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**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 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

*Marcel Punt*

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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes Reger even gave unfinished manuscripts to Straube, enabling him to have direct influence on the genesis of a piece.<sup>5</sup>

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2. a. O. Schreiber: "Zur Frage der gültigen Fassung von Regers Orgel-Opus 135b", *Mitteilungen des Max-Reger-Instituts*, Bonn, neunzehntes Heft, August 1973, pp. 34-38.

b. M. Weyer: "Die Orgelwerke Max Regers", Florian Noetzel Verlag, Wilhelmshaven 1989, pp.129-134.

3. B. Hambraeus: "Karl Straube, Old Masters and Max Reger", *Svensk Tidskrift för Musikforskning*, Uppsala 1987, pp. 63-65.

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*).

Cited from S. Popp: "Max Reger - Briefe an Karl Straube", Ferd. Dümmers Verlag, Bonn 1986, p. 8.

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 led 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 music<sup>6</sup>, and from then on, he remained dependent on Straube, needing confirmation of his abilities as a composer for the rest of his life.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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6. Popp, *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

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 is 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. geirrt; 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.<sup>9</sup> So the whole issue is even more complicated than had been assumed up until now. Now we are left with two versions, neither of which is authentic.

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9. 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<sup>10</sup>, 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.)<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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10. Popp, *ibid.*, p. 16.

11. H. Moldenhauer: “Anton Webern. A Chronicle of his Life and Work”, London 1978, p. 228.

Cited from Hambraeus, *ibid.*, p. 54.

12. Instead of Straube, the premiere was performed by H. Dettmer on the 11th June 1916.

Cited from Popp, *ibid.*, p. 260.

13. Popp, *ibid.*, p. 260

### Appendix A 1 - Removed sections from 135b

#### Fantasy

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The image displays a handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Fantasy". The score is written on multiple staves, including a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a separate staff for a string quartet (indicated by "2 Vln", "2 Vcl", "2 Vla", "2 Vcl"). The notation is dense and includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. Key performance instructions include "a tempo (rit.)", "2 tempo", "poco cres.", "poco a poco mallo rit.", "molto allegro", "rit.", and "molto Largo". The score is marked with a downward arrow at the top and an upward arrow at the bottom, indicating its position within a larger work. The handwriting is in black ink on white paper, with some corrections and annotations visible throughout the piece.

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### Appendix A 2 – Removed sections from 135b

#### First fugue

The image displays a handwritten musical score for the first fugue, consisting of six systems of staves. The notation is dense and includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, accidentals, and dynamic markings. The score is written in a cursive, handwritten style. A downward-pointing arrow is located at the top right of the first system. The first system begins with the tempo marking *Allegro* and includes dynamics like *poco* and *rit.*. The second system features the tempo marking *Allegro* and dynamics like *rit.* and *rit. poco*. The third system includes the tempo marking *Allegro* and dynamics like *rit.* and *poco*. The fourth system includes the tempo marking *Allegro* and dynamics like *rit.* and *poco*. The fifth system includes the tempo marking *Allegro* and dynamics like *rit.* and *poco*. The sixth system includes the tempo marking *Allegro* and dynamics like *rit.* and *poco*. The score is written on a single page and is enclosed in a hand-drawn rectangular border.

Appendix A 3- Removed sections from 135b

Cont. first fugue

I. And. (3'4" + 10")

The image displays a handwritten musical score for a fugue, consisting of four systems of staves. The first system is marked 'I. And. (3'4" + 10")' and includes dynamic markings like 'p' and 'f'. The second system features performance instructions such as 'sempre poco a poco'. The third system contains a large, dense scribble of black ink, with some faint text like 'sempre' and 'poco a poco' visible through it. The fourth system continues the notation and includes a circled '2' at the end. An upward-pointing arrow is located at the bottom right of the page, below the final system.

### Appendix A 4- Removed sections from 135b

#### Second fugue

The image displays a handwritten musical score for the second fugue, consisting of several systems of staves. The notation includes treble and bass clefs, key signatures, and various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and accidentals. Dynamics and performance markings are present throughout, including *Adagio*, *meno pp/ff*, *ff*, *max.*, *sempre pp*, *sempre ff*, *pp*, *ff*, *molto*, *meno*, *can.*, *rit.*, *ritard.*, *rit. marc.*, and *rit. marc.*. A large section of the score is heavily scribbled out with black ink. On the left side, there are handwritten notes:  $\frac{13}{8}$ ,  $\frac{6}{8}$ ,  $\frac{8}{8}$ , and  $\frac{13}{8}$ . At the bottom left, the text "fine mit Fortissimo!" is written above a  $\frac{12}{8}$  time signature. At the bottom right, there is an upward-pointing arrow. The score is divided into systems by double bar lines.

## Appendix B – Survey of the letters from Reger to Straube concerning 135b

date	quotations from correspondence between Reger and Straube <sup>1</sup>	remarks
end of september 1914	"Nun wegen des Orgelwerks: so will ich Dir gestehen, daß ich <i>ein solches vorhabe!</i> Ich gehe schon etwas "schwanger" mit der Sache! Also wird sie wohl werden!"	This seems to be an answer to a request from Straube. They may have spoken about it previously.
29/10/14	"Ein neues großes Orgelwerk "kristallisiert" sich."	
30/04/15	"Es interessiert Dich wohl zu vernehmen, daß ich an einem <i>neuen</i> Orgelwerk <i>großen</i> Stils arbeite! Kann ich nächsten Donnerstag 6. Mai abends 7 1/2 Uhr "ungegessen" zu euch kommen? Bitte um <i>möglichst umgehendste</i> Nachricht!"	On the 3rd May 1915, Reger repeats this request very strongly.
05/05/15	"Deine 2 Karten erhalten, haben sich mit meiner <i>gekreuzt!</i> Ich komme morgen Donnerstag sehr pünktlich abends 7.30 zu Euch; ..."	
17/05/15		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. <sup>2</sup> It was probably at this time that Reger sent the manuscript to Simrock.
01/03/16	"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 <i>Orgel!</i> Ein neues <i>großes</i> Orgelwerk! Ich hoffe sehr, Dir dasselbe im April dann geben zu können <i>gedruckt</i> . Es hat 20 Druckseiten Umfang."	Reger still mentions the full title. He also writes that it concerns a "new major piece for organ". So Straube has yet to see it. He underlines the word " <i>gedruckt</i> " (printed), because often Straube received a second copy of the manuscript from Reger. <sup>3</sup> The "Korrekturbogen" concern the second proof. <sup>4</sup>
07/04/16	"... , ich bringe ein neues, <i>großes</i> Orgelwerk mit."	Obviously Straube still has not seen the piece.

date	quotations from correspondence between Reger and Straube <sup>1</sup>	remarks
10/04/16	"Kann ich nun nächsten Dienstag 11. April (morgen) abends 1/2 8 Uhr (7 1/2) zu Euch kommen oder <i>wo</i> wollen wir uns sonst nächsten Dienstag <i>abend</i> treffen? ...Das neue <i>Orgelwerk bringe ich mit!</i> "	<p data-bbox="880 356 1147 496"><b><i>On the 11th April 1916, having seen it for the first time, Straube immediately suggested the radical alterations in the piece.</i></b></p> <p data-bbox="880 533 1141 615">The "<i>exemplarmäßige Abzug</i>" concerns the third proof (see note 4, pp. 116).</p>
12/04/16	"Die Änderungen in dem Orgelwerk hab' ich <i>schon alle</i> gemacht! Ich sende es morgen nach Berlin und lasse Dir sobald als möglich einen <i>exemplarmäßigen</i> Abzug machen! Ich denke, daß ich Dir denselben balde senden kann. Es war doch fein, daß wir uns gestern abend getroffen haben."	
22/04/16	<p data-bbox="400 662 847 862">"Ich sende Dir anbei als Ostergruß das neue Orgelwerk, das ich extra für Dich in exemplarmäßigem 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 <i>nicht</i> bieten!</p> <p data-bbox="400 866 847 1184">Nun höre: ich bin am 10. Mai Mittwoch abends in Leipzig, übernachtete sogar in Leipzig, bitte, richte Du Dir das <i>sicher</i> so ein, daß wir uns am 10. Mai abends treffen! Wenn Du Chorprobe hast, so treffen wir uns eben <i>nach</i> Deiner Chorprobe; ich schlage wie immer "Hannes" vor! Also sei so gut, darauf <i>nicht</i> zu vergessen! Bitte, sei so gut, mir wegen unseres Zusammentreffens am 10. Mai abends, auf das ich mich <i>sehr</i> freue, <i>genaueste</i> Nachricht <i>baldigst</i> zukommen zu lassen."</p>	<p data-bbox="880 1162 1151 1448"><b><i>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 "something really beautiful".</i></b></p>
08/05/16	"Vergiß Du bitte <i>nicht</i> , daß wir uns nächsten Mittwoch 10. Mai, <i>abends</i> bei Hannes treffen wollen. Du kommst nach Deiner Probe; ich bin um 10 Uhr abends <i>sicher</i> bei Hannes! Ich bringe Dir was <i>sehr Schönes</i> mit! Also sei so gut, <i>sicher</i> abends 10 Uhr am Mittwoch 10. Mai abends im Hannes zu sein!"	
09/05/16	"Nicht wahr, Du vergißt <i>nicht</i> darauf, daß wir uns für morgen, Mittwoch 10. Mai <i>abends</i> bei Hannes verabredet haben! Du kommst, bitte, sogleich nach Deiner Probe zu Hannes! Ich bin von 10 Uhr abends an <i>sicher</i> bei Hannes. Sollte ich noch <i>nicht</i> da sein, so komme ich sofort dann! Ich bringe Dir auch was <i>recht Schönes</i> mit."	

**Notes to Appendix B**

1. Popp, *ibid.*, pp. 242-260.
2. Weyer, *ibid.* p. 124.
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.

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