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Closing a Gap Between Theory and Praxis. Friedrich Kalkbrenner's Treatise on Harmony for Pianists

ABSTRACT

Background

Friedrich Kalkbrenner's 'Traité d'harmonie du pianiste' was published only in the year of his death, in 1849, both in a French and in a German version. (An English translation by Robert Cocks should be also available very soon.) Once being issued, the work had to find its place on a market overflowed with treatises on harmony and music theory, in general. The author himself considers this difficulty already in the introduction, mentioning that it would be nearly overbearing to add something to the great tradition of books dealing with teaching harmony, in that point referring to Johann Joseph Fux, Johann Georg Albrechtsberger – with whom he studied counterpoint in Vienna himself –, but also, among others, French theorists, such as Charles-Simon Catel and François-Joseph Fétis. Kalkbrenner continues with criticizing contemporary composition lessons in which the student would learn the chords and its inversions, but not how to use them. It is his intent to close that gap by giving an instruction for young pianists with many musical examples built on the rules of figured bass.

By reading Kalkbrenner's introduction, the assumption arises that the title of the whole work is completely misleading. Neither does the author provide a book dealing with lectures in harmony, nor does he concentrate on the topic modulation, as the subtitle of the French and the English version connotes. Instead of, the book contains at the time of its appearance already seemingly antiquated methods and facts by focusing on and trying to preserve the tradition of improvising respective preluding, in this point being very similar to the 'Systematische Anleitung zum Fantasieren' (1829) by Carl Czerny. Edler (2015) mentions that Czerny's work represents already the end of a generation of pianists to which also Kalkbrenner belonged – a generation that was seen around 1850 mainly as being only the forerunners of the masters that emerged around 1830 and included names like Fryderyk Chopin and Franz Liszt, who were changing a brilliant technical, but uninspired piano art to poetic virtuousness and composition. According to that, Kalkbrenner's treatise, published even 20 years later than Czerny's, must have partially evoked the impression of something quite outdated instead of representing some new method in the eyes of many contemporaries.

Aims and repertoire studied

Nevertheless, the intention of the book might be useful and informative from another perspective: Being based on countless musical examples, it might give some insight into Kalkbrenner's thinking about how to improvise a piece of piano music as a first and very essential step on the way to a written

composition. This is an aspect that texts about Kalkbrenner do not treat very intensively, so far. Instead of, publications on him either mainly focus on biographical informations (Walter 1982, Papi 2007) or on his work and his merits for the piano (Nautsch 1983, Levin 2015, Hervé 2016). Indeed, Kalkbrenner was one of the most prominent personalities among the 'pianistes-compositeurs' between circa 1825 and 1835. It is well known that he inspired the young Chopin with his *Piano Concerto in D minor, op. 61* and with many elements of his brilliant piano style, in general. Already in 1827, around ten years prior to Chopin, Kalkbrenner composed a cycle of preludes through all tonalities, his op. 88, that were not only didactic exercises, but mainly made for performing them on stage as a whole.

Methods

Many passages of these short piano works are constructed on 'marches harmoniques' to be found in treatises on harmony of the French tradition, in example the ones written by Catel or Napoléon-Henri Reber. But also the near to several musical examples in Czerny's 'Systematische Anleitung' as well as to Kalkbrenner's own treatise seems to be obviously. The first piece of Kalkbrenner's op. 88 cycle, in example, contains in the opening measures a typical combination of scales followed by two-part sequences changing between thirds and sixths. After that opening passage, the notes clearly show the near to Johann Sebastian Bach's prelude in C major of the *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I*. The analytical discussion of applying respective individualizing (sequential) models could be set forth in op. 88, nr. 10 (opening cadence, rule of the octave), in nr. 18 (sequence of falling fifths in measures 11–14), and in other pieces of the cycle.

Implications

A short analytical detour over Kalkbrenner's preludes in comparison with its theoretical environment offers the possibility to reconstruct many passages of these short musical pieces. By doing so, musical analysis is able to close another gap – or probably the same gap Kalkbrenner is mentioning in his introduction of his treatise on harmony, but from a present-day perspective of historically informed music theory.

Keywords

Romantic piano music, improvisation and composition, preluding, treatise on harmony

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