

MAX REGER'S ORGAN FANTASIAS BASED ON CHORALE MELODIES

ÉVA PÉTER¹ 

SUMMARY. Johann Baptist Joseph Maximilian Reger is best known for his organ compositions. He favored the genres of the Baroque. He treated and developed the genres of chorale prelude, fugue and fantasia in his own individual way. He was inspired by his friend and performer Karl Straube (1873-1950), organist of the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, who provided him with inspiration and ideas for his compositions. The present study focuses on the chorale fantasias pertaining to the composer's group of works for organ. These compositions by Reger are considered to be seminal works of organ literature. They were composed in a short period between 1898 and 1900. Reger designed the registration of the organ works for the disposition of German late Romantic organs, which are characterized by a faithful imitation of an orchestral sound. Formally, they follow the structure of the Baroque chorale variation and chorale partita. The titles of the chorale fantasias echo the opening lines of the sacred hymns they are based on. The melodies date from the 16th and 17th centuries and belong to the hymn repertoire of German Lutheran congregations. Some of them can also be found in the Hungarian Reformed congregational hymnal.

Keywords: chorale fantasia, baroque genres, Lutheran congregational singing, formal structure, disposition of late Romantic organs.

Johann Baptist Joseph Maximilian Reger (1873-1916) was a prolific composer. According to the researchers of his life's work: "His style developed primarily from his study of the works of Bach and Brahms".² Among his

¹ *PhD Docent, Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Romania, Faculty of Reformed Theology and Music, Music Department. E-mail: evapeter65@gmail.com*

² Pándi, Marianne. *Hangversenykalauz I. Zenekari művek. (Concert Guide I. Orchestral works.)* Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1980, pp. 211.



compositions, the most significant are his organ works and chamber music pieces. Although Reger was a Roman Catholic by religion, his organ works, and vocal compositions have many links to the music of the Lutheran Church. This is evidenced by the chorale cantatas composed for the main festive services of the church year, the piece based on the 100th Psalm (op. 106),³ the *12 Geistliche Lieder* (op. 137) for voice (with piano, harmonium or organ accompaniment), the *Drei Motetten* for mixed choir (op. 110), the *a cappella* choral works and the *Acht geistliche Gesänge* (op. 138).⁴

Reger's oeuvre is known through his organ compositions. He favoured the genres associated with the Baroque era. He developed and refined the genres of the chorale prelude, fugue and fantasia in his own individual way. He was inspired and supported in the development of his compositions by his friend and performer, Karl Straube (1873-1950), organist of the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig.

Reger designed the registration of the organ works for the disposition of German late Romantic organs, which are characterized by a close imitation and representation of the orchestral sound. The timbre and nuances in dynamics particular to the W. Sauer, E. F. Walcker, Voit & Söhne, Furtwängler & Hammer and Rieger organs represented the ideal sound sought by the composer. Analysts emphasize Reger's fascination with the organ, although the composers of his day were more interested in exploiting the potential of the orchestra's sound: "When the most famous composer of his time turned to the orchestra's grateful, many-headed dragon, Max Reger made himself worthy of the honorable name of the new Johann Sebastian Bach in the nobly mystical world of the organ. His rich treasure trove of inspiration was equipped with the most modern musical formulas, and yet he was happy to reach for the ancient power of the chorale and with it the majestic simplicity of old church song."⁵

³ Performing apparatus of the work: choir, orchestra and organ. A major example of the 20th century revival of Lutheran church music. The composition combines the formal elements of the baroque cantata and the symphony. It consists of four movements composed in one piece, like the four movements of a symphony. The musical material of the choir alternates between polyphonic and homophonic compositional style. The work ends with a fugue whose theme is combined with Luther's *Ein feste Burg* chorale. See Gerhard Dietel: *Zenetörténet évszámokban II 1800-tól napjainkig. (History of Music II From 1800 to the present.)* Springer publishing, Budapest, 1996, pp. 692.

⁴ Wörner, Karl H. *A zene története. (History of Music)*. Vivace Zenei Antikvárium és Kiadó, Budapest, 2007, pp. 567.

⁵ Járosy, Dezső. "Max Reger és gyermekköltészete". In *Zenei Szemle – A zenetudomány és hangversenyélet köréből*. Szerk. Járosy Dezső. (Max Reger and his works for children). In *Music Review - Musicology and Concert Life*. Ed. by Dezső Járosy), Vol. 1, No. 7, Timișoara, 1917, pp. 216.

This study focuses on the chorale fantasias pertaining to the composer's group of works for organ. These compositions by Reger are considered to be seminal works of organ literature. They were composed in a short period between 1898 and 1900. Heinrich Reimann's (1850-1906) work for organ, *Phantasie über den Choral Wie schön leucht' uns der Morgenstern*, published in 1895, was the inspiration for Reger's chorale fantasias.⁶

The titles of Reger's seven chorale fantasias recall the opening lines of the sacred hymns they were based on. The melodies were composed in the 16th and 17th centuries and belong to the hymn repertoire of German Lutheran congregations.⁷ Some of them can also be found in the Hungarian Reformed congregational hymnal.⁸

1. The melody and the text of the *Fantasie über den Choral "Wie schön leucht't uns der Morgenstern"* op. 40. Nr. 1. were written in 1599 by Philip Nicolai (1556 - 1608), a German Lutheran pastor, poet and songwriter. The melody of this popular Jesus hymn⁹ consists of three major phrases and a short final line

⁶ "Influenced by the Bach Renaissance, the work revives the genre of the chorale arrangement written for the organ, more precisely: the chorale partita; it elaborates several chorale verses in the form of free variations with texts below) and ends with a fugue." Gerhard, Dietel. *Zenétörténet évszámokban II 1800-tól napjainkig. (History of Music II From 1800 to the present.)* Springer publishing, Budapest, 1996, pp. 642.

⁷ In a short time, the Lutheran Reformation in the German-speaking world developed a very rich repertoire of religious songs, the chorales, which were intended for use in native tongue, in congregations. Their influence on Western art music and the development of European church singing was decisive. The German chorale literature drew on a number of sources: the Gregorian melodies, the medieval cantion and the Genevan psalms, but it was also influenced by secular melodies. The musical material cited as sources was more or less reworked, with new texts added. From a tonal point of view, their modal structures were mostly retained. The melodies in major and minor keys appeared only later. From the point of view of rhythm, the German chorales of the 16th century were still characterized by free variation of different sound values, but later on a distinctive, steady chorale rhythm of quarter notes developed. This performance style influenced the entire repertoire of the Protestant church, including the Hungarian-language congregational singing material. For a more detailed presentation of the topic, see Péter, Éva. Luther énekek az 500 éves református zenei anyagban. In *Új utakon a művészetpedagógia. (Lutheran hymns throughout 500 years of Reformed music. In New ways in art education.)* Published by: Music-Singing Department of the Juhasz Gyula Faculty of Education, University of Szeged, ed. Mrs. József Dombi, 2018, pp. 61-70.

⁸ Song titles: *Our hearts are filled with joy today; Our God is strong.*

⁹ In the collection of evangelical hymns, *Zöngedező Mennyei Kar*, published in 1696, we can find the earliest Hungarian version of the hymn, with the opening words: *Tündöklő hajnali csillag Bright Morning Star*). In later collections, the text changes slightly, so that the initial line is *Szép tündöklő hajnalcsillag Beautifully Bright Morning Star*). The chorale melody can be found in the discant voice of Maróti's four-part arrangement of 1743, and the same in the appendix of Albert Molnár Szenczi's collection of *Psalms songs*, on page 384 of the 1764 edition, with the text: *Szívünk vígsággal ma betölt Our Hearts Are Filled with Joy Today*). This second version of the text, together with the melody, is continuously present in Hungarian Reformed hymnbooks. Some recent editions contain both texts.

and is structured as an *AABC*. The motif structuring of the melodic phrases is consistent with the verse structure: phrase *A* corresponds to three verse lines of 8-8-7 syllables each, i.e. $A=a+b+c$; in phrase *B* the structuring separates four-syllable motifs, i.e. $B=d+e+e+f$; the summarizing character of phrase *C* is given by the descending direction of the entire range and the repetition of the closing motif of the preceding phrases. The only melodic change over the centuries has been in phrase *B*: the motif *e*) has moved around the third of the tone (musical example 1). The motif of phrase *B* is reminiscent of the motif found in Christmas carols and in the children's songs of German, Hungarian and other European peoples.

E.g. 1

409.

Ein Geistlich Braut-

Lied der gläubigen Seelen/ von Je-

su Christo ihrem himlischen Bräutigam:

Gestellt vber den 45. Psalm des
Propheten Davids.
D. Philippus Nicolai.

I.

Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern/
Voll Gnad vnd Warheit von dem HERRN/
Die süsse Wurzel Jesse
Du Sohn Davids/ auß Jacobs Stamm/
Mein König vnd mein Bräutigam/
Hast mir mein Herz besessen/
Lieblich/freundlich/
Schön vnd herrlich / Groß vnd ehrlich/
Reich von Gaben/
Hoch vnd sehrprächtigt erhaben.

Sff Ey

The melody: *Wie schön leucht't uns der Morgenstern*

The organ piece opens with an *Introduzione*. It reveals the characteristic elements of Reger's compositional style. Complex rhythmic formations are heard, which blur the regular metrical pulsation. In terms of sonority, a constant change of tonal center is noticeable. From an organ-technical point of view, one can note the presence of a very large number of *sonorities*, which in the manual use all the fingers of both hands to play the chord progressions. The musical material presented in the pedal is divided into two separate parts: sometimes the right and left feet play in octave parallel, sometimes they present two separate musical parts. Extreme opposites of dynamics alternate (*tutti - ppp*). From this dramatic first section, the melody of the chorale emerges in bar 17, as if the evening star symbolizing Christ were emerging from the dark night. The *Andante sostenuto ma non troppo*, in E flat major, conveys a sense of balance and calm. The *cantus firmus* in the left hand, rolling in even fourths, conveys a sense of order.

E.g. 2

Reger: *Fantasia über den Choral Wie schön... m. 16–19.*

The processing of the second stanza begins in a *Piu Andante*, *quasi Allegro moderato* tempo. The rolling movement of the chorale melody in quarter notes is broken up by steadily progressing triola value distribution; then *quasi ritenuto* and later *piu mosso* tempo markings add variety to its performance. The dynamics are constantly changing, with all the nuances appearing from *ppp* to *fff*.

After fourteen bars of transition, for the third time, the *cantus firmus* is heard in the top voice, gradually progressing from *Adagio con espressione* tempo to *Andante* tempo. Reger varies the musical material by using the diminution typical of the baroque: he adds to the main melody of the chorale, as a quasi-ornamental element, passing notes of short time units, alternating or even skipping notes, chromatic steps. All this through musical material that moves in steady sixteenths and reflects frequent dynamic changes.

E.g. 3

72 Adagio con espressione

3. Geuß (pppp) sehr tief in mein Herz hin - ein, du

Reger: *Fantasie über den Choral Wie schön...* m. 72–75.

When the fourth verse is developed, the tempo accelerates: *Allegro vivace* tempo and a rhythm moving in thirty-seconds make the musical material even more dynamic. Later, above the *cantus firmus* of the bass, scales moving in sixth parallel emerge in a *vivace assai* tempo.

E.g. 4

106 Vivace assai

hoch in ihm er freu - et. Ei - a, Ei - a,

111 *piu f* *poco a poco cresc.*

Ei - a, himm - lisch Le - ben wird er gc - ben

Reger: *Fantasie über den Choral Wie schön...* m. 106–111.

The dynamic climax in bar 113 is associated with a *Piu vivacissimo* tempo, and in terms of rhythm various elements are built on each other:

triola, anapest, dotted rhythm and syncopated accent shift. A half-cadence in bar 121 forms a cesura, followed by the monumental Fugue in *Allegro vivace* tempo that closes the work.

The fugal theme, which is two bars long and has nothing in common with the chorale melody, appears in every voice.

E.g 5

(FUGE)
Allegro vivace

II (I) III (II) II (I) III (II)

126 *f* II (I) III (II) *mf* *f* *f*

Reger: *Fantasie über den Choral Wie schön...* m. 122–129.

During the development of the fugue, in bar 151, in the pedal solo, the chorale melody reappears, for the fifth time, in full harmonic integration with the fugue's independent musical material. The *cantus firmus*, fragmented into melodic lines, is always in a different voice. A rapidly dynamically intensifying musical material concludes the work, in which the phrase B and C of the chorale melody appears in a musical material of chords, in a triumphant finale.

2. The text of Luther's hymn *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* is a paraphrase of Psalm 46 of the Holy Scriptures. It was published in print, with its melody, in 1529 and quickly became well-known. The structure of the melody is A B A B C D E F B. It belongs to the group of chorale melodies beginning with a repeated first part.

Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott, in dem wir stehen und wohnen
 Wir haben die feste Burg auf unserm Berg, wir halten durch die Feinde und die Heiden
 Und weil wir den unschuldigen Todestod nicht verdienen, so sei uns Gott gnädig

Wir alle laßt uns durch die Feinde nicht erschrecken
 Denn wir wissen, daß wir haben die feste Burg, wir halten durch die Feinde und die Heiden

Und weil wir den unschuldigen Todestod nicht verdienen, so sei uns Gott gnädig
 Und weil wir den unschuldigen Todestod nicht verdienen, so sei uns Gott gnädig

"Ein' feste Burg."

M. Luthers Lied

The melody *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*

Reger arranged the melody in several versions for organ. For example, in Op. 67 No. 6 the theme appears in a fugue-like arrangement, while in Op. 79b No. 2 the main melody is placed in the pedal solo and accompanied by chords in the manual.

The *Fantasia* in D major, Op. 27, is a large-scale composition.¹⁰ Reger leads the melody of the chorale in two tonal planes: in D major in polyphonic mode and in B flat major in homophonic mode. The two tonalities alternate ("shift") continuously. The collage-like approach, which Reger used only in this work, results in an interesting tonal landscape.

At the beginning of the work, in *Allegro vivace (ma pomposo)* tempo, in *fff* in D major, the pedal solo opens the music (baroque hallmark). After three bars, in the left hand, in middle voice, the chorale melody AB melody line is presented without repetition. This is followed by the chordal presentation of the A line in B flat major. The key of D major returns with the CD line of the chorale melody, followed by the B melody line in B flat major.

¹⁰ I have previously written about this work. Péter, Éva. The significance of Ein Feste Burg ist unser Gott in Music Literature. In *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Musica*, LXII, 2, 2017, pp. 153–165. DOI:10.24193/subbmusica.2017.2.12

E.g. 7



Reger: *Fantasie über den Choral Ein feste Burg... m. 23–28.*

The EF melody line in D major continues, followed by the B flat chordal version of the C line; then, after the conclusion of the chorale melody with the B line in D major, the D melody line in B flat major is played.¹¹ In the densely woven musical material, the chorale melody is always well represented. Between the virtuoso extreme voices, the *cantus firmus* in the left hand sounds sublime.

Table 1

<i>Allegro vivace (ma pomposo)</i>							
AB	A	CD	B	EF	C	B	D
D major	B flat major	D major	B flat major	D major	B flat major	D major	B flat major

Table of tempo, structural elements and keys

The second major unit of *Fantasia* begins in bar 48 in *Meno mosso* tempo, with a *piano* dynamic. The message of the text demands a low volume: *Mit unsrer Macht ist nichts getan, wir sind gar bald verloren*. The main melody is in the pedal. The opening AB lines are repeated by the composer this time, and with the rest of the melody is led through in D major (CD E FB). In the case of the gradually interspersed E, then F, and finally the closing B line, played in B flat major, the *Tempo I.* signal directs our attention to the interspersed melodic lines in a collage-like manner.

¹¹ The bottom row of the table illustrates the alternation of the two tones when different melodic lines are played.

E.g. 8

Reger: *Fantasie über den Choral Ein feste Burg...* m. 57–62.

The dynamics gradually intensify and a chromatically rich, organ technically very difficult and varied musical material with a complicated rhythm (96-101 bars) leads to the third large unit of Fantasia.

Table 2

<i>Meno mosso</i>	<i>Tempo I</i>	<i>Meno mosso</i>	<i>Tempo I</i>	<i>Meno mosso</i>	<i>Meno mosso</i>	<i>Tempo I</i>	<i>Meno mosso</i>
AB	E	AB	F	CD	E	B	FB
D major	B flat major	D major	B flat major	D major	D major	B flat major	D major

Table of tempo, structural elements and keys

The sequence of the chorale melody lines, and the alternation of the keys are clearly reflected in the tables (Tables 1-2). It is noticeable that while the entire chorale melody is performed twice in D major (separately in the first and second major sections of the Fantasia), the chorale melody is presented only once in B flat major.

In the third major section, at the *Quasi tempo I.* mark, the chorale melody is heard again, in the upper register of the pedal score, which presents two separate voices, and then in the right-hand voice, amplified in octaves. In this case, the chorale melody emerges uninterrupted, in one large arc, in the key of D major.

Reger: *Fantasie über den Choral Ein feste Burg...* m. 99–104.

From bar 135 onwards, a fugue begins, in which the composer uses the chorale A melody line as a fugue theme. Its first three appearances (in alto, soprano and then tenor) are in tonal imitation, quoting different text lines from the sacred hymn. The continuation serves to foreground the other lines of the chorale melody (B-C-D-E-F-B melody lines) in such a way that the composer displays them alternately between the two most audible parts (upper manual and pedal), while the fugue presents the listener an increasingly varied and rich sound. In terms of rhythm, acceleration is noticeable, as the chorale melody is diminished and the fugue theme starts in *stretto* from bar 176 onwards, in different voices. As the conclusion of the grandiose fugue, in measure 182, in *Maestoso*, then in gradually slowing down tempo (*sempre ritardando*), the melody line B of the chorale can be heard at a *ffff* volume (*das Reich muss uns doch bleiben*). The musical material expands to ten/twelve voices, and the harmonic chordal sound provides a sublime finale.

Reger: *Fantasie über den Choral Ein feste Burg...* m. 181–190.

Reger himself described his own music as difficult, not only for the performers but also for the listeners. In 1917, Dezső Jánosy wrote of Reger's works in the pages of the *Zenei Szemle*: 'Wagner's extended tonal excursions appear in such a bold and sudden succession in his music, the like of which had never been seen before. In his search for the source, it was perhaps the nature of his favorite instrument, the organ, that helped him to express these exaggerations. Despite the organ's constrained way of playing, it is the most direct bridge to the superimposition of foreign harmonic formulas. In terms of volume, as is usually the case with more recent masters, his art rests on the principle of extremes.'¹²

After writing the seven chorale fantasias, Reger composed *Fantasie und Fuge über den Namen BACH* in 1900. In this work, the composer presents the B-A-C-H motif in various transpositions, rhythms and reverses, counterpointing it with new melody lines. In 1901, he also composed a fantasia entitled *Symphonic Fantasy and Fugue for Organ*, Op. 57, also known as the *Inferno-Fantasie*, because it is said to have been inspired by Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. The chromaticism typical of Reger's organ style is here taken to the extreme, interwoven with a relentless modulation process (even the smallest note is separately harmonised).

¹² Jánosy Dezső: „Max Reger és gyermekköltészete”. In: *Zenei Szemle – A zenetudomány és hangversenyélet köréből*, Szerk. Jánosy Dezső, (Max Reger and his works for children. In: *Music Review - Musicology and Concert Life*, Ed. by Dezső Jánosy), Vol. 1, No. 7, Timișoara, 1917, p. 216.

To sum up, Reger's chorale fantasias follow the formal structure of the Baroque chorale variation and chorale partita. After an 'Introduzione', more or all the strophes of the chorales are elaborated. As the text is printed under the musical material, the performer can choose the appropriate performance style to faithfully represent the textual content, transforming the succession of strophes into a seamless progression.

Translated from Hungarian by Juliánna Köpeczi

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