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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. Once 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 almost overbearing to add anything to the great tradition of books dealing with the teaching of harmony, referring to the works of Johann Joseph Fux, Johann Georg Albrechtsberger — with whom he himself studied counterpoint in Vienna — but also French theorists such as Charles-Simon Catel and François-Joseph Fétis among others. 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 of modulation, as the subtitle of the French and the English version connotes. Instead of which, the book contains at the time of its appearance already seemingly antiquated methods and facts. It focusses on and tries to preserve the tradition of improvising or more exactly preluding, being very similar in that respect to the *Systematische Anleitung zum Fantasieren* (1829) by Carl Czerny. Edler (2015) mentions that Czerny already represents the end of a generation of pianists to which Kalkbrenner also 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 virtuosity and composition. According to that, Kalkbrenner's treatise, published 20 years later than Czerny's, must have partially evoked the impression of something quite outdated instead of representing a new method in the eyes of many contemporaries.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 so

far do not treat very extensively. Instead, publications on him either focus mainly on biographical information (Walter 1982; Papi 2007) or on his work for the piano and his merits in that field (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 based on *marches harmoniques* as they can be found in harmony treatises of the French tradition, for example those of Catel or Napoléon-Henri Reber. But also the proximity between several musical examples from Czerny's *Systematische Anleitung* and Kalkbrenner's own treatise seems to be obvious. The first piece of Kalkbrenner's Op. 88 cycle, for example, contains in the opening measures a typical combination of scales followed by two-part sequences alternating between thirds and sixths. After that opening passage, the notes clearly show a resemblance to Johann Sebastian Bach's Prelude in C major of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I. The analytical discussion of applying respective individualizing (sequential and harmonic) models could be set forth in Op. 88 No. 10 (opening cadence, rule of the octave), in No. 18 (sequence of falling fifths in measures 11–14), and in other pieces of the cycle.

#### Implications

A short analytical detour via Kalkbrenner's Preludes compared with their 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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