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The Art of Strict Musical Composition by Johann Philipp Kirnberger; David Beach; Jurgen Thym

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The Art of Strict Musical Composition

by Johann Philipp Kirnberger

Translated by David Beach and Jurgen Thym

With an introduction and explanatory notes by David Beach

Music Theory Translation Series, vol. 4.

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982

xix, 423 pp.

REVIEWER

William Caplin

Johann Philipp Kirnberger's *Die Kunst des reinen Satzes in der Musik* (1771-79) is a monument of eighteenth-century musical thought. Theorists have long been interested in Kirnberger for his novel classification of dissonance types, his refinement of fundamental-bass principles, and his reorientation of the theory of rhythm and meter. Historians and performers have also found in his writings a wealth of information dealing with late-baroque and pre-classical compositional style and performance practice. Thanks to the efforts of David Beach, Jurgen Thym, and the Yale University Press, Kirnberger's major theoretical treatise is now available in a splendid translation, accompanied by a helpful introduction and many explanatory notes.

Kirnberger can probably be ranked as the leading figure in the history of harmonic theory after Rameau. Kirnberger's modifications and extensions of Rameau's views made possible the wide acceptance and further elaboration in the nineteenth century of a theory that interprets harmonic relationships in terms of the progression of a fundamental bass through the scale degrees of a tonality, a theory that continues to form the basis of modern harmonic analysis. In particular, Kirnberger extends and emphasizes the ideas of "implied" and "interpolated" fundamental bass, concepts that were first formulated by Rameau but ignored by most of his followers. But perhaps Kirnberger's best-known contribution to harmonic theory concerns the classification and explanation of the behavior of dissonance. While agreeing with Rameau that seventh chords rank with triads as fundamental harmonic structures, Kirnberger rejects the French theorist's attempt to account for suspension chords through the problematic notion of "supposition." He formulates instead a distinction between the "essential" seventh dissonance and the "nonessential" suspension dissonance—a distinction which is still considered valid today.

Kirnberger is also a major theorist of rhythm and meter. Breaking with earlier traditions, he finds the origins of rhythmic-metric phenomena neither in the *tactus* model of the raising and lowering of the

hand nor in the *rhythmopoeia* model of the Greek metrical patterns. Rather, he assumes that the elemental units of rhythm and meter are stimuli of equal intensity and duration—what we today call “pulses” or “beats”—that become differentiated as accents and non-accents. These units form an abstract framework within which the actual durational values of the musical texture, which are not bound to the traditional Greek patterns, receive their metrical interpretation. Thus by clearly separating meter from rhythm (duration), Kirnberger lays the foundation for our continuing common-sense notions of temporal organization in music.

In addition to these specifically theoretical concerns, Kirnberger is interested throughout his writings with many practical matters of compositional technique that can be of considerable value to historians, performers, and teachers today. Although he wrote during the pre-classical era, Kirnberger expresses more the late-baroque spirit of his teacher J. S. Bach. (He even proclaims his theory to be based upon Bach’s “method.”) Kirnberger’s many technical and aesthetic criticisms of the “galant style” can help historians sharpen their understanding of the kinds of stylistic distinctions that were perceived as noteworthy by an informed listener of this period, albeit one of extremely conservative tastes. Modern performers will be especially interested in Kirnberger’s remarks on the significance of time signatures and note values chosen for a given composition, inasmuch as they reveal important information about the general character, tempo, and modes of articulation of a work.¹ Moreover, teachers of music theory who are not concerned with the more rarefied issues in the history of harmonic theory will find that many of Kirnberger’s observations, especially those on chorale harmonization, can be directly applicable to classroom instruction today.²

Beach and Thym’s edition of Kirnberger’s *magnum opus* achieves the highest standards for the modern presentation of a theoretical treatise.³ This will come as no surprise to readers already acquainted with their previous translation of Kirnberger’s *Die wahren Grundsätze zum Gebrauch der Harmonie*, recently published in this journal.⁴ In the present volume, Beach and Thym have once again demonstrated their ability to render eighteenth-century German into a modern, idiomatic English that faithfully preserves the content of the original. The musical examples are handsomely drawn and the format of the book as a whole presents a pleasing appearance. Moreover, Beach has provided a generous number of explanatory notes that clarify, supplement, or place into historical context many of the issues raised by Kirnberger throughout his treatise.

In general, the translators have adopted an editorial policy that fulfills the main goal of a modern edition: namely, that of enabling the reader to reconstruct as much as possible the original text. For example,

editorial emendations are clearly distinguished as such, and continuous references to page numbers of the original edition greatly facilitate a comparison of the English and German versions. In addition, many of the most important or unusual German technical expressions are presented and explained in footnotes. Two terms of great significance for Kirnberger's theory, however, have been omitted from discussion. First, the reader never learns that Kirnberger actually calls the "nonessential" dissonance an "accidental" (*zufällig*) dissonance. This should have been pointed out because the term has long been interpreted literally, with unfortunate consequences. For instance, Arnold Schoenberg's polemic against the notion of "nonharmonic" tones is based partly on his reaction to the absurdity of claiming that such tones arise accidentally or by chance, a direct reference to (as well as a misunderstanding of) Kirnberger's concept.⁵ Second, the reader may have some difficulty determining what Kirnberger precisely means by "strict musical composition" (*reiner Satz*), because the translators use the English word "strict" in a number of other contexts where Kirnberger himself uses different expressions. For example, he speaks at one point (p. 99) of a "strict style" (*strenge Schreibart*) that is opposed to a "free style" (*leichten Schreibart*) and refers another time (p. 159) to the "strict counterpoint" (*schlechte Contrapunkt*) that is important to the "art of strict composition" (*Kunst des reinen Satzes*). To be sure, the translators have wisely chosen to avoid littering the text with bracketed German terms, but they might occasionally have adopted this method of reference to aid the reader in interpreting Kirnberger's ideas.

In his informative introduction to the translation, Beach unravels for the reader the complicated history of the important roles played by J. G. Sulzer and J. A. P. Schulz in the origin and authorship of the work that appeared under Kirnberger's name. He also gives an excellent summary of Kirnberger's theoretical achievements and places them in their appropriate historical context as an outgrowth both of the thoroughbass tradition represented most completely by Heinichen and of the new harmonic orientation advocated by Rameau. Beach argues convincingly that Kirnberger's approach does indeed reflect the basic pedagogical principles of J. S. Bach; he also notes "that Kirnberger owed a lot more to Rameau than he would have cared to admit" (p. xiii). Thus Beach deals at some length with the relationship of Kirnberger's harmonic theories to those of his French predecessor—a topic of special interest, since Kirnberger scathingly denigrates Rameau throughout his writings.

But in attempting to arrive at a satisfactory comparison of these two theorists, Beach proposes an interpretation that demands further investigation (p. xiv):

... there is only a superficial similarity between Kirnberger's and Rameau's application of the fundamental bass since there is such a vast difference in their concepts of harmony, or more specifically in their conceptions of the relationship between vertical and linear aspects of harmony. Rameau considered all chords, even those resulting from temporal displacement, as harmonic entities, whereas Kirnberger gave such status only to his two fundamental chords, the triad and the essential seventh chord, and their inversions. Thus, for example, where Rameau would indicate two separate fundamentals for a suspension chord and the harmony supporting its resolution, Kirnberger would indicate only the latter.

However, Beach has exaggerated the difference between Rameau's and Kirnberger's conception of harmonic meaning. First, Rameau does not regard all vertical structures as harmonic entities; that is, he does not place a fundamental bass under all chords. In his *Génération harmonique* (1737), the work most representative of his mature theory, Rameau introduces the idea of what we today call the "passing chord," a vertical sonority that has no harmonic value and hence possesses no fundamental bass.⁶ Indeed, one of his examples (a passing "II⁷" standing between a root position tonic and its first inversion) is similar to the example presented by Kirnberger when discussing the same concept.⁷

Second, Kirnberger is not so progressive a harmonic reductionist as Beach here implies. An examination of Kirnberger's fundamental-bass analyses reveals quite clearly that he considers the nonessential suspension dissonance to be contained within a chord that has genuine harmonic value. Kirnberger rarely indicates the fundamental bass of harmonies in the examples from *Kunst*; but when he does so, suspension chords are always given a fundamental bass.⁸ And throughout the entire analysis of his own *Fugue in E Minor* (appended to vol. 1 of *Kunst*) Kirnberger places a fundamental bass directly below all suspension chords rather than only under the chord of resolution, as Beach suggests. The difference between Kirnberger's and Rameau's understanding of suspension chords has nothing to do with any greater or lesser sensitivity to linear and vertical dimensions; both theorists believe that these chords involve the temporal displacement of one of the voices from its normal progression, and both consider these chords to be harmonic entities.⁹ Their disagreement centers rather on which note within the chord is non-harmonic and, hence, what the harmonic meaning of the chord as a whole really is. Rameau generally believes that the harmony of the suspension chord differs from that of the chord of resolution, whereas Kirnberger recognizes that both of these chords usually have the same harmonic meaning. That most theorists today follow

Kirnberger's analysis attests to the importance of his contribution to this major issue of harmonic theory.

In summary, Beach and Thym have served Kirnberger very well indeed; in the process they have made an important contribution to the historical study of music theory. Their excellent translation will provide wider access to Kirnberger's ideas and will further his impact upon our understanding of music, much as the original must have done for Kirnberger's contemporaries more than two hundred years ago.

NOTES

1. See the chapter on "Tempo, Meter, and Rhythm" (*The Art of Strict Musical Composition*, vol. 2, part 1, chapter 4).
2. Vol. 2, part 1, chapter 1, "Different Types of Harmonic Accompaniment to a Given Melody," could make an excellent supplementary reading assignment in a harmony course at the intermediate or advanced level.
3. The translation does not actually contain the complete treatise. In omitting Kirnberger's lengthy presentation of double counterpoint (vol. 2, parts 2 and 3), the editors have remained faithful to the goal of Yale's *Music Theory Translation Series*, which seeks to present "landmarks in musical thought and not merely pedagogical handbooks" (p. vii).
4. David W. Beach and Jurgen Thym, "The True Principles for the Practice of Harmony by Johann Philipp Kirnberger: A Translation," *Journal of Music Theory* 23 (1979): 163-225.
5. Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, trans. Roy E. Carter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 309-317.
6. Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Génération harmonique* (Paris, 1737), pp. 185-86.
7. *Ibid.*, Ex. 28; Kirnberger, *Strict Musical Composition*, Ex. 5.9, p. 104.
8. See, for instance, Ex. 4.43, p. 74, where a cadential six-four suspension chord is clearly analyzed as dominant harmony. In *Die wahren Grundsätze zum Gebrauch der Harmonie*, Kirnberger specifically notes that the "two types [of six-four chords] must be distinguished from one another, since they differ with respect to fundamental harmony. . ." and that "the real root of the [non-essential] dissonant six-four chord is the bass note" ("*The True Principles*," p. 176).
9. Rameau is explicit on this point: "The dissonance formed by the fourth is thus resolved by descending diatonically to the third whose place it had occupied" (*Treatise on Harmony*, trans. Philip Gossett [New York: Dover, 1971], p. 239); "Chords of supposition serve only to suspend sounds which should be heard naturally" (p. 299).