

# Reger's Bach and Historicist Modernism

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Most accounts of Austro-German music from about 1885 until 1915, or roughly from the death of Wagner until the start of World War I, still tend to focus on chromaticism and atonality as the barometers of emergent modernism. Only more recently have we begun to understand that early modernism was a many-splendored thing, not restricted to late Mahler, Schoenberg and his pupils, and Strauss through *Elektra*. One particularly rich vein of this period that has yet to be fully mined is what might be called historicist modernism, incorporating music written in the years around 1900 that derives its compositional and aesthetic energy not primarily from an impulse to be New, but from a deep and sophisticated engagement with music of the past. I am not referring here to neoclassicism, a term that normally connotes a repertory and practices associated with Stravinsky, Hindemith, and other composers of the 1920s and 30s. Often brash and cosmopolitan—and self-consciously *au courant*—neo-

classicism has tended to overshadow historicist modernism, an earlier and soberer, but equally fascinating, phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

Brahms plays a key role in the development of historicist modernism. He showed how techniques of the remote past could be put in the service of a musical language both expressive and original. His *a cappella* sacred vocal works, steeped in Renaissance and Baroque principles,

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<sup>1</sup>Accounts of neoclassicism can be found in Scott Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music: From the Genesis of the Concept through the Schoenberg/Stravinsky Polemic* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988); Stephen Hinton, *The Idea of Gebrauchsmusik: A Study of Musical Aesthetics in the Weimar Republic (1919–1933) with Particular Reference to the Works of Paul Hindemith* (New York: Garland, 1989); Richard Taruskin, "Back to Whom? Neoclassicism as Ideology" (a review essay on the foregoing), this journal 16 (1993), 286–302; and "Historical Reflection and Reference in Twentieth-Century Music: Neoclassicism and Beyond," a special segment of *Journal of Musicology* 9 (1991), 411–97, with articles by J. Peter Burkholder, Joseph N. Straus, Marianne Kielian-Gilbert, and Scott Messing.

are of course prime examples, but the most extraordinary and influential product of his historicist imagination is the finale of the Fourth Symphony from 1885. With its unique fusion of ancient and contemporary practice, this passacaglia had a profound impact on subsequent composers. Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, Reger, and Zemlinsky all wrote pieces modeled after or partially inspired by Brahms's finale.<sup>2</sup>

Max Reger understood perhaps better than any other composer of his generation that for Brahms the music of the past was not a crutch but a creative stimulus. "What assures Brahms immortality," he wrote in 1896 (and reiterated in later years), "is never and will never be his reliance on old masters, but the fact that he knew how to produce new, unimagined psychological [*seelisch*] moods on the basis of his own psychological makeup."<sup>3</sup>

One could say much the same for Reger's historicist modernism, which is modeled on that of Brahms and which is most evident in his attitudes toward and assimilation of the music of J. S. Bach. Reger's reception of Bach exemplifies an important development in the years around 1900, when Bach began to edge out Beethoven as a principal model for many composers in Austria and Germany. As Rudolf Stephan has observed, Bach's music came to represent both an *Altklassik* alongside the *Klassik* and a pathway forward among the many crosscurrents of modernism.<sup>4</sup>

In this article I would like to investigate Reger's historicist modernism, first by sketching aspects of contemporary Bach reception and examining Reger's activities in that context, then discussing in greater detail two compositions from different periods of his career, his First Suite for Organ, op. 16 (1895), and his Bach Variations for Piano, op. 81 (1904).

## I

The signs of engagement with Bach around 1900, many and diverse, intensified a nineteenth-century trend, which had begun with Forkel and continued with Wagner, Spitta, and many others, of seeing Bach as embodiment of the German spirit.<sup>5</sup> One practical goal was to get Bach's works actively into the repertory of performers in both secular and sacred and professional and nonprofessional contexts. The Neue Bach-Gesellschaft came into being on 27 January 1900, as successor to the old one, with the goal (as stated in its bylaws) "to make the works of the great German composer Johann Sebastian Bach a creative force among the German people and in those countries that are open to serious German music, and in particular to make his sacred works useful for the worship service."<sup>6</sup> To that end, the NBG began publishing the *Bach-Jahrbuch* (which first appeared in 1904), initiated a series of moveable Bach festivals to be held in different locales every few years, and planned editions of both instrumental and sacred vocal works "für den praktischen Gebrauch."<sup>7</sup>

The first two decades of the twentieth century would see a rash of publications assessing or advocating Bach's position with the modern

<sup>2</sup>Schoenberg, "Nacht," from *Pierrot lunaire* (1912), and Passacaglia for Orchestra (fragment from 1926); Berg, *Altenberg Lieder*, op. 4, no. 5 (1912); Webern, Passacaglia for Orchestra, op. 1 (1908); Reger, finale of First Organ Suite, op. 16 (1895); Zemlinsky, finale of Symphony in B $\flat$  (1897).

<sup>3</sup>Cited in Johannes Lorenzen, *Max Reger als Bearbeiter Bachs* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1982), p. 86 (trans. mine). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the German are my own.

<sup>4</sup>Rudolf Stephan, "Max Regers Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert: Über ihre Herkunft und Wirkung," in *Musiker der Moderne: Porträts und Skizzen*, ed. Albrecht Riethmüller (Laaber: Laaber, 1996), p. 37. Stephan's are among the most thoughtful writings on Bach reception among German composers around 1900. See also his "Johann Sebastian Bach und die Anfänge der Neuen Musik," in *Vom musikalischen Denken: Gesammelte Vorträge*, ed. Rainer Damm and Andreas Traub (Mainz: Schott, 1985), pp. 18–24; and "Schoenberg and Bach," in *Schoenberg and His World*, ed. Walter Frisch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 126–40.

<sup>5</sup>For a summary of this phenomenon, see Michael Heinemann and Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen, "Der 'deutsche' Bach," in *Bach und die Nachwelt*, ed. Heinemann and Hinrichsen, vol. II (Laaber: Laaber, 1999), pp. 11–28. See also the still valuable study by Friedrich Blume, *Two Centuries of Bach: An Account of Changing Taste* (New York: Da Capo, 1978).

<sup>6</sup>"Satzungen der Neuen Bachgesellschaft," in Arnold Schering, *Die neue Bachgesellschaft, 1900–1910* (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1911), p. 21.

<sup>7</sup>See Schering, *Die neue Bachgesellschaft*, for details on all the early activities and publications of the NBG. I am grateful to Steven Crist for alerting me to this pamphlet and to Christoph Wolff for securing a copy from the Bach-Archiv in Leipzig.

world. In its inaugural issue in the fall of 1901, the journal *Die Musik* featured as its lead article "Johann Sebastian Bach und die Deutsche Musik der Gegenwart," by Wilibald Nagel, a critic-historian from Darmstadt. Besides rehashing the idea of Bach as national icon, Nagel sounds a note that would become very characteristic of Bach reception: Bach as healthy, as restorative within a culture that was seen by many as decadent or sick. He argues that the artistic world is dominated by *Sensation*, by an emphasis on the sensuous, for which Bach could help provide a "Wiedergesundung."<sup>8</sup>

Four years later, the editors of *Die Musik* would follow up on Nagel's theme by conducting a full-fledged survey on the question "Was ist mir Johann Sebastian Bach und was bedeutet er für unsere Zeit?" (What does Johann Sebastian Bach mean to me and what is his importance for our era?). Opinions were sought from virtually every major living figure in music, not only those within the Austro-German sphere like Mahler, Reger, Schillings, Artur Nikisch, and Guido Adler, but also the farther-flung Sibelius, Glazunov, Debussy, Leoncavallo, Puccini, Grieg, MacDowell, and Elgar. Among the responses (received from about half of those contacted), to which *Die Musik* devoted almost an entire issue, the metaphor associated with Bach by Nagel in 1901—that of health—surfaces with striking frequency.<sup>9</sup>

In his response to the survey, Albert Schweitzer stressed the more religious and mystical side of Bach: Bach as *Tröster*, as comforter. Yet a few years later, he may be said to have put his two *pfennig* into the discussion reflected in the pages of *Die Musik*. In the German edition of his Bach study, published in 1908, Schweitzer added at the very end the plea

that "Bach help our age to attain the spiritual unity and fervour of which it so sorely stands in need."<sup>10</sup> This sentence does not appear in the original French edition of 1905.

In 1913 August Halm would publish his *Von zwei Kulturen der Musik*, the first modern study to place the "culture" of Bach's fugal polyphony on an equal status (and in a dialectical relationship) with that of Beethoven's sonata forms. Halm analyzes a number of Bach themes for their organic growth and integrity, for their "spiritual, biological unity," and for their powerful "life force" or *Lebenskraft*.<sup>11</sup> Halm's work had a direct influence on that of his friend Ernst Kurth, whose *Grundlagen des linearen Kontrapunkts* appeared in 1917. For Kurth, Bach is the greatest manifestation of the way in which a dynamically flowing melodic line can generate larger polyphonic and formal structures. Expanding on Halm's view of the generative powers of Bach's melodies, he attempts to demonstrate "kinetic energy" in individual phrases or passages from Bach's works.<sup>12</sup>

The critic Paul Bekker, in an essay of 1919 entitled "Neue Musik," cites Kurth favorably and characterizes the awareness of Bach as Melodist as a key feature of the modern era in music:

Our position vis a vis Bach is . . . a very different one from that of the earlier generations. We see in Bach not only the great master of contrapuntal technique, we see in him not only the powerful tone poet; we also see in him principally the unmatched *shaper of melodies*. His melodic art was founded in an unprecedented power of linear musical sensibility, for which later eras despite their Bach cult had little regard.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Wilibald Nagel, "Johann Sebastian Bach und die Deutsche Musik der Gegenwart," *Die Musik* 1/1 (1901), 207. Nagel's article and other aspects of Bach reception in the years before World War I are treated in Wolfgang Rathert, "Kult und Kritik: Aspekte der Bach-Rezeption vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg," in *Bach und die Nachwelt*, vol. III (Laaber: Laaber, 2000), pp. 23–61.

<sup>9</sup>"Was ist mir Johann Sebastian Bach und was bedeutet er für unsere Zeit?" *Die Musik* 5/1 (1905), 3–78. For further discussion of this survey, see Walter Frisch, "Bach, Brahms, and the Emergence of Musical Modernism," in *Bach Perspectives* 3, ed. Michael Marissen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), pp. 126–29.

<sup>10</sup>Albert Schweitzer, *J. S. Bach*, trans. [from the German edn.] Ernest Newman (Boston: Humphries, 1911), vol. II, p. 468.

<sup>11</sup>August Halm, *Von zwei Kulturen der Musik* (3rd edn. Stuttgart: Klett, 1947), pp. 206, 218.

<sup>12</sup>See Ernst Kurth, *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Lee A. Rothfarb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), for excerpts from *Grundlagen*. For an assessment of Kurth's thought, see, in addition to Rothfarb's illuminating comments in that volume, his *Ernst Kurth as Theorist and Analyst* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

<sup>13</sup>Paul Bekker, "Neue Musik," in his *Neue Musik* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1923), pp. 100–01.

For Bekker, Bach's melodic art could show the way to a modern musical language not by mere imitation or "superficial" adoption, but only when "the spirit of a new age can recognize and readapt stylistic elements of an older art." Bekker is calling not for neoclassicism, but for a profound historical-structural engagement with music of the past, especially Bach's. The one composer he mentions specifically in this context is Reger, whom he calls "the first to make reference in his art to that past which for us, insofar as we want to connect with a past at all, is the most fruitful; he was the first to reach beyond the classic-romantic models to Bach."<sup>14</sup>

Bekker anticipates the remarks of Stephan cited above in positing Bach as an alternative around 1900 to the standard "classic-romantic" models. In his description of adapting older styles "in the spirit of a new age" Bekker also provides as plausible a characterization of historicist modernism in music—and of the role of Reger's Bach reception within it—as we might want. We need not worry the concept of historicism in its many Germanic guises, a topic that has filled many books.<sup>15</sup> But we might turn briefly to Carl Dahlhaus's concise account of musical historicism, which he sees as dialectically divided in the nineteenth century into two basic attitudes, "tradition" and "restoration." In the first, "past and present form an indissoluble alloy." The past is not alienated or viewed as something foreign; rather, "past things form an essential part of the present." Many works of Brahms, which impart a sense of identification that indicates continuity, would seem to capture this kind of historicism. "Restoration," however, implies the acknowledgment of a gulf that must be bridged in an act of understanding.<sup>16</sup> Reger's music often

seems to be an act of restoration. He is reaching back, often obsessively or desperately, to the world of Bach that is acknowledged as past and that must be reconstituted in contemporary terms.

## II

Reger's response to the 1905 survey in *Die Musik* on the contemporary significance of Bach reads as follows:

Sebastian Bach is for me the beginning and end of all music; upon him rests, and from him originates, *all* real progress!

What does—pardon, what should—Sebastian Bach mean for our era?

A really powerful, inexhaustible medicine, not only for all those composers and musicians who suffer from "misunderstood Wagner," but for all those "contemporaries," who suffer from spinal maladies of any kind. To be "Bachian" means: to be *authentically German, unyielding*.

That Bach could be misunderstood for *so* long, is the greatest *scandal* for the "critical wisdom" of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>17</sup>

Reger touches here on virtually all the major themes of contemporary Bach reception—Bach as progressive, Bach as German, Bach as sturdy, Bach as healthy. But his relationship with Bach went far beyond fervent admiration; it approached what Johannes Lorenzen has aptly called "monomaniacal identification." Reger's letters and reported comments are full of references to "Allvater Bach," on whom he would call in times of need. In 1902 Reger described to his fiancée Elsa his work on an arrangement of Bach's Cantata 93 ("Wer nur den lieben Gott läßt walten") as a "spiritual chalybeate bath

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(Regensburg: Bosse, 1969); and Leo Treitler, *Music and the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>17</sup>"Seb. Bach ist für mich Anfang und Ende aller Musik; auf ihm ruht und fusst *jeder wahre* Fortschritt! Was Seb. Bach für unsere Zeit bedeutet—pardon—bedeuten *sollte*? Ein gar kräftigliches, nie versiegendes Heilmittel nicht nur für alle jene Komponisten und Musiker, die an 'missverstandnem Wagner' erkrankt sind, sondern für alle jene 'Zeitgenossen,' die an Rückenmarksschwindsucht jeder Art leiden. 'Bachisch' sein heisst: *urgermanisch, unbeugsam* sein. Dass Bach *so* lange verkannt sein konnte, ist die *grösste Blamage* für die 'kritische Weisheit' des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts" (*Die Musik* 5/1 [1905], 74).

<sup>14</sup>Bekker, "Neue Musik," pp. 102, 100.

<sup>15</sup>See Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (rev. edn. Wesleyan: Wesleyan University Press, 1983); and Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985).

<sup>16</sup>Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, trans. J. B. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 70, 67. On musical historicism, see also *Die Ausbreitung des Historismus über die Musik*, ed. Walter Wiora

[*Stahlbad*].<sup>18</sup> Bach became an essential companion to a composer who was plagued by self-doubt, was physically and psychically restless, suffered from alcoholism, and composed and performed with compulsive prolixity. Antonius Bittmann has related Reger's personality and his musical style to a *fin-de-siècle* culture obsessed with, and often characterized by, nervousness—or, as it was often called around 1900, neurasthenia.<sup>19</sup>

Lorenzen has given us what is undoubtedly the most complete picture to date of Reger's *Bach-Pflege* as reflected in the vast array of arrangements and transcriptions. These cover virtually all genres and span almost Reger's entire career, from 1895 to 1916. The numbers are astonishing: Reger edited, arranged, or transcribed 428 individual pieces by Bach. No other composer since Bach himself was so deeply, indeed pathologically, involved with his works.

Reger's activity in this sphere can be summarized as follows:

- thirty-four arrangements of Bach organ works, for either piano two-hands or four-hands, or for two pianos. These include larger works like preludes or toccatas and fugues, as well as chorale preludes.
- thirty-five arrangements for organ of Bach keyboard works. These include some Preludes and Fugues from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, the Two-Part Inventions, and the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue.
- fourteen arrangements of Bach's orchestral works for four-hand piano or for chamber ensemble, including the Orchestral Suites and the Brandenburg Concertos.
- seven arrangements of solo concertos, often for chamber ensemble, or with piano reduction of the orchestral part.

<sup>18</sup>Johannes Lorenzen, *Max Reger als Bearbeiter Bachs*, pp. 55, 52.

<sup>19</sup>Antonius Bittmann, *Negotiating Past and Present: Max Reger and Fin-de-siècle Modernisms* (Ph.D. diss., Eastman School of Music, 2000), chap. 7. On Reger's Bach reception, see also Helmut Wirth, "Der Einfluß von Johann Sebastian Bach auf Max Regers Schaffen," in *Max Reger 1873–1973: Ein Symposium*, ed. Klaus Röhrling (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1974), pp. 3–20; and Friedhelm Krummacher, "Auseinandersetzung im Abstand: Über Regers Verhältnis zu Bach," in *Reger-Studien 5*, ed. Susanne Shigihara (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1993), pp. 11–39.

- two arrangements of Bach's violin sonatas for violin and piano.
- two arrangements of Bach's cantatas, with realized organ part.<sup>20</sup>

We can add to this list Reger's edition of Bach's keyboard works prepared with August Schmid-Lindner for Schott and his revision of Joseph Rheinberger's two-piano arrangement of the "Goldberg" Variations.

Reger's Bach arrangements and transcriptions had varying purposes. Some of the earliest transcriptions of organ works for the piano, from 1895 and 1896, were virtuoso pieces destined for concert use, much in the mode of Busoni (whose transcriptions were a direct inspiration for Reger) or d'Albert. Also intended for the concert hall were some of the arrangements of the concertos and orchestral music for smaller ensembles. The four-hand arrangements of the Brandenburg Concertos (and of some of the organ works) were offered as *Hausmusik*. The transcriptions of the two-part inventions for organ and of selected chorale preludes for piano were for instructional use. The cantata arrangements and some of the transcriptions for organ of keyboard works were intended for the Protestant liturgy.<sup>21</sup>

Lorenzen locates Reger's Bach-related activities directly under the rubric of historicism, which was a fundamental part of Reger's artistic formation with Hugo Riemann, with whom he studied from 1890 to 1895. That a composer of Reger's ability should have as his principal teacher not another composer, but a musicologist—moreover a musicologist of the status and authority of Riemann—does indeed constitute, as Lorenzen says, a "unique constellation."<sup>22</sup>

But ultimately Reger's Bach was not Riemann's Bach. For Riemann, Bach was part of a formidable past that was being brought to light by historical research and that had to be absorbed into the music of the present. "Behind Beethoven, Mozart, and Haydn, now Gluck, Handel, and Bach have risen again as

<sup>20</sup>For more details, see Lorenzen, *Max Reger als Bearbeiter Bachs*, pp. 18–25.

<sup>21</sup>See Lorenzen, *Max Reger als Bearbeiter Bachs*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 30.



the first great masters of the most recent past," Riemann intoned in "Degeneration und Regeneration in der Musik," a broadside of 1907 aimed at contemporary music. "And behind them in turn rise up Palestrina and Lasso as witnesses of a period that lies still further in the past, and the greatness of whose music, which at first sounds strange to us, must be, and will be, exemplary for the music of the present and future, just as the art of the Renaissance and Antiquity are for the visual arts."<sup>23</sup> All this sounds very much like a musicologist placing a clammy and restrictive hand on the music of his own time. Reger broke publicly with Riemann over the "Degeneration" article. In a response, he proudly included himself among the "moderns" like Strauss and endorsed a vision of music in which one could revere the older masters and still "ride to the left," a metaphor that he takes from—and turns against—Riemann.<sup>24</sup>

### III

Reger's own compositions give a better picture of this left-tilting historicism than either his arrangements or his polemical writings. It seems clear that the flood of organ works that issued from Reger for about a decade, from the mid-1890s until 1905, were part of a determined attempt to forge a modernist style in the image of Bach, the composer most closely associated with the instrument. Heinrich Reimann, a leading writer on music and one of the most renowned organists of the time, urged all players and prospective composers for organ to steep themselves in the style of Bach. He wrote in 1894, using the metaphor of health or safety that would dominate the responses to the 1905 survey: "Beyond this style there is no salvation [*Heil*] . . . Bach becomes for that reason the criterion of our art of writing for the organ."<sup>25</sup>

At this point in his career, Reger steered clear of the genres in which the major musico-political battles of the later nineteenth century were being fought. He avoided the post-Wagnerian symphonic poem and music drama, cultivated by Strauss, Schillings, and Pfitzner. After an initial flurry of chamber music (ops. 1, 2, 3, 5, from 1890 to 1892), Reger created little in that medium until after 1900. He thus may be said also to have avoided at this point continuing the tradition strongly associated with Brahms, where figures like the young Zemlinsky, Schoenberg, and countless Brahms epigones (Robert Fuchs and Heinrich von Herzogenberg, for example) located themselves. In organ music Reger found an area that offered rich possibilities because it was largely unplowed.

Most commentators recognize the summit of Reger's Bach reception in the so-called Weiden organ works, written between 1898 and 1901, when he returned to live with his parents and be treated for nervous exhaustion and alcoholism. These colossal pieces include three Chorale Fantasies (ops. 27, 30, and 40); three Fantasies and Fugues (op. 29; the Fantasy and Fugue on BACH, op. 46; and the Symphonic Fantasy and Fugue, op. 57); and two sonatas (ops. 33 and 60).<sup>26</sup> I would like to focus on two Bach-inspired works composed on either side of the Weiden period, the First Organ Suite, op. 16, and the Bach Variations for Piano, op. 81, which together provide an equally rich picture of Reger's historicist modernism.

Reger completed his Suite for Organ in E Minor, op. 16, on 23 July 1895, near the end of his formal study with Riemann. He had begun the work in 1894 as a "sonata" in three movements, comprising an introduction and triple fugue; an Adagio based on the chorale "Es ist das Heil uns kommen her"; and a passacaglia. The work evolved into a "suite" in four movements, although the Suite in fact resembles a

<sup>23</sup>Hugo Riemann, "Degeneration und Regeneration in der Musik," in *Max Hesses Deutscher Musikkalender für das Jahr 1908*, rpt. in "Die Konfusion in der Musik": *Felix Draeseke's Kampschrift von 1906 und ihre Folgen*, ed. Susanne Shigihara (Bonn: Gudrun Schröder, 1990), p. 249.

<sup>24</sup>Max Reger, "Degeneration und Regeneration in der Musik," *Neue Musik-Zeitung* 29 (1907); rpt. in "Die Konfusion in der Musik," pp. 250–58.

<sup>25</sup>Cited in Hermann Wilske, *Max Reger—Zur Rezeption in seiner Zeit* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1995), p. 104.

<sup>26</sup>Other instrumental works directly inspired by Bach include the Preludes and Fugues for Solo Violin, ops. 117 and 131a.

sonata.<sup>27</sup> The Adagio was expanded to a ternary form, of which the middle part incorporates two more chorales, “Aus tiefer Not” and the Passion Chorale, “O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden.” Between the original second and third movements Reger added an Intermezzo in the form of a scherzo with trio.

Reger dedicated his Suite not, as was to be his practice, to a living figure he admired, but “To the Memory of Johann Sebastian Bach” (Den Manen Johann Sebastian Bachs). The work, which appeared in 1896, was given its premiere by Reger's friend, the virtuoso organist Karl Straube on 4 March 1897, in Berlin. The strongly historicist orientation of the score was remarked by critics, including one reviewer in the *Monthly Musical Record*, who noted that the “boldness” of the inscription to Bach was “in large measure justified” by Reger's “knowledge of harmony, of counterpoint, canon, and fugue, and of part-writing generally.”<sup>28</sup> Reger himself thought the Suite was the best thing he had composed up to that time.<sup>29</sup> Seeking a wider audience for it than it might receive as an organ work, he arranged it for piano four-hands, as one might a symphony.<sup>30</sup>

Reger alluded to the significance of the Organ Suite in a letter he wrote to Riemann in August 1895, as the latter was leaving Wiesbaden and as Reger's formal instruction with him came to a close: “As a young musician, who, full of the noblest enthusiasm, continued to serve only his masters Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms and to absorb them within himself, I ask your permission that this young unknown musician may give you and your wife once again the most heartfelt and best thanks. . . . As your student I will not bring you any dishonor. As proof you must get

<sup>27</sup>The terminology was fairly fluid in the nineteenth century as far as multimovement organ works. Reger even quipped that “our organ sonatas are really closer to suites” (cited in Martin Weyer, *Die Orgelwerke Max Regers* [Wilhelmshaven: Florian Noetzel, 1989], p. 31).

<sup>28</sup>Anonymous review of 1 July 1896, rpt. in *Der junge Reger: Briefe und Dokumente vor 1900*, ed. Susanne Popp (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf and Härtel, 2000), p. 275.

<sup>29</sup>Max Reger, *Briefe eines deutschen Meisters: Ein Lebensbild*, ed. Else von Hase-Koehler (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1928), p. 54.

<sup>30</sup>Despite Reger's strong advocacy, the arrangement was not published. See *Der junge Reger*, pp. 280–82.

to know my Organ Suite (with Passacaglia). (Bach varied the theme 21 times in his; I have done it 32 times.)”<sup>31</sup>

In the spring of 1896, Reger felt sufficiently confident to send a copy of the Suite to his idol, Brahms. This was the occasion of his only direct contact with the older composer, who would die the following April. In his accompanying letter, Reger asked Brahms's permission to dedicate to him a symphony in progress (a work that was never completed). Brahms replied with the following note:

Dear Sir! I give you heartfelt thanks for your letter, whose warm, indeed too friendly, words were very sympathetic to me. Moreover, you spoil me with the lovely offer of a dedication.

Permission for that is certainly not necessary, however! I had to smile, since you approach me about this matter and at the same time enclose a work whose all-too-bold dedication terrifies me!

You may then without concern set down the name of your most respectful

J. Brahms.<sup>32</sup>

Brahms provided no comments on the Suite, but he did enclose an autographed picture of himself and asked the young composer to reciprocate.<sup>33</sup>

Brahms might have been “terrified” by not only the dedication of the suite to Bach—one could scarcely imagine him doing something similar—but also by the close associations with a work of his own. Reger's Suite concludes with a passacaglia in E minor that bears more

<sup>31</sup>*Der junge Reger*, p. 246. Reger refers of course to Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor, BWV 582, a work he arranged for four-hand piano at this time (see Lorenzen, *Max Reger als Bearbeiter Bachs*, p. 18). By counting twenty-one variations in Bach, Reger seems to consider the initial thematic statement as a variation. In the Bach there are twenty-one total statements of the theme, and twenty actual “variations.” Reger seems to reckon his own passacaglia in a similar way; yet he is nonetheless in error, unless he is referring to an earlier version of the passacaglia that no longer survives. Reger's movement, as it appears in the original manuscript and in printed editions, has twenty-nine variations, or thirty total statements of the theme. It is hard to see how he comes up with the number thirty-two.

<sup>32</sup>*Der junge Reger*, p. 265. The letter is misdated as March 1897 in *Briefe eines deutschen Meisters*, pp. 54–55.

<sup>33</sup>The photographs exchanged by Brahms and Reger are reproduced in *Der junge Reger*, p. 274.

than a passing resemblance to the finale of Brahms's Fourth Symphony. Reger's finale is in fact an extraordinary synthesis of past and present, drawing on Bach's C-Minor Passacaglia (the model acknowledged by Reger in his letter cited above) and on the finales of Joseph Rheinberger's Organ Sonata No. 8, op. 132 (1882), and Brahms's Fourth Symphony, both also in the key of E minor.

As Martin Weyer has shown, Reger's Suite follows closely the structure of Rheinberger's Sonata No. 8, which has as its first movement an Introduction and Fugue in E minor; as its second or slow movement an "Intermezzo" marked Andante (in E major); as the third a "scherzoso" in A minor; and as a finale a passacaglia.<sup>34</sup> The similarities extend to numerous details as well. Both introductions begin with tonic pedal points, which are followed by dissonant chromatic chords and scalar flourishes. The principal fugue themes are close in shape. In both works material from the slow introduction is brought back at the end of the passacaglia.

Besides following the "sonata" model of Rheinberger, Reger might be said to adopt the "symphonic" design of Brahms, as manifested in the first three symphonies, in which the outer movements are the largest and most imposing, while the two interior ones are on a smaller, more intimate scale. The model of Brahms's Fourth Symphony lies—remotely, but significantly—behind the larger plan of Reger's Suite. The key signatures of Reger's four movements match precisely those of Brahms: one sharp in the outer movements, five sharps for the Adagio, and no sharps or flats for the Intermezzo. Three of Reger's movements do in fact share Brahms's keys: E minor for first movement and finale, and B major for the Adagio.

I would like to look in some more detail at two movements from Reger's Suite, the slow movement and finale. The Adagio assai is at once a Classical-Romantic slow movement with a ternary form (ABA) and a composite neo-Baroque chorale prelude. The chorale on which the A segment (the original slow movement of the 1894 sonata) is based, "Es ist das Heil uns

kommen her," never appears in a purely melodic form, but is elaborately decorated in the upper voice (ex. 1; chorale tune added above example). The models for this portion of Reger's movement seem to be the chorale preludes from Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* that have been called "ornamental," where the tune appears in the soprano part complete and continuous, but highly embellished. These preludes would include "Das alte Jahr vergangen ist" (BWV 614), "O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde gross" (BWV 622), and "Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein" (BWV 641).<sup>35</sup>

"O Mensch" must have been Reger's primary inspiration. In the Bach-Gesellschaft edition that Reger would have known (volume 25), this chorale prelude is the one of the few from the *Orgelbüchlein* to appear with a tempo indication (presumably Bach's own), Adagio assai, precisely the tempo marking Reger gave to the A segment of his slow movement. "O Mensch" seems moreover to have been one of Reger's favorite among Bach's chorale preludes. It took pride of place—as the first—in the edition of the thirteen Bach chorale preludes he arranged for solo piano, published in 1900. (It was in the preface to this edition that he famously called the chorale preludes of Bach "symphonic poems in miniature.") In 1915 Reger published two different arrangements of "O Mensch" as an instrumental "aria," one for violin and keyboard and another for string orchestra.<sup>36</sup>

Rudolf Huesgen points to what he calls a *Parsifalstimmung* in the A segment of Reger's Adagio and at the same time identifies an "exalted religious mysticism, such as we sense in the St. Matthew Passion and in certain cantatas by Bach."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Wagner and Bach, who

<sup>35</sup>See Russell Stinson, *Bach: The Orgelbüchlein* (New York: Schirmer, 1996), pp. 70–73.

<sup>36</sup>See Lorenzen, *Reger als Bearbeiter*, p. 20. The arrangement for string orchestra has been given a ravishing (if slow) recording by Dennis Russell Davies and the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra (Dabringhaus and Grimm, MDG 321 0940-2). The similarity of Reger's Adagio to Bach's "O Mensch" is noted by Rudolf Huesgen (*Der junge Reger und seine Orgelwerke* [Inaugural-diss., Freiburg, 1935], p. 72), who, however, does not comment on either the striking identity of tempo indication or Reger's later arrangements of the chorale prelude.

<sup>37</sup>Huesgen, *Der junge Reger*, p. 72.

<sup>34</sup>Weyer, *Orgelwerke*, p. 17.



Es ist das Heil uns kom - men her von Gnad und lau - ter Gü - ten

Adagio assai

un poco crescendo

18' p

II 8' 4'

pp

pp

Example 1: Max Reger, Organ Suite, op. 16, movt. II (with chorale superimposed).

11 Più andante  
II 8' 4'  
p  
I 8' 4'  
poco a poco crescendo  
("Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir")

15  
mf sempre poco a poco crescendo e stringendo

Example 2: Max Reger, Organ Suite, op. 16, movt. II (with chorale text added).

join hands in certain moments of *Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*, are both plausible inspirations for Reger's Adagio, which, however, is characterized by a thicker and busier contrapuntal texture than either of his predecessors would have provided in such an instance.

The contrasting B section of Reger's Adagio, in B minor, is in two parts, each based on a different chorale, "Aus tiefer Not" and the Passion chorale ("O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden"), respectively.<sup>38</sup> The two chorales are developed successively—and in different ways—and are then combined in counterpoint. "Aus tiefer Not" is treated by Reger fugally in as many as six parts (ex. 2; chorale text added by me). Reger also manages to fit in stretto (m. 16) and augmentation (mm. 17–18). Reger's elaborate treatment of "Aus tiefer Not" alludes directly and

unmistakably to Bach's own chorale prelude on the same tune from part III of the *Clavierübung* (BWV 686). This is the most elaborately contrapuntal of Bach's chorale preludes, in which the chorale is likewise treated in six-part imitation through the use of a double pedal.

Reger develops the chorale tune "Aus tiefer Not" for sixteen measures, modulating to the dominant, F#. After this densely polyphonic discourse comes a long fermata, and the Passion chorale begins as a solo line, marked "Adagio (recitativo)" (ex. 3). Reger has gone from the most "instrumental" of textures and styles to the most vocal. In this section, phrases of the Passion chorale alternate between a recitative manner and fuller five-part writing that is clearly meant to imitate choral style. Just as Reger's treatment of "Aus tiefer Not" brings to mind Bach's six-part chorale prelude, so his use of the Passion chorale reminds us of the *St. Matthew Passion*, where it plays a starring role. In the B section of his Adagio, then, Reger seeks to embrace both sides of Bach—Bach the instrumental composer-contrapuntalist and Bach the composer of sacred vocal music. In

<sup>38</sup>To avoid confusion, I refer to this chorale tune by the more general designation, as the Passion chorale, following *J. S. Bach*, ed. Malcolm Boyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 361, because it is associated in Bach's work with several different texts (including, in the *St. Matthew Passion*, "O Haupt voll Blut," "Herzlich tut mich verlangen," and "Wenn ich einmal soll scheiden").

Example 3: Max Reger, Organ Suite, op. 16, movt. II, Passion chorale.

Example 4: Max Reger, Organ Suite, op. 16, movt. II, superimposition of "Aus tiefer Not" and Passion chorale.

the closing measures of the B section, Reger brings together the two tunes, "Aus tiefer Not" and the Passion chorale, in a final gesture of contrapuntal legerdemain (ex. 4).

No one could mistake Reger's Adagio for a work by Bach, nor for one by Brahms in his historicizing, Bachian mode, as in the late Chorale Preludes, op. 122 (which were yet to be composed at the time Reger wrote his Suite). The language and the quality of expression are uniquely those of Reger, whom we sense is constructing a modern music by delicately handling the relics of a beloved past. Reger seems to acknowledge a gulf between himself and the past, yet does not wallow in nostalgia. As throughout his *œuvre*, he places a high value on craft, especially on counterpoint. The counterpoint leads to a higher level of ambient dissonance than we would find in Bach, or even in Brahms. The dissonance creates for the listener a level of discomfort that is clearly intentional on Reger's part. The disjunction between the historical technique and the sonority it is ma-

nipulated to produce serves to reinforce the presentness—the modernity, as it were—of the music and our reception of it.

The finale of Reger's E-Minor Suite is less strikingly original than the Adagio, but is if anything more synoptic, drawing on several previous passacaglias (ex. 5). The themes by Bach, Brahms, Rheinberger, and Reger share the triple meter characteristic of the passacaglia genre and follow a standard eight-measure pattern.<sup>39</sup> From Bach and Rheinberger, Reger adapts the con-

<sup>39</sup>In all the literature on Brahms's passacaglia, I have not seen the Rheinberger movement mentioned as a possible source, although it appeared two years before Brahms began to work on his finale. (For an assessment of the likely inspirations for Brahms, see Raymond Knapp, "The Finale of Brahms's Fourth Symphony: The Tale of the Subject," this journal 13 [1989], 3–17.) It is certainly possible that Brahms knew the Rheinberger Sonata. Weyer (*Die Orgelwerke*, p. 26) adduces as another possible source for Reger a passacaglia theme in B minor from an organ work by Gustav Merkel, composed in 1885, which seems to borrow from both Bach and Brahms.

a. Bach, Passacaglia, BWV 582



b. Rheinberger, Sonata No. 8, op. 132, finale (1882)



c. Brahms, Fourth Symphony, finale (1885)



d. Reger, Organ Suite, op. 16, finale (1894–95)



Example 5: Passacaglia themes.

tour of large leaps followed by half- or whole-step motion. From Brahms he takes the initial rising stepwise ascent, as well as the introduction of one, and only one, chromatic note (aside from the leading tone), A $\sharp$ , or the raised fourth. The total number of Reger's variations (twenty-nine) is closely in line with Brahms (thirty). (Rheinberger, with twenty-four variations plus a coda, lies somewhere in between.)

As in the Bach C-Minor Passacaglia, Reger's first variation introduces rhythmic syncopation in the upper voices. But where Bach abandons the syncopation after variation 2, Reger is more systematic in continuing and developing it across the first five variations. A feature of Bach's C-Minor Passacaglia that Reger may be said to have adopted via Brahms is moving the ostinato in a middle group of variations into the upper voices, then staging a kind of "return" in the bass. Reger's procedure in the passacaglia is again a kind of sophisticated synthesis of Bach and Brahms: the ostinato begins in the bass and remains there until variation 12, where, at the first dynamic climax (*fff*), it moves into the top voice. Then it retreats into the bass again for the transition to the major variations and remains there during the major variations. For the return to minor in variation 22—a major articulation point in Reger's movement—the theme goes back to the melody, the exact inverse of what Bach and Brahms do at

their "returns." At variation 25 Reger returns the theme to the bass for the final, culminating group of variations.

Another model lies behind Reger's passacaglia (as it does behind Brahms's). This is Bach's Chaconne in D Minor for Solo Violin (BWV 1004), which turns to the major mode for a series of variations almost exactly half-way through the movement (a feature shared by neither Bach's C-Minor Passacaglia nor Rheinberger's). As in Bach's chaconne and Brahms's finale, the turn to the major mode is associated with softer dynamics and a slowing of the rhythm. In all three works—Bach's chaconne and Brahms's and Reger's passacaglias—these changes make for a kind of internal slow movement.

From Brahms, Reger also takes the concept of creating real countermelodies that at times overshadow the passacaglia theme. Brahms begins that process already with the second variation, and in the fourth a broad violin melody emerges, to which the passacaglia theme is now accompaniment, or at least subordinate. In his first variation, Reger introduces an idea that is, as already noted, treated imitatively. This idea becomes augmented and transformed into a more genuinely melodic gesture, marked *hervortretend* by Reger. Other important countermelodies are introduced in variations 9, in the slower major variations (16 and 18).

Andante (♩ = 66) (quasi Adagio)  
sempre assai legato; la melodie sempre dolce (quasi Oboe solo)

sempre con Pedale

espressivo *p* *m.g. molto*

A1 A2

5 A3 B1 B2

*p* sempre espressivo *meno p* *p* *pp*

(sempre con Ped.)

C1 C2

*pp* *meno p e cresc.* *f* *pp*

*molto espressivo* *poco stringendo* *a tempo* *un poco rit.*

(sempre con Ped.)

Example 6: Max Reger, Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Bach, op. 81, theme.

#### IV

The self-critical Reger recognized the Organ Suite as a milestone in his development as a composer. Yet in it we sense a young composer of enormous technical ability flexing historicist muscles that also seem to get in his way. For all his prowess and imagination, Reger cannot be said, in the Organ Suite, to transcend any of his models, except perhaps in the Adagio. By the time he composed the Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Bach for Piano, op. 81, a decade later in 1904, and on the other side of the Weiden organ works, Reger was in his full maturity as a composer. Like the Organ Suite, the Variations were acknowledged by Reger as a special work in his compositional development. To Karl Straube he wrote that

op. 81 was “the *best* that I have written up to now.”<sup>40</sup> As in the case of the Suite, such a comment should be taken seriously.

Outside of the theme itself and the final fugue there is no hint of neo-Baroquism in op. 81, which falls clearly into the tradition of monumental piano variations of the nineteenth century. Reger's models were the “Eroica” and “Diabelli” Variations of Beethoven and the Handel Variations of Brahms, along with the *Urquelle* of all those works, Bach's “Goldberg” Variations. What immediately distinguishes Reger's op. 81 from any other variation set in the literature, however, is the nature of the

<sup>40</sup>Max Reger, *Briefe an Karl Straube* (Bonn: Dümmler, 1986), pp. 61, 63.



theme. He uses the entire opening instrumental ritornello of the duet "Sein' Allmacht zu ergründen" from Bach's Cantata 128, *Auf Christi Himmelfahrt allein*.<sup>41</sup> Bach's ritornello, scored for *oboe d'amore* and continuo, lacks the rounded and clearly segmented phrase structure of traditional variation subjects. Its fourteen measures may be said to divide, as with most Baroque ritornellos, into units that contain no large scale returns or repetition, only small internal ones.

The theme has three larger units (ex. 6): A (mm. 1–6), B (mm. 7–10), and C (mm. 11–14). The A unit subdivides into three smaller phrases: A1 (mm. 1–2), which closes on the tonic; A2 (mm. 3–5), which is a parallel or answering phrase that also moves to the tonic; and a concluding gesture, A3 (mm. 5–6), which cadences on the dominant minor. The B unit has two parallel phrases, treated as a sequence, of two and a half measures each: B1 (mm. 7–8), which moves to the subdominant minor, and B2 (mm. 9–10), which moves to III, or D major. The final unit, C has two broader phrases: the first, C1 (mm. 11–12), builds upward to the climax of the ritornello; the second, C2 (mm. 13–14) leads downward to the final cadence and echoes aspects of the melody of B (a downward curve).

The ritornello selected by Reger is an entirely different creature from the rounded and/or binary themes used by Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms in their variation sets. As Elmar Budde puts it, Reger's op. 81 presents a "remarkable paradox: Reger writes variations on a theme on which no variations, in the sense of a traditional horizon of expectations, can be written."<sup>42</sup> One might supplement Budde's paradox in the following way: Reger creates his finest homage to Bach not by allusion to Bach's compositional techniques or structures, as in the Organ Suite,

but by challenging himself to write variations on an unvariable theme. The text of Bach's duet, which reads "Sein Allmacht zu ergründen, wird kein Mensche finden" (No man can fathom His omnipotence), may be significant in this regard. By selecting the melody associated with these words Reger expresses awe of Bach's own compositional *Allmacht*, which no one can possibly comprehend or equal.

The fourteen variations of op. 81 are not numbered; they are separated from one another only by double bar lines. (See Table 1 for a formal synopsis.) This practice, exceptional among Reger's variations, suggests that the work is to be understood as a more continuous, "organic" composition. One can agree with the Munich critic Alexander Berrsche, who suggested that the Bach Variations were "gedichtet," as compared with Reger's other great solo piano set, the Telemann Variations, op. 134, which were "komponiert."<sup>43</sup>

Harmonically, Reger divides his variations into two large groups of seven. The first group remains in the tonic, B minor; the second begins to modulate, first in an abrupt shift to the remote key of the Neapolitan, C major (var. 8), then to B major (var. 9), G# minor (var. 10, ending on G# major, or V of C#), C# minor (var. 11, moving to V of B), B major (var. 12), and back to the tonic B minor (vars. 13–14). The fugue concludes in B major.

Crosscutting this harmonic scheme is an approach to treating the theme that is as unique in the variation literature up to that time as is the theme itself. The risk of writing variations on a theme as long, complex, and irregular as the Bach ritornello (which lasts close to two minutes in performance) is that complete variations will seem too independent and self-contained, and will sap the overall flow of the work. Reger steps up to the challenge by constantly changing the kind of variation he writes, from stricter ones that retain the original melodic and harmonic structure, to freer fantasy-like variations based on only a motivic fragment or two from the ritornello. Such variety is, to be sure, not unusual in the literature. Beethoven's "Diabelli" Variations and Brahms's

<sup>41</sup>Reger did not actually seek out this theme himself; it was suggested (and sent) to him by his friend, the pianist August Schmid-Lindner, who was also the dedicatee and first performer of the work.

<sup>42</sup>Elmar Budde, "Zeit und Form in Max Regers *Variationen und Fuge über ein Thema von Johann Sebastian Bach* op. 81," in *Reger-Studien 3: Analysen und Quellenstudien*, ed. Susanne Popp and Susanne Shigihara (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1988), p. 129. Budde's phrase "horizon of expectations" refers to Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory.

<sup>43</sup>Cited in Budde, "Zeit und Form," p. 134.

Table 1

## Reger, Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Bach, op. 81

FORMAL UNIT	MEASURE NO.	TEMPO	KEY	COMMENTS
Theme	1–14	Andante	B minor	"past"
Variation 1	15–28	L'istesso tempo	B minor	strict; "past"
Variation 2	29–42	[slightly faster]	B minor	strict; "past"
Variation 3	43–56	Grave assai	ambiguous → B minor	free; "present"
Variation 4	57–70	Vivace	B minor	strict; "past"
Variation 5	71–92	Vivace	B minor	free; "past"
Variation 6	93–115	Allegro moderato	B minor	strict; "past"
Variation 7	116–27	Adagio	B minor	strict; "past"
Variation 8	128–45	Vivace	C major	free; "present"
Variation 9	146–55	Grave e sempre molto espressivo	B major	free; "present"
Variation 10	156–78	Poco vivace	G# minor	free; "present"
Variation 11	179–201	Allegro agitato	C# minor	free; "present"
Variation 12	202–16	Andante sostenuto	B major	free; "present"
Variation 13	217–40	Vivace	B minor	free; "present"
Variation 14	241–54	Con moto	B minor	strict; "past"
Fugue	255–384	Sostenuto	B minor → major	"past" and "present"

Handel Variations also progress from stricter to freer, although the overall number (or proportion) of measures and essential harmonic framework of the original theme remain intact. But in op. 81 Reger avoids any simple trajectory.

In Table 1, the terms "strict" and "free" must be taken as relative, where the former indicates a variation that follows the original ritornello closely at least as to sequence of thematic ideas (and often actual number or proportion of measures), while the latter abandons the ABC formal-thematic structure in significant ways. In the freer variations, one has the impression that fragments of the original theme are being cited, recollected, or meditated upon, rather than "varied." Any attempt on the part of the listener to follow the standard narrative of a variation set is thus thwarted.

The first two variations, which form a pair, remain very close to the theme and to traditional variation technique. The fourteen-measure structure remains intact, as do the melody, harmony, and bass; variation consists principally in the rhythmic animation of the inner parts. Variation 3, however, brings a sudden change (ex. 7). Reger slows the tempo to Grave

assai, and instead of the theme in the tonic, we get a two-measure sequence of highly ambiguous harmony, based on a fragment of the descending figure from the last measure of C2, which has been heard at the end of the previous variation. Gradually there emerges in the bass a three-note rising chromatic figure based on A1 (B $\natural$ -C $\sharp$ -D $\sharp$ , m. 45), whose first phrase then appears complete in its original form in the melody of m. 48.

We might now interpret the preceding measures (43–47) as having been an introduction to a standard variation, but after only one measure A1 is interrupted by a furious, crashingly dissonant outburst that seems unrelated to any aspect of the original ritornello (m. 49). The whole process then begins again (not shown in the example): we return first to the introductory measures of this variation, based on the fragments of C2 and A1, and then once again to the start of an apparently "real" variation on A1, in the tonic (m. 53). But as before, only a first phrase is allowed to be heard before the fantasy-like C2 interrupts again. Now C2 miraculously metamorphoses into its original cadential form and ends the variation on B minor.

43 Grave assai (♩ = 25) (♩ = 50)  
una corda  
molto espressivo  
pp  
mf  
pp  
molto

45 Poco più mosso (♩ = 44)  
pp  
molto  
p  
sempre espressivo  
pp  
poco  
(A1)

47 poco rit.  
sempre espressivo  
sempre dolcissimo

48 a tempo (♩ = 48)  
A1  
sempre espressivo  
ppp  
ppp  
sempre con Pedale, ma delicato

49 "outburst"  
tre molto agitato corde  
ff e cresc.  
ff  
marcato  
sempre con Pedale

Example 7: Reger, Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Bach, op. 81, variation 3.

An extraordinary aspect of variation 3 is that, despite its freely unfolding fantasy style, its fourteen measures correspond exactly to the dimensions of the ritornello. But the main point to be made is that this variation interrupts the traditional flow of a variation set quite early in its course and dramatizes that very action. The variation twice tries and fails to “begin” when A1 appears in B minor; the second time, it seems to give up and moves immediately to the final cadential phrase, C2, thus collapsing the entire variation process.


Variation 4 returns to the structure of the theme and first two variations, but variation 5 dissolves it anew, and in a different way. The first ten measures are based almost exclusively on sequential treatment of a figure derived from A1. The “real” A1, in its original form, emerges in m. 81, and as in variation 3 we might think that a conventional variation is about to begin. But, as in variation 3, the process is interrupted, and this form of A1 becomes treated sequentially, as at the beginning of the variation. In op. 81 Reger exploits a distinction—and this is perhaps the most original contribution of the work to the variation literature up to that time—between “real-time,” complete variations and freer, more fragmentary ones, which seem generated by memory.

Reger's strategy in the second half of the piece is, at first, to round off the individual variations with a return to the initial motive of that variation (var. 8, m. 140; var. 9, mm. 152–53; var. 10, m. 170; var. 11, m. 193). In doing so, Reger omits the C portion of the ritornello and creates an actual thematic return where one was not present in the original. He may thus be said to “classicize” or “romanticize” what was a more open-ended Baroque aspect of the theme. In variation 12, the C section returns (m. 211) after a long absence, and the effect is quite striking. But this variation, like the immediately preceding ones, is also rounded off by a return of its initial motive (in m. 215); aspects of Classical-Romantic and Baroque thus commingle.

A different but related way of thinking of op. 81 is that there is an implied past and present (as indicated in Table 1). The past is represented by the theme and the stricter variations, which together might be said to embody for

Reger the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic traditions, extending from Bach, the author of the theme, through to Beethoven and Brahms, who wrote monumental keyboard variations to which Reger pays homage. The freer variations in op. 81, in which the standard structure is disrupted by motivic fragmentation or motion to distant harmonic regions, may represent the present—the present of 1904. Here contemporary music has undergone a kind of *Sprachkrise* analogous to what Hofmannsthal described in his famous *Lord Chandos Letter* of 1902, in which “everything fell into fragments . . . the fragments into further fragments, until it seemed impossible to contain anything at all within a single concept.”<sup>44</sup> As we have seen above, Reger acknowledged in the musical culture of his time a similar crisis or malady, which he felt Bach could help to heal.

In portions of Reger's op. 81, perhaps especially in variations 3 and 5, the variation structure tends to break down and thus capitulate to the contingency of musical language and syntax. But the work also resists contingency and dissolution. In variations 8–13, the rounded returns represent an assertion of order, which becomes still more explicit in variation 14, the only “strict” variation in the second half. The fugue, which lasts almost eight minutes, might be heard as a heroic effort both to accept fragmentation (in the form of the fugue subject) and to reestablish coherence through powerful formal and harmonic closure in the final pages.

However we choose to explain the complex temporal-structural framework, it is clear that Reger writes directly into the Bach Variations, in a way that he could not have done in the Organ Suite, an awareness of historical time that is the essence of historicism. He composes out the distance between himself and Bach, and between himself and Beethoven and Brahms as well. It is almost impossible to put this layered process into words, but Reger manages to put it into music in ways that make op. 81 perhaps the most revealing and touching document of his historicist modernism. 

<sup>44</sup>Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Lord Chandos Letter*, trans. Russell Stockman (Marlboro, Vt.: Marlboro Press, 1986), p. 21.