

Alexander Reinagle

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A MESSAGE ABOUT MAVERICKS 250

Charles Amirkhanian

1976. It seems just yesterday that I was producing radio programs on 200 years of American classical music for KPFA Radio in Berkeley during the bicentennial.

As we arrive at the USA's semiquincentennial this July 4th, we find ourselves living up to the words of eminent music scribe Alex Ross: "No other city has an organization quite like Other Minds, cultivating all the music that would otherwise drop between the cracks." Other Minds is pleased to present Mavericks 250, a two-part mini-festival celebrating some of this country's most brilliant (and little-known) composers.

We begin with a major centennial celebration of the droll Philadelphia-born mastermind of mid-century musical modernism David Tudor (1926-1996).

Following that, we'll host a scintillating evening of piano sonatas of Alexander Reinagle (c. 1750-1809) composed in Philadelphia shortly after the time of the First Constitutional Convention. Yes, there was modern music in America even before the 19th Century!



It's a great honor to have as our performing artists Composers Inside Electronics, a quintet of player-composers who not only performed with David Tudor himself, but who have kept alive his music by performing on bespoke homemade electronic instruments identical to Tudor's hand-built originals. These instruments create "live electronic music" and, at their debut in the early 1970s, led to a more fluid way of integrating improvisation, interaction, and spontaneity into the previously cumbersome practice of synthesized music.

And from Tempe, Arizona, we welcome noted Baroque and early-American music scholar and keyboard player Stephen Siek. His studies of the earliest composers in the USA and his expertise in music of the period include fascinating lecture-concerts that bring to life a forgotten chapter of our musical past. His own recording of Alexander Reinagle's work on the Titanic label is both definitive and invigorating.

We're grateful to these players for making Mavericks 250 possible. And our thanks to Mills Music Now and Northeastern University for generously sharing their wonderful Littlefield Concert Hall with Other Minds.

Alexander Reinagle: Composing a New Nation

Stephen Siek, piano and fortepiano
240th Anniversary of Reinagle's
First American Concert

Monday, July 20, 2026, 7:30 pm
Littlefield Concert Hall, Mills College
at Northeastern University
Richards Rd, Oakland, CA 94613





Program

ALEXANDER REINAGLE

Variations on “Lee Rigg” (c. 1787)

Sonata No. 3 in C Major (c. 1790)

Allegro con brio

Adagio

Allegro

INTERMISSION

Variations on

“Steer Her Up and Had Her Gawn” (c. 1787)

Sonata No. 2 in E Major (c. 1790)

Allegro

Adagio

Allegro

Stephen Siek, piano and fortepiano

This concert is sponsored by a generous donation from Gretchen Brosius.

This concert is part of our PastForward piano series and is supported in part by a grant from the Ross McKee Foundation.

Other Minds offers sincere thanks to Baroque keyboard player Janine Johnson of Berkeley, owner of the 200 year old Clementi fortepiano employed in today’s concert. Special thanks to Wayne Huber and Laurell Caskey for advice and guidance.

Alexander Reinagle and His Music

Stephen Siek

The esteemed American Music historian Gilbert Chase once grouped America’s earliest composers into two distinct categories, and he believed they could best be classified as either “Gentlemen Amateurs” or “Immigrant Professionals.” Francis Hopkinson (1737-91), a Philadelphia lawyer who signed the Declaration of Independence and served in the Continental Congress, belongs in the first category. His famous song *My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free* is believed to have been the first song composed on American soil, and his additional published works are not without interest, including a 1788 cycle of songs dedicated to “His Excellency George Washington, Esq.” Benjamin Franklin also turned his creative genius to music, and despite his lack of formal training, he is believed to have composed a multi-movement string quartet during his service as America’s Commissioner to France in 1778. By this point, Franklin’s glass harmonica, which he had invented in 1761, was also enchanting

countless Europeans—including Mozart, who even composed a substantial work for it in 1791, the last year of his life.

But despite the impressive musical accomplishments of the Founding Fathers, the pursuit of music as a livelihood in Early America was invariably left to immigrants born and trained abroad, and among this group, Alexander Reinagle was arguably the most accomplished pianist in the New World. After he settled in Philadelphia in the fall of 1786, his professional ascendancy was rapid, and the following year, George Washington even heard him perform at the Constitutional Convention. Two years later, Reinagle had relocated to New York, then the nation's capital, and Washington took advantage of his proximity to engage him as the piano teacher for Martha's ten-year-old granddaughter, Nelly Custis (1779–1852). When Congress moved the nation's capital to Philadelphia in 1790, through sheer serendipity, Reinagle had also relocated, because he was one of the most prominent theater composers of the era, and Philadelphia had now become the theatrical epicenter of Federalist America. Hence, Nelly was soon reunited with a teacher she appears to have adored, and her progress was rapid.

At that time, piano “method books” scarcely existed, and it was customary for teachers to write out freshly composed pieces for their students, compositions which were always tailored to their abilities. Today, many of the exercises and pieces Reinagle composed for Nelly have been preserved at Mount Vernon, as well as at the Library of Congress and other archives, and they provide a surprisingly detailed record of eighteenth-century piano instruction. Most of these works were never published, but then—as now—arrangements of popular songs were immensely

popular. Among those that did eventually see print, variation forms on familiar melodies predominate, because variations provided a double advantage, in that the more difficult variations served as incentives for ambitious students, while those who were less accomplished could simply skip the most challenging variations when they performed them in public. Nelly's keyboard accomplishments have been well documented by multiple sources, and it seems very likely that she could have performed Reinagle's Variations on “Lea Rig,” which first appeared in his collection Variations on Famous Scots Tunes, published in Glasgow in 1782. Five years later, he engaged a Philadelphia engraver, John Aitken, to create *A Selection of the Most Favorite Scots Tunes*, which contained only nine of the original eighteen that had appeared in the Glasgow edition, but he added two new sets for a total of eleven. He also added some more difficult variations to “Lea Rig” (now being spelled as “Lee Rigg”), and it is the Philadelphia version that will be heard this evening. Reinagle's variations on the buoyant and energetic “Steer Her Up and Had Her Gawn,” which also appeared in the Aitken collection, will also be heard.

The tunes themselves were well known to generations of Scots, and suggest two of the mainstays of eighteenth-century Scottish life, the pasture and the sea. In Scottish dialect, “Lea Rig” has a meaning approximating “The Meadow Ridge,” and it invokes farming, while “Steer Her Up and Had Her Gaun” might best be understood as “Get her going and keep her moving,” applicable perhaps to machinery, but also certainly to a ship's prow. The tune “Steer Her Up” is also lively and even suggestive of a sea chanty, and it contains a curious feature of Scottish folk music: the so-called “double tonic,” or a sudden shift to a chord a full step below the tonic scale degree when a

cadence is reached. The “Lea Rig” tune is also characteristically Scottish in that it is built on a “gapped” scale where the seventh scale degree is often missing. Hence, the interval of a major sixth shapes much of its lyrical outline.

It seems much less likely that Nelly ever performed any of Reinagle’s four Philadelphia Sonatas, the most significant keyboard music composed in Federalist America, for they were never published during his lifetime. Today we know about them only because they are included in a collection of musical manuscripts that the composer’s grandson donated to the Library of Congress in 1904. Their exact dates of composition are unknown, but informed guesswork places them somewhere between 1788 and 1794. The likeliest hypothesis is that they remained unpublished because Reinagle would have lost money on their production and sale, since at the time there were simply too few pianists in the new Republic capable of performing them.

The Sonatas’ manuscripts contain no dates, and they are simply identified by their keys: the D major, the E major, and the C major, while the collection also includes a fourth Sonata in F major which is missing an accompanying violin part. Somewhat curiously, the D major is the only one of the set without a slow movement, and both remaining movements are marked Allegro. But the LC folio also contains a set of Variations Reinagle composed in 1787 on the slow movement to Haydn’s D major Symphony “L’Imperiale,” so some pianists have chosen to insert those Variations as the slow movement to the D major.

Both the E major and the C major pay homage in various ways to Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–88), the second son of J. S. Bach, whose musical style

was immensely inventive and even revolutionary. The era of counterpoint had died out years earlier along with the younger Bach’s famous father, and it is rarely found in any of the 150+ keyboard sonatas that he published in his lifetime. Some years before his emigration, Reinagle journeyed to Hamburg at least twice to visit Emanuel, and his admiration for Bach’s approach to sonata form seemed to border on idolatry. Like Emanuel, Reinagle adhered to the classical structures found in Haydn and Mozart, but everywhere we also find the younger Bach’s wit, and his mercurial shifts in temperament. The Finales of both the E major and the C major explode with jocularity and abrupt dynamic shifts, while the lengthier first movements, despite their rapid tempos, often emphasize more lyrical gestures.

But some of the most profound and hauntingly beautiful music of Reinagle’s entire keyboard output is found in the slow movements of each of these Sonatas, which are both in minor keys and are both marked Adagio. Paralleling the newer styles found in Haydn, Mozart, and even Beethoven, the Adagio of the C major is cast in *empfindsamer Stil* (sensitive style), in which the left hand moves in a rather static arpeggiation while the right hand is lavishly decorated with ornamental embellishments. Reinagle further entices his listener with sharp, and often unexpected dynamic contrasts. The Adagio to the E major might be characterized as a minor masterpiece, for with its severely dotted, martial-like rhythms, Reinagle is clearly looking backward to the French Baroque, but with great fondness and sensitivity. As scholar Anne McClenny Krauss once observed, his lyricism is reminiscent of the operatic style of an Italian cantilena, and the overall pathos is deeply moving.

Artist Bios

Edinburgh-born **Alexander Reinagle** (c. 1750–1809) was raised by a family of musicians praised by Handel for their weekly concerts with the Edinburgh Musical Society. Alexander was trained as a keyboardist—he was also a second-best violin player—and took to the family profession. Our first knowledge of a public performance is in April 1770 in Edinburgh. It was an itinerant life; records surprisingly indicate he and his siblings were shipped to Virginia on occasion to work on plantations. Still, his early musical career took him to Glasgow, London, and back to Edinburgh where he worked as a musician, teacher, concert manager, and church organist until his 30s when, with his sick brother Hugh, he traveled to Lisbon. The city’s milder climate allowed Hugh a few more years.

Earlier trips to Europe had put Alexander in touch with C. P. E. Bach; Bach’s letters suggest that Lisbon afforded Reinagle the opportunity to publish Bach’s music and sell pianos in addition to performing concerts. By 1786 Reinagle had emigrated to America, and on July 20, 1786, in New York “At the Assembly-Room, Broad-Way...will be performed A Grand Concert of Vocal and Instrumental MUSIC; under the Direction of Mr. Reinagle.” It was his first concert in the United States: mostly Haydn, but with songs and sonatas by Reinagle and others. As the musicologist Anne Krauss notes—in her groundbreaking article on Reinagle where much of the information for this bio is taken—“Reinagle’s first performance in America was notable because his decision to perform at the piano rather than the harpsichord introduced the public to his keyboard prowess on the most modern instrument available.”

By all accounts, the life of an American musician has not changed in 250 years; for the rest of his life, in Philadelphia and other parts of the Eastern Seaboard, Reinagle gave concerts himself, promoted and produced concerts for others, taught lessons, printed songbooks, sold pianos, and composed music. Amongst these accomplishments—many of which you will hear about during Stephen Siek’s program this evening—two events stand out: 1) Reinagle was a principle force in the erection of Philadelphia’s New Theatre on Chestnut Street—one of the earliest, if not the first, European-style theaters built in America for paying audiences and, 2) Reinagle played for a Philadelphia audience that included George Washington during the 1787 Constitutional Convention. Washington later hired Reinagle to teach his step-granddaughter Nelly Custis. Throughout, Reinagle composed *The Philadelphia Sonatas* as well as a number of adaptations and variations of the Scots tunes he heard during his childhood. Alexander Reinagle died in 1809 and is buried in Baltimore.



Stephen Siek, pianist and musicologist, is the author of *England's Piano Sage: The Life and Teachings of Tobias Matthay* (Scarecrow Press, 2012; 2nd ed., H. L. Marston, 2020) and of *A Dictionary for the Modern Pianist* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016; Bloomsbury, 2025). His interest in Alexander Reinagle began in the 1980s when he first began teaching courses in Early American Music, and his doctoral dissertation (U. of Cincinnati, 1991) focused extensively on Reinagle and his music in the first concentrated study of Benjamin Carr's *Musical Journal* (1800–1804)—the earliest collection of exclusively secular music in the new Republic. In the summer 1993 issue of *American Music*, he presented original research concerning Reinagle, Carr, and other musical figures active in post-Revolutionary Philadelphia, and his recording of Reinagle's *Philadelphia Sonatas* (1998) on the Titanic label soon met with high acclaim.

Siek has concertized extensively throughout the US, Canada, and the UK, and has presented numerous lecture/recitals for organizations such as the Historical Keyboard Society of America, the American Liszt Society, and the Society for American Music. His scholarly papers have been presented at institutions ranging from Yale to the University of Nottingham, and in 2015 he performed at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in Glasgow for the Tenth Biennial International Conference on Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain.

His numerous articles have appeared in such journals as the *American Music Teacher*, the *Piano Quarterly*, the *Piano Journal of the European Piano Teachers' Association*, and *International Piano*.

He is also a contributor to the *Revised New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, as well as the new edition of the *Grove Dictionary of American Music*. His other scholarly writings have included pieces for the *American Musical Instrument Society Journal*, and *Symposium* (the journal of the College Music Society).

A recognized authority on historic pianism, Siek moderated a panel of experts at the Eastman School of Music in 2015, and he has annotated over two dozen CDs for leading labels which commemorate some of the greatest artists of the past. For APR, his annotations include memorials to Harriet Cohen, Myra Hess, Irene Scharrer, Bartlett & Robertson, and Tobias Matthay, and he has annotated the entire Decca catalogue of Dame Moura Lympany, as well the highly acclaimed complete Decca LPs of Ruth Slenczysnka. He has also annotated the complete Deutsche Grammophon catalogue of Andor Foldes, and for the Hyperion label, Garrick Ohlsson's highly praised disc of the solo works of Charles Tomlinson Griffes.

Siek is a past president of the American Matthay Association, and holds Bachelor of Music and Master of Music degrees in piano from the University of Maryland. He also holds a Ph.D. in musicology from the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati, and for many years he served as a professor of music at Wittenberg University in Ohio. He now lives in Tempe, Arizona, where he currently directs the Academy for Continued Learning for the Emeritus College at Arizona State University, and serves as a Faculty Associate in the School of Music. In 2019, at a ceremony in London, he was awarded the status of Honorary Associate by the Royal Academy of Music.



UPCOMING OTHER MINDS EVENTS

Wednesday, September 9, 2026, 7:30 pm
THE NATURE OF MUSIC 21: MARINA PETERSON
Goldman Theater at the David Brower Center, Berkeley, CA

Thursday–Sunday, October 8–11, 2026
OTHER MINDS FESTIVAL 30
Joseph Bohigian, Charlemagne Palestine,
Sylvie Courvoisier, Juri Seo, Mahsa Vahdat,
Kristin Norderval, King Britt, Khatchadour Khatchadourian,
Zachary James Watkins, and John Diaz
Brava Theater, San Francisco, CA

Sunday, November 15, 4:00 PM
THE MUSIC OF ERIK LOTICHIUS,
Ralph van Raat and Heather Pinkham, pianos
Mills College at Northeastern, Oakland, CA

Thursday, December 3, 7:30 PM
THE NATURE OF MUSIC 22: CHRISTOPHER SHULTIS
Goldman Theater at the David Brower Center, Berkeley, CA

Saturday–Sunday, January 23–24
VOX LUMINA, a new intermedia opera by Theresa Wong
Brava Theater, San Francisco, CA

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Founded in San Francisco in 1992, Other Minds® is a leading organization for new and experimental music in all its forms, devoted to championing the most original, eccentric, and underrepresented creative voices in contemporary music. From festival concerts, film screenings, radio broadcasts, and the commissioning of new works, to producing and releasing CDs, preserving thousands of interviews and concerts and distributing them free on the Internet, Other Minds has become one of the world's major conservators of new music's ecology.

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