

JOHANN ANDERAS KIRCHHOFF (1722-1799)

Harpist and composer Johann Andreas Kirchhoff was one of a number of German virtuosi employed at the Royal Opera House in Copenhagen in the 18th century.

Contemporary written sources indicate that he was one of the greatest exponents of the harp of the time and that he was held in very high esteem, both in Denmark and internationally. Kirchhoff was born in Wiessenfels, Saxony, on 27th March 1722. Little is known about his early life and education, but he spent some time in employment as court musician to the Duke of Weimar.

He also established himself as a soloist at the European music scene and it was on one of his foreign tours that he arrived in Denmark in 1758. He was on his way from St. Petersburg to England by sea, but when his ship was becalmed in the Sound between Sweden and Denmark, he went ashore. Hearing of the dangers of a sea voyage over the Kattegat at that time of the year, he decided to spend the winter in Copenhagen. His fame had gone before him and he was presented to the reigning king, Frederik V, who was captivated by Kirchhoff's harp playing and offered him a position at court, ensuring him that he would be held in the highest esteem. Kirchhoff was much taken by the King's kindly disposition, and decided to settle in Denmark. In 1760 he was honored with the title of "Royal Musician" and he played at the Royal Court until his death. Kirchhoff was a member of the Royal Opera Orchestra from 1772 - 1786 and in 1779 he was given Danish citizenship.

Theatre critics of the time singled out Kirchhoff for the brilliance of his playing in the orchestra - "...Herr Kirchhoff, whose harp playing is indispensable to this opera, and who delights his audience..." "...the only reason to see this piece is for the joy of Herr Kirchhoff's playing...". He was obviously a wonderful musician, and a great audience favourite.

He continued to tour abroad and was especially appreciated in Sweden and France. He received various other offers of employment and one especially lucrative offer of 2,000 rigsdaler a year came from France, but he refused, saying that "King Frederik V has won my heart and I will not be ungrateful."

Despite ill health in old age, Kirchhoff continued to play and write for his beloved instrument. Writing of him in 1825, A.T. Elmquist says:

“He frequently said that although he had visited many countries and many royal courts, he had never found such a good country as Denmark. Here one could live in complete security and no honest person had anything to fear.”.

Kirchhoff died on the 24th February 1799.

He was known as a composer as well as a virtuoso, but it had long been assumed that most of the music he wrote for the harp had been lost – and he himself is consequently almost forgotten. Research in Danish academic libraries has led to the discovery of many “Hand-Stücken für die Harfe”. Every one of them is in the form of a small suite and the collection is a treasure of charming, original harp repertoire.

The little iconographic evidence we have, coupled with the character of the music he wrote, would indicate that Kirchhoff played a hook harp. This harp had been developed in Germany and remained popular in northern Europe long after pedal harps had been invented. Hooks were fitted into the neck of the instrument to enable the player to manually raise the pitch of the string by a semi-tone by turning the hook with the left hand. Since his “Hand-Stücken” were written for such an instrument, they are eminently playable on the modern lever harp.

An edition of 4 of these suites are available at Adlais music:

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Portrait of Johann Andreas Kirchhoff by Erik Paulsen (1749-1790).
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This article about Johann Andreas Kirchhoff (1722-1799) is part of a research project about harpist and harp music in the Nordic countries in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Royal Theatre Orchestra (Det Kongelige Kapel) in Copenhagen is the oldest orchestra in the world and there is a published list of all the musicians who have been employed there, starting with the trumpet corps in 1448. The first harpist named was Florian, who played in the orchestra from 1558. Every musician has a number, and Kirchhoff is number 410. He was appointed in 1772