

PRELUDE AND FUGUE FOR THE LEFT HAND BY REGER

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Abstract: *Max Reger stands out among the composers who addressed a particular genre of piano literature, enriching it with elegant and beautiful pieces. The composer is genuinely concerned with the valorisation of technical and expressive resources of the left hand. In this respect, the Prelude and Fugue in E flat minor, a piece which reminds us that the piano is, in its way, a miniature orchestra, is also in the spirit of Bach, to whom Reger renders tribute throughout his work.*

Keywords: *Reger, left hand, prelude, fugue, pianist*

1. Introduction

In order to reach the highest level of artistic mastery, the pianist must identify and resolve all technical issues. One of the challenges pianists face is that of developing a left hand technique comparable to the right hand one. In a pianist's work, there is a problem related to the functional asymmetry of pair receptor analyzers. In the piano apparatus, the left hand generally shows some developmental disabilities compared to the right hand.

The problem of the left hand has always concerned piano pedagogues (and composers, o.n.). It would be ideal for a pianist not to display any asymmetry phenomenon in the functionality of both hands, but this is almost impossible [1].

One of the composers who addressed this particular genre of piano literature for the left hand (wanting to enrich the piano art with new technical and aesthetic means) was Max Reger, with *Prelude and Fugue* in E flat minor, a difficult and valuable

piece from the point of view of both the piano technique and emotional content.

2. Max Reger

2.1. Biographical and creative highlights

Johann Baptist Joseph Maximilian Reger was a German composer, conductor, pianist, organist and academic teacher [4]. He was born on March 19, 1873 in Brand near Bayreuth, being the eldest son of a primary school teacher, Joseph Reger, and Philomena Reichenb rger.

After his birth, in 1874, the Regers moved to Weiden, where the father dealt with the musical education of talented Max. Since 1884, he studies the piano and the organ, under the guidance of the organist Adalbert Lindner, who becomes his teacher for the next eight years, so that at the age of 13, due to his exceptional progress in the art of playing the organ, he replaces him (between 1886 – 1889) at the organ of the catholic parish in Weiden.

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The piano lessons focused especially on the study of polyphony in Beethoven and Brahms and his repertoire as an organist at that time included works by Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, part of the creation of J.S. Bach and Brahms. These models will influence Reger's creation later, in which he will combine "the Baroque force" with "the romantic tenderness". His main points of reference are Beethoven and Schumann. The closest and widely accepted model remains Brahms [3].

The year 1888, (as a result of a journey he takes to Bayreuth, where he attends the Mastersingers of Nürnberg and Parsifal, being particularly impressed by Wagner's polyphonic writing), represents a turning point for the young artist who decides to become a composer. However, he later declared his opinion against "the perverse trifles of Wagnerians and Straussomania" [5].

Lindner sends his disciple's works to the famous maestro Hugo Riemann, who takes him as a student, between 1890 – 1893, first at Sondershausen, then at the Conservatory in Wiesbaden. This is when he begins studying and deepening the compositions for piano and organ of J.S. Bach, a period of time which Reger himself describes as "the way backwards from enchantment with Liszt to honouring Beethoven and Bach" [2].

Between 1893 and 1896, Reger teaches organ and theory at the Conservatory in Wiesbaden, and after one year of military service, in 1898, he rejoins his family in Weiden, so that from 1901 he moves to Munich, where he marries Elsa von Berken, in 1902.

In Munich, in 1904 he is appointed professor of theory, composition and organ at the Akademie der Tonkunst, his organ compositions starting to be regularly performed by the famous organist Karl Straube, and his concert activity, both as

an organ performer and in the chamber music field, intensifies.

In 1907, Max Reger leaves for Leipzig, where he will accept the position of Music Director of the University, also teaching composition. In Leipzig, the artist will be surrounded by admiration, his value being fully recognized, receiving academical and honorary awards throughout Germany. His reputation is also growing due to Reger festivals, which are held starting from 1910 (the first festival of this kind being organized in Dortmund [3] to popularize his compositions).

Since 1911, Reger is entrusted with the leading of the famous orchestra Meininger Hofkapelle (founded by Hans von Bulow and conducted by Richard Strauss), performing along with it, as a conductor, in many tours. All these activities weaken his health, forcing him to abandon the Meiningen orchestra and settle down in Jena, from where he continues touring and, once a week, gives lectures in Leipzig. He dies unexpectedly from a heart attack in Leipzig, on May 11 1916, aged only 43.

From the rich creation dedicated to the piano, (his piano pieces being often elegant and beautiful [5]), we mention: Improvisationen op.18; 6 Morceaux op.24; 7 Characterstücke op.32; 6 Intermezzi op.45; 6 Burlesken op.58; Variations and Fugue on a theme by J.S. Bach op.81; Variations and Fugue on a theme by Beethoven, for two pianos op.86; 4 Sonatinas op.89; Introduction, Passaglia and Fugue for two pianos op.96; Variations and Fugue on a theme by Mozart, for two pianos op.132a; Variations and Fugue on a theme by C.P. Telemann op.143.

3. Max Reger - Prelude and Fugue

The Prelude and fugue in E flat minor is the last of the four pieces, with no opus number, composed by Max Reger in 1901.

Alongside with it, Scherzo, Humoreske and Romanze constitute the fruit of the composer's concern for the valorisation of the technical-expressive resources of the left hand. The mention of Reger's name stirs the reflex exclamation: "Fugue!"[5] which could be justified by the fact that the organist's experience, an interpreter of Bach, conditions his entire organ (and piano, o.n.) production: he was talked about as even "the second Bach"[3].

The composer, who in 1914 said that he could honestly declare that of all living composers he was probably the closest to the great masters of a glorious past, in the prelude and fugue for the left hand he also creates a work in the spirit of Bach.

3.1. Musical analysis

The *Prelude* is structured on the articulations of the four component

phrases, which together form the so-called deployed period, a specific form of the Baroque polyphonic music, which is based on the pregnancy and processing valences of the generating motif. The first phrase can be divided into two motifs that mark important harmonic points, namely G flat major and E flat minor. The second phrase is constructed in three „beats” by presenting, sequencing and then widening the motif. The third phrase achieves a chain of modulations using the sequencing method. The conclusion is built on the E flat pedal on which is set the succession of the cadence chords

The Prelude begins in a grave and impressive mood, wrapped in a medieval sonority which is due to the plagal harmonic relation between steps IV and I. (figure no.1).



Fig. 1, measures 1-4

Impermissible chaining for the classical harmony also appears, like the one between steps V – IV. The rich, diversified harmony is under the influence of organ music and always keeps an improvisatory character.

The melodic describes intervals of perfect ascending fifths and fourths, resolved by laws of Bachian counterpoint through gradual contrary motion.

The rhythmic also pursues the achievement of the free character of the prelude by a diversity of rhythmic formulas.

We are dealing with a piece of atmosphere in which the interpreter must resort to various pianistic means, with great precision and subtlety of attack. The role and effectiveness of every finger is essential for achieving the perfect balance between the melodic line and the accompaniment. Differentiated use of

fingers is essential given that the left hand must combine in itself the functions of the two hands.

The following *Fugue* keeps the tonality in E flat minor in the monothematic polyphony of the three voices. Elements specific to Bach are fully present, as a tribute to the Leipzig cantor.

Thus the exhibition followed by the ample *divertissement* serve together, through all stages of thematic processing.

The melodic of the theme is simple, built on the arcuate gradual slow movement of two identical sequences starting on the first step towards the third step, and respectively the fourth of the tonality, to finally return to the starting point by setting it through its sensitive.

But original is the rhythmic structure of the theme, having the profile of a hemiole,

dividing the two ternary measures into 3 binary measures.

Expositions of the theme follow without delay in the descending order of the voices, i.e. soprano, tenor and bass. Counter-subjects built on the same preponderant gradual movement insert small syncopes among the equal sixteenth values.

The exposition ends mid 8th measure by a cadence on the dominant function.

The *divertissement* starts with two thematic exposures, subject-response, in B flat minor and E flat minor in the bass and soprano voices. There follows the sequencing of a dynamic motif in the interlude preparing a third exposition, also in the soprano voice. Another interlude presents a new thematic element formed by long sounds finishing in a delicate lower embroidery, which will be the material for further processing. (figure no.2).

The image displays a musical score for measures 20-24. It consists of three systems of music. The top system shows a single melodic line with a dynamic marking of *p* (piano) and a tempo marking of *rit.* (ritardando). The middle system is a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a dynamic marking of *mp* (mezzo-piano) and a tempo marking of *a tempo*. The bottom system is also a grand staff with a dynamic marking of *f* (forte) and a tempo marking of *scherezando* (scherzando), along with the instruction *sempre cresc.* (sempre crescendo).

Fig. 2, measures 20-24

On the base of this new counter-subject, the theme reappears in the bass with an ample sonority, strongly marked by the accents put ostentatiously on each of its sounds.

In contrast, the response of the soprano, with the indication „espressivo”, tempers the atmosphere, like the calm before the storm. The same sequenced embroideries now have the role to lead in „crescendo

sempre” towards the last exposition of the theme which the bass voice doubled in the octave accomplishes in a monumental sonority.

The Coda puts in motion the entire keyboard, using the elements of virtuosity. The arpeggios, glissandos, as well as the particularly strong accents accompany the conclusion (figure no.3).

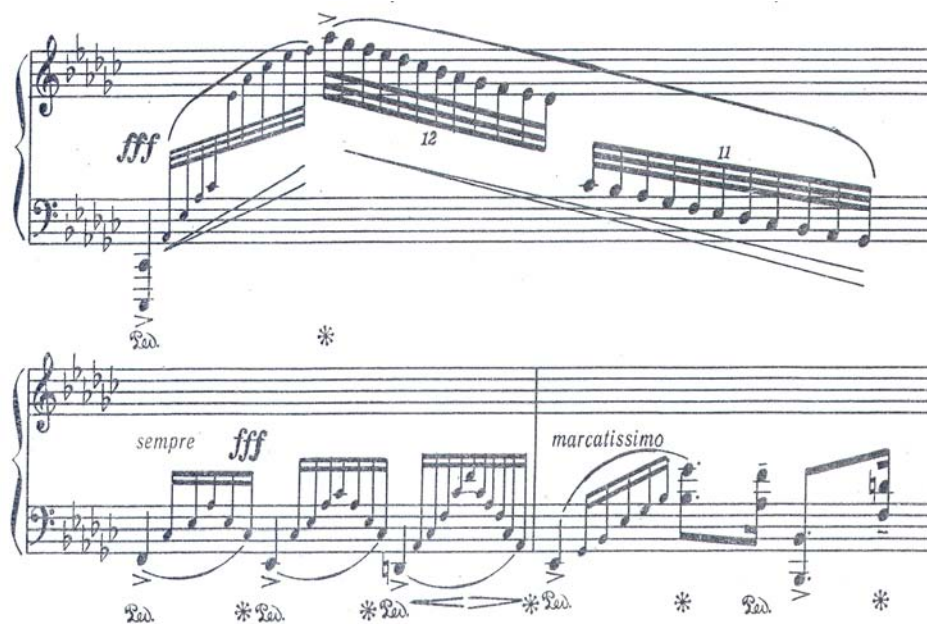


Fig. 3, measures 35-37

The end contrasts with the sudden drop of volume, which lets the initial motif of

the theme to be heard more and more faded (figure no.4).

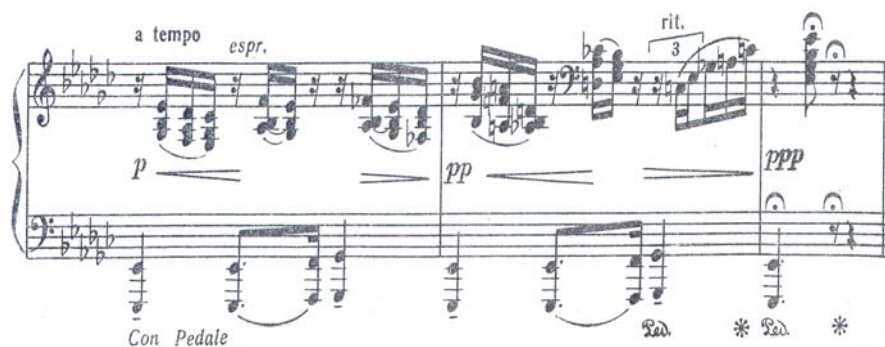


Fig. 4, measures 38-40

4. Technical and interpretative remarks

In order to fully understand the philosophy and beauty of this difficult work from the point of view of the pianistic technique, the interpreter must be in possession of various interpretative means that allow him to clearly show its internal structure at sound levels. At a closer look at the musical text, we see that Reger insists on the legato interpretation of the theme (with the notation *sempre ben legato*), a mandatory requirement to be achieved by the interpreter approaching this work. To achieve the legato required by the composer, the pianist must learn how to use each of the 5 fingers in a differentiated way, the technical execution having to be combined: *sempre ben legato* in the high and mid voices, *non legato* – low voice. Also performing dynamic and agogic gradations (within the limits of the musical text, of course) he will be able to highlight the harmony and colour of the timbre that envelope this piece. Of great help in highlighting the musical material proves to be the right pedal which, if skillfully used, will intensify and enrich the sonority required by this fugue, favouring the rendering of its specific atmosphere. In the coda of the fugue, the effect of the right pedal (kept on the octave and on the quarter values in the bass, overlapped by the sound effect of glissandos and arpeggios) reminds us that the piano is, in its way, a miniature orchestra.

5. Conclusions

Max Reger, addressing a particular sector of piano literature (that of creations for the left hand alone) managed to create in an old form a valuable work which enriches the piano repertoire. The composer, a central figure of the movement back to Bach [5], due to his talent, manages to find the way of giving life by means of only 5 fingers to a work that fully highlights the technical, interpretative and coloristic resources of the piano. The tragic pathos of the E flat tonality is suggestively expressed in a work of real value, proving irrefutably that works for the left hand constitute an essential component of the artistic piano heritage.

(English version by Gilda Cristina Marinescu)

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