

March 2016

**Matthew Riley, *The Viennese Minor-Key Symphony in the Age of Haydn and Mozart*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. ISBN 978-0-19-934967-8.**

Bertil van Boer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://remix.berklee.edu/haydn-journal>

---

### Recommended Citation

van Boer, Bertil (2016) "Matthew Riley, *The Viennese Minor-Key Symphony in the Age of Haydn and Mozart*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. ISBN 978-0-19-934967-8," *HAYDN*: Vol. 6 : No. 1 , Article 5. Available at: <https://remix.berklee.edu/haydn-journal/vol6/iss1/5>

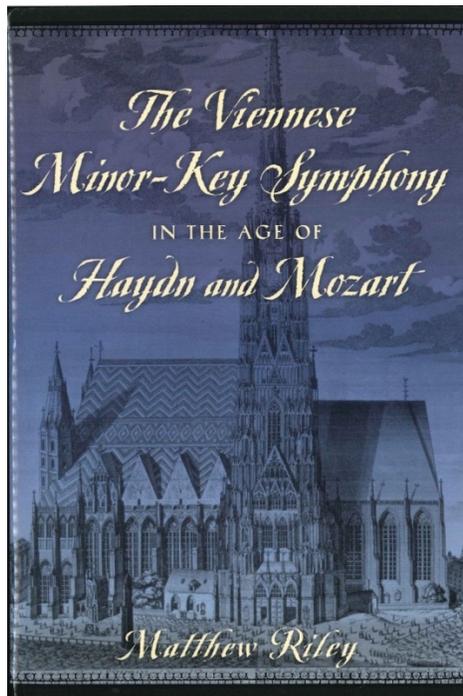
This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Research Media and Information Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in HAYDN by an authorized editor of Research Media and Information Exchange. For more information, please contact [jmforce@berklee.edu](mailto:jmforce@berklee.edu).

van Boer, Bertil. "Book Review: Matthew Riley, *The Viennese Minor-Key Symphony in the Age of Haydn and Mozart*." *HAYDN: Online Journal of the Haydn Society of North America* 6.1 (Spring 2016), <http://haydnjournal.org>.  
© RIT Press and Haydn Society of North America, 2016. Duplication without the express permission of the author, RIT Press, and/or the Haydn Society of North America is prohibited.

---

**Book Review: Matthew Riley, *The Viennese Minor-Key Symphony in the Age of Haydn and Mozart*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. ISBN 978-0-19-934967-8.**

by Bertil van Boer



The use of minor keys in the eighteenth century has always presented us with some interesting and sometimes difficult terminological issues. While one often considers the “Classical” period one where formal construction and musical symmetry were the compositional criteria of the day, particularly in genres that rose to become of enormous, even global popularity, such as the symphony, it is clear that other stylistic developments of a more changeable nature were underway, some of which ran contrary to this idea of symmetrical form and structure. In our concert world today, for example, our notion of the symphony continually reflects the works of Mozart, Haydn, and (of course, later on) Beethoven, although it is also true that more and more works by others from that era are coming to light that are both revising our knowledge of its

development and the context within which the works of these three composers were created. Such developments are beginning to seep into the public musical consciousness, verifying and expanding upon the notion that other things impacted the development of the symphony (among other genres). Of particular note is the idea that somehow composers of the Hapsburg Empire, including the two first of the aforementioned, underwent some sort of compositional “crisis” that resulted in highly emotional, dramatic, supercharged works collectively called either a “Romantic crisis” or “*Sturm und Drang*” period. Such outlooks, in turn, seem to be at odds with the conventional wisdom that stresses the purity of form and structure of Classical period music.

That there was an actual *Sturm und Drang* period in German literature beginning already in 1773 with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* is not in question. But the protagonist’s penchant for wild, unrestrained (and yes, even pathological) emotional displays seem to mirror a sudden influx of equivalent musical elements, characterized by focus on minor keys, driving rhythms, syncopations, tremolos, wide and unprepared melodic leaps, tension-filled orchestration, and unorthodox approaches to structure and style. This parallelism is often seen as problematic, not least due to the fact that the literary style was mainly northern and central German and the musical manifestations seem to focus on the minor key music of Mozart and Haydn. In *The Viennese Minor-Key Symphony in the Age of Haydn and Mozart*, Matthew Riley attempts to sort this issue by broadening the discussion with respect to symphonies by casting a wider net in the Vienna of this period. His approach, which seeks to fuse both historical and analytical facets, not only provides a context for these composers (and their colleagues and predecessors), but also calls into question the very notion of a Viennese “*Sturm und Drang* period” by viewing in-depth the minor key symphonies as touchstones.

The work is arranged more or less chronologically, taking into account symphonies not only by the two main figures but also prominent figures such as Georg Christoph Wagenseil, Florian Gassmann, Karl von Ordonez, Carl von Dittersdorf, and, most importantly, Jan Vanhal. Haydn and Mozart were actively engaged with these

van Boer, Bertil. "Book Review: Matthew Riley, *The Viennese Minor-Key Symphony in the Age of Haydn and Mozart*."

*HAYDN: Online Journal of the Haydn Society of North America* 6.1 (Spring 2016), <http://haydnjournal.org>.  
© RIT Press and Haydn Society of North America, 2016. Duplication without the express permission of the author, RIT Press, and/or the Haydn Society of North America is prohibited.

---

colleagues to one extent or another for portions of their lives, and therefore Riley's work is seminal in analyzing the minor key symphony *in situ*. It opens with a lengthy introductory chapter in which he presents the historical perspective of the Viennese musical *Sturm und Drang*, adding elements of the current wisdom of form and genre, before constructing a framework upon which to hang his multiple analyses. He includes a table of minor key works from Vienna from about 1750-1790, and proceeds to outline some of the formal analytical principles through which to guide his analysis. Citing recent studies by Darcy/Hepokowski and Gjerdingen, he tantalizes the reader with a few rough constructs of Mozart's well-known first G minor symphony (K. 183), Haydn's in the same key (Hob. I:39), and, for good measure, a Dittersdorf work, likewise in G minor. This merely whets the appetite for what is to come. Before he opens his narrative analysis, he ensures that the reader is familiar with various issues, such as the mediant modulation, as well as disclosing his discovery of two "plots" of minor key works, one "tragic" and one "comic." This in turn diffuses the issue of minor key works representing actual emotions or emotional stress, as one continually reads in earlier descriptions of the *Sturm und Drang*, by neutralizing minor key subjectivity and replacing it with different musical constructional scenarios that emphasize both irregularity and conventionality. This does not mean, however, that he eschews the occasional subjective judgment of each of the symphonies. Rather, he makes it a part of the overall narrative, as opposed to some sort of final critique.

The main book includes a chapter on the three Imperial court composers Wagenseil, Gassmann, and Ordonez, and how their minor key symphonies broke from the hidebound court style and musical preferences of their predecessors such as Georg von Reutter and J. J. Fux. He concludes that their efforts were intended for a rather elite group of high-born listeners for whom the works were sidelines. These composers were to be regarded as important stepping stones, originators of this interest in minor-key symphonies but without particular innovation. Regarding Ordonez's C minor symphony (C14), he states (p. 64): "[It] matches neither the nervous energy, broad melody, nor formal sweep of the best symphonies of Haydn or Vanhal." And yet, this work is considered by Riley to be trendy in terms of the development of the subgenre.

Thereafter come more in-depth analytical chapters which discuss Vanhal's important early works (prior to his nervous breakdown), contrasting them with Haydn's first set of minor-key symphonies. He, like Dan Hertz before him, finds the C minor symphony (Hob. I:52) a masterful piece of highly charged writing, and subsequently notes that the final work of this sequence, the F-sharp minor "Farewell" (Hob. I:45), is a work both leading towards the popular trend of the characteristic symphony and a transition to a more advanced (and less unconventional) style that characterizes the last set beginning with Hob. I:78. Riley does note that the D minor "Lamentation" symphony (Hob. I:26) seems awkward, though he takes some time to try and place it with the church sphere. In all of these cases, he provides excellent descriptive analyses of his points, and comparisons with the later Vanhal works. Not surprisingly, he saves his comments on Mozart's two G minor symphonies for last, telling us correctly that these works already have a plethora of analyses available. But his comments on how they relate to earlier trends and minor key structures, and their internal relationship to other minor-key works such as the incidental music to *Thamos*, offer new contexts that are logical, even as he notes their unusual, innovative stylistic features.

In short, Riley's book is quite ground-breaking, and while one may question some of the analytical perspectives, the inclusion of works by Vanhal, etc., it provides a good basis for further exploration. There are, of course, a number of controversial issues. First, Riley uses the term "Kleinmeister" even as he makes a point that composers like Vanhal are important to understanding the society within which both Haydn and Mozart operated. This term, long past its sell-by date and a remnant of that very exclusionary (and ahistorical) approach once espoused by German musicologists, is one that needs to be eliminated from our vocabulary. Second, even as he assembles a new paradigm to move beyond the concept of the musical *Sturm und Drang* in Vienna, Riley continues to let the remnants of its stylistic features pop up when describing the works themselves. The notion of the musical *Sturm und Drang* truly needs to be revisited, and not perhaps relating solely to Vienna, but this is not the place for such a study. However, since Riley makes precisely that point, to continue to refer to the *Sturm und Drang* elements seems awkward. Third, the historical discussions often seem a bit superficial. Riley "trawled"

van Boer, Bertil. "Book Review: Matthew Riley, *The Viennese Minor-Key Symphony in the Age of Haydn and Mozart*." *HAYDN: Online Journal of the Haydn Society of North America* 6.1 (Spring 2016), <http://haydnjournal.org>.  
© RIT Press and Haydn Society of North America, 2016. Duplication without the express permission of the author, RIT Press, and/or the Haydn Society of North America is prohibited.

---

minor-key symphonies outside of Vienna (p. 7) but apparently was not able to make any connections to whether they had a specific link to that city. From a personal perspective, Joseph Martin Kraus's C minor symphony of 1783 was certainly known there; he visited the city and, according to some sources, presented it as a gift to Haydn. This story may now be known as apocryphal, but the work was on sale with Johann Traeg from 1785, and there are a number of sources from archives associated with the Imperial court. Of course, Kraus also mentions Vanhal in one of his letters. Both Haydn and Mozart, and probably Dittersdorf, Vanhal, and Kozeluch (who is mentioned also in one of Kraus's letters) knew of this minor-key work. Moreover, Paul Wranitzky, whose minor-key works are noted, often styled himself as a student of Kraus (whether true or not). Finally, Riley seems to have relied mainly upon the scores he could find in modern editions, and many of the contemporaneous quotes seem to have been filtered through secondary sources rather than having been confirmed first hand. But these are minor quibbles, and they do not detract from the achievements of Riley's work. The analyses are the focus, and they lead us to some new and exciting conclusions, and to material that will stimulate fruitful and thoughtful discussions on a topic that, for the first time, is placed into its proper context without the detritus of the *Sturm und Drang* stereotypes.