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LEWANDOWSKI S.

Lewandowski, Stephan — PhD, Brandenburgische Technische Universität Cottbus-Senftenberg (Germany).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9537-7622>

stephan.lewandowski@b-tu.de

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SEBASTIAN PRIXNER (1771–1855) AS A MUSIC THEORY TEACHER

Till present day only very few writings are existing on Sebastian OSB Prixner (actually Peter Prixner). In 1789 a teaching book by Prixner was published, which is entitled *Kann man nicht in zwei, oder drei Monaten die Orgel gut, und regelmäßig schlagen lernen? Mit Ja beantwortet und dargethan vermittelt einer Einleitung zum Generalbasse*. This relatively comprehensive writing with probably one of the most enthusiastic and promising titles in the history of music theory is of some interest, as it contains several rules and graphic depictions that are specially designed for beginners in figured bass, for example tables of all dissonances both in major and minor mode, a table which explains and summarizes the intervals not usually indicated in figured bass signatures, or an abstract graph of the rule of the octave without any notes, but only with figured bass indications. The author calls the rule of the octave “Oktavsystem” and traces it back to the theories of Jean-Philipp Rameau (1683–1764) and François Campion (1686–1747).

Even though it might be questionable, if the book ever reached its aim and taught playing the organ to musical beginners in only maximum twelve weeks, it bears some potential for a practical oriented and historically informed education in music theory today, especially in the context of the raising discipline of applied piano praxis. In the article is shown this potential by mainly concentrating on the third part of the book, a main section of Prixner’s writing that deals with explanations about how to improvise—that means: how to invent free fantasies as well as how to prelude—on the organ. Both the author’s partially inventive ways of explaining complex interrelationships to beginners and his refreshing, at times humorous writing style might still be motivating for present day students.

Keywords: activity of Sebastian Prixner, pedagogy of music theory, organ, figured bass, prelude.

Introduction. Of what character is a person who writes some music theoretical teaching book with the most enthusiastic and promising title *Kann man nicht in zwei, oder drei Monaten die Orgel gut, und regelmäßig schlagen lernen? Mit Ja beantwortet und dargethan vermittelt einer Einleitung zum Generalbasse?* [Prixner 1789]?¹ Peter Prixner was born on 14th October in 1744 in Reichenbach in the region of Oberpfalz (Bavaria). From the age of twelve, he attended the St. Paul Gymnasium in Regensburg, a city only about 30 kilometres from his birthplace. In 1763 he was admitted to the monastery St. Emmeram in Regensburg as Brother Sebastian. It is delivered that he played the organ excellently, but also had extraordinary scientific knowledge, especially in the field of music theory. From 1786 until his death in 1799 he directed the music seminar in St. Emmeram, after he had already been choirmaster with few interruptions from 1770 onwards. He died one day before Christmas, on the 23rd of December in 1799. His

¹ The title of the teaching book can be translated into English language as Can’t One Learn to Play the Organ Good and Regularly Within Two or Three Months? Answered with Yes and Presented with the Help of an Introduction to Figured Bass (own transl.).

character is described as follows: “By a unique trait of divine love, he was so different from the way of acting of the time that, because of the righteousness of his character, he seemed, as it were, not to fit the spirit of the age” [Emmerig 2002, p. 59].¹ Furthermore it is reported: “Nothing earthly seemed to please him, except when he happened to hear somewhere more or less easily catchy music of high artistry or saw it written in notes.” [Ibid., p. 60].²

Thomas Emmerig writes that the time when Prixner lived and worked at St. Emmeram has been described as the “Golden Era” of the monastery [Ibid., p. 59].³ This can be attributed to the merits of Prince-Abbot Frobenius Forster (1709–1791). A year before Prixner entered the monastery, Forster had taken over its leadership and founded a leading centre for the humanities and natural sciences there. Previously, Forster had served as professor of philosophy and experimental physics at the University of Salzburg. In the monastic environment of St. Emmeram, however, he had significantly better financial means to realize his visions in science and teaching. In such an environment, Prixner’s music theory and musical teaching also fell on fertile ground.

Methodological Framework. The present text wishes to present an overview of Prixner’ Organ School by pointing out and commenting remarkable details within the book. Also, the treatise shall be seen in the context of music theory teaching in Germany in the second half of the 18th century. Finally, the potential of Prixner’s treatise for university music theory teaching today shall be examined.

Research Results. It can be assumed that Prixner was a student of Joseph Riepel (1709–1782), who was Kapellmeister at the court of the Princes of Thurn and Taxis in Regensburg since 1749. All of Riepel’s influential music theoretical writings were written in Regensburg. Anyway, a detailed influence of these writings on Prixner is hard to trace back. When Prixner entered the St. Paul Gynnasium in 1756, the first two parts of Riepel’s *Anfangsgründe zur musikalischen Setzkunst—De rhythmopoeia, oder: Von der Tactordnung* [Riepel 1752] and *Grundregeln zur Tonordnung insgemein* [Riepel 1755]—had been already published, the third one—*Gründliche Erklärung der Tonordnung insbesondere, zugleich aber für die mehresten Organisten insgemein* [Riepel 1757]—was soon to appear.⁴ Emmerig gives a hint that Prixner has copied a part of Riepel’s writings, which ones seems to be unknown till present day [Emmerig 2002, p. 60].

However, similarities between Riepel and Prixner are certainly discernible. Both Riepel and Prixner represent positions critical of tradition, both with regard to the content of music theory and to the way in which this content is taught. Their texts are motivating, encouraging and always closely related to musical practice. Thus, they are characterized by numerous demonstrations of what is explained in each case by means of practical musical examples. The motivation of the readership also includes a pedagogical aspect that should not be underestimated in its effect to this day: humour. Although Prixner does not follow Riepel’s example in choosing the dialogue form for his organ school (there are only few exceptions within Riepel’s theoretical works that are not written in dialogue form), his renderings are nevertheless interspersed with humorous expressions almost throughout.

¹ Own translation, orig.: “Durch einen einzigartigen Zug göttlicher Liebe unterschied er sich so sehr von der Handlungsweise der Zeit, daß er der Rechtschaffenheit seines Charakters wegen gleichsam nicht zum Zeitgeist zu passen schien.”

² Own translation, orig.: “Nichts Irdisches schien ihn zu erfreuen, außer wenn er zufällig irgendwo mehr oder weniger eingängige Musik von hoher Kunstfertigkeit hörte oder in Noten geschrieben sah”.

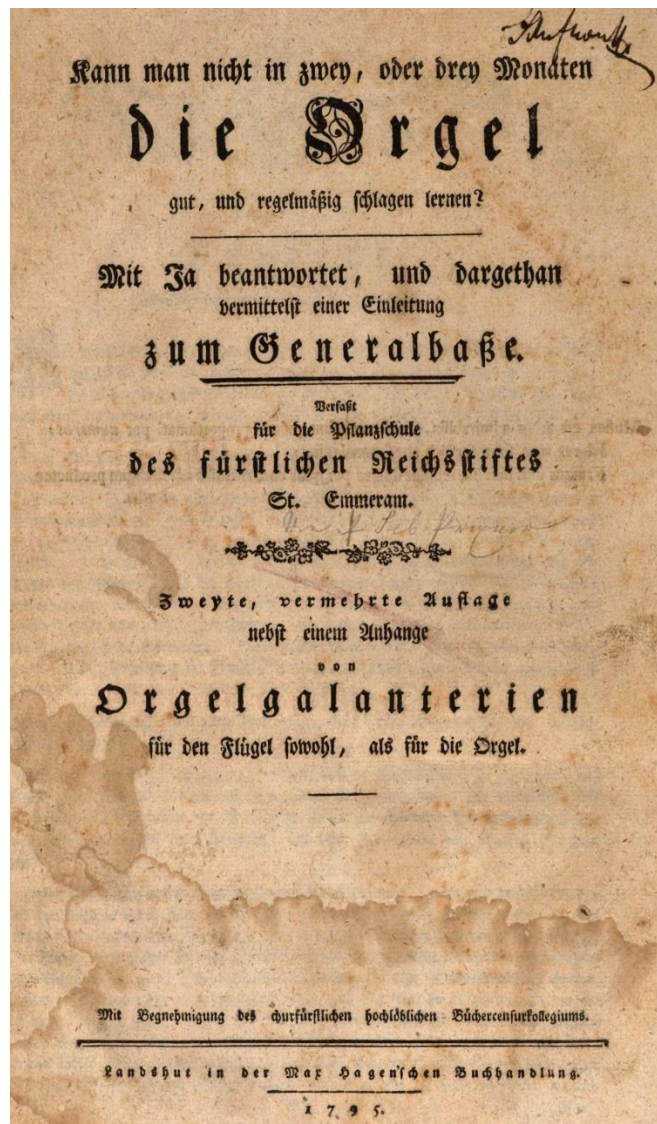
³ Own translation, orig.: “Goldene Ära”.

⁴ The title of this series of music theoretical writings by Riepel can be translated as “Beginning Grounds to the Art of Musical Setting”, own translation. English versions of the titles of the first three parts might be *De Rhythmopoeia, or: About the Arrangement of the Bars* (part I), *Basic Rules for the Tone Order in General* (part II), and *Thorough Explanation of the Tone Order in Particular, but at the Same Time for the Most Organists in General* (part III), own translations.

And finally, it seems like an exaggeration of Riepel's positions when Prixner promises that the new methods used within his textbook will allow to teach organ playing in only a very short time (illustration 1).

Illustration 1.

Title pages from both editions of Prixner's teaching book [Prixner 1789 and Prixner 1795]



Though it might be doubtful, if Prixner's teaching book ever reached its promised aim—to teach any student to play the organ good and regularly within only twelve weeks—it might have had some success nevertheless: The first edition from 1789 was soon out of print [Prixner 1789]. Six years later, “a second extended edition together with an appendix of organ galantries”¹ came out [Prixner 1795]. Again, the title is very promising and, after close reading, misleading if not disappointing. Emmerigs comparison of the two editions shows that the appendix of the first part is missing in the new version, single paragraphs are reformulated with a tendency to become clearer and shorter [Emmerig 2002]. Also, some note examples have been replaced in the new edition. The fourth part of the first edition is completely missing, and the promised organ galantries (either for the organ or the piano), which were probably supposed to replace this part, even seem not to have appeared at all. However, one should not reproach the author too much, as he did not originally intend to publish for a large readership, but primarily wrote down his own teachings for internal monastic use. Both the completeness and the refreshing immediacy of Prixner's first edition may justify the author's focusing on it now.

In the following, few selected passages shall be picked out from this edition in order to demonstrate the precedingly described way of presenting music-theoretical content and how it is conveyed, and its potential for teaching today in the context of historically informed music theory as well as the emerging discipline of Applied Piano Practice.

Illustration 2.

Tables showing dissonances that are potentially concei-vable both in major and in minor mode [Prixner 1789, pp. 75–76]

| Tabelle aller Dissonanten in den Durtönen. | | | | | | | | | |
|--|--|----------|-----------------------|-------------|---|--|---------------------|--------------------------|--------|
| Die Wohn- plätze der Dis- sonanten. | Hier wird auf kein steigen oder fallen reflectiert. | | | | | im Steigen allein | im Fallen allein | | |
| | Finalis | 5 43 | 65 43 | 7 4 2 | 7 | | 9 | — | 5 2 |
| Secunda | 6 4 3 | | | 7 | 9 | — | | | |
| Tertia | | 7 | | | 9 | — | | 6 4 2 ^b | |
| Quarta | | 7 | | | 9 | sb : wenn des So- nesQuarta um ein Semiton : erhö- het ist. | | 4 ⁱ | |
| Quinta | 5 43 | 65 43 | 7 6 5 4 3 | 7 | 9 | — | | | |
| Sexta | | 7 | | | 9 | — | 6 4 3 | 8 4 3 | |
| Septima | | 7 | | | 9 | sb | | 6 4 2 ^b | |

¹ Own transl., orig.: “zweite, vermehrte Ausgabe nebst einem Anhang von Orgelgalantrien”.

| Tabelle aller Dissonanten in den Molltönen. | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|--|----------|--------------------|---------------|--------|--|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Die Wohn- plätze der Dis- sonan:en. | Hier wird auf kein steigen oder fallen reflectiert. | | | | | im Steigen allein. | im Fallen allein. | | | |
| Finalis | 5 43 | 65 43 | $\frac{7}{4}$ 2 | 7 | 9 | — | | | | |
| Secunda. | 6 4 3 | | 7 | | 9 | 8 5 ^b | — | | | |
| Tertia. | 5ta su- perfl. | | 7 | | 9 | — | — | | | |
| Quarta. | | 7 | | 9 | | 5 ^b und 7 dimi- nut: wenn die Quart des Tonos um ein Se- miton: erhöht ist. | 6 4 ₁ 2 | 6 4 ₁ 3 ^b | | |
| Quinta. | 5 43 | 65 43 | 7 6 | 76 5 54 43 | 7 9 | — | | 6 4 ₁ 2 ^b | | |
| Sexta. | die steigende | — | | | | 7 | 2 fu- perfl | 6 fu- perfl | 6 4 ₁ 3 ^b | |
| | die fallende | 7 | | | | — | — | | | |
| Septima | die steigende | — | | | | 4 dimi- nuta. | 5 ^b | 7 dimi- nuta. | — | |
| | die fallende | 7 | | | | — | | | | |

The tables presented in illustration 2 show all dissonances usable according to Prixner both in major and in minor mode. Each table consists of four columns. The left one shows the “living places”¹ of the dissonances (Prixner 1789, pp. 75–76], i.e. the scale steps on which the respective dissonances occur. The remaining columns divide the possible dissonances into three categories: Those that can occur with stepwise upward or downward motion (third and fourth columns) and those where the progression of the bass line is not relevant (second column). The representation is based on the diatonic scale in major and in minor mode; in the case of minor, the melodic scale is used, with the sixth and seventh degrees raised upward and the corresponding notes not raised downward. An exception is the augmented fourth scale degree, where a diminished fifth can occur in the major scale and a diminished fifth together with a diminished seventh in the minor scale. There seems to be a printing error in connection with the top entry of the table of all dissonances in minor mode [Prixner 1789, p. 76]: The two vertical lines indicate that the same entries at the corresponding position of the dissonance table in major mode [Prixner 1789, p. 75] should also be here, but that the numbers were simply forgotten. This overview shows which dissonances are potentially conceivable in a musical composition and thus which tools are used to create a sound that is modern in the late 18th century, even if it does not yet say anything about the application of these tools.

1 Own transl., orig. “Wohnplätze”.

Illustration 3.

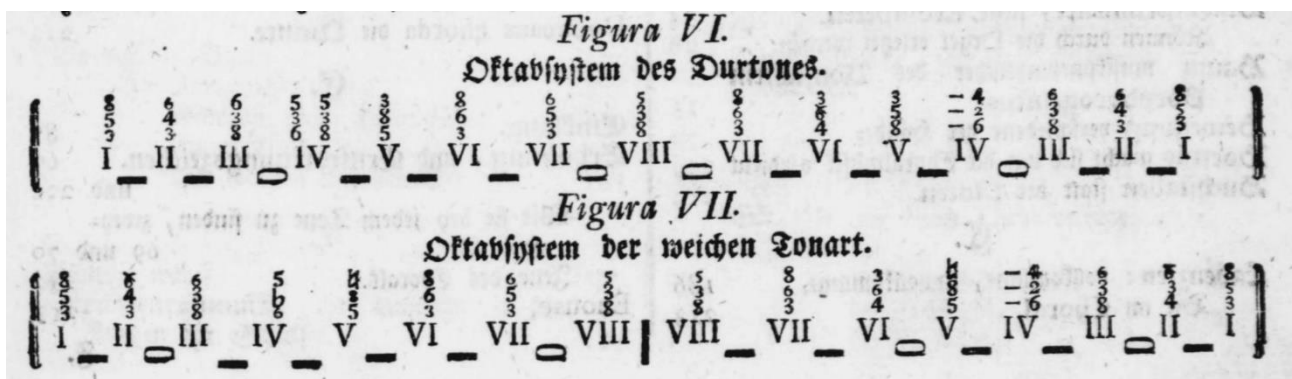
Tables on thorough bass rules [Prixner 1789, p. 163]

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
| 2 | 4 | 6 | 4 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| 5 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 2 oder 2* | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| 3 | 2* | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| 4 | 4 | 8 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 6 | 6 |
| 4 | 43 | 8 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 6 | 6 |
| 4 ^b | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| 5 ^b | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| 5* | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 |
| 56 | 65 | 8 | 3 | 8 | 3 | 8 | 3 |
| 6 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 5 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |

Another graphic depiction, which expresses Prixner’s desire for clear and compactly summarized presentations, can be found in a later section of the book [Prixner 1789, p. 163]. The author provides two tables specially designed for beginners in thorough bass (see illustration 3). The left columns of both tables (overwritten with the number 1) show a selection of thorough bass notations commonly occurring in a score. The columns on the right show the intervals that are not numbered, but are nevertheless taken for granted and played. This sets Prixner’s teaching method apart from older introductions to thorough bass, which initially sometimes use “over-figurations”, i.e., thorough bass indications that specify the exact placement of each upper voice [see for example Dandrieu, n.d. (1718)]. These methods were sometimes still maintained in the second half of the 18th century [see for example Deysinger 1763 and Lendorff 1766].

Illustration 4.

Rule of the octave according to Prixner [Prixner 1789, p. 223, figurae VI and VII]



However, the author resorts to the method of “over-figuration” elsewhere, namely in the context of an abstract graphic representation of the rule of the octave in major and in minor, in which no notes are used [Prixner 1789, p. 223] (see illustration 4). Prixner titles this representation “octave system” [Prixner 1789, p. 223],¹ a designation of the rule of the octave that is, if not singular, at least rarely encountered in the German-speaking world. The term “Sitz der Akkorde” is found much more frequently, a term for whose transfer into English (“seat of the chords”) would be useful like to in connection with a clearer demarcation of the German thorough bass tradition from both French thorough bass and the Italian partimento on the terminological level.

Prixner seems to have been well read. He traces his “octave system” back to the theories of Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764) and François Campion (1686–1747) [Prixner 1789, p. 59]. In particular, Campion’s treatise should be mentioned in this context, since it bears a French variant of the term “rule of the octave” (for the first time) in its subtitle and could also have served as a model due to the extensive identity of the harmonization of the octave in major and minor in comparison with [Campion 1716]. The fact that the Italian tradition, at least in this point, remains unmentioned need not necessarily have been due to Prixner’s ignorance: The search for an adequate term required a terminological model, and it can be assumed that such a model did not exist in Italy until Bonifazio Asioli’s *Trattato di Armonia* [Asioli n.d. (1813), p. 112], well after the creation of Prixner’s organ school.

It has been already pointed out that Prixner’s teaching method is characterized by numerous practical examples. Two of these will now be examined in more detail. The first example is from the third part of Prixner’s textbook, which contains instructions for improvising. Prixner distinguishes between the longer and harmonically more complex free fantasia, potentially reaching regions far removed from the initial key, and the shorter preludes [Prixner 1789, p. 146]. With the latter, Prixner writes, one should not “go too far into other keys” [Prixner 1789, *ibid.*].² A third category, the non-free fantasy, the author would like to leave to the composer and not treat in detail in his book [Prixner 1789, *ibid.*].

Illustration 5.

Musical example containing various elements in the bass line:
Tone steps, thirds, fourths, fifths etc., chromatic lines, syncopations, and pedal point
[Prixner 1789, pp. 155–158]



¹ Own transl., orig.: “Oktavsystem”.

² Own translation, orig.: “sich ja nicht zu weit in andere Tonarten versteigen”.



By means of only three paragraphs dealing with the essence of fantasizing, with the invention of a theme, and with its execution, Prixner arrives, after only eight pages, at a summary pattern of an “organ conversation”¹ [Prixner 1789, p. 153] which, although not containing extensive modulations, is of extreme complexity (illustration 5). At first, he notes only the bass part, including the thorough bass numbers. Prixner’s division of the bass line into different categories according to its intervallic course becomes clear here: In tone steps, in thirds, fourths, fifths etc. Chromatic lines, syncopations, and a dominant pedal point also appear [Prixner 1789, pp. 153–154].

The individual sections or categories are then commented, with the author using small letters of the Latin alphabet, getting as far as the letter (u) (!) [Prixner 1789, pp. 154–155]. Prixner is of the opinion: “In this example, there is sufficient material for an organ lover to carry out an idea in various ways” [Prixner 1789, p. 155].² Furthermore, he believes that his example will be “clearer and more useful with notes than with too many numbers” [Prixner 1789, *ibid.*]³ and adds a possible solution (Illustration 5).

His complete example differs from the preceding one that is not written out in that it is one measure longer, which is not explained. The difference, however, is quite obvious: Prixner does not begin with a gradually descending line, as in the thorough bass variant, but with an initial cadence, for which he needs an additional introductory measure.

In the “Appendix to this third part”⁴ [Prixner 1789, pp. 197ff.], which is omitted in the second edition of Prixner’s teaching book together with the fourth part [Prixner 1795], the author returns to the invention of simple, short preludes and puts himself in the position of beginning or still little experienced organists. He writes: “In order not to make their profession too difficult and too frustrating right from the beginning, but to make it as easy as possible for them [the learning organists], it would not be bad if they were presented with little written preludes” [Prixner 1789, p. 197].⁵ Arbitrary in his choice of keys, Prixner then promises to present various preludes in the keys of A major and E major. Without further commentary, eight examples then follow in E major, as many in A major—and two more in D major.

Illustration 6 shows one of these small compositions, the sixth one in A major. A typical contemporary sounding is provided by the false-cadence-like turn in measures 2/3, as well as the simultaneity of several, partially upward-resolved syncopes in the upper voices, for example starting from the German Sixth Chord in measure 5 or in the final measure.

¹ Own translation, orig.: “Orgelgespräche”.

² Own translation, orig.: “In diesem Beyspiele findet sich für einen Orgelliebhaber hinlänglicher Vorrath, einen Gedanken auf verschiedene Art auszuführen”.

³ Own translation, orig.: “mit Noten deutlicher und zum Gebrauche dienlicher seyn, als mit zu vielen Ziffern”.

⁴ Own translation, orig.: “Anhang zu diesem dritten Theile”.

⁵ Own translation, orig.: “Um ihnen [den lernenden Organisten] ihren Beruf nicht gleich im Anfange zu schwer, und zu verdrüßlich zu machen, sondern aufs möglichste zu erleichtern, wäre es nicht ohne, wenn ihnen kleine Vorspiele geschriebner vorgelegt würden.”

Prelude in A major [Prixner 1789, p. 205]



Conclusion. One may overlook small deficiencies in Prixner’s textbook, for they rarely represent desiderata in content, but on the contrary are often, as it were, overfulfillments of preceding promises or announcements. On the one hand, the methodology in the organ school, which does not always progress linearly from easy to difficult, may have a much more negative effect, especially in connection with the fact that Prixner does not really assume that he wants to teach musical beginners.

The spoiler in this respect is already in the introduction of his book: “Whoever reads my question [the title of the book] will without any recollection fall into the thought that I am never willing to answer it in the affirmative with regard to those who have no knowledge at all, or only a poor knowledge, in the art of music: no! I require from my pupil not only previous instruction, but practice and true genius.” [Prixner 1789, preface, p. 3].¹

At the Institute for Instrumental and Vocal Pedagogy at the Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus (Germany), selected exercises from Prixner’s textbook have nevertheless been successfully used in the so-called “Schwerpunkt Musiktheorie” (“Emphasis Music Theory”), which includes the subjects “Applied piano practice” and “History of Music Theory”. Advanced students benefit both from Prixner’s comprehensive, actually very practice-oriented teaching and from his humorous language, which admittedly is completely comprehensible especially for native German speakers.

Eberhard Kraus already praised Prixner’s teaching in 1964: “It was a good teaching, we have his script before us. He thoroughly treats the construction of the organ, tells of its history and essence, speaks of the various uses of the organ within the liturgy, and instructs in praeambulating, fantasizing, and improvising by means of numerous, precisely executed examples” [Kraus 1964, cited after Emmerig 2002, p. 67].² A more intensive

¹ Own translation, orig.: “Wer meine Frage [den Titel des Buches] liest, wird ohne alle Erinnerung auf die Gedanken verfallen, daß ich sie nie in Rücksicht auf diejenigen mit Ja zu beantworten gesinnet bin, die in der Tonkunst überhaupt gar kein, oder doch nur ein schlechtes Kenntniß besitzen: nein! ich verlange von meinem Schüler nicht nur einen vorhergehenden Unterricht, sondern Uebung und wahres Genie.”

² Own translation, orig.: “Es war ein guter Unterricht, wir haben sein Skriptum ja vor uns. Er behandelt gründlich den Bau der Orgel, erzählt von ihrer Geschichte und ihrem Wesen, spricht von der verschiedenen Verwendungsmöglichkeit der Orgel innerhalb der Liturgie und unterweist an Hand zahlreicher, genau ausgeführter Beispiele im Praeambulieren, Phantasieren und Improvisieren.”

revival of Prixner's organ school in the future, including the partly remarkable original compositions it contains, would be very desirable.

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СТЕФАН ЛЕВАНДОВСКИ

Левандовски, Стефан — доктор філософії, Бранденбурзький технічний університет Котбус-Зенфтенберг (Німеччина).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9537-7622>

stephan.lewandowski@b-tu.de

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СЕБАСТЬЯН ПРИКСНЕР (1771–1855) ЯК УЧИТЕЛЬ ТЕОРІЇ МУЗИКИ

Актуальність дослідження. Мистецтво прелюдіювання кінця XVIII – початку XIX ст. зараз є в зоні активного дослідницького інтересу. Однак музично-теоретичній діяльності Себастьяна Прікснера (1744–1799), ймовірного учня Йозефа Ріпеля (1709–1782), на поточний момент не приділено достатньо уваги. У статті досліджується підручник Прікснера з дуже промовистою назвою: «Чи може будь-хто навчитися добре грати на органі протягом двох-трьох місяців? Відповідаємо *так* і даємо можливість уявити це за допомогою введення до мистецтва фігурного басу». Цю книгу було оприлюднено у двох виданнях (1789 і 1795). Хоча Прікснер ніколи не мав наміру написати бестселер, записавши лише зміст лекцій, які він читав своїм студентам у монастирі Св. Еммерама в Регенсбурзі (Баварія/Німеччина), книга, тим не менш, мала досить великий успіх. За декілька років було оприлюднено друге видання, яке замислювалося як переглянute та розширене, але насправді ж містить в основному оптимізацію методів навчання, і, таким чином, є навіть меншим за обсягом, ніж перше. Праця Прікснера є яскравим прикладом музично-теоретичної педагогіки кінця XVIII століття, яка все більше зосереджувалася на підручниках, призначених для самостійного навчання.

Основна мета дослідження полягає у зверненні уваги на підручник, який на сьогодні можна вважати радше не забутим, а недооціненим. Хоча трактат Прікснера містить теоретико-практичні поради та вправи щодо навчання гри на органі загалом, його також слід розглядати в контексті спеціальної галузі: «теорії прелюдіювання», розділу теорії музики XVIII століття, на якій автор зосереджується в останніх частинах книги.

Методологія. У статті детально розглядаються обрані фрагменти, розділи та музичні приклади з підручника Прікснера. Основну увагу спрямовано на зміст книги та методи навчання Прікснера, а також на їхню актуальність для викладання теорії музики сьогодні. Таким чином, робота Прікснера вводиться в контекст історії музичної теорії.

Висновки та перспективи дослідження. Хоча «Органну школу» Прікснера можна вважати видатним навчальним підручником свого часу, який містить вказівки з теорії музики, імпровізації, прелюдіювання тощо, виявляється, що цей трактат є корисним лише як супровідна книга, доповнення до «справжнього» курсу гри на органі. Особливу цінність мають деякі графіки й таблиці, що підсумовують складні правила – наприклад, гармонізацію мажорної та мінорної гами (правило октави), або збірку маленьких органних прелюдій авторства Прікснера, які дають певні уявлення щодо створення органної прелюдії та особливостей її застосування у творчій практиці композиторів Південної Німеччини другої половини XVIII століття.

Ключові слова: діяльність Себастьяна Прікснера, педагогіка теорії музики, орган, фігураційний бас, прелюдіювання.