

FERDINAND RIES

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I adore the music of Ferdinand Ries. His life was full on interest and while I remain a committed Beethovenian, the relationship between Ries and Beethoven was an interesting one

The recent BBC television programme entitled Eroica, which was said to document the events leading up to and including the premiere of the Eroica Symphony, was inaccurate and absurd. It also portrayed Ries as a rather stupid adolescent being constantly barked at by Beethoven.



The relationship between any master and pupil can be difficult and it reveals much of the character of these two men. The television programme overlooked facts such as Ries's deformity he having lost an eye through smallpox as a child. But there is so much rubbish written about the Eroica that for the BBC to add further to this misinformation was unfortunate. People have called it the French Revolution Symphony, others have said that Beethoven was attracted to Napoleon in an unnatural way thus suggesting that Beethoven was homosexual which he was not. Carl Czerny opined that the symphony was written in honour of the English general Abercrombie. Other sources state that its is all about the death of Admiral Nelson hence that magnificent funeral march.

Even today there are people who promulgate stories about composers and their works which are accepted as facts and therefore distort the truth.

Ries had a musical father in Franz Anton Ries who was born in Bonn on 10 November 1755 and taught his son to play the piano and the violin. Young Ries studied the cello with Romberg. Franz was the leader of the Bonn electoral court orchestra until 1794 and was a friend of Beethoven and of the German violinist and impresario Johann Peter Salomon who also played in the Bonn Court Orchestra before settling in London in 1786. Franz died in Berlin on 1 November 1846, eight years after his son.

Franz had another musical son, Hubert, who was born in Bonn in 1802 while Ferdinand was studying with Beethoven. Hubert studied with Spohr and became a court musician and the director of the local Philharmonic Society from 1835. He specialised in violin music and wrote a tutor and at least two violin concertos. He died in Berlin in 1866.

Ferdinand went to Munich in 1801 to study with Winter but he was poor and became an itinerant music copyist and was paid a miserable amount per page. But he was a prudent young man and saved what he could often by going without food. He went to Vienna in October 1801 with a letter of introduction from his father to Beethoven and the older man received him gladly. Recognising the young man's abject poverty Beethoven helped Ries financially and in many other ways without being asked and Beethoven never asked for repayment. These magnanimous gifts were never bestowed as a business transaction, or a loan with interest. It was simply Beethoven's kind-heartedness.

While most sources state was Ries was with Beethoven from 1801 to 1805. By 1804, it appears that Beethoven could teach him no more and sent him to Albrechtsberger who, sadly, is another one of those fine early composer who are now almost forgotten. Johann Georg Albrechtsberger was born at Klosterneuberg near Vienna in 1736 and therefore 34 years older than Beethoven. He became an organist in the Viennese Court and at the cathedral. He wrote excellent text books for their time and much music and clearly inspired Mozart who took Albrechtsberger's Adagio and fugues as the model for his own. Albrechtsberger died in his

home town in 1809. The grounding in composition which he gave to Ries was invaluable.

Beethoven remained kind and acquired a post for Ries as a pianist in the Court and as pianist to Count Brown the Russian charge d'affaires and, then to Count Lichnowsky.

Then politics interfered. Ries, as a citizen of Bonn, was subject to conscription in the French army and was summoned to Paris in 1805. It is said that he made this journey mainly on foot some 650 miles as the crow flies perhaps a little further than the distance from Land's End to John o'Groats. After all that exertion, he was turned down because he only had one eye.

For the next two years Ries lived in misery in decadent Paris. In August 1808 he returned to Vienna and received an offer to be the kappellmeister to Jerome Bonaparte the King of Westphalia. He accepted.

Beethoven was furious apparently wanting the position for himself and felling gazumped. As a result he would have nothing to do with Ries and made damaging comments about him. He would not acknowledge him or say any kind about him. Later when Ries was earning respect as a composer Beethoven said, "His compositions imitate me too much!"

Sadly that is the general attitude today. I have heard well-meaning musicians refer to Ries's eight symphonies as Beethoven's symphonies numbers 10 to 17 which is grossly unfair. As previously said there is a lot of rubbish written about composers and their music and others perpetuate it by repetition. For example, Michael Kennedy writes that Salieri was hostile to Mozart and there is the other apocryphal story that Salieri poisoned Mozart. This has done Salieri's reputation no good and, while I adore much Mozart, Salieri is a finer composer and far more original. The facts are that Leopold Mozart wanted his son to have the positions which Salieri attained because he was more experienced and a better musician. This infuriated Leopold and in the Mozart household Salieri was always verbally abused.

Circumstances intervened again. In May 1809 Vienna was occupied by the French. Ries was a French subject but there was hostility which he found distressing. He wanted a change and so over the next six years or so he toured Europe and Scandinavia as a pianist. He went to Hamburg and on to Stockholm in September 1810. He was very successful and gradually made himself some money and established his reputation. Despite Beethoven's hostility he played the music of Beethoven, amongst others, on his tours.

Ries had his heart set on Russia wanting to perform there and enjoy the culture but the destruction of Moscow in 1812 dashed his hopes of going there. Wanting to broaden his horizons he went to England arriving there at the end of April 1813 where he met up with Salomon whom his father knew well. At a Philharmonic Society concert on 14 March 1814 he performed in one of his sextets.

Where Ries scores over Beethoven was in some original ideas. For example, in his Sextet in B flat, Op 142, there are parts for piano and also for harp.

His fortunes changed he found a very attractive English lady and married her.

He stayed in London until 1824 mainly working at composition and making money. His farewell concert was on 8 April 1824. With his wife he moved to Godesburg near Bonn and in 1826 they moved to Frankfurt. He was in demand everywhere. He directed the Lower Rhine Music Festivals in 1825, shared these duties with Spohr in 1826, with Klien in 1828, and was sole director in 1829, 1830, 1832, 1834 and 1837.

In 1834 he was appointed conductor and director of the local orchestra and the director of the Singacadamie at Aachen.

In the last ten years of his life Ries turned mainly to opera and oratorio. Die Rauberbaut was premiered on 25 October 1828 and Liska (otherwise known as The Sorceress) on 4 August 1831. Two oratorios The Triumph

of Faith and The King of Israel were performed with great success.

It is probably true to say that most of his instrumental and orchestral work was composed during his sojourn in London. The number of his works in various genres is in doubt.

There are at least eight symphonies, nine piano concertos, fourteen string quartets, two sextets, a septet, an octet, a quintet, three piano quartets, five piano trios, twenty violin sonatas and much more.

His piano sonatas are exemplary. The Opus 26 sonata is a real joy.

But the psychologist in me comes out again. Beethoven had been dead for ten years and had eventually treated Ries very badly. But Ries, along with Wegeler, wrote Biographical Notes of Beethoven in 1837.

It more than suggests that Ries was not a bitter or spiteful person.

Ries died in Frankfurt on 13 January 1838.

Is his music merely an imitation of Beethoven?

Many composers of that time wrote in the same style and so their respective music bears similarities. For example some of the music of Haydn and Mozart is very similar

In simple terms, Ries's music is less heavy than that of Beethoven and is brighter and more cheerful. The Symphony no. 1 in D, Op 23 is a marvellous starting point. It is full of life. It sparkles. It is very exciting and has stirring horn parts which makes the blood rush. The Symphony no. 2 in C minor is completely different being somewhat dark and dramatic and yet the drama is applied by a small paint brush and not a trowel. The violin sonatas are worthy and one of the successful characteristics of them is their forward motion. They do not get bogged down with uneventful episodes and academic ornamentation.

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