Reicha, Antoine: Cours de composition musicale, ou Traité complet et raisonné d'harmonie pratique (1818)

When Reicha applied for the post of Professor of Counterpoint and Fugue at the Paris Conservatoire in 1818, his *Cours de composition musicale ou Traité complet et raisonné d'harmonie pratique*, in press at the time, represented both an asset and a liability. In his application letter, the composer describes the work as the "fruit of thirty years of meditation and research", but equally feels obliged to defend himself against "certain attacks . . . directed against [his] manner of teaching". Indeed, the project of the *Cours de composition* is as ambitious as unconventional: Reicha in effect proposes to train the student in harmony, of course, but also in composition. Thus the work concludes quite originally with a section on the "manner of writing harmony for the orchestra", opening the door to treatises by Kastner (*Traité général d'instrumentation*, 1839) and Berlioz (*Grand traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes*, 1844), both of them students of Reicha. By teaching "practical harmony", Reicha claims to renew both the pedagogy and the theoretical content of harmony treatises, which he proposes to adapt to "modern music" (Preface, i). Also, the work seems to oppose key points of Catel's *Traité d'harmonie* (1801), the official textbook of the Conservatoire, thereby incurring sharp criticisms from the likes of Fétis (see the entry "Reicha" in his *Biographie universelle des musiciens*).

The *Cours de composition musicale* is divided into three parts, whose internal organisation, full of anticipations and doublings-back, is not always easy to follow. The first part covers intervals, inversions, voice-leading, cadences, bass lines, part-writing, sequences, etc., without any surprises. The second part goes back over certain points raised in the first (resolution of chords, cadences, voice-leading) but also concerns itself with non-chord tones. The third part deals with counterpoint in two, three, and four parts and then concludes with remarks on the treatment of harmony in the orchestra.

Where theory is concerned, Reicha's *Cours de composition* differs from Catel's *Traité d'harmonie* on two points that precipitated theoretical quarrels in France at the beginning of the nineteenth century: the classification and generation of chords, and the theory of the fundamental bass. Catel, contrary to Rameau, effectively looked to counterpoint to explain the generation and progression of chords. Reicha, taking a thoroughly practical approach, contents himself with drawing up a table of thirteen chords divided between "fundamental" and "altered" (Part I, pg. 8), which he views as autonomous vertical entities (in his table one finds the seventh chords classified into "species"—perhaps the origin of the terminology still current in France). But, even more than the question of chord generation, it is Rameau's theory of the fundamental bass that sets Reicha's *Cours de composition musicale*

apart. Whereas Catel contents himself with indicating that chords can progress indiscriminately by second, third, or fifth, Reicha revives the issue of harmonic progression by regular motion of the fundamental bass (pg. 21). Thus, implicitly returning to principles formulated in Rameau's *Traité de l'harmonie* (pp. 49–51), he indicates that chord roots should prefer to move by fifths and thirds, the second being tolerated only exceptionally.

Finally, the *Cours de composition musicale* stands out for grounding its pedagogy in a profusion of music examples, composed—another original feature—by Reicha himself (Preface, i). Thus, the third part contains no fewer than 50 examples of harmonic progressions realised in quite varied pianistic figurations. Those notebooks that survive from Reicha's students (e.g. César Franck, Léonie Boursault-Kastner) testify to the effectiveness of this teaching, which confronts students with the infinite possibilities of composition even while forming a sort of repertoire on which to draw. The abundance of music examples in the *Cours* may explain why so many instrumentalists at the Conservatoire gravitated towards Reicha's counterpoint and fugue class rather than that of Fétis.

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Trans. Tadhg Sauvey

Further reading

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