

Over one Hundred Years without Max Reger

An introduction to his Music for Solo Cello

Johann Baptist Joseph Maximilian Reger (full name), universally known as **MAX REGER**, was born in Brand, Germany on March 19th, 1873. He was an important German composer, organist, pianist and teacher.

He studied music in Munich and Wiesbaden with Hugo Riemann. In 1901 he settled in Munich, where he devoted himself to teaching organ and composition, and from 1907, he worked in Leipzig, where he was music director of the university until 1908 and then professor of composition at the Felix Mendelssohn Conservatory until his death. Among his students we must highlight Joseph Haas and George Szell.

He also had an intense activity as an orchestra director and pianist, numbering well over 100 concerts every season. From 1911 he conducted the Meiningen Court Orchestra until it was dissolved in 1914, at which time he moved to Jena. He finally died of a myocardial infarction in Leipzig on May 11th, 1916, at the so young age of 43 when he was producing some wonderful works.

During a creative life of just over 20 years, Reger produced a large number of works in all genres (with the exception of opera), almost always using abstract forms, although very few of them are known today. He was a strong standard-bearer of absolute music, and saw himself as part of the musical tradition of Ludwig van Beethoven and Johannes Brahms. His work often combines the classical structures of these composers with the extended harmonies of Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner and the complex counterpoint of Johann Sebastian Bach.

He also left a large number of works for organ, including the Fantasy and Fugue on BACH (based on the BACH Motif, it is considered one of the most difficult in the instrument's repertoire). He was particularly attracted to the fugue form throughout his life, even stating: "Others compose Fugues — I live in them."

Reger's three Suites for solo violoncello are each very mature works, dating from 1914-15 and, above all, they are most elegantly written. They could be defined as romantic works of strong emotional impulses. In reality they still belong to the 19th century although they extend the chromatic language as did the young Schoenberg or Richard Strauss.

Reger also wrote four sonatas for cello and piano:

Cello Sonata No.1, in F minor, Op.5 (dedicated to Oscar Brückner)

Cello Sonata No.2, in G minor, Op.28 (dedicated to Hugo Becker)

Cello Sonata No.3, in F Major, Op.78

Cello Sonata No.4, in A minor, Op.116 (dedicated to Julius Klengel)

Little specifically romantic music for **unaccompanied solo cello** remains in the repertoire today; unfortunately, most of them have a technical aspect, like only pieces or whims of figures like Grutzmacher, Piatti, Servais or Popper to name only four. Therefore, Max Reger's three great Suites opened frontiers perhaps not sufficiently credited for this fact; Reger actually gives us the pure sound of a solo cellist, singing, preluding, improvising, and communicator. The pieces are spontaneous and unpretentious in character, yet they are complex at the same time. They make playful allusions to Bach here and there.

In the best late Romantic tradition, they are often lovingly lost in chromaticism and emotional explosions - not to mention the exuberant use of thirds and sixths that remain so grateful in the exact timbres and registers of the cello that Reger demands of the performer. This is pleasant music, uninhibited and direct in its expressiveness and full of moments of intimacy in movement.....great works still to be discovered by the majority of the public... and musicians!

Suite N°. 1 in G Major, Op. 131c/1 (dedicated to Julius Klengel)

I - Präludium

II - Adagio

III - Fugue

Suite N°. 2 in D minor, Op. 131c/2 (dedicated to Hugo Becker)

I - Präludium

II - Gavotte

III - Largo

IV - Gigue

Suite N°. 3 in A minor, Op. 131c/3 (dedicated to Paul Grümmer)

I - Präludium

II - Scherzo

III - Andante con variazioni

With Max Reger, solo literature for strings experienced a renaissance that would continue to have an impact for half a century in works by Hindemith, Bartók, Honegger and others. Max Reger does not consider the suite in a strictly baroque sense, but rather as a free sequence of three, or four movements of varying moods; however, all begin with a prelude.

The first Suite is the shortest and simplest of the three. The opening movement, 'Prelude', is the one that is undoubtedly closest to Bach, but with the difference that there is no hidden or latent polyphony. A clear and melodic language, linked to expressiveness, is present in the 'Adagio'. It concludes with a fugue for two voices.

After the Prelude of the Second Suite, the 'Gavotte' and the 'Gigue' are the real core movements of the suite, but he breaks the atmosphere with a Largo, which seems like a wistful, retrospective soliloquy.

The third Suite is the most complicated of the three, oriented toward polyphony and capable of both the most tender sensitivity and extroverted roughness, and embodies the post-Romantic disruption characteristic of the early 20th century. The final 'Andante con Variazione' is not only very difficult to perform, but has some of the most advanced Reger writing for cello.