

Backstage with...

IVAN ILIĆ

Haydn's pupil and a friend of Beethoven, Anton Reicha completes the musical jigsaw of the early Romantic period. But behind the polite façade lurks an experimenter who was one of classical music's true originals

Whenever I speak to someone about Reicha for the first time – and they often have no idea who he was, when he was alive, or what stylistic period he was a part of – I always try to attach him to Beethoven. They grew up together. Reicha left Prague when he was 15 for Bonn where his uncle was conductor of the court orchestra. Beethoven was, as the story goes, playing viola a few seats away from where Reicha was playing the flute so they got to know each other very well. They became both friends and rivals, which I think among young and ambitious men is always an interesting dynamic – they feed off of one another, but then they also keep a very close eye on what the other is doing. They can be dismissive of one another too, particularly when the other is not around, as a way of stabbing them in the back.

They went to university at Bonn together, they studied logic, philosophy, mathematics. Both of them took a lesson with Haydn when he was passing through Bonn and both vowed to go and study with Haydn in Vienna. Beethoven went first and then Reicha made his way soon

“It was a shock to find someone had written a piano piece in five-eight in the 1790s”

after Napoleon invaded Hamburg in 1794. So, from the age of 15 to about 21 they were very close and had many of the same experiences musically. They met again in Vienna when they were in their early 30s. Beethoven was performing his own music and was a great proponent of his own works, and Reicha wanted to break in as well but he wouldn't perform his own music. Many of the pieces that I've become interested in were composed during this period, and Reicha was very aware of what Beethoven was doing, but the scores have just been sitting there untouched for almost 200 years.

I'd been aware of Reicha's wind quintets since college. The works were immediately successful



Ivan Ilić at home with his Pleyel piano

and have been in the repertoire ever since. But then I read somewhere a reference to this crazy composer who wrote experimental fugues when Haydn was alive that did things like experiment with multiple keys at once. It was the unusual rhythmic elements in Reicha that got me really curious, because I always assumed, like many of us who go on standard music history courses, that all of that started with Bartók. It was a shock for me to find out that someone had written an entire piano piece in five-eight in the 1790s.

While Beethoven was more into finding patrons for his work, Reicha was more of an independent spirit, and from his early 20s he gave private lessons. That allowed him to do whatever he wanted in his compositions – he had no one to answer to. The history of music has been so influenced by Beethoven that we tend to interpret other composers' life trajectories through the prism of Beethoven's life. Thus there are always three periods: the young, ambitious man, then the heroic middle period, and then the kind of introverted, spiritual late period. Reicha is particularly difficult to come to terms with because his output is very different.

Most of his experimental music happens at the beginning of his career. Middle period works, like the Etudes, Opus 97, are actually very conventional like the wind quintets. Also,

the way Reicha used the piano changed over time so it's very difficult to pigeonhole him. He wrote nine sonatas, some of which were very ambitious and burst out of the form. Others are quite condensed and small-scale, like Haydn. There were variations – one set lasts over 45 minutes, another lasts over an hour! He also repeats variations within the variation form, which is a very unusual thing to do. There are lots and lots of fugues as well – almost a hundred. He was obsessed with fugue writing.

I try to programme these pieces with lesser-known Beethoven, and lesser-known Haydn or Mozart. I want people to both listen to these great composers with fresh ears, but also to experience somebody that all of these composers knew. It kind of completes their landscape.

We have a way of vandalising music history by studying the peaks of the mountains without the valleys and anything in between, and it's always exciting to meet one more major musical figure. We're talking about somebody who was a long time friend of Beethoven and a student of Haydn, somebody that those people knew. In other words, Reicha is a historical nexus. Just to be able to hear his music is a wonderful opportunity to indulge one's curiosity.

Ivan Ilić's Reicha CD is out now on Chandos