

PERSONAL TOUCH

The piano music of the Czech-French composer Antoine Reicha is largely unknown, despite its inventive playfulness, couched in the familiar language of classicism. *Ivan Ilić*, who has championed Reicha's piano works on disc, explains some of the dilemmas facing performers of this music

AS I EMBARK ON A PROJECT TO record five CDs of music by Antoine Reicha for Chandos, I often find myself answering the question: why? It can be tough to dispute the widely-held notion that forgotten music is 'forgotten for a reason'. Dismissing unfamiliar repertoire is easy and appeals to our lazier instincts. There is, however, another reason we do it: deciding that you like a piece in the absence of consensus is intimidating. You have to develop your own criteria, and think for yourself, which is never easy.

Reicha's piano music may not be known, but he was a unique historical figure: a student of Haydn and a friend of Beethoven, he was also the teacher of

Berlioz, Franck, Liszt, Onslow and Gounod in Paris. His substantial output includes two dozen wind quintets which enjoyed immediate success upon publication, and have been performed widely ever since. In contrast, some of his piano works were published and forgotten; most remained in manuscript at France's National Library and have only been published in the past three years.

It is exciting to give what may be the premieres of pieces written over 200 years ago by a seminal historical figure. However, it raises a paradox: people may listen once to music they have never heard before, but if they do not like it, they will not give it a second chance. So should the priority be a convincing interpretation, one that

generates interest in the music, allowing it to be performed again? Or is it more appropriate to follow the score as closely as possible, so that we give the composer a chance to convince the listener without interference? Sometimes it is possible to do both, but when there is a contradiction, the ethics involved in making performance choices become complex.

One of the advantages of playing repertoire which is 'new' yet firmly rooted in a well-known idiom is that we already have a general idea of the style. In this case, playing Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven translates directly to playing Reicha. But whereas Beethoven – Reicha's exact contemporary – filled his scores with intricate and sometimes bewildering

instructions, Reicha's piano scores are largely devoid of markings. Again, this raises a question to which there is no easy answer: does the absence of markings imply stylistic homogeneity? Or does it suggest that Reicha trusted performers to make their own decisions, in good taste? Deciding which approach to take and when to take it – especially when there is no precedent – is an exciting, often daunting task.

There are further ambiguities in Reicha's piano music, as his compositions are inextricably linked to his career as a teacher and theorist. In the case of his treatise *Theoretische Schriften und praktische Beispiele* (Theoretical writings and practical examples, published in 1803), Reicha provides 24 pieces meant to challenge pianists and illustrate experimental principles of composition. The works occasionally verge on the bizarre, or tongue in cheek, as when Reicha writes a *Fantasy on a Single Chord* (E major). In theoretical treatises it is common to

include short musical excerpts, rather than bona fide works written for the occasion. What were Reicha's intentions? Does the fact that they are ostensibly finished works imply that they should be performed? Perhaps if Reicha were to see three of these works programmed alongside his *Grande Sonate en ut majeur* he would be horrified. How does this kind of dilemma affect performances of those works? I am not exactly sure – but I am sure that it does.

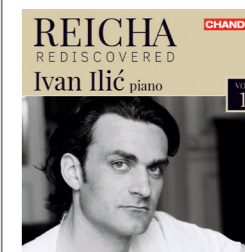
There are countless other works in the piano repertoire for which these kinds of questions are less problematic – or, more accurately, for which long-standing performance traditions dictate the answers. So there is real satisfaction in playing relatively unknown repertoire, and in making decisions which can transform both the shape and destiny of a work.

For the first recording of the series, I have selected three experimental works, two substantive Sonatas, and the first section of Etude No 1 from Reicha's 34 *Études*

dans le genre fugue Op 97. The final piece serves both as an 'encore' and as a preview of the next three CDs in the series, which will feature all of the Opus 97 *Études*, first published in 1820. The *Études* are Reicha's answer to Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, albeit with less pathos. As for Volume 5, I haven't decided yet. I prefer to leave some questions unanswered... 🎵

Volume 1 of Ivan Ilić's Reicha Rediscovered is now available from Chandos Records (CHAN 10950). www.chandos.net

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Ivan Ilić: 'It is exciting to give the premieres of pieces written over 200 years ago by a seminal historical figure'



IRINA POPA