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# IN THE SHADOW OF MAX REGER : SIGFRID KARG-ELERT, A NONCONFORMIST OF THE "LEIPZIG SCHOOL"

by Elke Voelker

Sigfrid Karg-Elert (1877-1933) remains one of the most colourful personalities among the turn-of-the-century German composers. In spite of his immense popularity in the Anglo-Saxon world, he still receives too little recognition in our concert programs. If one wants to take up a banner for him, one must first remove his music from under the shadow of an overwhelming Reger cult. Bold value judgement comparisons to Reger's compositions are carelessly made too often as a result of superficial treatment of Karg-Elert's work. In this context I would like to refer to a lecture by Johannes Michel entitled, "*Sigfrid Karg-Elert und Max Reger*", which offers a comprehensive overview of such statements – from reviews to textbooks on organ literature – and which comes to the following conclusion: "A comparison (of the composers) seems only to make sense in so far as one limits oneself to measuring one against the other or playing one off against the other. Only when one has accepted their fundamental differences is it possible to interpret and assess influences and relationships."<sup>1</sup>

If one researches archives and libraries for sources that try to pull Karg-Elert's artistic persona somewhat out from under Reger's shadow and illuminate his individual importance for the history of early 20th century music, one quickly enters a "wasteland". In order to fathom the relationship of both composers to each other, the following relevant personal statements, a short description of compositional styles and an analysis of respective collections of works will provide impetus for further research.

At the beginning, the relationship between Reger and Karg-Elert was without a doubt marked by mutual appreciation. The latter wrote in a letter to Godfrey Sceaats<sup>2</sup>: "At that time (c. 1905-08) I wouldn't have dared to write organ music because I was completely intimidated by Reger's presence whom I, in awe, viewed as a true giant. However, Reger himself, who later lived practically next door and with whom I was on friendly terms, inspired me to write for the organ. He valued my work highly." Karg-Elert, for his part, played Reger's works at concerts at the turn of the century. He even dedicated two of his own compositions (No 1 of *Acht Konzertstücke* Op 26 and his *Monologe* Op 33) to him. The relationship cooled down noticeably over time. For Karg-Elert this can be attributed to the overwhelming public acknowledgement of his role model Reger and also to an increasing divergence in approaches to composition. In 1905 he wrote about Reger: "In this long letter I have put down the whole of the development of my musical taste and my conception of 'old' and 'new' music, how my development took place, how I came across Reger, what I thought and think of him, and how I am, bit by bit, turning away from him. To get straight to the point: I find I dislike intensely his latest muddled, incoherent and often altogether unclear scribbling."

Karg-Elert repeatedly felt the need to defend the "unusual" in his style. This he did in candid, unmistakable words in a letter on 8 June 1907, to his publisher Carl Simon: "My

beloved *Passacaglia* is more than a match for Reger's pointless, chaotic, immature organ pieces! ... There has to be a turning point soon. ... If only music people would realize that that which so upsets them about my music and seems to them illogical, bizarre and unclear, as if it had been written in the 'Sturm und Drang' tradition, is not arbitrary, but intentional. If they would see that behind this incomprehensibility there lies a very specific, logical system, then they would gradually find their way in and be able to understand my entirely subjective language. I don't write in the 'Sturm und Drang' tradition; I revise and sort out much too much for that! ... but, when the mind thinks clearly and logically so that not a single note is superfluous and unjustifiable ... unfamiliar but never illogical ... That's exactly what I'm accusing Reger of (with whom I am truly infatuated), that he sends innumerable compositions with incredible irresponsibility out into the world without having substantial ideas. Nothing but unclear improvisations which are jotted down in a moment's time! Whatever comes to his mind at the time, loosely connected, unscrupulous, rhapsodical. I just don't understand it no matter how great my love for him may be! ... The only works of significance are Reger's *Choralvorspiele*!"

This was not by far the only piece of writing in which Karg-Elert – frustrated by his own powerlessness in the face of the giant Reger – let out steam. Already in November 1905 letters rained down on his Berlin-based publisher: "I began ... a long letter to you on November 17<sup>th</sup> and worked on it daily; fourteen days ago I was very upset and unable to work because of – Reger! Dear Mr Simon, you would just – throw up – if you lived here. For five weeks, one hasn't heard or seen anything other than Reger, Reger, Reger. 'Reger is the greatest organ virtuoso, greater than Bach', 'Reger is the most tremendous piano titan, much greater than Liszt and Rubinstein put together', 'Reger is the greatest pedagogue', 'Reger is the greatest conductor, greater than Nikisch, Mottl and Weingartner put together', 'Reger is the most tremendous, greatest (!!) composer, already today he is head and shoulders above Beethoven – Bach – Brahms'!!!! And this is how the nonsense and the common, blind adoration have been going on for five weeks now."

Karg-Elert does, however, admit to one thing: "Apart from this, I really love Reger!" – nonetheless, he immediately qualifies this statement: "It's not my way to blare along and march behind the victory wagon when it goes against my convictions ... And the works which have now been published by Lauterbach & Kuhn make me feel very uneasy if not disgruntled (despite my Reger-adoration!). The entire local trade press is now saying: all music which has been written up to now (including Reger's 'more approachable' works) is dreary stuff, rubbish, junk (Schumann, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Wagner, Richard Strauss, etc. is all shallow, amateurish nonsense [Dilettantenquark] !!!), only the latest Reger is divine revelation! This is the music of the future, etc., etc. Look, dear Papa Simon, I might be radically progress-oriented, but I never vote or write against my convictions, and now I've had more than I can take of the new Reger tumult and the mad, harmonic witchcraft, which, however, strikes 99% of all music people right now (!) as incredibly 'clever'. It pulls the wool over their eyes (actually their ears) – it's all revolting to me. I won't go along with it anymore. All of these adulations have really, really set me back and totally disheartened me. I am fighting a sacred battle for the highest ideals! I know exactly where the boundaries of my talent lie – but I still believe that I can put my hope in the future! But if this last immature chaos by Reger is supposed to be music, if this is the future of our art, then I feel afraid for the future, I won't be a part of it!"<sup>3</sup>

After receiving this letter, Carl Simon did not have anything better to do than to send a copy directly to Munich on 30 November 1905. The addressee was Mrs Elsa Reger. Reger reacted accordingly. Palpably in his unequivocal statement to the publisher Simrock on 26 May 1915: "I certainly agree to you having an edition of the work made for harmonium – but please by Kämpf and only by Kämpf, not by that awful fellow Karg-Elert!". At this point the frosty, distanced relationship becomes all too evident. Karl Straube, however, wrote a letter<sup>4</sup> to Karg-Elert in 1910 in which he expresses a favourable opinion of his compositions: "Leipzig, 27.XII, 1910. / Dorotheenplatz 1. III. Dear Sir, Thank you for your kind words, which give me too much praise. If my performance has in any way and at any point inspired you, then it is a great satisfaction and pleasure for me, especially if the outcome is works such as Op 66 (actually Opus 65) and Op 73. I think the *Chaconne* is outstanding, and it would be as much of a great honour as a pleasure for me to perform the work here in Leipzig and in Berlin. The improvement in your works for organ from Op 25 – via Op 66 – to Op 73 is enormous, and I truly hope that you will continue to progress in this direction firmly and vigorously toward the great forms. I will do everything within my power to make your name known. ... The fact that I played three of your *Weihnachtschoräle* on the 24<sup>th</sup> again, I want to assure you, had nothing whatever to do with my having received your letter. The intrinsic value of these works is so great that they deserve to be performed under any circumstances. Very faithfully, Your humble servant! Karl Straube."

Later on Karg-Elert responded in a virtually serene manner to his former antithesis Reger. He began to view him more and more as a historical person. In his *Portraits* Op 101, Karg-Elert copied Reger's compositional style in *Crucifixus etiam pro nobis* and summarized in his *Harmonologik*, from the year 1930, virtually historically: "Reger's work includes everything that is possible as far as detachment of sound goes ... just only in excessive accumulation and unprecedentedly short-lived density which barely allows the complete effect of any specific appeal."

After Reger's death ominous shadows really began to spread over Karg-Elert's work: ideological defamation which affected even the dead Reger. The National Socialist race theorist Richard Eichenauer stated that Reger must remain a spiritual stranger to his own people because of the impact of his alleged eastern Baltic heritage and that his music ran contrary to the Arian ideal of race.<sup>5</sup> However Reger's musical confessions of loyalty to "Germanness", some patriotic overtures (*Dem deutschen Heer* Op 140; *Dem Andenken der im Krieg gefallenen deutschen Helden* Op 144b), contradict such defamatory statements. The attacks against Karg-Elert were all the more fierce. Johannes Piersig, a student of Straube, reported (1981): "To begin with his disposition: the determination of his enemies to keep him (Karg-Elert) from coming into fashion, to use all possible means to fight against him, can be traced back to the defamation of him as 'Jewish', which, by the way, began long before the Nazi era. Aside from the fact that in 1933 [?] Karg-Elert submitted a family tree so old and 'pure' that it would have put Himmler to shame, he appeared ... somewhat Mediterraneanally exotic, more Arabic than Jewish ... there have always been such factions in the history of music. But the opposing fronts ... aren't aware of the momentum of infamous demagogic intolerance (as after World War I) on this scale, and whose instruments in each case are provided by way of party ideology. After 1920 the smallest youth group would foam merely at the mention of Karg-Elert or Mendelssohn, just like a cooking pot into which baking soda had been poured."<sup>6</sup> In 1926 (the year that Straube joined the Nazi Party!), a completely

stunned Karg-Elert commented on the latest defamation of himself in the *Deutsches Jahrbuch der Musik*: "Am I not 'German' enough?" It seems so ... Four weeks ago I received a *Deutsches Jahrbuch der Musik* from Rolf Cunz. The contents were up in arms against the 'contaminating Jewish aspects of radical modernism' (Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Schreker, Mahler, Krenek, Haba, Hindemith). All of them Jews! And there it says: 'who, for example, elevated Karg-Elert so greatly – his fellow Jews!' Well, well! What absurd allegations that damn snooping comes up with. I see, just because my name is 'Sigfrid', I must be Jewish! Just because some of my compositions have French or English titles, I must be a 'non-German' who people boycott. Oh, how often my friendship to and fondness for England, France and Italy have already harmed me, to be labeled right away as Jewish, a traitor or a Bolshevik. It's terrible!" In 1935, two years after Karg-Elert's death, his name was included in the *Juden-ABC*. The inevitable consequence: his compositions and theories abruptly disappeared from the scene; he became an outlaw – just like Mendelssohn.

Today the compositions of Karg-Elert have been gradually made available to us in excellent new editions. Above all we have Wolfgang Stockmeier and Günter Hartmann to thank for this. A catalogue of complete works<sup>7</sup> was published by Sonja Gerlach in 1984.

If you try to chronologically place the organ works by Reger and Karg-Elert as well as their major works in relation to each other in order to find indications of possible mutual influences, you can at least identify the following:

Firstly: Karg-Elert's compositional working out of a specific form remarkably often emerges after Reger's treatment of the same.

Secondly: There is a coinciding break in their compositions for the organ. With Karg-Elert it manifested itself around 1914, and with Reger about ten years earlier. It was only at that time that Karg-Elert began his principal compositions for the organ.

Thirdly: Complementary forms to Reger's compositions can be found comparatively easily; for example, Reger's Op 67 and Karg-Elert's Op 65 can be juxtaposed. Reger's *Choralfantasien* can be seen as the "precursor" to the *Symphonic Chorale* Op 87, or Karg-Elert's *Monologe* Op 33 (dedicated to Reger!) can be logically related to Reger's *Monologe* Op 63 and so on.

But what about the musical language of both composers? Both, Reger even more so than Karg-Elert, found themselves in a compositional process which had its starting point in the gigantic nature of the German *Furor organisticus*. Reger poses seemingly unsolvable problems for both the performer and the listener. The partially Cyclops-like dimensions of his works reflect the neo-platonic, creative insanity of a time in which Friedrich Nietzsche characterized the ideal man as "so lebhaft und energievoll wie nur möglich" (as lively and full of energy as is possible). Carl Dahlhaus put it into appropriate words: "Reger's music, as opposed to that of Mahler or Berg, leaves listeners who have understood little or nothing with the clear and uncomfortable feeling that they have understood nothing. Reger is a composer who ... denies the listener a solid footing – not even in one of the 'dimensions' of the tonal line, in the melody, harmony or rhythm. He postulates, more seriously than Schoenberg, with whom it originates, did, that music has to be developed in all 'dimensions' – thus the exclusion of a partial simplicity which perception could hold on to."<sup>8</sup> As opposed to Karg-Elert "the functional independence of the solo voices, the regularity and congruence of the thematic work is missing in Reger"<sup>9</sup>, which is not to be understood pejoratively as a

flaw. With Reger you don't find consistently well-organized tonal lines, no pan-thematic composing, no network of relationships where every note points to its origin, as is characteristic for Karg-Elert's style or like you find with Schoenberg, for example, from Op 26 (1923) on. His polyphony of a musical prose<sup>10</sup> is not based upon the rhythmic independence of the voices either, but upon the dominance of the harmonies, which reduces the possibility of a too vivid build up of the individual voices. Only in his later works (for example Op 145) does Reger find his way "to a compositional technique that is absolutely akin to Karg's pan-thematic work. Karg's Op 78/4 and Reger's Op 145/5 constitute a sufficient comparison. One would barely venture to wonder whether Reger also slowly found his way to this texturing technique under the influence of Kargic compositions, a texturing technique whose early signs were first seen in Reger's *Lyrische Orgelstücke*."<sup>11</sup>

Reger commented on his change to a style of greater simplicity and clarity after the Meiningen era in a letter to Fritz Stein on 26 April 1913: "I am making a stand against all that is extravagant, against all that is overdone... That is the 'fruit' of Meiningen; this cure has done me capital, and it hasn't just done me good, it would do a lot of others good as well." His self-criticism of his own work grew, his harmonies became simpler, the form more concise. He attempted "Mozart-like" effortless and transparency in his orchestral compositional style (*Romantische Suite* Op 125, *Vier Tondichtungen nach Böcklin* Op 128, *Mozart Variations* Op 132, among others). An equivalent of this for the organ can be found in his *Neun Stücke* Op 129: "... something infinitely graceful, a timelessly elegant sound, delicate in music and arranged as fine as a spiderweb."<sup>12</sup>

Adam Adrio<sup>13</sup> could have just as easily made a similar judgement about Karg-Elert's later works as about Johann Nepomuk David: The compositions "reveal a surprising stylistic development that continues where Bach, Bruckner and Reger left off; but which then ... begins to consistently develop its own ideal of the polyphony of independent tonal lines that derive from strong constructive-speculative tendencies – naturally harmonically embedded in its own world. Or if we look at the 'sequential principle' of form in Hindemith's sonatas for organ, it becomes clear that Karg-Elert had long been familiar with these compositional techniques." Karg-Elert's own awareness of the pioneering direction of his later style also comes to light: "... I have rediscovered the genuine organ style most intensely in *Music for Organ* (strictly polyphonic). From now on the new compositional style is going to branch off from the last works. *Music for Organ* imbued my opponent, the exalted Reger-disciple Karl Straube, to the highest degree, with fanatic enthusiasm. A student of his (Piersig) studied the work under him, and we heard him play it in a virtuoso, even breath-taking or *affanato* [= in a distressful or anxious manner] fashion! It sounded so unbelievably new, that I could barely even believe that it was by me. It is a work completely in tune with the spirit of our German Renaissance movement."<sup>14</sup> Wolfgang Stockmeier commented on Op 145: "In Karg-Elert's *Music for Organ*, tradition and progress come together in a powerful union. Here the unbroken historical development of music becomes visible. Romanticism is encouraged and pursued, people don't act as if it never existed ..."<sup>15</sup> Piersig too emphasizes the historical significance of Karg-Elert as a composer at the turn-of-the-century in a letter to Sceats<sup>16</sup>. "In Germany, a period of only apparently polyphonic, but in reality figurative-harmonic composition, was followed by the most recent school with its constructive-linear, formal and rigid compositional style, neglectful of all emotional expression (Hindemith, David, Distler). Both of Karg-Elert's later works (the

aforementioned *Music for Organ* and *Fantasie und Fuge B.A.C.H.* in the 'German' version of the manuscript) represent a climax within the almost glaring contrast of these two schools, which will also become a benchmark for the future. For if one wants to describe the timeless and universal significance of Johann Sebastian Bach, to use a classic example, in terms of its fundamental musical features, then one would have to say that in his day Bach took the principles of harmony and linearity, each one in the complete autonomy of its own intrinsic value, to their limits. And that he also placed these two opposite poles in an indissoluble, vivid relationship in a type of a formal arrangement that was unheard of at the time. In terms of their validity for modern times, the same can be said about both of Karg-Elert's later works for organ. They comprise the final use of modern harmony and new vocal line in a brilliant synthesis."

1 Presented at the foundation meeting of the Karg-Elert Society on 1 November 1984, in Heidelberg; printed in *Mitteilungen der Karg-Elert-Gesellschaft* (Announcements of the Karg-Elert Society), Heidelberg 1987. p. 9–15.

2 Quoted from Karl Josef Nüschen: *Die Choralgebundenen Orgelwerke* (The Chorale Preludes for Organ) by Sigfrid Karg-Elert, 1977.

3 Leipzig state archives, file Breitkopf & Härtel No 5997.

4 Leipzig state archives, file Breitkopf & Härtel No 5921.

5 Quoted from Oskar Söhngen: "Max Reger heute" (Max Reger Today) in *Mitteilungen des Max-Reger Institutes Bonn* (Announcements of the Max Reger Institute Bonn), Bonn 1973, p.3.

6 Johannes Piersig: "Sigfrid Karg-Elert. Zwei späte Orgelwerke Op 145/150" (Sigfrid Karg-Elert. Two later Works for Organ (Op 145/150), in *Musik und Kirche* (Music and Church) 51, 1981, 266 f.

7 Sonja Gerlach (ed.): *S. Karg-Elert, Werkverzeichnis* (S. Karg-Elert, Catalogue of Works).

8 See Susanne Popp: "Warum ist Regers Werk so schwer verständlich?" ("Why is Reger's work so difficult to understand?"), in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (New Journal for Music), 134, 1973, 134 ff.

9 H.E. Rahner: *Max Regers Choralfantasien für Orgel* (Max Reger's Chorale Fantasies for Organ), 1936, p.36.

10 See Hermann Danuser: *Musikalisches Prosa* (Musical Prose), 1975, p. 119–124.

11 Quoted from Günter Hartmann: *Die Orgelwerke* (Works for Organ) by S. Karg-Elert, 1985, p. 687 f.

12 Fritz Stein: *Max Reger*, Potsdam 1939, p. 65 f.

13 Friedrich Blume: *Geschichte der evangelischen Kirchenmusik* (The History of Evangelical Church Musik), 1965, p.334.

14 Letter to Sceats on 10 December 1931.

15 Accompanying text to the recording Psal. 229/2609777 PET.

16 Letter on 12 May 1936.

## Synopsis of compositions

### Max Reger (1873–1916)

Fantasie und Fuge c-Moll, Op 29 (1898)  
 Fantasie und Fuge über BACH, Op 46 (1900)  
 Sinfonische Fantasie und Fuge, Op 57 (1901)  
 Präludium und Fuge d-Moll (1902?)  
 Fünf leicht ausführbare Präludien und Fugen,  
 Op 56 (1904)  
 Vier Präludien und Fugen, Op 85 (1904)

### Sigfrid Karg-Elert (1877–1933)

Fantasie und Fuge D-Dur, Op 39b (1905/06)

Präludium und Fuge gis-Moll (1906)  
Präludium und Fuge fis-Moll (1912)  
Phantasie und Fuge d-Moll, Op 135b (1915)  
Sechs Choralvorspiele (1893–1901)  
(13) Choralvorspiele, Op 79b (1901–04)  
52 leicht ausführbare Choralvorspiele, Op 67  
(1902)

30 kleine Choralvorspiele (zu den  
gebräuchlichen Chorälen), Op 135a (1914)  
Erste Sonate in fis-Moll (Fantasie, Intermezzo,  
Passacaglia), Op 33 (1899)  
Zweite Sonate in d-Moll, Op 60 (1901)  
Vier Sonatinen für Klavier, Op 89 (1905, 1908)

Drei Orgelstücke, Op 7 (1892)  
[Aquarelle, 5 kleine Tonbilder für Klavier, Op 25  
(1897/98)]  
Zwölf Stücke für die Orgel, Op 59 (1901)  
Monologe, 12 Stücke, Op 63 (1901/02)  
Zwölf Stücke für die Orgel, Op 65 (1902)  
Zehn Stücke für die Orgel, Op 69 (1903)  
Zwölf Stücke für Orgel, Op 80 (1904)

Neun Stücke für die Orgel, Op 129 (1913)  
Sieben Orgelstücke Op 145 (1915/16)

Choralfantasien.

„Ein‘ feste Burg ist unser Gott“, Op 27 (1898)  
„Freu‘ dich sehr, o meine Seele!“, Op 30 (1898)  
„Wie schön leucht‘ uns der Morgenstern“,  
„Straf mich nicht in deinem Zorn“, Op 40 (1899)  
„Alle Menschen müssen sterben“,  
„Wachet auf ruft uns die Stimme“,  
„Hallelujah, Gott zu loben“, Op 52 (1900)

Erste Suite in e-Moll (Introduktion und Fuge,  
Adagio assai, Intermezzo, Trio, Passacaglia),  
Op 16 (1892)  
Erste Sonate in fis-Moll (Fantasie, Intermezzo,

66 Choral-Improvisationen zum Konzert- und  
gottesdienstlichen Gebrauche, Op 65 (1907/10)  
Drei Choralimprovisationen, W 14 (1911)  
20 Prae- und Postludien (Choralstudien), Op 78  
(1912)

First Sonatina in A Minor, Op 74 (1909)  
Drei sinfonische Kanzonen, Op 85 (1910)

Triptych, Op 141 (1930)  
Sinfonie fis-Moll, Op 143 (1930)  
Kaleidoskope, Op 144 (1930)  
Music for Organ, Op 145 (1931)

[Monologe. Fünf (kirchliche) Stücke für  
Harmonium, Op 33 (1905)  
Aquarelle. Fünf charakteristische Stücke für  
Harmonium, Op 27 (1905)]  
Trois Impressions, Op 72 (1909)  
Zehn charakteristische Tonstücke, Op 86 (1911)  
Drei Pastelle, Op 92 (1911)

Seven Pastels from the Lake of Constance, Op  
96 (1921)  
Three Impressions, Op 108 (1923)  
Cathedral Windows. Six pieces for organ, Op 106  
(1923)  
Three New Impressions, Op 142 [II] (1930)  
Sempre Semplice (12 easy pieces), Op 142 [I]  
(1931)  
Eight short pieces, Op 154 (1930/31?)

Drei sinfonische Choräle, Op 87 (1911)  
Nr. 1 „Ach bleib mit deiner Gnade“  
Nr. 2 „Jesu, meine Freude“  
Nr. 3 „Nun ruhen alle Wälder“

<p>Passacaglia), Op 33 (1899)          Introdution und Passacaglia d-Moll (1899)          Variationen und Fuge C-Dur „Heil, unserm König Heil“ (1901)          Variationen und Fuge über ein Originalthema, Op 73 (1903)</p>	<p>Chaconne (35 Variations on a Basso Ostinato) and Fugue Trilogy with Choral (ca. 1908)          Zweite sinfonische Kanzone (Fantasie/Introdution, Kanzone, Passacaglia und Fuge), Op 85/2 (1910)</p>
<p>Introdution, Passacaglia und Fuge e-Moll, Op 127 (1913)</p>	<p>Hommage to Handel (Passacaglia). 51 Studies in Variation Form on a Ground Bass of Handel, Op 75 [II] (1914)</p> <p>Passacaglia (55 Variations) and Fugue on BACH Op 150 (1931)</p>
<p>Schule des Triospiels, Joh. Seb. Bachs zweistimmige Inventionen, für Orgel dreistimmig bearbeitet, zusammen mit Karl Straube (1903)</p>	<p>22 leichte Pedalstudien (Trios) zur Einführung in das moderne Orgelspiel, Op 83 (1913)</p>

Elke Völker, international concert organist and church musician at the Historic Emperor Cathedral of Speyer in south-west Germany, has begun a project to record the complete organ works of Karg-Elert. Four CDs have so far been released on the German Aeolus label. She played a lunchtime recital in St Andrew's Cathedral last April during a brief tour that included recitals in Melbourne and Hong Kong, and this summer has played in major cathedrals in Finland, Poland and Belgium.

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