



RCO

Max Reger as ‘Master Organist’? What we think and what we know

Christopher Anderson

Journal of the Royal College of Organists
Volume 9 (2015) pp. 18-45

CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON is Associate Professor of Sacred Music at the Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas. His book *Max Reger and Karl Straube: Perspectives on an Organ Performing Tradition* appears with Ashgate, and is the winner of the prestigious Max Miller Book Award for 2006, given by The Organ Library of the American Guild of Organists via the Boston University School of Theology. A new book, *Selected Writings of Max Reger* appears with Routledge. Dr Anderson has been a regular contributor to conferences and in 2005 was a featured lecturer at the Internationale Max-Reger-Tage of the Bruckner University in Linz (Austria). His archival researches have involved the central musical institutions of the cities of Leipzig and Meiningen. Christopher appears regularly as an organ recitalist.

Max Reger as ‘Master Organist’? What we think and what we know

Christopher Anderson

Wir traten ein in einer dunklen Kirche
Heiligtum—
Still setzte sich der Meister auf die alte
Orgelbank
Und hub ganz leis und feierlich zu
präluieren an:
Ein cantus firmus zog dahin,
bedächtigt, zögernd fast, doch unerbittlich
schreitend,
Als ob’s hinübergang in eine andre Welt.
Und langsam spann bald eine zweit und
dritte Stimm, die erst’ bekämpfend, dann
erweiternd,
Sinnvoll verflochten, sich um’s
domgewordne Tongezelt.
Des Meisters Blick, ganz erdenfern, schaut
nicht mehr auf die Tasten,
Seitwärts gewendet flieht sein Aug der
kunstgeübten Hände Hasten.
Er ist’s nicht mehr, der spielt—Gott spielt
aus ihm.
Stumm lauschen wir—
und zum Gebet verwandelt hat sich unsres
Dankes Ungestüm.

We entered a dark church sanctuary—
The master sat himself quietly on the old
organ bench
And raised up to begin a prelude, gentle
and solemn:
A cantus firmus floated by,
sedate, almost hesitant, yet unrelenting in
its stride,
As if it were passing over into another world.
And slowly a second and third voice spun
themselves out, the first combative, then
expanding,
Skillfully intertwined, in the sonorous
cathedral-like tent.
The master’s gaze, quite removed from
earth, no longer looks on the keys;
Turned to the side, his eyes escape the quick
movements of his skilled hands.
It is no longer he who plays—God plays
through him.
Speechless, we listen—
and the turbulence of our thoughts
transform into prayer.

‘Reger improvises at the organ’, Margarete Stein-Czerny (1936)¹

Introduction: Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme

In 1969, the Italian artist Agostino Raff created a triptych entitled *Max Reger: Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, the left panel of which shows Reger seated at a quasi-cubist three-manual organ console, the music rack empty, the composer’s conspicuously over-scaled hands and feet in action, his imagination at work (**Plate 1** at the conclusion of this article). The title invokes the great organ Fantasy Op. 52 No. 2 on the chorale of the same name, but Raff’s piece frames the organ in three further ways worth considering. First, the triptych form itself, like an altarpiece, inevitably intermingles ecclesiastical and musical motives to suggest an environment in which the organ is very much at home. Second, the painting’s

modernist style relates well to the technology of the modern organ—with its pneumatic and electric actions, a proliferation of registration aids, and an orchestral sound palette—which Reger's organ music has always seemed to demand. Raff's stylistic palette recalls the composer's progressive music generally, grounded in the past but pressing forward into the twentieth century. Third and most important, Raff here portrays Reger not as a composer of organ music (although the work's title speaks to one of Reger's best known pieces) but rather as an organist. It is worth noting, too, that the image has achieved some renown among organists since it found its way onto the cover of Breitkopf's seven-volume modern edition of the complete organ works, still widely circulated today.

Raff's work invites reflection on the received idea of Reger as an organist, a notion perhaps most sharply formulated by Hermann Wilske as 'the tendency to identify the organ works with the player'.² The question is not whether Reger was an organist, but rather what sort of an organist he was, and how the evidence does or does not agree with various perceptions of the composer's abilities at the instrument that have accrued with time. It is of no small significance that Raff modelled Reger's head from Hoenisch's 1910 photograph of the composer at the piano in his music room (Plate 2), where he sits against the background of the great figures of the musical past—Liszt, Schubert, and others. Rather literally, then, Raff has transformed the pianist of the photograph into the organist of the triptych: the figure in the earlier image, anchored in the past, becomes in the later one the creator of modernist music on a modernist instrument.

The blending of the piano and the organ, and in some sense of tradition and innovation, becomes more explicit in Raff's *A Max Reger* from 1979 (Plate 3). Here, Reger is made to pose at an organ console constructed of clean lines and outfitted with a combination action. As in the 1969 painting, Raff bases the head on a late portrait-style photograph of the composer. He is dressed traditionally, but the colour scheme makes clear that the vibrant body does not really belong in its pale clothing. And it is difficult to miss the two diagonals that invade a scheme otherwise so strongly oriented to the horizontal and vertical. Raff understands these diagonals to represent Reger's dynamic progressivism and the union of past to future in his music. But together with the black colour, the line scheme suggests the open wing of a grand piano.

In 2002, Raff produced a new painting with the impassioned title *Disperazione di Max Reger al crollo delle Torri / Organo d'America* (Plate 4), in which the composer finds himself amidst the chaos of the World Trade Center attacks, the recognizable vertical lines of those buildings transmuted into organ pipes.³ The result suggests a central if unlikely position for this composer in modernist and postmodernist discourses. It likewise points to deeply ingrained ways of how we think about Reger. As it did during the composer's lifetime, the organ itself functions in all these images as an integral element: as the instrument of Bach, a metaphor for Germanic musical tradition *in nuce*; and as the instrument of modernity, a symbol of the progress that drove technological innovations in the German Empire of Reger's day, and the progressive spirit that led to the hegemony of the American economy. Consequently, Reger's alliance with the organ, whether real or imagined, easily blurs into the rhetorical double alliance he maintained artistically between tradition and innovation, between reverence for the *alte Meister* on the one hand and his orientation as a 'rider toward the left' on the other.⁴ Not least for these reasons, the organ is so central to our understanding of him that it is nearly impossible to conceive of Reger without some sort of

significant relationship to the instrument—as Raff’s work in fact implies.

Whatever Reger’s practical relationship to the organ was, and however it may have changed from the 1880s through the 1910s, we are not left entirely to our imaginations when trying to formulate it. He was photographed at least four times at an organ console, two of them at the Sauer instrument in the concert hall of the Leipzig Conservatory from 1908/1909 and 1911. A third, undated photograph finds him at the console of the Sauer organ at Berlin’s Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche (Plate 5). Not coincidentally, both organs played a central role in the career of Karl Straube, Reger’s confidant and principal interpreter. The fourth image shows Reger posed at the organ of the Welte studio in Freiburg i.B., presumably on 26 July 1913, the date of his organ recordings for that firm.⁵

Aside from this relatively meagre photographic evidence, it is probably significant that artists never chose to depict Reger at the organ during his lifetime. Instead, he tends to be caricatured as an unconventional composer: Starkloff’s 1913 drawing places him atop a Pegasus that snorts out the opening bars of the *Symphonic Prologue to a Tragedy* Op. 108 while jumping over a fence in the form of the opening bars of the *Hiller Variations* Op. 100 (Plate 6; naturally, Reger and his horse ride to the left). The drawings of Willy von Beckerath (1909) show him as a conductor, whereas the caricatures of Wilhelm Thiemann (1913) show him in the dual roles of conductor and pianist.

Certain images from the period between the composer’s death and the appearance of Raff’s work do seek to relate Reger to the organ, and in this respect they provide a precedent for Raff. Among these is the design of Reger’s grave marker in the Munich Waldfriedhof (Plate 7), later adopted by Karl Hasse for his 1951 pamphlet *Max Reger*.⁶ Likewise of interest is the memorial plaque placed on the composer’s Munich apartment (Plate 8), aptly headed by the figure of the organist St Cecilia, who stands for music generally in the same way that the organ composer Reger tends to stand for the composer generally.

There can be no question that the organ occupied for Reger, and occupies for us, a prominent place in his creative life. The organ is part of who this composer was, and his affiliation with the instrument distinguishes him from contemporaries like Strauss, Mahler, and Pfitzner. Already during Reger’s lifetime, his demanding organ music gave rise to the remarkably durable assumption that he possessed an equally advanced technique. As early as 1901, Heinrich Lang confessed in a review of the composer’s music, ‘I do not know whether Herr Reger himself is an organist of note, but I would tend to assume so, because his compositions offer the performing artist seemingly unsurpassable difficulties’.⁷ Lang’s view is hardly isolated: many contemporary reviews cite Reger as ‘one of the most able organ players’, or, as Max Loewengard formulated it in 1909, ‘an organist of the old school who can improvise effortlessly hour upon hour, mile on mile’.⁸ Still in 2001, the sixth edition of Slonimsky’s *Music Since 1900* describes Reger as a ‘formidably industrious and prolific German composer and master organist’—and not as a chamber pianist and conductor.⁹

Such ‘a tendency to identify the organ works with the player’, to return to Wilske’s expression, clearly gave rise to confusion among the composer’s contemporaries. Wilske points to a 1914 review of a concert with the Meiningen Court Orchestra, Bülow’s erstwhile ensemble which Reger served as Kapellmeister from late 1911 through mid-1914. There, the reviewer recalled that ‘Reger had played his own organ Fantasy’ at the Heidelberg Tonkünstlerfest ‘about twelve years ago’ and had thereby become a major force in German music.¹⁰ But the Heidelberg festival in fact had taken place in 1901, and, significantly, the

organist had not been Reger, but rather the up-and-coming virtuoso Karl Straube, who performed the Fantasy and Fugue on BACH Op. 46 in the Peterskirche on 4 June. Certainly, the memory slip says something important about Reger's imagined status as an organ performer. The composer himself seems to have encouraged the idea when in 1902 he claimed to Theodor Kroyer that he had played 'the complete organ works of Bach and Mendelssohn' already by the early 1880s.¹¹

Alongside the notion of Reger as an accomplished organist run two other tendencies that gained currency in the literature during the first decades of the twentieth century. The first is the inclination of certain writers to explain the character of the composer's performance style, whether as a pianist or a conductor, in terms of the organ. Thus, regarding his idiosyncratic pianissimo, one observer in 1912 remarked that he 'treated the l'bach piano like an organ. In certain passages, one could believe that the sweetest vox coelestis had been installed in the instrument'.¹² The Meiningen cellist Antoine-Élisée Cherbuliez, who called Reger a 'wonderful pianist and organist', went as far as to claim that Reger had arrived at an unusually sympathetic understanding of Bruckner's symphonic language because both composers had come to music from the organ.

[Reger], who had issued from the organ, who had adopted all the flooding and roaring, the powerful fantasizing dreaminess, the infinite sonority of this instrument as the germ, so to speak, for his whole later development—he understood better than others the juxtaposition of sections, the inorganic character, the chaos of Bruckner's sound world which often appears like a powerful organ fantasy. And in his performances, he tried not to blur the shortcomings of the architecture.¹³

For Cherbuliez, the application of an organist's sensibilities to symphonic development was the key to Bruckner—and to Reger.

The second tendency emerges as a willingness to grant the composer authority in matters of performance practice, especially with respect to J. S. Bach. In 1910, the Berlin organist Walter Fischer presented a lecture on the interpretation of Reger's organ works in which he maintained that an intelligent approach to these scores resulted not merely in faithfulness to the composer's intentions. Reger's indications regarding registration and tempo modification in certain works also serve as 'a hint for the performance of similar organ pieces by Bach'.¹⁴ Eleven years later, already five years after the composer's death, Hermann Unger echoed Fischer's sentiment in his survey *Max Reger: Darstellung seines Lebens, Wesens und Schaffens*. 'He who resurrected Bach's polyphonic clavier and organ art in his own creations', wrote Unger, 'was likewise called to reproduce the "true manner" of these old works'.¹⁵ Even if Unger means something more metaphysical than practical, the premise remains: Reger enjoyed an unmediated identification with Bach that needed no support from scholarship. Composer understands composer, organist understands organist.

No matter what his abilities at the instrument, Reger never showed particular interest in playing his own big organ pieces or those of other composers, any more than he did in playing, say, his Piano Concerto Op. 114. From 1898 onwards, he had in Straube an interpreter with whom he was particularly satisfied. Not least due to Straube's influence, an increasing number of organists proved willing and able to take up the challenges of the repertory after 1900. Still, the image of Reger-as-organist that developed over the twentieth

century seems to depart significantly from reality. Unger ventures as far as to say that Reger's gifts 'as an organist can be ignored, since they seem hardly worth mentioning due to a long period in which they received no practical application—as strange as it may seem to have to characterize the greatest organ composer since Bach as a fairly clumsy organist'.¹⁶

Unger is clearly right on two counts. First, there is an atypical disparity between the technical demands of Reger's organ music and the apparent non-virtuosic character of his organ playing, a situation that contradicted not only the prototype of the nineteenth-century virtuoso, but also the contemporary organ culture in France, for example. There, prominent organ composers like Widor and Guilment still represented an effective fusion of composer and performer—*Schöpfer* and *Nachschöpfer*, to use the singular German terminology. Reger, on the other hand, speaks more nearly to the emerging 'specialist composer'. The bifurcation of composer and performer embodied by Max Reger and Karl Straube indeed presented an exceptional alliance. The fact that reasonable observers with respectable knowledge would infer Reger's performing abilities from his music seems to indicate the dominance of the traditional arrangement in the collective mindset of the time. Second, Unger is right to imply that at an earlier period in his development, Reger had cultivated an organ technique. And, as the photographs discussed earlier indicate, he did return to the organ periodically throughout his life. It remains, then, to address directly the topic at hand: what kind of an organist was Max Reger?

Childhood and youth

Reger grew up in the household of a Catholic preparatory school teacher in provincial Bavaria. Joseph Reger taught German, penmanship, and geography, as well as harmony, violin, piano, and organ. The boy's parents regarded his musical instruction, in which the organ played an integral role, as part of a larger humanistic education that would prepare him for a career in school teaching. Having received his first keyboard lessons from his mother, he began private piano and organ lessons in 1884 with Adalbert Lindner, who the following year would become organist and choirmaster of the Catholic parish of St Michael in a building shared with the local Protestant congregation. In 1885, Reger's father, assisted by the twelve-year-old Max, fashioned a one-manual house organ from parts of a disassembled instrument that had served as a practice organ at the Weiden school.¹⁷ Lindner later would draw a direct line from this project to the composer's mature organ music, a claim that seems exaggerated.¹⁸

The boy enrolled in the Weiden preparatory school in autumn 1886, and his grade reports from the following three years attest to high marks in all the musical subjects. At the school Reger was able to practise on the single-manual Steinmeyer instrument that had replaced the organ taken down in 1885. Shortly thereafter in 1886, he assumed part-time duties as organist of the Michaeliskirche. Lindner remembered that Reger 'at first [played] various masses and finally the entire Catholic organ liturgy at high mass and vespers'.¹⁹ The boy continued his service for the local parish through 1889, and this would have given him considerable opportunity to develop as an improviser. Lindner recalls his pupil's having studied pieces of Bach, Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Liszt, but the future composer seems to have drawn at least as much upon extemporization. He tested his incipient harmonic

language in freely invented voluntaries, some of them likely incorporating Gregorian melodies. Lindner continues:

In the last two years, Reger's playing aroused admiration not only because of his enormous ability in sight-reading (he seems never to have taken a mass home to play it through), but particularly his wonderful ingenuity with respect to harmony. When on high feast days he allowed his inexhaustible fantasy free reign on the full organ at the beginning and end of the service, one could hear chords and chord progressions of such unprecedented daring that one would likely have searched in vain for them in the harmony books of the time.—This harmonic severity reached its zenith, however, after my organist had deeply immersed himself in the tonal world of Richard Wagner. His improvisations became more and more chromatic, dissonance-laden, and often so thick and full of notes that my poor old bellows pumper could no longer supply the necessary quantity of wind, despite the greatest exertion via the four large, in part already defective, feeder bellows. The pumper sometimes showed a not unreasonable desire to abandon the whole affair in the middle of this cruel labor of Sisyphus.²⁰

Lindner's description of this early keyboard style—'dissonance-laden, ... thick and full of notes'—bears striking similarity to the parameters of Reger's later organ music, and indeed the older man's memory may have projected the style of the mature works backward onto the boy's early days. Still, it is not difficult to imagine that this improvisatory language, concerned with Wagnerian harmonic experimentalism and the sheer massive nature of organ sonority, had significant bearing on the composer's eventual expectations about what organs could and should sound like.

When Reger's interest turned in the late 1880s to possible study with Hugo Riemann, he wrote to the respected theorist that he was playing Bach's fugues on the organ, undoubtedly seeking to impress upon his mentor-to-be in Sondershausen that he was seriously studying the repertory.²¹ By late 1889 he could report that he had

played organ in church on Sundays and feast days for 5–6 years. I have been asked to play differently from now on, since the people have been disturbed in their devotions by my playing, and since the organ must suffer great damage. (I played Mendelssohn's and Schumann's organ works.) Most of our local acquaintances are against [my going to] Sondershausen because they fear I could return as a Protestant. Most esteemed Herr Professor can judge from these few facts the local petty situation and people.²²

Lindner, too, would later point out the 'largely quite conservative choir personnel' with whom Reger had worked in Weiden.²³ To Riemann, the young Reger painted a more radical portrait of a narrow-minded society made anxious at the incursion even of the forerunners of the musical avant-garde (Mendelssohn, Schumann), and of Protestant progressivism.

Sondershausen and Wiesbaden

It is fair to say that during the four years between 1886 and 1890—from the time he began playing liturgies at Weiden until his departure for study with Riemann in Sondershausen—

Reger reaped the most intensive benefits from organ playing he would ever have. Lindner's claim that the period was 'of immense fundamental significance' is surely right.²⁴ During these years the young Reger occupied himself both with the study of written-down organ music and with extemporization, although later he seems to have exaggerated the role of repertory playing, as in his 1902 claim to Kroyer cited earlier. For his part, Riemann took seriously the young man's proficiency at thoroughbass realization, undoubtedly practised not least in his weekly duties as organist. Revealingly, the theorist confided in Reger's fellow student Max Arend that

when Reger first arrived to become his pupil, and when he played for him, [Riemann] was not without reservation, namely because of his wild musical fantasy. His worries gave way, though, when he saw how firm Reger already was in thoroughbass extemporization and in counterpoint.²⁵

Certainly, when Reger left Weiden in April 1890 for study with Riemann, he found himself at the top of his game as an organist. Another fellow pupil in Sondershausen recalls having served as Reger's bellows pumper while the young man practised Bach at the Conservatory during the 1890 term, and having listened 'with great devotion' to his organ performances. 'Technical difficulties', he remembered, 'appear to have been unknown to him'.²⁶

Reger followed Riemann to his new position at the Wiesbaden Conservatory in autumn 1890. Riemann himself had demonstrated a more than casual interest in the organ with his *Orgellehre* of 1888.²⁷ Upon arriving in Wiesbaden two years later, Riemann had enough confidence in his young pupil's abilities to affect an appointment for him as instructor of piano and organ at the Conservatory, a position he would retain until well after Riemann's move to Leipzig in August 1895. Reger's duties as an organ instructor would have been modest—in 1891 there were seven organ students and four instructors—as were the facilities: Lindner cites only a pedal piano when Reger arrived in 1890.²⁸ By April 1892, Riemann was able to claim in a testimony for the German military that 'as an organist he has already an appreciable virtuosity and expert knowledge'.²⁹ Further, Riemann wrote to the C. F. Peters firm in September of the same year to recommend his pupil's *Three Pieces* Op. 7: 'Max Reger has been my special pupil [*Spezialschüler*] for a number of years, now not yet 19 years old, excellent pianist and organist, altogether phenomenal musician'.³⁰

Whatever his ability level, we know little about Reger's repertory during the 1890s. It seems reasonable that the lack of a church position and intense theoretical studies under Riemann would have distanced the pupil from his former practical involvement with the instrument. This is not to say, however, that he gave up organ playing altogether: when opportunities arose, he appears to have met them. He reported to Lindner that he had performed one of Schumann's BACH fugues Op. 60 at an examination recital in March 1891, and he appeared as organist at a so-called historical concert at the Conservatory on 18 March 1892.³¹ In February 1893, Reger played the organ part in Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* Op. 45.³² With his fellow student Eduard Diener, he performed two four-hand compositions in March 1894, a fantasy by the Swiss composer and organist Karl Hess, and Diener's own *Andante religioso*.³³ Perhaps most interestingly, in December 1895 Reger played the organ and a 1672 Italian harpsichord in trio sonatas of Corelli and dall'Abaco respectively, again in context of the Conservatory's 'historical concerts'.³⁴

In addition to the level of playing Reger attained and the repertory he used to attain it, the kinds of organs with which he was familiar before the turn of the century assume an important role. Hermann Busch has documented the instruments with which Reger came in the most frequent contact throughout his life, and there is no need to repeat that information here.³⁵ Certainly the majority if not all the organs the composer knew in the 1880s and 1890s were mechanical action instruments with comparatively limited possibilities for orchestral crescendi and the like. The new Steinmeyer organ at the Weiden preparatory school, the Steinmeyer in the Erbdorf Simultankirche where Reger played in the 1880s on occasional visits to his uncle, and the Walcker organ of the Wiesbaden Marktkirche had mechanical cone chests, whereas Lindner describes the organ of the Weiden Michaeliskirche—the instrument with which Reger had the most extended contact in his early days as a church organist—as having ‘a hard action and long stop knobs that were difficult to draw’, a reference to slider chests.³⁶ This latter instrument originated in the 1560s and had gone through two renovations by the time Reger encountered it.³⁷ It had a forty-seven-note manual compass, almost certainly with a short octave, and Lindner indicates the presence of a Schiebekoppel.³⁸ Neither this Weiden organ nor the other ones Reger knew well approached the big new modern designs of Wilhelm Sauer in the principal churches of Berlin and the Cathedral of St Willibrord in Wesel, where Straube emerged as an experimental virtuoso and chief advocate of Reger’s music. In a telling letter from December 1897, still several months before his first face-to-face encounter with Straube, Reger would voice an opinion undoubtedly forged from his experience with the relatively conservative instruments he knew best:

In my view the organ is namely the instrument most compatible with the most pungent turns [of harmony] because of its rigid, rock-firm sound and its ‘relatively’ absolute tuning [*in folge seines starren felsenfesten Klanges — u. ‘relativ’ absoluter Stimmung*]. Proof. J. S. Bach, G-minor Fantasy. If you transcribe this for orchestra, it will sound ‘impure’ in passages, which lies in the nature of wind instruments!!!³⁹

This is a fascinating perspective from a young composer who in the next years would produce the monumental fantasies and fugues that became known in Straube’s progressive interpretations—that is, through a performance approach based in ‘orchestral’ sound and the ironed-out harmonic palette of equal temperament.

During the 1890s, Reger turned his attention away from playing the organ (and the piano, for that matter) and towards the composition of organ music. He did not assume a particularly intimate relationship between organs and organ music as did his French contemporaries. If anything, he came to believe that a grasp of technique per se, rather than the tonal possibilities of any particular organ type, led to a responsible art-work. Already in 1893 he remarked to his friend Anton Gloetzner that he regarded the attainment of virtuosity ‘merely as a means to the end of composition’.⁴⁰ And by December of the following year, during work on the Suite in E minor Op. 16, he enthused to Lindner that ‘above all I would like to dedicate myself more to organ composition’.⁴¹

While under Riemann’s tutelage, Reger could not help but adopt his mentor’s attitude about what constituted a ‘true’ organ style. Echoing Riemann, he wrote to the English publisher George Augener late in 1892 that

since J. S. Bach we have made *no progress at all* in organ style. We have rather gone backwards in this respect—for instance Mendelssohn in his organ pieces has passages here and there that are not entirely appropriate to the organ's character. This way of writing was continued by Rheinberger, and Liszt wrote directly 'against' the organ.⁴²

Accordingly, in his 1893 reviews of organ compositions by American and French composers for the *Allgemeine Musik-Zeitung*, his most frequent complaint concerns the lack of a 'real' organ style and the reliance on pianistic writing. Riemann's role in encouraging this aesthetic is undeniable, but it is at least as fundamental to recognize that Reger's ideas grew from what he perceived as the basic possibilities of the few instruments he knew well.

Once he struck a close friendship with Straube in 1898, those ideas came under a significant new influence from quarters well removed from both his provincial upbringing and from Riemann's relatively conservative views. Early in 1899, Reger wrote to Riemann, full of praise for Straube, in his words 'the "Bülow" of the organ'. He added:

By thorough study I have now come to the opinion that, if we really want to make progress in organ literature, this is *only possible* on the basis of *Bachian tradition*. Certainly, we should exploit the achievements of our modern organ to the very best ability—I myself play Bach on the organ extremely 'colorfully', but that to which we must hold fast is the *inexorable* logic of the writing, the solidity of the voice leading, the intentional *avoidance* of all so-called lyrical, that is to say mostly sentimental, elements; never a *play* with the sound effects of the various stops, rather a *purposeful, real* composing for the organ. I have tried to employ this style now in my opp. 27, 29, and 30.⁴³

Reger clings to Riemann's idea—hardly original at the time—that organ composition had to proceed from Bach. It is difficult not to wonder, though, what he means by playing Bach 'colourfully', and whether he would have meant the same thing ten or even five years earlier. The character of the 'modern organ' had become clearer to him only about a year before, and, not surprisingly, Reger seems not to have referred to it before this time.

Similar ambiguities arise with respect to Reger's playing of his own organ music during these years. In September 1898, the composer contacted his Wiesbaden acquaintance Cäsar Hochstetter to report with pride on the success of his *Chorale Fantasy on 'Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott'* Op. 27. 'I myself played the work eight days ago', Reger wrote, 'and the effect is, without flattering myself, grandiose—it's *the best thing I've written thus far*'.⁴⁴ A number of questions arise immediately from this remark, positioned in the letter just before his report that Straube had recently premiered Op. 27 in Wesel. Where in or around his then-residence of Weiden would the composer have found an organ even remotely suited to realize his Op. 27? Was his organ technique up to the task, even under informal circumstances? And is it not at least possible that Reger speaks here of playing Op. 27 on the piano, not on the organ? The achieving of a 'grandiose' rendition may well speak to an organ realization, but it cannot rule out the idea that Reger simply tried out his music at the piano.

Only in 1904 did the composer acquire a comparatively large harmonium of two manuals and pedal, on which he apparently played portions of his demanding *Variations and Fugue on an Original Theme* Op. 73. In his discussion of Reger's large Weiden organ

works, Lindner emphasizes that an essential aspect of the composer's genius lay precisely in his ability to conceive such music without extended practical contact with the instrument.

These works came into being almost exclusively at a time when Reger no longer occupied himself at all with practical organ playing! If Anton Bruckner, who as a professional organist remained in contact with the organ for the greater part of his life, had given us such epoch-making, gigantic works, this would not give cause for such admiration and astonishment. Nearly all the most significant organ composers back to Pachelbel, Muffat, and Froberger had been practising organists. But while Reger was composing his powerful organ hymns, he had access to no organ at all. Already in Wiesbaden, he could no longer further the technique he had won in Weiden and Sondershausen, since at the local Conservatory where Reger first studied and later taught, no organ was available. A pedal piano was the lone weak substitute. Then when Reger settled in Weiden after his Wiesbaden years, which themselves had been quite unfriendly to his organ technique, there was no large instrument available to him here, either. ... With respect to his whole work for the modern organ, then, Reger relied only on his imagination of sonority, and when one considers as well what problems must be solved there in terms of sound and registration, dynamic shading, the lifting out of important voices, and so on, our admiration for Reger's genial relation to the organ's sound world must grow immeasurably.⁴⁵

As an exception, Lindner reports that the composer tried out his *Chorale Fantasy on 'Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern'* Op. 40 No. 1, apparently on the small Steinmeyer instrument of the Catholic Stadtpfarrkirche in Erbdorf while visiting his uncle there in September 1899. During the same visit, the young man also had occasion to play for a number of early morning liturgies.⁴⁶

Munich

During the last sixteen years of Reger's life, we hear rather less about his practical contact with the organ than during the formative period of the 1880s and 1890s. In 1905, he received an appointment at the Munich Akademie der Tonkunst, where he succeeded Josef Rheinberger as teacher of composition, counterpoint, and organ. That Reger would be asked to teach organ in the shadow of such a respected predecessor suggests the high regard in which he was held with respect to the instrument and its music. We know little about his organ duties in Munich, and he in any case resigned the post effective 15 July 1906 amid what he regarded as an impossible political environment directed against him and his music. An informative case during this time is that of Karl Hasse, who, after having been one of Straube's first organ pupils in Leipzig, enrolled at Munich in September 1905 to study theory and organ with Reger. Once the composer gave up his position in 1906, Hasse turned for counsel to Straube, who advised him to continue his studies in Frankfurt with the conductor-composer Siegmund von Hausegger. In confidence to Hasse, Straube contrasted Reger's instinctive nature to the considered mind of Hausegger, from whom 'one can learn what style is'.⁴⁷ Much later in 1932, Hasse recalled having related to Straube the particulars of Reger's organ teaching, presumably with respect to Bach, on the Munich Academy's 1851/1905 two-manual Walcker organ. 'On [this] highly unsatisfactory practice and teaching

instrument', wrote Hasse, 'Reger looked for stop combinations involving the mixture, which at the time I could regard only as proceeding from empty play or from a mania for rather eccentric sounds'.⁴⁸ It may well have been an account like this that prompted Straube's reply to Hasse in 1906. 'I regret Reger's way of interpreting Bach', he wrote to his former student in an unguarded moment of candor, 'because my own artistic goals in this regard could be misunderstood as soon as R. sets up school.—I am very prejudiced against effects like those you described to me'.⁴⁹

Reger's instinctive way of playing, probably informed by more old-fashioned approaches than Straube's ('... involving the mixture'), did not suit the latter's more rationalized interpretive sense, particularly with respect to Bach and issues of historical performance. The same divergence between the two men's ideas about Bach interpretation would contribute to a significant strain on their friendship in late 1910, when Straube went to some lengths to prevent Reger's participation in the 1911 Leipzig Bach Festival. With respect to the organ, Hasse himself spoke to Reger's abilities in his 1921 book-length study for *Die Musik*, where he sought to refute the popular comparison between Reger and Bruckner:

The only point of commonality is that both came from school teachers' households, and that they grew up on the organ. Bruckner is supposed to have improvised quite significantly on this instrument. Reger also may have been familiar with this in his youth. Then only in his very last years did he again seat himself on the organ bench a few times, where he vacationed in the summer [in Kolberg; see below]. ... It is reported that there, he improvised fugues in strict style with incomparable mastery. Otherwise, improvising was not his strong point.⁵⁰

Hasse recalled nothing like a proficient organist, particularly not along the lines of Straube and other virtuoso figures. He nevertheless underestimates the practical contact the composer had with the organ during his mature years.

Early on during his tenure in Munich, Reger seems to have enjoyed playing the organ occasionally in Catholic services, particularly on the small two-manual Maerz organ in the Johanniskirche of nearby Haidhausen. The composer reported to Kroyer on 1 November 1902 that

Two or three times I have had the opportunity to play the organ in the Catholic Johanniskirche of Haidhausen during the children's service (Sunday mornings), after not having played the organ for twelve years! Now I am told that I should not play anymore, that the people are very disturbed in their devotions by my playing. No one can pray anymore!—Fabulous!⁵¹

This self-described iconoclasm, whereby Reger's musical approach runs counter to the pious atmosphere of the contemporary Catholic liturgy, agrees strikingly with the formulation used in his letter of September 1899 to Riemann, in which he had belittled the narrow-mindedness of his hometown surroundings. In both instances, he uses an episode with the organ to identify himself as a pronounced progressive among stalwart religious conservatives. We may assume that the basic parameters of his improvisational style had not changed, at least not in liturgical contexts.

While living in Munich, Reger took the opportunity to return to Weiden on 7 March

1903 at the invitation of the Protestant congregation that had taken full possession of the Michaeliskirche, the church in which he had played regularly during the late 1880s. There, he evidently tested and performed on the new two-manual Strebels instrument, and he also played the Maerz organ in the new Catholic Stadtpfarrkirche. Elsa Reger's recollections of the visit, formulated much after the fact in 1930, offer a rare solid reference to her husband's performing his own large-scale organ music, if in an informal setting.

[At the Michaeliskirche] my husband did not play a notated work but rather improvised [*präludierte*] so wonderfully that all of us sitting in the nave were deeply moved. In the afternoon, Lindner invited Reger to play on his new organ in the Catholic Stadtpfarrkirche. Naturally, my husband was glad to fulfill this request. He first improvised [*präludierte*] for an extended time, after which Lindner put op. 59 (12 Pieces for Organ) on the music rack, and finally the powerful Fantasy 'Bach,' which he played with overwhelming beauty. These were unforgettably uplifting hours.⁵²

The combination of extemporized and written-down music described here is certainly believable, but one must wonder how close Reger's rendition of the BACH Fantasy Op. 46 adhered to the score. Elsa Reger's language makes clear that the repertory her husband played was put in front of him in an informal, impromptu manner, and, if he was in a technical position to play his music at all, he would have done so merely by negotiating it at sight.

Leipzig

The circumstances of Reger's appointment in 1907 as University Music Director in Leipzig offer another window onto his relationship with the organ during his maturity. In February 1907, the impending appointment met with opposition from within the University of Leipzig, likely originating in a distaste for Reger's music. In any case, the post of organist at the University Church of St Paul had been traditionally paired with the directorship, and certain voices pointed out that Reger's Catholicism made it impossible for him to serve the Protestant University parish. The legitimacy of his candidacy, it was therefore claimed, turned on the question of the St Paul's organ position. It is perhaps indicative that, during these deliberations, Reger's actual technical equipment as an organist appears to have been used neither for nor against him. Rather, the opposition advanced the argument as a question of confession rather than ability. The issue was resolved after the influential Adolf Wach, member of the Gewandhaus governing board and son-in-law of Felix Mendelssohn, declared that 'the association of the organist position with that of University Music Director is a coincidental question'.⁵³ The actual point, Wach went on to write, was that Reger's position as a composer was unassailable, and that his University appointment would be strengthened by a concurrent post at the Leipzig Conservatory.

Owing to his engagement at both University and Conservatory, Reger would have known not only the organ of St Paul's Church, but also the E. F. Walcker instrument in the Conservatory's concert hall, both in its original disposition of 1887 and in Sauer's greatly expanded design of 1909: indeed, it was the Conservatory's performance organ with which

he was photographed on at least two occasions, as mentioned above. Similarly, he would have been in a position to observe the renovations to the instruments of the St Thomas Church and the Gewandhaus: all three of the latter organs were directly associated with Straube. As is well known, Reger's Leipzig years are marked by an absence of organ composition, but it does not follow that the composer gave up contact with the instrument altogether. For instance, in February 1908 he is supposed to have improvised 'for a long time' on the house instrument of the Hamburg merchant Freiherr von Ohlendorff.⁵⁴

The Magdeburg organist Georg Sbach has supplied a detailed eyewitness account of Reger's improvisations on the organ in the expansive (Protestant) Cathedral of Kolberg (Kołobrzeg, now in Poland) in August 1907 and 1909, thus confirming Karl Hasse's report that the composer played the organ 'where he vacationed in the summer'. By August 1913, Reger could remark to the Duke of Meiningen that his organ performances in the resort town of Kolberg had achieved some popularity. 'Here I am completely lazy', he wrote. 'Once I played the organ in a concert at the local cathedral for a charitable cause and attained a full "house".'⁵⁵ Sbach's recollections offer a portrait that, more so than any other account, contradicts Unger's notion of the composer as 'a fairly clumsy organist'. On the other hand, Sbach suggests that Reger's improvisational style was intimately related to the architectural features of his organ music. According to Sbach, in 1907

Max Reger made himself at home at the console incredibly quickly and began to improvise. However, this first improvisation I heard from him was very brief and served only to try out the various stops of the organ, and to learn the various gradations of voicing, dynamic possibilities of expression, and registration aides. ... After a few days, the concert took place. The last number on the program was given as 'Improvisation by Max Reger.' ... He had notated the theme of a passacaglia on a tiny piece of paper. He began first with an introduction. Huge, gorgeous chords of unimaginable splendor alternated with brilliant passages for manual and pedal. Melodies of such moving character filled the room as I had never heard before. And then the theme of the passacaglia began in the most extreme pianissimo. The way Reger treated the theme, enhanced it, presented it in ever new guises, then closed with powerful chords—all this was indescribably magnificent and deeply moving. When the master finished, a breathless quiet prevailed for a long time in the great space of the cathedral, and only very gradually did the public move from its seat. I stood transfixed beside the console, never having experienced a greater moment than this direct revelation of a powerful musical genius. After the concert, someone said to me, 'Max Reger possesses the greatest musical mind of our time.' Another could not believe that Reger had really improvised, claiming instead that he must have played from memory. But I knew very exactly all of his published organ compositions to date, and I knew that none of them contained even remotely similar passages.⁵⁶

In this rich account, admittedly coloured by the distance of some fifteen years, Reger's approach recalls the structure of the well-known *Introduction and Passacaglia in D minor* WoO IV/6 (1899), or of the F-minor work on the same plan from the *Monologue* Op. 63 (1902). Still, Sbach seems to insist that Reger's improvisation departed noticeably from the style of his works—though this may simply have served the point that the music was new, not memorized—and he underscores the effect of harmony and texture rather than, say,

counterpoint.

On his 1909 return visit to Kolberg, Reger appears to have improvised on the model of a slow prelude and double fugue, the last number on a programme that included Bach's 'Dorian' Toccata BWV 538 played by Sbach and Boëllmann's 'Prière à Notre Dame' played by an unnamed organist.

In the middle of the program, someone was to play Boëllmann's 'Prière' from the *Suite gothique* (which at that time, unfortunately, was often heard in Germany). I sat with Reger on a bench in the back of the organ gallery. He whispered to me, 'Now comes the prayer.' (Pause) 'It's one for children.' (Pause) 'For quite young children.' Again, as the last number on the printed program stood 'Improvisation by Max Reger'. This time he improvised, after a long, beautiful prelude, a huge double fugue in the quickest tempo. It was most interesting to observe the master while he improvised, made easily possible by a free-standing console. Reger did not look at the manuals, rather his gaze was directed straight ahead, and one had the feeling that he was looking into another world. In this way he accomplished manual changes even in the most difficult places with uncanny celerity and with unerring reliability. He sat completely still when playing fast passages. On the other hand, his body began to move somewhat when the tempo became slower.⁵⁷

This time more specific about Reger's demeanour in performance, the image is one of complete technical mastery, comfort with the modern conveniences of the instrument, and eminent artistry. Popular notions of Reger as an accomplished organist proceed from observations like this one. In fact, Sbach's Reger portrait from Kolberg recalls most immediately the sovereign improvising master of Margarete Stein-Czerny's poem that heads this essay, a romanticized fantasy evidently inspired by an encounter with Reger's playing in 1914. In both accounts, the music transcends the mundane as the composer connects mysteriously with 'another world', that is, the world of modernist sensibilities.

Meiningen

It is important to note that, even if embellished, the images cited here speak to improvisation rather than to the interpretation of notated music. Indeed, part of Sbach's nationalist point is that even Reger's improvised creations quite transcend the composed-out drivel of a Boëllmann. Even so, that perspective finds itself at odds with other, less flattering accounts, including Reger's own impressions of his technical proficiency voiced toward the end of his life. Once he came into the service of Duke Georg II of Meiningen in late 1911, an extensive correspondence with Georg bears witness to the composer's own ideas of himself as an organist. Already in a letter of 21 June 1911, before he assumed the post of Meiningen Kapellmeister, Reger wrote to Georg that he 'had been' an organist and violinist, and so was qualified to lead the examinations at the school for teachers in Hildburghausen.⁵⁸ But when, about a year later, Georg requested that Reger test the new three-manual organ the Duke had gifted to the Stadtkirche in Bad Salzungen (Wilhelm Sauer Op. 1025, 1909), he insisted that someone more qualified accompany him. 'I have not yet been able to travel to Salzungen', Georg's Kapellmeister reported on 14 May 1912, 'since my pupil [Hermann]

Poppen, who is a very great organ virtuoso, is away. He must go with me when I travel to Salzungen. Poppen is a professional organ inspector in the Grand Duchy of Baden'.⁵⁹ The outing to nearby Salzungen followed on 19 June, and Reger quickly reported to the Duke that the instrument was 'a solid piece of work'. The only criticism he offered concerned the voicing of Manual II's Oboe 8' stop, too strong for Reger's taste, and the absence of a Clarinette 8'. Further, Reger believed that the builder had overestimated the wind pressures, and that accordingly a 1.5 horsepower motor would have sufficed, whereas Sauer had supplied one at 2.5 horsepower.⁶⁰

It is difficult to know whether the Salzungen report reflects Reger's or Poppen's ideas, or indeed whether Reger played the organ at all, since he had gone to the trouble of bringing along a professional inspector. Nevertheless, Kapellmeister Reger did not hesitate to air his opinions about organs during his Meiningen tenure. It is clear that Reger held the 1889 two-manual Schlimbach organ in the Meiningen Stadtkirche in particularly low regard. In describing its condition to Georg, he drew a clear distinction between his own authority to judge organs and that of Johannes Brahms, who had maintained warm relations with the Meiningen court and had cast the instrument in a positive light.

The action is antiquated and functions badly. ... The disposition itself is unfortunate. If Meister Brahms was satisfied with this organ in his day, this is to be explained by the fact that Brahms actually never had anything to do with the organ per se. He himself did not play the instrument, and since Brahms's death, organ building techniques have made enormous progress.⁶¹

The mature Reger placed a high value on the advantages of modern industrial techniques as adopted by the most progressive builders, an aesthetic undoubtedly cultivated from his collaborations with Straube and other forward-thinking organists over the years. The 'enormous progress' of which he speaks to the Meiningen Duke was on his mind, too, when he praised the gigantic Walcker instrument in Hamburg's Michaeliskirche—at the time of its building in 1912 the largest church organ in the world—as 'magnificent, outfitted with all the modern finesses'.⁶²

When, early in 1913, the question arose as to the building of an organ for the Great Hall of the Meiningen Schützenhaus then under construction, Reger advised Georg away from the old-fashioned instruments he had known from his youth. He asked 'to have the organ built electrically, and with a moveable console. The moveable console is of course only possible with electric action'.⁶³ Despite Georg's initial commission that the organ should be built by Sauer, Reger established that moveable consoles were the specialty of Steinmeyer. Acting on his Kapellmeister's counsel, Georg awarded the contract to Steinmeyer accordingly. After the instrument's completion in February 1914, the Duke again turned to Reger, requesting that he play the dedicatory recital. 'I cannot give this organ recital', was the composer's revealing reply. 'Twenty years ago I played really well, but now my pedal technique is so very "rusty" that I cannot allow myself any longer to be heard in public'.⁶⁴

Reger suggested that Straube be approached to play instead. Georg's testy response to that proposal is significant, since it demonstrates the popular assumption that the composer's technique was on a par with his music. The Duke of Meiningen argues his position with his typical sharp sense of economics:

I am happy that the big organ is a success. Its existence per se makes no sense, though, since to pay such a high price without getting to hear the instrument would have been insane. In principle I acquired this organ for you, because you are the only person in Meiningen who can play such an instrument. You even caused me to have the organ built, so I ask that you bring the instrument to the ears of the citizens of Meiningen.⁶⁵

Georg's insistence hardly seems unreasonable, particularly since only the previous August, the Duke had heard from Reger himself that he had played the organ for a packed cathedral in Kolberg to much acclaim. But the entreaty to perform for a hometown audience in Meiningen came too late. On the same day as Georg's response, 28 February 1914, the composer suffered a debilitating mental and physical collapse following a performance with the Meiningen Court Orchestra in the western German city of Hagen. The crisis had been long coming, brought on by years of unrelieved stress and a packed schedule of teaching, performing, and composing. Now, the radical result would necessitate Reger's withdrawal from his Meiningen post altogether. During his convalescence in Martinsbrunn (Meran), he argued for Fritz Stein's candidacy as his successor in Meiningen. Among Stein's many advantages, claimed Reger, was his status as 'an excellent organist, whereas I am more nearly just a bungler [*Stümper*]'—I have not been able to practice the organ in twenty-four years'.⁶⁶ He refers exactly to 1890, twenty-four years earlier, the year of his move from Weiden for study with Riemann, and away from regular organ playing.⁶⁷

Reger's confessions to Georg concerning the state of his organ technique are surely believable. But if we are to give even slight credence to Georg Sbach's sympathetic portrait of the composer improvising in Kolberg, then the exchange with the Meiningen Duke must be somewhat exaggerated. In fact, it was precisely during his Meiningen years that Reger played the organ publicly in two prominent venues. First, Rudolf Walter has documented the programmes of several concerts Reger gave with the Court Orchestra in regional churches between 1912 and 1916.⁶⁸ He supplied organ improvisations for many of these events, playing also what was presumably less demanding repertory as well as the accompaniments to chamber works with organ. Otherwise, he seems to have relied on local organists to present more extensive solo music.

As mentioned earlier, it is difficult to know the particulars of Reger's organ repertory at any point in his career. It is perhaps worth noting that in December 1911 the composer wrote the Meiningen Duke with the offer to donate his copy of Franz Commer's fifteen-volume collection *Musica sacra* to the church choir of Sonneberg, with one qualification. 'Volume 1', he remarked, 'I cannot send along, since I myself need it, and it only contains organ pieces'.⁶⁹ Commer's collection of 1838 (Plate 9) contains short pieces by J. S. Bach, Bruhns, Buxtehude, Frescobaldi, Merulo, and Muffat, among others, much of it making only modest if any demands on the pedal, and none of it subject to the heavy editing characteristic of Straube's editions. It is at least possible that Reger drew from it on occasions for which he felt it appropriate to play repertory.

Second and finally, in July 1913 Reger agreed to the Welte firm's request that he record some organ rolls at the company's Freiburg studios, after having already recorded some of his piano music on a Welte mechanism in 1905. He chose to record at least seven chorale preludes from his Op. 67 as well as isolated pieces from other incidental collections (Opp.

56, 59, 65, 69, 80, 85, and 92). It has often been claimed that the composer's choices reflect his modest technical abilities as an organist, and this may be true. But it is at least as pertinent to recognize two additional factors. First, there is evidence that Reger himself would have regarded the organ used for the recordings as too small for his large-scale organ pieces, even if he had wanted to play them. For instance, the following year he would write to Straube concerning the new three-manual, forty-five-stop Steinmeyer organ in the Meiningen Schützenhaus, calling the instrument 'small by our standards. ... The organ is hardly sufficient for my BACH [Op. 46]'.⁷⁰ Second, if Welte intended to make a profit on the sale of their rolls, then it was in the firm's best interest that music of an immediately appealing character for use in domestic settings be put on the market, not Reger's large-scale experimental works. Hence, his choices may well reflect not only his technique but also Welte's customer base.

It seems to me that the most reliable kind of information to be had from Reger's and others' organ recordings for Welte concerns the parameter of tempo modification and musical movement, ascertainable quite apart from the problems originating in the recording process itself.⁷¹ Reger's musical concept is indeed instructive in this regard, expansive in movement and detailed in rubato. In the context of the present discussion, it is important to note that, no matter what Reger claimed to the Duke of Meiningen in 1914 about his unwillingness to play the organ in public, he evidently had felt confident enough as an organist to offer his playing for sale through Welte the previous year.

Postscript

All these considerations bring us now full back round to Agostino Raff's images of Reger the organist, the first of them originating only some sixty years after the composer's death. Their effectiveness stems from the skill with which they present multiple layers of images and assumptions that had begun to grow around the composer already during his lifetime: the instinctive, genial creator of monumental organ music, the Janus-faced modernist allied at once with the instrument of Bach and the instrument of progress, even the 'master organist', as Slonimsky's description would have it. Such images reflect a fascinating collage of modernist concerns. The impressions offered by the historical record, too, are provocatively conflicted and complex. Remarks like those of Duke Georg and Heinrich Lang suggest that Reger's contemporaries themselves never achieved clarity about his position as an organist, even when his stature as the great organ composer after Bach was secure in many circles. He conforms only uncomfortably to our image of the virtuoso organist, informed as it is by the French after Widor and Lemmens, and by the Germans after Straube.

Yet to dismiss the nature of his facility on these grounds alone results in blindness to a significant element of Reger's fundamental musical sense. The recollections of Max Arend may hit closest to the truth in characterizing his playing as 'less and more than virtuosity'. Arend speaks here of Reger's piano playing, but the idea seems at least as appropriate to the composer as organist. Arend continues by relating an instructive instance of Reger the orchestral player:

Reger once took up the viola part in the Conservatory orchestra. About this, Riemann remarked

that it was not good to play an instrument on which one felt oneself to be a dilettante. I do not believe Riemann was right about this. Reger's original musicality allowed him to apprehend on every occasion exactly what was necessary. He was capable, fundamentally if not always literally, of everything in music.⁷²

Arend here describes an old-fashioned, comprehensive musical competence which Reger took for granted, not least with respect to the organ: the lines between composition, improvisation, and repertory playing are not nearly so clearly drawn as they tend to be a century later. That paradigm indeed may be the single most fundamental assumption Reger inherited from his conservative musical upbringing, and, seen through its lens, a fresh evaluation of his relationship to the organ becomes a new look at the whole musical phenomenon of Max Reger and his time.

Notes

1. 'Reger fantasiert auf der Orgel (Meran, April 1914)', in Margarete Stein-Czerny, *Stunden mit Max Reger* (Berlin: Verlag Ed. Bote & G. Bock, 1955), 13. Stein-Czerny's poetry appeared originally as *Gedichte und Tagebuchblätter* (Kiel: Mühlen, 1936). This and other translations from the German are my own.
2. Herman Wilske, *Max Reger: Zur Rezeption in seiner Zeit* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1995), 85.
3. Raff has told me on two occasions that he is dissatisfied with this work and regards it as a less than successful experiment. The ideas evoked by the painting are nonetheless fascinating and potentially insightful. Letters to the author of 9 March 2005 and 15 June 2015.
4. The notion of 'riding left' surfaces in Reger's polemical exchange with Hugo Riemann in 1907 and may invoke another piece of contemporary art, namely, Wassily Kandinsky's *Le chevalier bleu* of 1903. See Riemann's 'Degeneration and Regeneration in der Musik', and Reger's essay of the same name, in Christopher Anderson (ed. and trans.), *Selected Writings of Max Reger* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 35–51. Reger closes his retort to Riemann with the defiant sentence, 'I ride unyieldingly to the left!'
5. The latter image is reproduced in Kurt Binninger, 'Die Welte-Philharmonie Orgel', *Acta Organologica* 19 (1986): 201. The photographs of the composer seated at the console of the Leipzig Conservatory's concert hall organ appear in my *Max Reger and Karl Straube: Perspectives on an Organ Performing Tradition* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 230–1.
6. Karl Hasse, *Max Reger* (Dortmund: Verlag W. Crüwell, 1951). Hasse had been a pupil of both Straube and Reger at Leipzig. The image of the gravestone's organ pipes appears on the cover, with its source cited in the front material.
7. Heinrich Lang, 'Kompositionen von Max Reger', *Allgemeine Musik-Zeitung*, 6 December 1901: 800.
8. S., 'Die Musikalische Gesellschaft', *Neueste Nachrichten Essen*, 7 January 1905; Max Loewengard, 'Max Reger-Abend', *Hamburgischer Correspondent*, 26 February 1909; both cited in Wilske, *Max Reger*, 84.
9. Laura Diane Kuhn and Nicolas Slonimsky, *Music Since 1900* (New York: Schirmer Reference, 6/2001), 133.
10. '5. Abonnements-Konzert der Konzert-Gesellschaft', *Hagener Zeitung*, 2 March 1914, cited in Wilske, *Max Reger*, 85.
11. Letter of 26 December 1902, cited in *ibid.*

12. W., 'Aus der Heimat', *Badische Landeszeitung*, 13 November 1912, cited in *ibid.*, 84.
13. Antoine-Élisée Cherbuliez, 'Max Reger und die Meininger Hofkapelle', *Schweizerische Musikzeitung und Sängerbblatt* 56/29 (11 November 1916): 321; and 56/30 (18 November 1916): 334. Compare Karl Straube's much later remark to Oskar Söhngen: 'In [Reger's] thought and feeling he was most closely related to his brother in Christ Anton Bruckner'. Letter of 15 November 1946 in Wilibald Gurlitt and Hans-Olaf Hudemann (eds), *Karl Straube: Briefe eines Thomaskantors* (Stuttgart: Koehler, 1952), 212.
14. Walter Fischer, 'Über die Wiedergabe der Orgel-Kompositionen Max Regers', *Vortrag für die Generalversammlung westfälischer Organisten zu Dortmund im Mai 1910* (Cologne: Tischer & Jagenberg, 1910), 11.
15. Hermann Unger, *Max Reger: Darstellung seines Lebens, Wesens und Schaffens* (Munich: Drei Masken Verlag, 1921), 34.
16. *Ibid.*, 32.
17. The organ survives in altered form at the Reger-Archiv Meiningen, Schloss Elisabethenburg.
18. 'Through this collaboration, the foundation obviously was laid for a comprehensive knowledge of organ building which would later serve him well in his own magnificent creations for Cecilia's noble instrument.' Adalbert Lindner, *Max Reger: Ein Bild seines Jugendlebens und künstlerischen Werdens* (Stuttgart: J. Engelhorns Nachf., 1923), 38.
19. *Ibid.*, 39.
20. *Ibid.*, 39–40.
21. 'I have played Inventions of *Bach* (phrased), and I'm using *Bach's* fugues for organ playing [*und Bach'sche Fugen benütze ich zum Orgelspiel*].' Letter of 5 December 1888 to Hugo Riemann in Susanne Popp (ed.), *Der junge Reger: Briefe und Dokumente vor 1900* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 2000), 43. Emphases original. It is not clear whether Reger means to say that he is practising organ fugues or transcribing other keyboard fugues for use on the organ.
22. Letter of 23 November 1889 to Hugo Riemann in *ibid.*, 59.
23. Lindner, *Max Reger*, 39.
24. *Ibid.*, 40.
25. Max Arend, 'Max Reger in Wiesbaden 1892/1893', in *Mitteilungen der Max-Reger-Gesellschaft* 14 (1937): 4–8, cited in Popp (ed.), *Der junge Reger*, 140.
26. Georg Behrmann, 'Erinnerungen an Max Reger 1890–1893, 2. Teil', cited in *ibid.*, 70.
27. Hugo Riemann, *Katechismus der Orgel (Orgellehre)* (Leipzig: Hesse, 1888).
28. By comparison, the Wiesbaden Conservatory's annual report for the academic year 1891–2 cites 239 piano majors divided among seventeen teachers. Of the seven organ students, only one was a major. Popp (ed.), *Der junge Reger*, 109. Lindner, *Max Reger*, 74.
29. Testimony of Hugo Riemann and Franz Mannstädt in *ibid.*, 116.
30. Letter of 22 October 1892 in *ibid.*, 124.
31. Letter of 3 March 1891 in *ibid.*, 86; 115.
32. Letter of 15 February 1893 to Adalbert Lindner in *ibid.*, 137.
33. *Ibid.*, 182.
34. *Ibid.*, 259–60.
35. Hermann J. Busch, 'Max Regers Orgelwelt', in Hermann J. Busch (ed.), *Zur Interpretation der Orgelmusik Max Regers* (Kassel: Merseburger, 1988), 6–28. See also *idem*, 'Max Reger und die Orgel seiner Zeit', *Musik und Kirche* 43 (1973): 63–73.
36. Lindner, *Max Reger*, 39.
37. Rudolf Walter, 'Max Regers Beziehungen zur katholischen Kirchenmusik', in Klaus Röhling (ed.), *Max Reger 1873–1973: Ein Symposium* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1974), 124–8.
38. Lindner, *Max Reger*, 41.
39. Letter of 1 December 1897 to an unknown recipient, Popp (ed.), *Der junge Reger*, 307. It is

unclear what Reger means precisely by 'absolute tuning', but surely he refers to modulatory passages such as bars 31–5 of the Fantasy BWV 542.

40. Letter of 8 August 1893, *ibid.*, 155.
41. Letter of 6 December 1894, *ibid.*, 222. Significantly, Reger follows this remark with 'As an organist, you [that is, Lindner] of course have the best opportunity to try out all the things yourself in a practical way', thus seeming to distance himself from the role of interpreter.
42. Letter of 8 December 1892, *ibid.*, 129. Emphases original.
43. Letter of 18 March 1899, *ibid.*, 400–01. Emphases original.
44. Letter from late September 1898, *ibid.*, 347. Emphases original.
45. Lindner, *Max Reger*, 139–40.
46. *Ibid.*, 171. In a postcard of 26 September reproduced by Lindner, Reger writes simply that Op. 40 No. 1 'has already been tried out practically. Now I have to play a memorial liturgy [Jahrtagsamt] three days in a row at 6:00 a.m. Too early!—Otherwise good.'
47. Letter of 12 March 1906 in Susanne Popp (ed.), *Max Reger: Briefe an Karl Straube* (Bonn: Dümmler, 1986), 109.
48. Cited in Busch, 'Die Orgelwelt Max Regers', 16.
49. Letter of 12 March 1906 in Popp (ed.), *Briefe an Karl Straube*, 109.
50. Karl Hasse, *Max Reger* (Leipzig: C. F. W. Siegel, [1921]), 57–8.
51. Letter of 1 November 1902 in Helmut Niemann, 'Max Reger in München', in Ottmar Schreiber and Gerd Sievers (eds), *Max Reger zum 50. Todestag: Ein Gedenkschrift* (Bonn: Dümmler, 1966), 120. Reger's 'twelve years' refers to 1890, the year of his move to study with Riemann.
52. Elsa Reger, *Mein Leben mit und für Max Reger* (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1930), 39.
53. Letter of 17 February 1907 from Adolf Wach to the Saxon Ministry of Culture, in Popp (ed.), *Briefe an Karl Straube*, 126.
54. Ottmar Schreiber (ed.), *Max Reger: Briefe zwischen der Arbeit Neue Folge* (Bonn: Dümmler, 1973), 193.
55. Letter of 31 August 1913, in Hedwig and E. H. Mueller von Asow (eds), *Max Reger: Briefwechsel mit Herzog Georg II. von Sachsen-Meiningen* (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1949), 517.
56. Georg Sbach, 'Max Reger im Kolberger Dom', in *Mitteilungen der Max-Reger-Gesellschaft 3* (1923): 8–9. Concerning the composer's unreliable memory, Hermann Unger notes 'his extraordinary nervousness [and] his inability to play even his own works from memory, even if only in passages or isolated bars'. Unger, *Max Reger*, 30.
57. *Ibid.*, 9. Not unusually, Sbach's account from 1923 is coloured by the anxiety towards French influence in the German territories common in the wake of the Treaty of Versailles.
58. Letter of 21 June 1911, in Mueller von Asow (eds), *Max Reger: Briefwechsel mit Herzog Georg II. von Sachsen-Meiningen*, 31.
59. Letter of 14 May 1912, in *ibid.*, 234.
60. Letter of 19 June 1912, in *ibid.*, 266–7.
61. Letter of 8 December 1911 in *ibid.*, 58.
62. Letter of 28 October 1912 to Georg II of Saxony-Meiningen, in *ibid.*, 372.
63. Letter of 27 May 1912 in *ibid.*, 240.
64. Letter of 27 February 1914 in *ibid.*, 570. Reger here refers to 1894, during his student days in Wiesbaden with Hugo Riemann. But see further below.
65. Letter of 28 February 1914 in *ibid.*, 572.
66. Letter of 24 April 1914 in *ibid.*, 596. Like Karl Hasse, Stein had been among Straube's earliest pupils in Leipzig between 1904 and 1906.
67. Compare this remark with the one to Theodor Kroyer from 1902, where 1890 likewise serves as the reference point. See note 49.
68. Rudolf Walter, 'Max Regers Kirchenkonzerte in Thüringen 1912–1916 und ihre Beziehung zu

- seinem Schaffen', in Günther Massenkeil and Susanne Popp (eds), *Reger-Studien 1: Festschrift für Ottmar Schreiber* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1978), 29–46.
69. Letter of 12 December 1911 in Mueller von Asow (eds), *Max Reger: Briefwechsel mit Herzog Georg II. von Sachsen-Meiningen*, 64–5.
 70. Letter of 25 March 1914 in Popp (ed.), *Max Reger: Briefe an Karl Straube*, 233–4. Other organists in fact recorded some of Reger's larger works for Welte, as for example Kurt Grosse's renderings of Opp. 46 and 52/2.
 71. On the larger questions related to the Welte firm, see especially Peter Hagmann, *Das Welte-Mignon-Klavier, die Welte-Philharmonie-Orgel und die Anfänge der Reproduktion von Musik* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1984). Significant new research on the Welte organ rolls continues to advance in the thoroughgoing work of David Rumsey (Basel), particularly around the Welte-Philharmonie organ preserved at the Museum für Musikautomaten, Seewen, Switzerland. See also the enlightening new recording to come from this work, *The Britannic Organ Vol. 8: Reger und Zeitgenossen spielen Max Reger*, Oehms Classics OC 847 (2014).
 72. Arend, 'Max Reger in Wiesbaden', cited in Popp (ed.), *Der junge Reger*, 140.

Plates

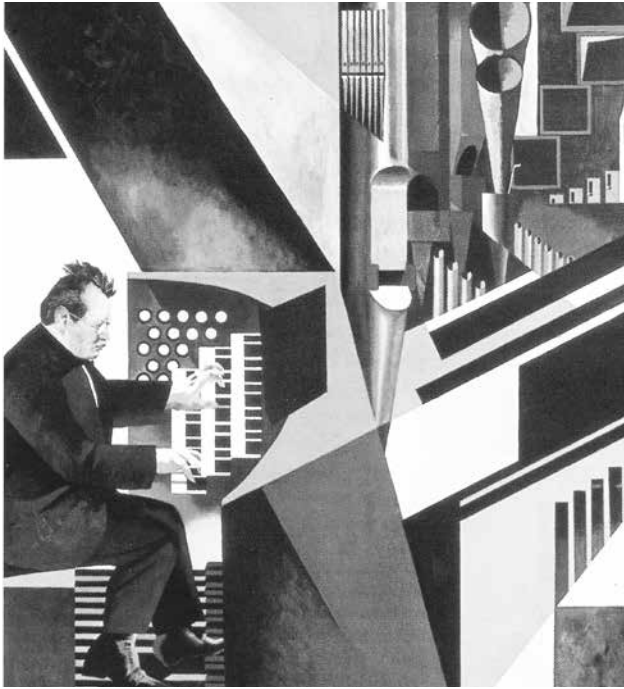


Plate 1: Agostino Raff (b. 1933): Triptych *Max Reger: Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, left panel (mixed media on canvas, 1969).



Plate 2: Max Reger at the piano, photograph by Hoenisch, Leipzig (1910).



Plate 3: Agostino Raff: *A Max Reger* (ink on paper, 1979).



Plate 4: Agostino Raff: *Disperazione di Max Reger al crollo delle Torri / Organo d'America* (draft, mixed media on canvas, 2002).



Plate 5: Max Reger at the Wilhelm Sauer organ Op. 660, Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche (undated).



Plate 6: Hugo Starkloff: *Max Reger, auf dem Pegasus die Schranken der Konvention überspringend* ('Max Reger, leaping over the bounds of convention', 1913).

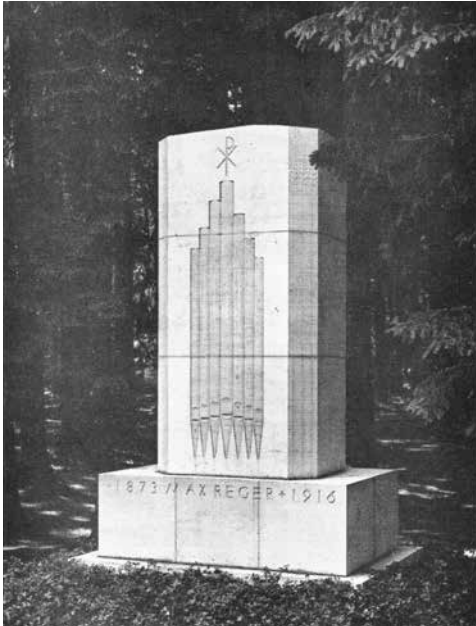


Plate 7: Max Reger's memorial stone, Waldfriedhof, Munich.

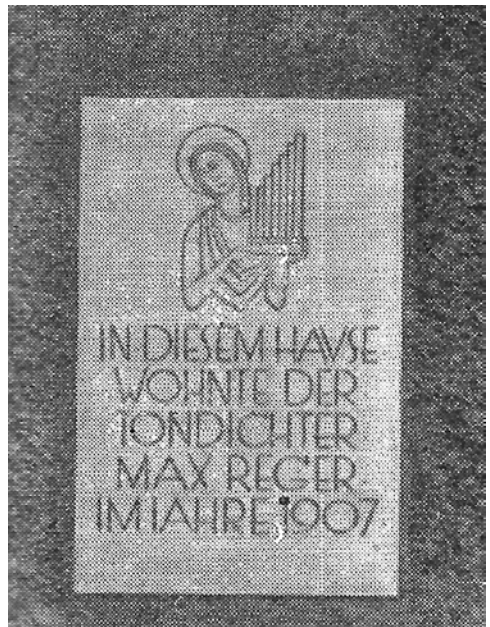


Plate 8: Memorial plaque at Reger's 1907 residence, Felixstrasse 4, Munich.

Sammlung
DER BESTEN MEISTERWERKE
Des 17^{ten} u. 18^{ten} Jahrhunderts
für die
ORGEL
zum Gebrauch beim Gottesdienst und zum Studium
gesammelt und herausgegeben
von
Franz Commer.

Band I.

Eigenthum der Verleger.
Berlin & Posen.
Leipziger Straße 37. | Wilhelmstraße 23.

Breslau,
Bichtenberg.

ED. BOTE & C. BOCK,

Stettin,
Simon.

Königs u. der Königin, S. K. H. des Kronprinzen u. S. K. H. des Prinzen Albrecht v. Preußen.
Leipzig, B. F. Steinacker.

Eingetragen gemäß den Vorschriften der internationalen Verträge.