

THE ORGAN WORKS OF THEODOR KIRCHNER (1823-1903)

John Riley

Kirchner is hardly a name well-known to organists and his output is a mere 14 short pieces, none of which are expressly liturgical in nature. Nevertheless, they are well worth exploring and eminently suitable for liturgical use or within a recital. The bicentenary of his birth seems a good opportunity to highlight his work.

Kirchner held various important teaching posts and enjoyed the friendship and advocacy of a number of leading composers of the day, notably Mendelssohn, Clara and Robert Schumann and Brahms. (His relationship with Clara was particularly close). As an organist, he held an important post in Winterthur, Switzerland, where his playing is said to have been admired by Wagner and Liszt, though his compositions were probably not regarded as warmly by them, being very much in the opposite camp to Wagner in particular.

Kirchner is probably best-known for his piano legacy consisting of over 1000 works, mostly aphoristic character pieces not unlike those of Schumann. Indeed one of this organ works, the Andante in E flat major appeared as one suitable for piano or organ in his op. 82 *Gedenkblätter* pieces for piano.

His undoubtedly success as a musician and teacher though was often undermined and limited by his less than stable character and profligacy, not least his gambling habits. For example, in 1884, Brahms and other leading musicians had to raise 30,000 marks to pay off Kirchner's debts.



**Theodor Kirchner (1823 – 1903): Sämtliche Orgelwerke
Clara Schumann (1819 – 1896): Briefe an Theodor Kirchner**

1 Präludium g-Moll (Maestoso)	op. 89 Heft I, Nr. 2	3:28
2 Arioso G-Dur (Andante)	op. 89 Heft I, Nr. 1	4:01
3 Quasi Sarabande g-Moll	op. 89 Heft I, Nr. 4	2:51
4 aus Briefen an Theodor Kirchner, Dezember 1857 – März 1858		
5 Andante G-Dur	op. 89 Heft II Lyrische Blätter, Nr. 5	2:56
6 Moderato c-Moll	op. 89 Heft II Lyrische Blätter, Nr. 6	2:34
7 Andante Es-Dur	op. 82, Gedenkblätter, Nr. 9	2:09
8 aus Briefen an Theodor Kirchner, Oktober 1862 – Dezember 1862		
9 Legende B-Dur (Poco lento)	op. 89 Heft I, Nr. 3	3:02
10 aus Briefen an Theodor Kirchner, Dezember 1862 – Februar 1863		
11 (ohne Bezeichnung) F-Dur	op. 89 Heft III Lyrische Blätter, Nr. 10	2:03
12 Poco lento a-Moll	op. 89 Heft III Lyrische Blätter, Nr. 9	1:50
13 Langsam d-Moll	op. 89 Heft III Lyrische Blätter, Nr. 11	2:01
14 aus Briefen an Theodor Kirchner, Juli 1863 – September 1863		
15 Largo As-Dur	op. 89 Heft II Lyrische Blätter, Nr. 7	2:09
16 Andante cantabile Ges-Dur	op. 89 Heft III Lyrische Blätter, Nr. 12	2:33
17 Andantino cantabile E-Dur	op. 89 Heft II Lyrische Blätter, Nr. 8	1:46
18 Brief an Theodor Kirchner, Juli 1864		
19 Andantino (poco lento) h-Moll	op. 89 Heft III Lyrische Blätter, Nr. 13	3:19
		2:49

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Stephanie Achilles, Sprecherin

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Kirchner's life and career was a long one, by the standards of the times at least, and whilst his organ works are limited in number, they nevertheless reflect a wide range of influences and something of the major developments, upheavals—and perhaps stylistic ambiguities and uncertainties—in organ music during that period. His Prelude in G major is contrapuntal in nature, not dissimilar to the preludes and sonata movements of Mendelssohn, yet also the thickness of texture and bold gestures reminiscent of Brahms, his early preludes in particular.

The Arioso in G minor demonstrates Kirchner's skilful use of motifs as the basis for development, whilst the Quasi Sarabande in G minor, as elsewhere, exhibits complexity of harmony and volatility of mood associated with works by Liszt and even Reger.

Most of his organ works however come under two collections of *Lyrische Blätter*, and as the title suggests these are rather akin to short character pieces for piano such as those by Schumann, and indeed of Kirchner himself. They are essentially lyrical and declamatory in nature with shifts of mood and texture that almost paint a narrative speaking to the listener. Although Kirchner's harmonic language overall is superficially not dissimilar to that of his near contemporary, Rheinberger, Kirchner's music at its best arguably conveys more of a personal and focussed voice and connection with the player and listener.

As with all music however, the proof must lie in the listening and playing. All but one of his organ works are contained within the op.89 volume, and available at reasonable price from www.jpc.de or as a download from www.stretta-music.com. All his organ works are included on a CD performed on the Buchholz - Grüneberg organ (1818/66) in Demmin Stadtkirche by Martin West: Ambiente ACD 2019. The disc is also interspersed with readings of letters sent by Clara Schumann to Kirchner. N.B. the extensive CD notes are in German only, as are the readings. The fine instrument and performance do full justice to Kirchner's organ output and the disc is highly recommended.