

(Johann Baptist Joseph) Max(imilian) Reger
(b. Brand, Bavaria, 19 March 1873 – d. Leipzig, 11 May 1916)

Eine Ballettsuite for Orchestra in D Major, Op. 130

Preface

Max Reger was one of the most influential, controversial, and idiosyncratic of the composers whose works formed a bridge between the late Romantic and early modern period. While simultaneously maintaining a career as a concert pianist, organist, and conductor, Reger managed an amazingly prolific creative life as a composer: 146 works with opus numbers and over 80 without opus numbers completed in a working life of approximately 25 years. Reger's titanic labors are all the more remarkable given persistent health problems throughout his life, a long struggle with alcoholism, and emotional difficulties that today would probably be regarded as a form of depression or bi-polar disease.

Although Reger is an unfamiliar presence today in concert halls outside the German-speaking world, in his lifetime he was a composer with considerable influence throughout the world. No less a personage than Arnold Schönberg—whose critical sensibilities were highly exacting and acute—considered Reger to be “a genius.” Schönberg's admiration of Reger was not shared by everyone, and one would be hard pressed to find another composer whose works received as mixed a reception as Reger's.

Reger's compositional style is not easy to understand or summarize. Within the Brahms vs., Wagner controversy of the late 19th century, Reger clearly came down on the side of Brahms. There is in Reger's music the constant influence of Brahms—sweeping melodies that are constructed out of smaller motifs, a predilection for the hemiola, and the reverence of older compositional forms. But Reger takes the style of Brahms one step further with a freedom of modulation that at times is almost atonal or pan-tonal in nature. Indeed, one of Reger's most influential works was pedagogical in nature, namely, the *Beiträge zur Modulationslehre* (Contributions to the Study of Modulation) of 1903 in which Reger made the theoretical case whereby one could seemingly modulate from one key to any other key. Therefore, it was only a small theoretical step from Reger's hypertrophic tonality to Schönberg's “emancipation of the dissonance.”

But Reger was also heavily influenced by J.S. Bach. One of his best friends and musical collaborators was Karl Straube, cantor of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig (the same position held a century and a half earlier by Bach), and Reger being a gifted organist and church composer made Bach's influence seemingly inevitable.

The end result is that much of Reger's music employs an extraordinarily complex harmonic structure that is grafted upon a dense contrapuntal background. It is as though Reger has one foot in the contrapuntal past while having the other simultaneously in the atonal future. As such, his music was sometimes deemed as being too radical for conservative tastes and too backward-looking for the younger generation who would soon become enamored of movements such as expressionism, Dadaism, and futurism.

Eine Ballettsuite, however, is one of Reger's most accessible compositions. Composed in 1913, it is one of a number of initial steps that the composer took towards the goal of finishing a complete symphony.

From 1911 until the outbreak of the First World War, Reger was conductor of the famous Meiningen Hofkapelle Orchestra. Increasingly, Reger became preoccupied with symphonic composition; however, like his mentor Brahms, his approach to orchestral writing was agonizingly slow and fitful. In a composer as productive and prolix as Reger, this seems ironic. But we must remember that the overwhelming legacy of Beethoven's symphonies proved to be daunting to many other composers from the 19th century. Unfortunately, Reger's premature death prevented him from ever completing his long-planned 1st Symphony.

Eine Ballettsuite (and the better known Böcklin Suite, Op. 128, also from 1913) were regarded by the composer as "preparations" for a symphony. The outward formal design of the composition is that of a baroque dance suite. The movements of the work, however, contain both generic and programmatic titles:

- I Entrée
- II Columbine
- III Harlequin
- IV Pierrot und Pierrette
- V Valse d'amour
- VI Finale

Originally, Reger had intended the work to be in only five movements; later, he added two movements. The work was actually at the printers when he withdrew the movement entitled "Pantolon" that had originally preceded the "Finale." This type of compositional second-guessing and self-criticism was not unusual with Reger. The manuscripts of many of his compositions show extreme revisions, sometimes with numerous pages being excised from his original drafts.

The programmatic elements of the work come from the stock characters of commedia dell'arte, the traditional improvised comedy that had its origins in Italy in the late Middle Ages. In Reger's case, given his propensity to absolute music, it is probably more accurate to say that commedia dell'arte inspired his composition, rather than ascribe programmatic intentions to the composition. Commedia dell'arte was something of an artistic fad in the pre-World War I era, as witness Stravinsky's *Petrushka* (1911) and Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912). The fascination with commedia dell'arte, then, can be seen as similar to the popularity of "Zigeuner" (or "gypsy") music in the previous generation.

The unsettled or ambiguous quality of Reger's extended chromaticism is also seen in the nervous fluctuation of his dynamic markings. There is no composer who ever went as quickly or as often from triple piano to triple forte and then back again. For a composer noted for his dense textures, there is a light, almost impressionistic, quality to *Eine Ballettsuite*. Reger was well familiar with Debussy's music and conducted several of the French composer's works with the orchestras he conducted. It should also be noted that Reger's links to the avant-garde are evident in the fact that the two composers most often performed in the concerts of Schönberg's Society for the Private Performance of Music were Max Reger and Claude Debussy.

The spirit of fin-de-siècle Vienna is present in the "Valse d'amour." Reger thought very highly of Johann Strauss, Jr. and conducted his waltzes a number of times with the Meiningen Orchestra. While some critics have complained about the mixture of serious and popular elements in this work, Reger could point to the precedent of Brahms' own Academic Festival Overture with its use of German university drinking songs. In fact, the second or "characteristic" theme from a Mozart or Haydn sonata form movement was often derived from a folk tune or popular tune of the day.

Eine Ballettsuite was premiered in Breslau on 30 October 1912 with Ernst Wendel conducting. The composer conducted the work with his Meiningen Orchestra the following day.

Although Reger never meant for the work to be choreographed, there is one documented ballet performance that occurred in Leipzig on 10 October 1917. For the occasion, the composition was

retitled Pierrots erster Ball (Pierrot's First Ball).

William Grim, 2004

Performance material: Breitkopf und Härtel, Wiesbaden