinations, from 1799 and 1803, he composed his *Trente six Fugues pour le Piano-Forte* and dedicated them to his beloved mentor Josef Haydn.³ He even composed a dedicatory poem in French and German, highlighting Haydn as the 'modern Orpheus'. This substantial body of fugues reflects Reicha's lifelong passion both for history and tradition, on the one hand, and experiment and innovation on the other. Years later, Reicha left for Paris and became a most influential teacher there, counting Liszt, Berlioz, Gounod and the young Franck among his pupils.

Reicha summarized his aesthetics years later as follows: "In the genre of the fugue, all parts are of equal importance; the harmony, consisting of 2, 3 or 4 parts, is pure, rich and concise; commonplaces should be carefully avoided [...]. This genre will always be what real connoisseurs and informed amateurs esteem most highly [...]."⁴ Let me add that Reicha included 6-part fugues (written out in six staves!) in this



Antonin Reicha, lithography 1825.

collection. Moreover, his most important innovation consisted of opening the tonal space towards *pantonicity*, thus making any chosen modulation possible. Quite surprisingly, the most appropriate keyboard instrument for the performance of these fugues is still the five-octave 'Walter' fortepiano of the 1790s which has the same range needed for the execution of the complete keyboard works of Mozart.

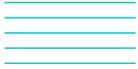


Antonin Reicha, lithography 1804.

To offer a closer insight, I have selected eight pieces which will serve to illustrate Reicha's approach to fugue writing. We can clearly distinguish two types of fugue subjects. First, those with themes by distinguished masters of the 16th to 18th centuries (Haydn, Mozart, Scarlatti, Händel, and Frescobaldi). The second type, nrs. 12, 24 and 34 of the following selection, use themes of Reicha's own invention.



Fugue no. 3 in F Minor, 4/4, Molto moderato in four parts is an artful exhibition of fugal means. The subject is taken from Haydn's F Minor String quartet, Opus 20, no. 5, as a clear dedication to Reicha's master.



No. 7.
Thème de
W.A. Mozart.

All^o

Fugue no. 7 in D Major, 4/4, *Allegro* in three parts is distinguished by big leaps of the theme, taken from Mozart's “Haffner” Symphony, K 385.

No. 9.
Thème de
Domenico
Scarlatti.

All^o mod^{to}

Fugue no. 9 in G Minor, 6/8, *Allegro moderato* in three parts quotes the theme of the famous “fuga del gatto” by Domenico Scarlatti, adorned with Reicha’s playful new counterpoint.

No. 12. Allegretto.

Fugue no. 12, [without key signature], 2/8, *Allegretto* in three parts, introduces a theatrical element and abounds in rests. This sort of humour is reminiscent of Beethoven's oeuvre around the same time.

No. 14. Le Thème survent.

avec lequel cette fugue, fantaisie est composée, est de Gerolamo Frescobaldi, un des plus celebres compositeurs au commencement du 15^{me} Siècle à Rome.

Fugue = forme et avec Majesté. *Presto.* *tr*

Fantaisie

forme et avec Majesté.

Fugue no. 14 in D Minor, 'Fugue-Fantaisie', 4/4, *ferme et avec Majesté* (in the choral sections) and *Presto* (in the two-part fugal sections), quotes Frescobaldi's Second Mass of his *Fiori musicali*. In addition to surprising modulations and bold theatrical settings, an improvisatory element is omnipresent.

*Adagio. * A 6 Sujets et 6 Parties.*

* On a grand' air de fugue sur 5 parties en fin pour être en état de bien distinguer chaque partie d'avec les autres.

Fugue no. 15 in C Major, 2/2, Adagio, in six parts, quotes a line from G.F. Händel's oratorio, namely the chorus 'I will sing unto the Lord'. Reicha's fugue is written out in two versions, on six staves and on two staves.

No. 24. 2me mesure composée. Allegro modto.

Fugue no. 24 in G Major, 2/2 + 3/4, Allegro moderato, in Reicha's words *mesure composée*, is indebted to an Alsatian folk dance in 5/8, as the composer mentions in the preface.



Fugue no. 34 in E-flat Major, 2/2, *un poco presto*, in four parts, *à deux sujets*, leads us through incredible modulations, in Reicha's claim 'd'après un nouveau système' – in a new [harmonic] system.

Pianist, composer and researcher **Jean-Jacques Düнки** was born in Switzerland in 1948. Following his studies in Basel, Berlin, Paris, Baltimore, New York and London, he was awarded First Prize at the 1981 Arnold Schönberg Competition in Rotterdam. He tours worldwide as a pianist and lecturer with a preference for early 20th century repertoire. First recordings of works by Reger, Zemlinsky, Schreker, Berg and Webern are found in his exquisite discography. He is a freshly-retired professor of piano, fortepiano and chamber music at the Hochschule für Musik in Basel, Switzerland and presently chairs the board of EPTA Switzerland. As a composer, he has a list of nearly a hundred works from his pen, mainly for keyboard and chamber music. Düнки, also an organizer of large congresses such as 'Schumann interpretieren' in 2010 and 'Liszt – früh und spät' in 2011, is the author of the book 'Schönbergs Zeichen' (Vienna 2006) and editor of books, articles and reviews on interpretation, the latest being 'Schumann interpretieren' (Sinzig 2014).



Photo Emil Golshani, 2016.

Notes:

- ¹ Arnold Schönberg's composition students from the year 1904 onward, among them Anton Webern and Alban Berg, had to study counterpoint during their first years.
- ² Schumann, R. (1848) 'Musikalische Haus- und Lebensregeln', Sinzig: G. Nauhaus, 2002 Studiopunktverlag, Sinzig, p. 52, item 34.
- ³ The score can be found and downloaded at following address: http://conquest.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/c/c4/IMSLP205281-PMLP08970-Reicha_-_036_-_Thirty-six_Fugues_ed.or._R.pdf (12 January, 2016).
- ⁴ Reicha, A. (1820) *Études dans le genre fugué*, Opus 97, preface, p. 1.