

DLA doctoral thesis – a summary

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Cello compositions of Max Reger

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I. The precedents of the research

I have known Max Reger mainly for his organ pieces and songs, even if he can be considered a very prolific composer with his approximately 150 works and more than 350 transcriptions, among which there are several full orchestra and chamber pieces as well. The selection of my dissertation topic was inspired by Dr Salamon Kamp, and my dedication to start the research was fueled by the support of Dr László Somfai and Dr Ferenc János Szabó.

In my dissertation I have focused on a clearly delineated aspect of Reger's work, his pieces written for the cello, which is a so far very much neglected – in Hungary practically unknown – field of research. As a first step, I scrutinized Reger's life and oeuvre, given that in my studies I had not had the chance to familiarize myself with the career and significance of this controversial, but in Germany highly renowned, composer. Once I got my first taste of his works, it became clear that, due to their complicatedness and complexity,

the analysis of the compositions will be a big challenge for a performing artist. Due to the length requirements of the dissertation, I needed to concentrate on a small yet truly exciting slice of the subject: on the solo suites and the cello-piano sonatas, and their place within the chamber music segment of Reger's oeuvre. I aimed to give a historical account of the reception and the impact of his works within the Hungarian context, focusing on the controversial views about his musical legacy. The goal of my research was to scrutinize the receptive horizon of the late 19th and early 20th century, which was surrounding Reger.

II. Sources

To start my research, I found it necessary to familiarize myself with German sources; therefore, I reached out to Prof. Dr. Susanna Popp, the director of the Max Reger Research Institute in Karlsruhe, who invited me to Karlsruhe after a short email correspondence. Preceding a shorter visit, I managed to win a DAAD research grant and spend a full year in Germany.

During my time at the Hochschule für Musik Karlsruhe, as the student of Prof. Dr. Thomas Seedorf, I had an excellent opportunity to closely observe the uniquely rich document collection of the Max Reger Institut (which included documents, photographs, pictures, memoirs, manuscripts, special editions, foreign literature, sound recordings, recordings of Reger playing a contemporary Welte-Mignon Rollen piano, and organ recordings). Next to Professor Seedorf, Dr. Jürgen Schaarwächter was also a big help during my research.

As biographical sources I used Fritz Stein's *Max Reger, Die großen Meister der Musik*, the Grove lexicon's entries, and the documents published by the Max Reger Research Institute. In addition, I got to know a lot also from Reger's correspondence, which I gained access to, from the archives of the Institute, during my stay in Germany. The primary source I used for the analysis of the cello sonata was Matthias Kontarsky's *Kompositorische Tendenzen bei Max Regers Sonaten für Violoncello und Klavier*, which presents Reger's life through the birth of his cello sonatas. Kontarsky's research uncovers that Reger composed a cello sonata in every relevant

stage of his life; consequently, their analysis is an excellent way to witness the musical progress of the composer.

I based my research about his Hungarian reception on music journals (such as *Nyugat* or *Antal Molnár Lexicon* entries) which are available in the Hungarian National Széchenyi Library, in the library of the Franz Liszt Music Academy of Budapest, and in the Budapest Music Institute, which painted a clear picture about the Hungarian philosophical trends at the turn of the century, Reger's position in the Hungarian music world, and the attitude of specific Hungarian composers towards Reger's works. In order to explore contemporary concert life in Budapest, I used Zoltán Kodály's two-volume *Retrospection*, but I found that even Béla Bartók's correspondence mentioned Reger's pieces which were played by the Hungarian composer.

Upon my return from the German research trip, I received solid assistance from music historian Dr Balázs

Szabó, whose help regarding the structure of my dissertation was priceless.

III. Method

In the first half of my study, I summarized Reger's life in a nutshell. I played special attention to Reger's relationships with artists whose work he recommended, who inspired him, and who supported him on his artistic advancement (for example, Karl Straube and Josef Hösl). His ambivalent ties to critics, with whom he had fought all his life, received emphasis. At the start of the analysis, I put the movements of all cello sonatas in music history into an illustrative table in order to compare them with Reger's movements following Baroque and Classical styles. While examining the op. 116 a-minor cello sonata and the op. 131c G-major suite, I was consciously considering the obvious connection points between Bach and Regel, the references to Baroque composition techniques. For the analysis of the suite, my major source was Brenda Heidhoff Leonard's PhD dissertation entitled *An analysis of Max Reger's Suites for*

unaccompanied cello, but Walter Frisch's *German Modernism: Music and the Arts* was a big help too, just like all the data provided by the researchers at MRI.

In my analysis I compared the studies of numerous music researchers (for example, Matthias Kontarsky or Udo Geefe), which made me realize that the interpretation of Reger's works is very hard and occasionally ambiguous. This is why the different researchers reached very different conclusions. I tried to use my performer experiences to take sides all through the examination, and I managed to identify a number of musical references in his works, especially from his role models Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, which sometimes appear as direct "quotations," while sometimes less direct.

IV. Results

My dissertation is relevant and unique because no larger research has been dedicated in Hungarian to Reger's chamber pieces yet.

With this study I managed to provide the most extensive biographical introduction of Reger in Hungarian, which might be useful for those who wish to extend their knowledge about the oeuvre of the German composer in Hungarian language. My work can be helpful also for cellists, so they can learn and understand Reger's works more profoundly, which is emphatically important given that for a couple of years it has been compulsory for students to perform Reger's cello suites at the exams of the Franz Liszt Music Academy of Budapest. As the organizer of the chamber nights of the Anima Musicae Chamber Orchestra, I feel that the most important research result is that we have extended the repertoire of our orchestra with the seldom performed chamber pieces of the composer.