

JOSEPH MARTIN KRAUS:
Brev 1776-1792

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One always hopes that Joseph Martin Kraus (1756-92) can be perceived as something other than merely the “Swedish Mozart.” Those who know his music will also know that if he has to be compared with anyone Viennese, Haydn is a better choice, though it seems to me that Beethoven, fourteen years his junior, is actually a more interesting candidate.

Kraus’ career was, in fact, quite successful in artistic terms, if problematic in financial ones. A graduate in law from the university of Göttingen, where he appears to have played a role in the early Romantic *Hainbund*, he came to Sweden in the summer of 1778 with few public credits as a composer or conductor. Reasonable attendance upon important musical officials managed to get him an assignment in 1780 to write an opera, with a libretto by no-one less than Johan Henric Kellgren (for whom this was his first theatre-text to be set to music). *Proserpin* was performed at Ulriksdals slottsteater in June 1781, and the pair was thereupon commissioned to write the opening opera for the new theatre in town just then nearing completion. That *Aeneas i Carthago* was never performed then, or in the lifetimes of Kraus, Kellgren, or Gustaf III, was not

the fault of any of them. Kraus' consolation prize was his appointment as *kapellmästare* and an extended trip to the Continent to see what was happening in the theatres there. After a journey through Germany to Vienna (and meetings with Haydn and Gluck – and quite probably Mozart as well), then to Paris and London (in time for the second great Handel jubilee in 1785), return to Sweden brought him membership in the Royal Musical Academy and a welter of teaching and conducting responsibilities. He continued composing and wrote the funeral music for his king, but ill-health caught up with him in the autumn of 1792 and he died on December 15th of tuberculosis.

Appearing in the 250th anniversary year of Kraus' birth, this collection brings into Swedish translation the 112 letters known to be by him. Hans Åstrand's translation is built upon the edition of the originals and its commentary by Irmgard Leux-Henschen, *Joseph Martin Kraus in seinen Briefen* (Stockholm: Svenskt musikhistoriskt arkiv/Edition Reimers, 1978). Åstrand does not claim to have broken any new scholarly ground in this book, though he includes one new letter. He has also gone back to the original manuscripts and modified Leux-Henschen's readings here and there and has expanded her commentary, often considerably. More than that, he has included Kraus' brief but interesting diary from his Grand Tour (1782-86). For Kraus' few letters in Swedish, Åstrand has let Kraus' language stand, merely annotating lexical problems now and then. A few of the letters exist only in fragments as published in 1833 by Fredrik Samuel Silverstolpe. There is one letter, mostly in German, from Göttingen in 1777 to his brother Franz (L-H p. 193/HÅ nr. 4, p. 18), whose sense seems to have defeated both Leux-Henschen and Åstrand. The fact is that those interested in the epistolary side of Kraus' life will need both editions: Leux-Henschen's for the original language(s), the locations of the letters (mostly in the Bezirksmuseum in Buchen), and her long biographical introduction; Åstrand's for the missing letter, the travel diary, the expanded commentary, and the index of names. Åstrand also provides Kraus' two contracts with the opera, a list of his works, and his will.

All but a few of the letters are to his parents, with some later ones to his siblings, especially his sister Marianne. The remainder are to university friends and business letters to authorities at the opera. A constant theme in his letters to his parents is his need for money, to live on and to pay his debts, but there are many charming moments, too. The story of his meeting with Gustaf III after the performance at Ulriksdal (which Åstrand thinks was little more than a dress rehearsal), in which each looked the other carefully up and down, is well known. Less well known is that when he was presented to Pope Pius VI in Rome, the pope remarked that not much seemed to have been noteworthy in Italian music recently, to which Kraus answered that that "showed that His Holiness was a connoisseur."

There is the occasional lapse, however. On p. 192, Åstrand's commentary on Kraus' mention of Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* and *Figaro* in a letter from Paris to his sister implies a meeting of the two composers. He does not mention the perhaps stronger case made by Kraus' use of thematic material from *Idomeneo*, an opera which then existed in only two manuscripts, neither of which Kraus could have seen. Bertil van Boer, who uncovered this fact ("The case of the Circumstantial Meeting. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Joseph Martin Kraus," *Eighteenth-Century Music* 1 (2004): 85-90), suggests that Kraus was more likely to have gotten that material directly from Mozart himself.

Åstrand's main aim is to bring Kraus the person more into focus for Swedes, and the letters do this. One hopes they will lead to a greater understanding of the modernity and sophistication of his music.