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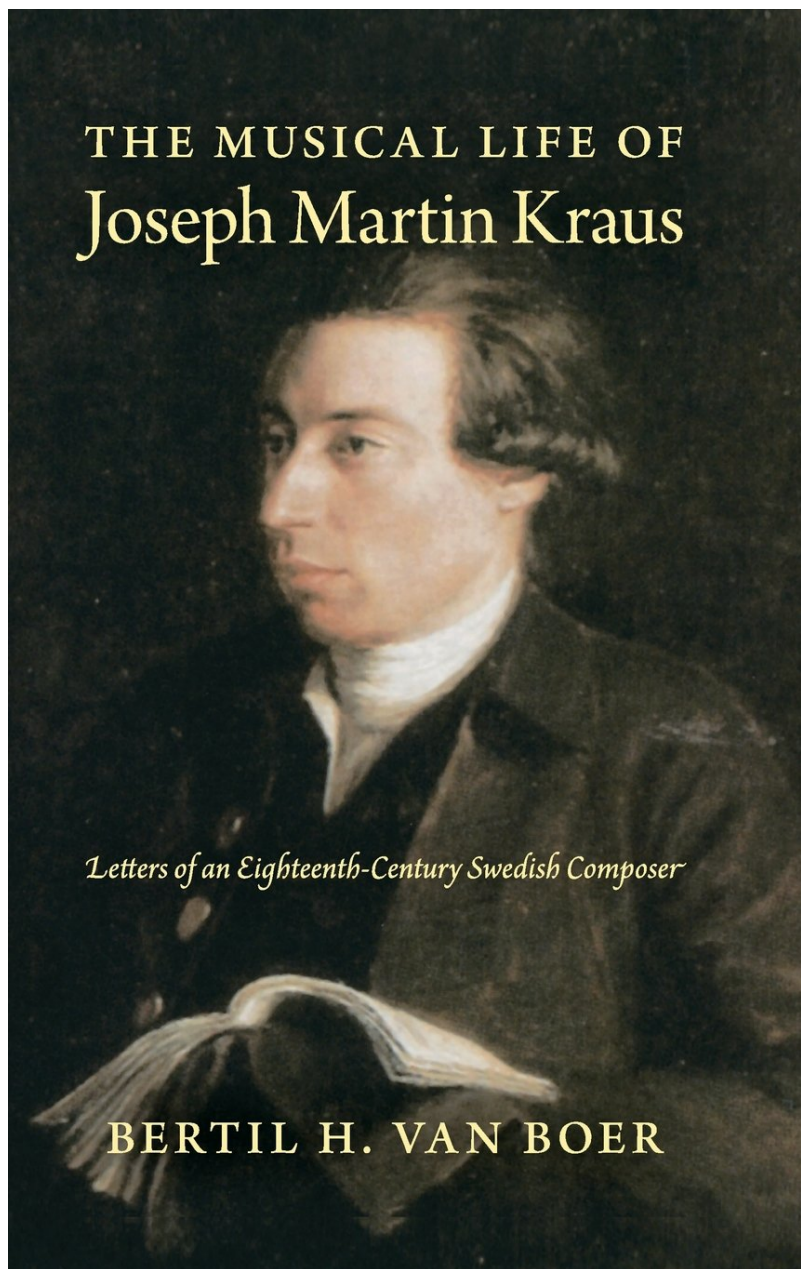
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Book Review: Bertil van Boer, *The Musical Life of Joseph Martin Kraus: Letters of an Eighteenth-Century Swedish Composer*

by Jenny Välitalo

Bertil van Boer. *The Musical Life of Joseph Martin Kraus: Letters of an Eighteenth-Century Swedish Composer*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-253-01274-6. \$60.00



Providing a complete text in English, Bertil H. van Boer's *The Musical Life of Joseph Martin Kraus: Letters of an Eighteenth-Century Swedish Composer* successfully complements the existing editions of Kraus's letters.¹ In addition to the translation, the author provides extensive supporting commentary that enhances the understanding of the composer, his music, and his time. This edition expands upon resources available in German and Swedish thus allowing access to a broader audience, and is an important contribution not only to the Kraus revival, but also to eighteenth-century scholarship.

German-Swedish composer Joseph Marin Kraus (1756-1792) led an illustrious yet brief career. Born and educated in Germany, he traveled throughout Europe on behalf of the Swedish court, experiencing musical innovation and political turmoil. He met the most important composers of his time, visited major musical centers, and lived in a time of both rediscovery and modernization. As *kapellmästare* at the musical establishment of Gustav III of Sweden (1746-1792), he served as composer, pedagogue, and visionary. His letters to his family, friends, and business partners are important portrayals of late eighteenth-century music and life.

Van Boer creates context for the reader by providing an introduction to Kraus's letters and to the man himself. The letters begin during Kraus's student days in Göttingen in 1776, and continue through 1792 in Stockholm. One of the merits of this book is that the author chronologically orders the letters from Kraus to his recipients. This structure, rather than an ordering by recipient, effectively provides a narrative of Kraus's life and the time in which he lived. The reader develops a cultural, historical, and personal timeline, and gains insight into Kraus's persona and the relationships he kept through his letters.

A unique feature of Kraus's letters is his use of language and expression. Kraus wrote in both German and Swedish, and provided both long commentary and brief references in Latin. He used words borrowed from other languages, and inserted proverbs and sayings of the time, as well as Greek epigrams. Kraus employed an eccentric and inconsistent use of italics, not limited to emphasis or customary application. Striving to allow Kraus's authentic voice to emerge, the author maintains Kraus's italics in this English edition and provides a contextual, non-literal translation. Kraus's idiomatic

¹ Irmgard Leux-Henschen, *Joseph Martin Kraus in seinen Briefen* (Stockholm: Edition Reimers, 1978) and Hans Åstrand, *Joseph Martin Kraus Brev 1776-1792* (Möklinta: Gidlunds Förlag, 2006).

expressions are specific to the original language, and their effect would be lost in a literal approach; the author is successful in balancing Kraus's idiom and the Swedish and German language-specific sayings of the time, documenting the original language and its meaning in the commentary where applicable. The commentary, available after each letter, is a key resource to understanding Kraus's unique use of language. It also provides historical and cultural context, and references for further reading.

Another merit to the commentary is the use of currency conversion to modern currency (such as the U.S. Dollar), and the reference to an approximate modern value where applicable. While a direct currency comparison or conversion is not viable because of the difference of purchasing power among European countries at the time, the reader benefits from an understanding of Kraus's financial references and social status. Especially valuable in this regard is the explanatory note to Kraus's last will and testament, Appendix A (p. 300). The author references a thirty-page inventory completed after Kraus's death, which reveals that Kraus was indeed an affluent court official, whose household aligned with his high status at a major musical establishment. Despite this affluence, Kraus's letters to his parents, even following his appointment as *kapellmästare*, are laden with requests for money. His letters concerning life in Sweden, where he arrived in 1778, are characterized by financial struggles, replete with complaints about even the most basic of needs. He refers to himself as "a living mortgage" (Letter No. 15). Kraus had abandoned his law studies in Germany and the prospect of following in his father's footsteps, and now found himself on a less secure path to both financial and professional success in a foreign country where his Catholic faith was in the minority.² His letters to his family reveal that these aspects were all concerns of his parents who, despite their own economic struggles and need to provide for Kraus's institutionalized brother, continued to financially assist their *kapellmästare* son.

² Uppsala Möte in 1593 determined that Lutheranism was the only allowed denomination in Sweden; Calvinism and Catholicism were outlawed. In the spirit of Enlightenment ideals, Gustav III officially established rights for non-Lutherans in 1781 through *Toleransediktet*, a reform that allowed adherents of a "foreign" Christian faith who intended to immigrate or already were present in the country to receive citizen rights. *Dissenterlagen* of 1860 (revised in 1873) allowed a Swedish citizen to leave the Swedish Church in favor of joining an approved denomination; belonging to a religious organization was still mandatory. Full religious freedom was not achieved until 1951.

Kraus was appointed Second *kapellmästare* at the Stockholm court in 1781; the author includes this contract that outline Kraus's duties (Letter No. 39a). In his comments, the author suggests that Kraus's parents seemed to be in disbelief that he had obtained a position. This assumption is viable because the letters leading up to this appointment reveal that Kraus's parents, burdened with requests of funding from their son, had given him an ultimatum. Kraus, horrified by his parent's wishes and the prospect of returning home to work as a bureaucrat, employed a most powerful defense to his artistic endeavors: God (Letter No. 40). Here one can see that Kraus struggled with finding his artistic voice and pleasing his parents, even while he was accumulating more debt than commissions. This situation resonates with the experience of many young professionals in the twenty-first century. It is important for the reader to remember that after all, Kraus is a young man in his twenties. It is also difficult at times for the reader to avoid frustration, especially after reading Kraus's insensitive responses to serious family events. The nature of Kraus's naïveté in adulthood is primarily evident through his financial missteps and his tendency to focus on himself. His response to the news regarding his sister's death display sorrow (Letter No. 40), but the vast majority of this letter deals with his own undertakings and need of funds for his debts. He does admit lack of economic control (Letter No. 41) stating that he needs to learn the art of "how to economize."

Kraus was able to reconnect in person with his family as he was sent out to travel continental Europe in 1782. He travelled in an official capacity as a diplomat of the Swedish court. During his four years of travel, Kraus's letters to family, friends, and his employer offer observations on eighteenth-century life, and the latest trends in both music and theatre in the cultural centers of Europe. The author includes Kraus's travel diary (Letter No. 45), which he suggests served as a general notebook. Along with the travelogues and letters of personalities such as Charles Burney (1726-1814) and Johann Friedrich Reichardt (1752-1814), Kraus's letters serve as a valuable resource to late eighteenth-century scholarship.

Following initial travels in Germany, Kraus arrived Vienna in April 1783. He remained for over six months and connected with leading composers such as Joseph Haydn and Christoph Willibald von Gluck. Kraus's writings display admiration of both composers and their compositions. His letters from Vienna in 1783 mention Gluck as "a terrific fellow that I love more than the tenth commandment" (Letter No. 51), and to his parents

he remarks, "I have found my Glück" (Letter No. 53). In a letter to his parents dated Eszterháza 18 October 1783, Kraus describes Haydn as a "quite decent soul" and remarks on the size and high performance standards of the orchestra under Haydn's direction. Kraus also recruited musicians for the Stockholm Court during travels. Two horn players from Haydn's orchestra arrived in Stockholm in 1785, as the author points out in his interlude, likely with Haydn's blessing.

Ordered to meet up with the King's entourage in the fall of 1783, Kraus's letters to his parents from Rome and Naples are prime examples of why Kraus's correspondence serves as an important travelogue of the time. Kraus's comments on music, musicians, art, architecture, and religion clearly reflect the time of innovation and rediscovery in which he was living. His multifaceted experiences expressed in these letters offer the reader insight into a wide array of topics. Not very impressed with the music in Rome, his comments on music are brief in comparison to his detailed observations on art and architecture. He attended mass as part of the official Swedish visit to the Vatican and was presented before Pope Pius VI.³ In his letters from Naples, Kraus's enthrallment with natural wonders such as Mount Vesuvius (which had produced a severe eruption in 1779) and the recent rediscovery of Pompeii is evident.

Kraus arrived in Paris in June 1784. Remaining for two years, he became involved in the city's concert life and his letters describe the various arts he experienced. Particularly interesting is his lengthy letter that includes critique of Nicoló Piccinni's (1728-1800) opera *Didone*, which was later published in Mannheim. This letter to Anton Klein is a fine example of Kraus corresponding with a friend on an artistic and intellectual level, including content he knew would interest the recipient. This seems to be true regarding letters to Roman Hoffstetter (1742-1815) as well. His letter to Hoffstetter (Letter No. 77) narrates Kraus's month long stay in London in 1785 that allowed him to experience the Handel Centenary Festival. Providing the perspective of a foreigner, Kraus comments on the size of performing forces and his admiration of the abilities and precision of the ensembles made up of English musicians only.

Kraus's letters depict the influence of German literature of the time. His letters to Samuel Liedemann (Letters No. 74 and No. 85) are infused with language displaying

³ As the author points out, a painting commemorating this event is on display at Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, Kraus may be one of the onlookers depicted.

elements of the *Sturm und Drang* movement as well as the male-bonding cult that was considered normal during Kraus's time, but might appear strange or even suggest homoerotic undertones to the modern reader. Kraus's letters to his sister Marianne, an accomplished artist, reveals a different intimate tone. With her, he could share his artistic self and the musical innovations he encountered on his travels. His letter to her from Paris on 26 December 1785 is the first mention of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* in history, and reveals Kraus's knowledge of Mozart and his music.

In addition to depicting Parisian life, Kraus's letters from Paris reveal that he wanted (and perhaps also was expected) to gain stature as a composer in Paris before returning to Sweden in hope of succeeding Francesco Uttini (1723-1795) as *kapellmästare*. Intrigues at the Stockholm court kept Kraus from returning to Sweden as expected. Arriving in Stockholm in late December 1786, Kraus's kindhearted human nature is demonstrated a few months later through requests for funds from his parents to help his rival, Georg Joseph (Abbé) Vogler (1749-1814).

Kraus was appointed *kapellmästare* in 1788, serving the court as director, pedagogue and composer. He composed one of his most famous works—*Funeral Music*—following the assassination of Gustav III in 1792. Kraus was already suffering from tuberculosis, which would end his life in 1795. His last letters depict a failing health and homesickness, and he jokingly remarked that he was unmarried (likely a response to his parents concerns).

Following Kraus's letters, the author includes four appendices. In addition to Kraus's testament, the author includes letters from Kraus's family, his teachers, and from Roman Hoffstetter to Fredrik Silverstolpe (1769-1851). Silverstolpe used the gathered material to publish the first biography of Kraus in 1833. This correspondence provides the reader with further insight into Kraus's life and how his family and friends remembered him.

Van Boer's document-driven undertaking results in an authentic and compelling documentation of Kraus's letters. He has examined the available original letters in Swedish and German, and provided a unique translation into English. The sentence structure of both Swedish and German is very different from that of English, which presents a challenge in translation. In this regard, a word for word translation would not be optimal; van Boer's approach enhances the narrative form of the letters while

maintaining the spirit of eighteenth-century idiom.

The author's agenda in part is to communicate that Kraus was by no means a minor composer in his day. Throughout this book, the reader can see evidence of Kraus's stature in music history through his appointment in Sweden, a military stronghold and important cultural center, and also through Kraus's letters that reveal that he had access to the leading composers of his time. Another interesting aspect of this book is the author's choice of subtitle. He opens his *Part One* referring to Kraus as a "German-Swedish composer," and yet in his subtitle refers to Kraus as only a "Swedish composer." This choice can perhaps be interpreted as an attempt to highlight Kraus's importance in Swedish history and remedy the lack of acknowledgement in Swedish eighteenth-century musicology. In *Musiken i Sverige*, the authors focus on Swedish composer Johann Helmich Roman (1694-1758) and to Gustavian era troubadour Carl Michael Bellman (1740-1795), but barely mentions Kraus.⁴ A recently published book by Hans Åstrand is a chief resource to Kraus and late eighteenth-century Sweden, but it is available in Swedish only.⁵ With this book, van Boer provides a comprehensive resource to an international audience of Kraus and his music. Furthermore, the currency conversions to U.S Dollars and British Pounds, rather than the Euro and Swedish Crowns, demonstrate an objective to appeal to readers not limited to Swedish and German audiences. However, including a conversion to the Euro in this discussion would have been beneficial, given the importance and widespread use of the currency.

Many elements of van Boer's writing contribute to an ample window into Kraus's life, his time and the subject matter of the letters. The combination of primary documentation of the letters with the supporting commentary, and a context-driven translation that maintains Kraus's personal writing style and tone, are key elements that make this work a success. This English edition, made available by a leading academic publishing company, will likely contribute to the ongoing revival of Kraus and his music. In addition to important portrayals of eighteenth-century life and music, Kraus's letters also depict his personality. Through the relationships Kraus kept through his letters, the reader discerns a sympathetic, well-educated, emotional and highly opinionated individual.

⁴ Leif Jonsson and Anna Ivarsdotter Johnson, eds. *Musiken i Sverige. Vol. 2: Frihetstid och Gustaviansk Tid 1720-1810* (Stockholm: Fischer, 1993).

⁵ Hans Åstrand, *Joseph Martin Kraus: den mest betydande gustavianska musikpersonligheten* (Möklinta: Gidlunds förlag, 2011).