

*To the memory of David Hooper and Ken Whyld,
in the belief that this is something they would have liked to see*

The Chess Endgame Studies of Richard Réti : Introduction

John Beasley, 14 January 2012, latest revision 12 November

Richard Réti (1889-1929) has always been one of my chess heroes, and ever since I first saw the stunning pawn study with which his name is indissolubly linked I have taken a particular delight in his endgame studies. I first met them in Golombek's 1954 book of his best games, where fifteen of them appear, and I have always looked out for them since. Nearly all are in Sutherland and Lommer's *1234 modern endgame studies* and rather more than all are in Harold van der Heijden's "Endgame study database IV" (more about this later), but the standard collection has always been Artur Mandler's *Richard Réti : Sämtliche Studien* of 1931. There was a Spanish edition of this in 1983 and I used to have a copy, but while I was looking after the library of the British Chess Problem Society I lodged it there on loan, and it was the one book I could not find when I came to reclaim my loans before the library moved elsewhere. Fortunately Jan Kalendovský had included all the studies in his 1989 book *Richard Réti, šachový myslitel*, and on looking at this again recently it occurred to me that a complete presentation of Réti's studies in English would be a job well worth doing. According to Kalendovský, Mandler's book was translated into a range of languages including English, but I have never seen an English edition and the British Library appears not to possess one.

Let me stress the word "presentation". This is not a definitive "edition" of Réti's studies in any normal academic sense. It isn't a translation of Mandler's 1931 book, for the excellent reason that I don't read German; it isn't even a translation of the relevant part of Kalendovský's book, because Kalendovský does not include all Mandler's detailed analysis. It is rather a presentation of each study in turn, with Réti's analysis as given by Mandler, further analyses taken from Harold van der Heijden's "Endgame study database IV" and from other sources, and a few computer-aided probings of my own, all tied together with text either quoted from Mandler or created by myself. I am sure that many readers will think some of my additional text unnecessarily detailed, particularly when I am spelling out background strategical considerations which they can see at a glance, but I am unrepentant. Reading Golombek's book as a schoolboy, I am afraid I found some of the studies bewildering rather than enthralling, and while most of the blame can be placed on my limited endgame knowledge at the time I still think a few extra notes in the presentation would have helped. So to readers who may think I am sometimes spelling out the obvious, well, perhaps I am, but my intention is that any young or modest enthusiast who comes across this presentation will peruse the studies in it with pleasure and enlightenment rather than the bewilderment which I sometimes felt in the 1950s.

The man

Réti was born in Pezinok, a small town (18,000 inhabitants in 1989) lying just below the modest hills of the Malé Karpaty some twenty kilometres north-east of what is now Bratislava. His father Samuel was a doctor, and his mother Anna, born Mayer, was from a Jewish mercantile family prominent in the town. He grew up in what would appear to have been comfortable circumstances, and from childhood he displayed a gift for mathematics. In 1904, he moved to Vienna with his mother and elder brother Rudolf, who later became a well known concert pianist. (The British Library has three books on music, published in America or Britain between 1951 and 1967, by one Rudolph Richard Réti, who was presumably a connection of some sort though I know no details.) He graduated from higher school in mathematics, and then studied it at the university. Vienna was a rich intellectual and cultural centre, in which chess existed cheek by jowl with music and the other arts (the *Wiener Schachzeitung* of 1906 recorded two games won by the music composer Richard Strauss), and Kalendovský paints a brief but vivid picture of the chess scene at the Central Café.

Réti also appears to have been at least a competent linguist, as were and are so many educated Europeans. His chess books were written in German, but I understand that he also spoke Hungarian, French (thanks to a French governess), and presumably Yiddish though I don't know if any evidence of this remains. But though he became a citizen of the newly formed Czechoslovakia after the First World War and played on its top board in the 1927 International Team Tournament, he appears never to have spoken Czech or Slovak.

In due course, Réti moved from mathematics to chess. As a player, he became one of the best of his time, with a tournament victory over a reigning World Champion (Capablanca, New York, 1924) to his credit; but he is also remembered for his books, his chess theories, and his endgame studies. But those whom the gods love... He died from an attack of scarlet fever, less than a fortnight after his fortieth birthday.

The composer

Réti's activities as chess player, writer, and theorist have been well chronicled elsewhere, and our concern here is solely with him as a composer. In his teens, he composed problems (his first was published in 1908, and at least seven problems by him are extant), but according to Mandler (*Mährisches Tagblatt*, 10 February 1927, quoted in translation by Kalendovský) he became so disillusioned when a problem of which he was particularly proud proved to have been completely anticipated some twenty years before that he swore to give them up, a vow which he almost completely kept. However, he found compensation in the less widely explored field of the endgame study. All seven problems are quoted by Kalendovský (on his pages 10, 12/13, and 351-353), but I am not including them here. Even the best of them does not seem to me to be more than good work in the style of the day, and I would not expect them to be of great interest to those who are not problem specialists.

His endgame studies are a very different matter. His first study does not seem to have appeared in print until 1921, but they rapidly reached the very highest standard, and they came thick and fast until his sadly early death. I read long ago – alas, I cannot remember where – that he once blew a tournament first prize by staying up all night to perfect an endgame study and being so tired as a result that he lost his next two games. Perhaps the story is a myth (I don't have convenient access to the round-by-round results which might enable the tournament to be identified), but everything one reads about him suggests that it *ought* to be true.

All this produced the 56 studies which are in Mandler's 1931 book. As regards their completeness, Kalendovský quotes Mandler as stating in his foreword that at Réti's express wish this collection contained all the studies authorized by him, and the chess world was asked, in his name, to regard his other studies as non-existent. This was of course an unrealistic request; they did exist, they had been published, and when Harold van der Heijden trawled the various sources in which they had appeared he inevitably picked them up and included them in his database. However, at Réti's express wish we are now asked to discount these other studies of his, and I am quite sure that we should do so. Indeed, I hope anyone trawling Harold's database for the "complete" works of other composers will adopt a similar discretion, even in the absence of a specific request. Nearly all of us have published work well short of the quality which we like to think we are able to attain, and our reputations are not well served by presenting these lesser efforts in company with our best work.

Presentation of the studies : general

Réti himself divided his studies into chapters as follows:

- Pawn endings (1-4 in Mandler's book, including 1a and 1b)
- Knights with or against pawns (Mandler 5-9)
- Bishops with or against pawns (M 10-17)
- Rook endings (M 18-27)
- Duels between two different men (M 28-34)
- Bishops and knights with or against passed pawns (M 35-44)
- "Unzeitgemäßes" (see below, M 45-48)
- Magic with a knight (M 49-53 including 50a).

However, for dissemination via the Internet it is convenient to present the studies in separate files grouped solely by material. I have therefore presented them in eight files as follows:

- Pawn endings
- Knights and pawns
- Bishops and pawns
- Rooks and pawns
- Knights and bishops
- Rooks and minor pieces
- Queens
- Casualties

but the order of studies within each file remains Mandler's except where the correction of a casualty has caused a new study to be added at the end of a file.

As regards "Unzeitgemäßes", Réti had this to say (my thanks to Thomas Brand for the translation). "There are two ways of composing endgame studies. A) You examine interesting, simple positions, look for the valuable

ones, and present them in an artistic and economical form, pure in aim. B) You start with a climax, a mate, a stalemate, or a zugzwang, and construct a foreplay. The second way doesn't suit me, but I've perpetrated some crimes..." The studies of the second kind were collected in the section "Unzeitgemäßes" (here, they are 6.2 and 6.3 in the "Rooks and minor pieces" file, and 7.1 and 7.2 in the "Queens" file). Since Réti thought he was not suited to this method of composition, he feared that the quality of this chapter would be below that of the rest, but then he recognized that his concern was unfounded and that this chapter had the same value as the others. We would surely agree.

And the presence of a "casualties" file will be noted. Réti composed long before computers were available to help with the analysis, some oversights have inevitably come to light, and not all the studies affected have proved amenable to rescue. Also to be noted is the presence of a file of updates and post-publication notes, which contains pertinent comments made by readers and lists of files which have been updated as a result. This is one of the benefits of Internet dissemination. If anything is found to be wrong, a corrected version can be posted, and anyone who has been keeping an eye on the relevant web site is immediately in touch.

Presentation of the studies : minor points

In the body of the text, and in accordance with my normal practice, I have followed the style of the scientific research literature, and have omitted all academic and other titles however honorific and well deserved they might be. Dedications, however, are quoted as Réti made them. I have taken them from Mandler's 1931 book rather than from Kalendovský's, since in Czech the names appear in an inflected form from which the root form cannot always be unambiguously recovered.

For sources, I have normally followed Kalendovský, who did some additional research and found some sources not known to Mandler, but I have checked the entries in *Kagan's Neueste Schachnachrichten* personally. (And yes, there is an apostrophe. On the evidence of my copies, this magazine, published by Bernhard Kagan, called itself "Kagan's" on its cover for its first three years, 1921-23, though the headings inside omitted the apostrophe from July 1922. The apostrophe was dropped altogether from the start of 1924.)

Mandler did not normally put main lines in bold, and all bold type in what follows is editorial. Sometimes it is obvious what is the main line and what is a subsidiary variation; sometimes I have had to take a view, particularly when a solution branches into two or three lines which Réti or Mandler may or may not have thought of equal importance. But I hope any misjudgement of mine in this matter will not affect the reader's pleasure.

Réti was in the highest class as an endgame study composer, but while we all know his classics there are also some deeper studies whose very difficulty has precluded popular appreciation. I hope this presentation will do something to repair the omission. To an extent which few if any other composers have done, he combined the imagination of the creative artist with the practical master's capacity for quick and accurate analysis. Indeed, it is perhaps only those of my own generation and the next generation to follow, who can remember what it was like to try and compose endgame studies *without* the massive analytical help now available from the computer, who can now properly appreciate the depth of skill and talent to which some of what follows bears witness.

Acknowledgements

I have done little more than a hack edit job on the available material, and any credit for its quality lies elsewhere. In particular, I have relied heavily on three books already published (Mandler's 1931 book of Réti's studies, his 1970 book *Studie*, and Kalendovský's 1989 book on Réti), and I am grateful to the British Library for access to the first of these (it holds a copy of the 1983 Olms reprint, in which this book is bound in with the original German edition of Réti's *Masters of the Chess Board*). I am also grateful to Yakov Konoval for checking some positions with $K + R + 2P \text{ v } K + R + P$ against the preliminary results for this material generated by himself and Marc Bourzutschky, and to all those who have generated the definitive results for positions with up to six men and have made them publicly available on Eiko Bleicher's web site <www.k4it.de>. With analytic support like this available on demand, the task of the presenter is made very much easier; indeed, in the case of some of the harder and deeper studies, this presentation would not have been possible without it.

And my thanks to all those (they are acknowledged by name in "Updates and post-publication notes") who have written to draw my attention to alternative settings of some of the studies, and to point out errors and infelicities in my original text. It has all helped to improve the quality of what follows.