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Max Reger’s Opus 135b and the Role of Karl Straube
A study of the intense friendship between a composer and performer that had potentially dangerous consequences upon the genesis of Reger’s work

By Marcel Punt

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Max Reger’s “Fantasie und Fuge in d-moll, op. 135b” for organ appears at a very crucial moment in the history of German music. Reger wrote this piece between 1914 and 1916, a period in which tonality had to give way to other principles of composition, such as unity creating intervals, twelve-tone music, variable ostinato, tone colour-melodies, etc. With this piece, Reger stands in the middle of this “development” from Wagner to Schönberg and Webern. So although the piece is still based on tonality, it already shows some aspects of the music that was to supersede it, namely both the fantasy and the fugue, which are based on the interval of a small second, the first theme of the fugue which consists of 11 different tones, the second which consists of even 12 different tones, and Reger’s way of changing sound together with the phrasing and the harmonic progress of the music. Reger’s opus 135b for organ could be regarded as one of his most advanced and still deserves more attention than it has received to date.

Most organists will still only know the piece in its definite shape, now available in the Peeters-edition. But the manuscript that was first sent to the editor Simrock in Berlin, differs quite substantially from the version that Simrock finally published.

Not until 1966 did this manuscript become available in volume 18 of the “Gesamtausgabe” by H. Klotz, and the “Korrekturabzüge”, featuring final adjustments and corrections, finally appeared in 1973. The latter proofs show that all the corrections had been made in Reger’s own handwriting. The most radical concern the removal, and the adjustments this necessitated, of 10 bars from the fantasy, and 29 bars from the fugue.¹

Then the key question arose; which of the two versions should be played, when trying to convey Reger’s intentions? This problem was approached through the analysis

¹. See Appendix A.
of architecture, the analysis of the order of different keys in the fugue, and through quotations from the correspondence between Reger and musicians, friends, etc.²

In 1987, Bengt Hambraeus added an important ingredient to the discourse. It is very likely that Karl Straube, one of Reger's close friends and the performer of most of his organ-works, was actually responsible for many of the corrections executed by Reger.³ His hypothesis arises in a much wider context of the aspect of interpretation in the performance practice at the beginning of this century, both in general and in the performance practice of Straube in particular. Therefore, this hypothesis is presented more as a possible example of the way Straube interpreted and approached music, rather than as a main issue. But of potentially greater interest, is the extent of Straube's influence on Reger's life and music in general, and especially his involvement in the development of 135b.

During their friendship, Straube was, at Reger's request, involved in the compositional process of many pieces. He was asked to look for suitable texts for songs and choir-music, and gave advice on technical difficulties concerning organ playing.

From 1911, this influence increased strongly. Reger became more and more occupied with conducting and ensemble-playing, and was increasingly involved as a teacher at the conservatory in Leipzig. Because of this, he seldom had the opportunity to work out his sketches and to make fair copies of his compositions. During the time they spent together between 1911 and 1916, Reger discussed many of his rough outlines with Straube.⁴ Sometimes Reger even gave unfinished manuscripts to Straube, enabling him to have direct influence on the genesis of a piece.⁵

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⁴ Straube thought that his cooperation in refining a composer's outline was private between the two of them, and that performers should only regard the edited piece as reliable. He wrote to Hans-Joachim Nösselt (24/04/1943): “Wenn Sie wüssten, wie oft ich, von meinem Freund Max Reger an, anderen Menschen diesen Dienst erwiesen habe, so würden Sie sehr erstaunt sein. Solches Tun geht fremde Leute nichts an. Es ist eine Angelegenheit verschwiegener Art zwischen einzelnen Persönlichkeiten, die Außenwelt hat nur zu dem im Druck vorgelegten Werk als Ganzes Stellung zu nehmen.” (In: Briefe eines Thomaskantors).
⁵ Popp, ibid., p. 213.
But although in accordance with Reger’s wishes, Straube’s influence might still have damaged many of the innovative outlines. Having an unstable personality and lacking self-confidence, Reger was very easily influenced by the mentally strong Straube.

Their lasting friendship started at the time when Straube, at the age of 25 and already a very successful performer, was the first to show interest in Reger’s pieces by playing them at his recitals. Until then, Reger’s earlier compositions had not received any critical acclaim, which lead to a huge personal crisis. Reger became lonely, a depressive and finally an alcoholic. The two met each other at one of Straube’s recitals and they rapidly became close friends. Reger recovered his self-confidence through Straube’s increasing enthusiasm for his music6, and from then on, he remained dependent on Straube, needing confirmation of his abilities as a composer for the rest of his life.7

With regards to 135b, Reger repeatedly asked for this kind of appreciation from Straube. It took almost a year before Straube paid any attention to it, and on the 11th April 1916, having seen it for the first time, he immediately suggested the radical changes to the piece. The very next day the insecure Reger executed all of these suggestions.8

7. Concerning the Requiem, Reger’s wife Elsa wrote to their friends Fritz and Gretel Stein:
   “Straube hat ihm bewiesen, daß er dem Stoff nicht gewachsen ist u. nun kann er es nicht fertig schreiben.... Wie oft - 5-6 Male weiß ich allein, hat Straube Werke von Max verworfen, die dann groß u. herrlich waren u. ihren Weg gingen. Straubes Einfluß ist nicht gut auf Max”. (16/12/1914)
   “Max wollte in deutscher Sprache ein Requiem schreiben... Er besprach dies leider mit Straube u. der riet ihm ab; Es würde nur ein Abklatsch des Requiems von Brahms. Also nahm Max den lateinischen Text vor u. schuf u. schuf. Leider nahm er des öfteren sein Werk mit nach Leipzig u. sprach es mit St. durch; so auch heute vor 8 Tagen. St. erklärte ihm nun, er habe den lateinischen Text nicht ausgeschöpft, er werde des Textes nicht Herr. Natürlich entschuldigt St. sich immer bei Max, daß er ihm seine Meinung so offen sagt, aber er sagt sie halt. Es ist Max der Glaube genommen ein Requiem schreiben zu können u. damit die Freude an dem Werk. Er findet den Faden nicht mehr u. hat das 3/4 fertige Werk St. geschenkt. Jetzt soll St. ihm einen deutschen Text aus der Bibel suchen. Lieber Fritz, Max ist so unsagbar leicht zu beeinflussen u. steht z.Z. wieder ganz unter St. Bann.... St. hat s.Z. mit dem Orgelwerk “Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern”, mit der “Serenade”, “Schlichten Weisen” etc. gerütt; er hat Lauterbach u.Kuhn vom Erwerb der Modulationslehre abgehalten, u. Max dadurch großen pekuniären Schaden zugefügt, das vergißt Max aber stets wieder u. hört in erster Linie auf St.”. (19/12/1914)
   Cited from Popp, ibid., pp. 245-246.
8. For the complete survey of the letters from Reger to Straube concerning 135b, see Appendix B.
It would appear to me, that in this case, a lot of damage has been done to the innovative version that Reger had in mind. During a year of correspondence before that particular evening, Reger had been expressing excitement in his letters to Straube over the length of the piece (see Appendix B). Obviously Reger had had no intention of shortening the piece himself, although he was seeking Straube's advice. What he really wanted was approval of his outline.

Comparing both versions from an analytical perspective, the extent of the damage becomes clear. In the fantasy, repeated patterns such as the large scales ending with trills, have become loose fragments by cutting other places where these patterns appear (see Appendix A 1). In the first fugue, the innovative accelerando, which was achieved by the acceleration of the note-value, has disappeared (see Appendix A 2 – A 3), as it is, together with the dynamic progress and phrasing, a very important part of the unity of this composition. All of these parameters of Reger’s music are indispensable, because they arose inseparably at the same time, belonging to one great idea.

But just like the abridged version, the manuscript does not represent Reger’s intentions either. Mostly Reger used the proofs to refine his compositions, not only as a means of correcting the few mistakes that were reproduced by the editor, but also to improve the parts of the music with which he was no longer satisfied. He also did this with regards to 135b. On the 1st March 1916, he wrote to Straube that he was looking through the proof of this piece (see Appendix B 1). Because the printed pages that he cut out from 135b have been thrown away, it is impossible to assess the extent of the alterations. Therefore we can not rely on the manuscript either to convey Reger’s intentions. So the whole issue is even more complicated than had been assumed until now. Now we are left with two versions, neither of which is authentic.

To enable performers to decide Reger’s intentions for themselves, it would be desirable to publish a faithful reproduction of the manuscript alongside the two latter proofs. Any other attempt to publish this piece would inevitably become an interpretation, for which there is no need. The publisher Breitkopf & Härtel did try to publish both versions in one sort of multifunctional text in volume 1 (nr. 8491) of the “Sämtliche Orgelwerke”, by printing the original version, from which organists, if they would like to perform the shortened version, could skip the parts that are between brackets. Apart from being an undesirable attempt to reproduce both versions, it would appear to me that this edition is neither practically, nor scientifically, very successful. The bars that have been changed by Reger to connect the parts that are left after the cuttings, are printed in the “Introduction”, which is very inconvenient. Even worse is the fact, that randomly chosen elements concerning tempo indications, dynamic signs, phrasing and articulation from the shortened version, appear in the text of the original. How this work has been done, does not become clear in this edition. To discover this, according to the “Notes to the present edition”, one has to look at the critical notes in the volumes of the “Gesamtausgabe” edited by H. Klotz. So, apart from another inconvenience, the edition in itself also fails scientifically.
In particular being a composer, conductor and pianist, Reger was probably not very familiar with the “in-crowd” of organists. From 1915, Straube became increasingly involved in what was later to become the “Orgelbewegung”, which spearheaded the revival of baroque music, as well as the integration of some elements of baroque style into contemporary composing. He became progressively critical of Reger’s still Wagnerian alternations of extreme emotion, culminating in complete rejection of the whole style\textsuperscript{10}, although Reger seemingly did not notice. In his letters to Straube, Reger kept expressing excitement about his latest piece (“…was recht schönes…”), and assumed Straube to have great interest in it (see Appendix B 2).

However, outside this in-crowd of organists Reger received a lot of critical acclaim, and was held in high esteem by the general public, other musicians, and composers like Schönberg and Webern. Between 1918 and 1922, 34 compositions of Reger have been performed in Vienna at the Society for Private Musical Performances, which was administrated by these composers during that time. (Debussy had 26 of his pieces performed there, Bartok and Ravel 12 each, and Scriabin 11.)\textsuperscript{11}

The whole story comes to a sad end. Straube received the finally finished third proof as an “Easter-greeting”, the intention being that he should perform the premiere. However, Straube never expressed appreciation towards Reger for this “honour”, and in fact completely disassociated himself from the whole issue\textsuperscript{12}

Seeing the final result, did he perhaps finally realize that there was no meaning in trying to adapt a piece which is constructed within its own style, to the new ideals of the “Orgelbewegung”? Did he realize that his interference had in fact been destructive to the piece, and feel embarrassed about it? Does this explain his lack of reaction to Reger’s last three letters in which he had repeatedly requested a meeting on the 10th May 1916 at their pub “Hannes” (see Appendix B 2)?

On the very night that the two were supposed to meet, Reger died of a heart attack in his hotel room in Leipzig.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10} Popp, ibid., p. 16.
Cited from Hambraeus, ibid, p. 54.
\textsuperscript{12} Instead of Straube, the premiere was performed by H. Dettmer on the 11th June 1916.
Cited from Popp, ibid., p. 260.
\textsuperscript{13} Popp, ibid., p. 260
Appendix A 1 - Removed sections from 135b

Fantasy

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↑
Appendix A 2 - Removed sections from 135b

First fugue
Appendix A 3- Removed sections from 135b

Cont. first fugue
Appendix A 4- Removed sections from 135b

Second fugue
## Appendix B - Survey of the letters from Reger to Straube concerning 135b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>date</th>
<th>quotations from correspondence between Reger and Straube</th>
<th>remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>end of September 1914</td>
<td>“Nun wegen des Orgelwerks: so will ich Dir gestehen, daß ich ein solches vorhaben! Ich gehe schon etwas &quot;schwanger&quot; mit der Sache! Also wird sie wohl werden!”</td>
<td>This seems to be an answer to a request from Straube. They may have spoken about it previously.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29/10/14</td>
<td>“Ein neues großes Orgelwerk &quot;kristallisiert&quot; sich.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05/05/15</td>
<td>“Deine 2 Karten erhalten, haben sich mit meiner gekreuzt! Ich komme morgen Donnerstag sehr pünktlich abends 7.30 zu Euch; ...”</td>
<td>Reger mentions the piece in a letter to Simrock (“ein Orgelwerk größten Stils - aber nicht zu lang...”), and asks for the transfer of 1000 Marks to his account, as had been arranged. It was probably at this time that Reger sent the manuscript to Simrock.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17/05/15</td>
<td>“Es war doch fein, daß wir uns gestern Abend getroffen haben! Ich sehe soeben die Korrekturbogen durch von meinem op. 135b: Phantasie und Fuge (d-moll) für Orgel! Ein neues großes Orgelwerk! Ich hoffe sehr, Dir dasselbe im April dann geben zu können gedruckt. Es hat 20 Druckseiten Umfang.”</td>
<td>Reger still mentions the full title. He also writes that it concerns a &quot;new major piece for organ”. So Straube has yet to see it. He underlines the word &quot;gedruckt&quot; (printed), because often Straube received a second copy of the manuscript from Reger. The &quot;Korrekturbogen&quot; concern the second proof.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01/03/16</td>
<td>“…, ich bringe ein neues, großes Orgelwerk mit.”</td>
<td>Obviously Straube still has not seen the piece.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07/04/16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Quotations from Correspondence between Reger and Straube</td>
<td>Remarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/04/16</td>
<td>&quot;Kann ich nun nächsten Dienstag 11. April (morgen) abends 1/2 8 Uhr (7 1/2) zu Euch kommen oder w0 wollen wir uns sonst nächsten Dienstag abend treffen? ...Das neue Orgelwerk bringe ich mit!&quot;</td>
<td>On the 11th April 1916, having seen it for the first time, Straube immediately suggested the radical alterations in the piece. The &quot;exemplarmäßige Abzug&quot; concerns the third proof (see note 4, pp. 116).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/04/16</td>
<td>&quot;Die Änderungen in dem Orgelwerk hab‘ ich schon alle gemacht! Ich sende es morgen nach Berlin und lasse Dir sobald als möglich einen exemplarmäßigen Abzug machen! Ich denke, daß ich Dir denselben balde senden kann. Es war doch fein, daß wir uns gestern abend getroffen haben.‘‘</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22/04/16</td>
<td>&quot;Ich sende Dir anbei als Ostergruß das neue Orgelwerk, das ich extra für Dich in exemplar-mäßigem Abzug habe herstellen lassen! Es kommt also noch so früh, daß Du das Werk in Hannover ”uraufführen” kannst; denn technische Schwierigkeiten wird Dir das Ding ja nicht bieten! Nun höre: ich bin am 10. Mai Mittwoch abends in Leipzig, übernachte sogar in Leipzig, bitte, richte Du Dir das sicher so ein, daß wir uns am 10. Mai abends treffen! Wenn Du Chorprobe hast, so treffen wir uns eben nach Deiner Chorprobe; ich schlage wie immer ”Hannes” vor! Also sei so gut, darauf nicht zu vergessen! Bitte, sei so gut, mir wegen unseres Zusammentreffens am 10. Mai abends, auf das ich mich sehr freue, genaueste Nachricht baldigst zu lassen.‘‘</td>
<td>Obviously Straube never expressed any appreciation for Reger’s alterations, even though it was done at his request, and did not even reply to the three letters in which Reger repeatedly asked him to come and see &quot;something really beautiful&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08/05/16</td>
<td>&quot;Vergiß Du bitte nicht, daß wir uns nächsten Mittwoch 10. Mai, abends bei Hannes treffen wollen. Du kommst nach Deiner Probe; ich bin un 10 Uhr abends sicher bei Hannes! Ich bringe Dir was sehr Schönes mit! Also sei so gut, sicher abends 10 Uhr am Mittwoch 10. Mai abends im Hannes zu sein!‘‘</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09/05/16</td>
<td>&quot;Nicht wahr, Du vergißt nicht darauf, daß wir uns für morgen, Mittwoch 10. Mai abends bei Hannes verabredet haben! Du kommst, bitte, sogleich nach Deiner Probe zu Hannes! Ich bin von 10 Uhr abends an sicher bei Hannes. Sollte ich noch nicht da sein, so komme ich sofort dann! Ich bringe Dir auch was recht Schönes mit.‘‘</td>
<td></td>
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Notes to Appendix B

3. Popp, ibid., “Einleitung”.
4. Reger executed these cuttings in the assumed first proof. But this proof is actually the second. According to O. Schreiber (see note 2a, p. 2), it shows on the reverse of the last page, a stamp of the editor which says “II. Correctur”, and on the front page a stamp of the “Notenstecherei C.G. Röder” with the date “15. Jan. 1916”. Reger had probably sent the manuscript to Simrock on the 17th May 1915 (see remark 17/05/15 in the table). It would appear to me that an editor does not need 8 months, from May 1915 till January 1916, to make a proof. Finally, there are also some differences between the manuscript and the printed text of this assumed first proof, obviously not mistakes, which means that there must have been a previous proof, which has probably been lost. The third proof was made between the 12th and 22nd April 1916 especially for Straube, so that he could perform the premiere.
Bibliography


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