

The Transcriber's Art – #53

Max Reger

by Richard Yates

The composer of this issue's featured transcription was born in the central region of what is today Germany. His father, although making a living primarily in another occupation, was a versatile musician and an active participant in local musical events and, as his son's earliest teacher, provided instruction on several instruments. A precocious musical aptitude was nurtured by professional musicians and he received an appointment as an organist while still a teenager. Although early in his career he was known primarily as a keyboard player, it was his compositions that became the foundation of his reputation today. His training derived in part from the models of Baroque composers of whose works he made extensive transcriptions. While not regarded as an innovator, he composed in all of the musical genres of his time except for opera. His compositions are notable for their balance of attention to both harmonic and contrapuntal considerations, with the latter holding a particular fascination for him. Indeed, his works include dozens of fugues and canons of more variety and complexity than any of his contemporaries. The last part of his career was spent in Leipzig, where teaching duties did not prevent him from producing larger-scale works that are admired and performed to this day.

I have no doubt that well-informed readers will recognize from these details the identity of this composer, Max Reger, despite the parallels to a certain Baroque era musician who is also fairly well-known in some circles.

Reger, Bach and Transcription Sources

The similarities to J.S. Bach are not coincidental. Reger made a lifelong study of Bach's music, which he clearly emulated in many compositions—notably the dozens of *Chorale Preludes* for organ, many on the same themes as those chosen by Bach. He also published editions of Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*, *Orchestral Suites*, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, *Keyboard Partitas* and *English Suites*.

While classical guitarists' attraction to Bach's magnificent music is understandable and will undoubtedly continue as long as guitars exist, it might be difficult to substantiate a compelling need for yet another edition of, for instance, the *Cello Suites*. But rather than rework the same sources, however marvelous, why not take a small step to similar works by a very good composer who used those as models?

Reger's Opus 131c (1915) includes three suites for solo cello. While they do not follow the standard order of dances of the Baroque suite, they closely resemble the textures of Bach's suites, including implied counterpoint through arpeggiation and compound lines. The first of these suites, in G major, even includes a substantial fugue. Opus 131d also includes suites for solo viola.

The parallels to Bach's solo violin works are found in Reger's 11 sonatas of Opus 42, 91, 117 and 131a. Of the first group, the fourth—in G minor—contains as its second movement a monumental *Ciaccona* with texture, scope and proportion entirely familiar to guitarists. While a guitar transcription would require considerable technical prowess, preliminary examination suggests the rewards may well be worth the effort. The opening has the same gravity and foreshadowing of complexities that Bach's does (here transposed to E minor, the most plausible key for transcription of the whole piece).



Opus 117 contains eight prelude and fugue pairs reminiscent of movements from Bach's solo sonatas and partitas. Indeed, there is nothing to be found in the harmonic language there that would surprise Bach. There is even another grand *Chaconne*. Many of these have the additional advantage of being readable by guitarists straight off the page.

Reger's compositions for keyboard are about evenly divided between piano and organ. The former include a considerable number of pieces with smaller dimensions and modest technical demands. The parallels with Bach continue with such collections as *Aus meinem Tagebuch*, *35 kleine Stücke* (c.f. Bach's *Clavier-Büchlein*) and the two- and three part *Kanons durch alle Dur und Molltonarten* (Canons in all major and minor keys).

Aus der Jugendzeit

Reger's opus 17 consists of 20 short, relatively easy piano pieces the majority of which are plausible candidates for transcription to the guitar. Composed in 1895, they are from the earlier period of his development and are consistent with the simpler piano works of Beethoven and Brahms. Reger's budding interest in Baroque counterpoint shows in only one, number 16, *Fast zu ernst!* (*Fughette – Andante con espressione*).

The last of the set is *Versöhnung* ("reconciliation"). For the guitar transcription, little modification was necessary beyond the choice of key, shortening some tied notes and thinning out octave duplications. Despite its modest technical demands, the piece has considerable lyrical charm and a few unexpected harmonic twists.

Please send comments, suggestions or your own Reger transcriptions to:

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Versöhnung

Op. 17, No. 20

Transcribed for guitar
by Richard Yates

Max Reger
(1873–1916)

Cantabile

⑥=D

p

4

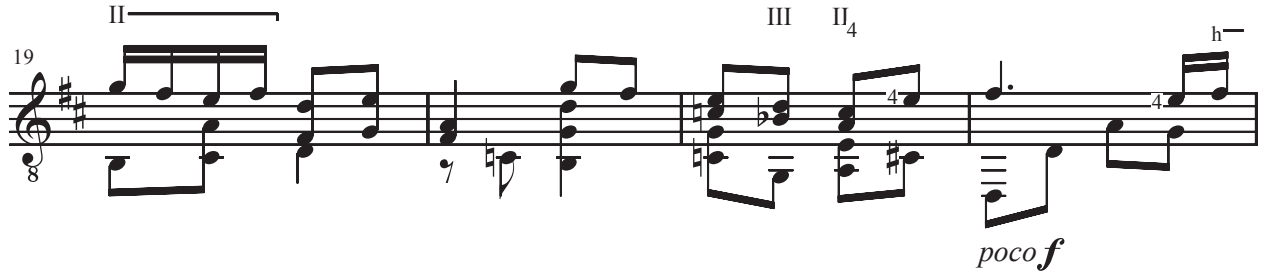
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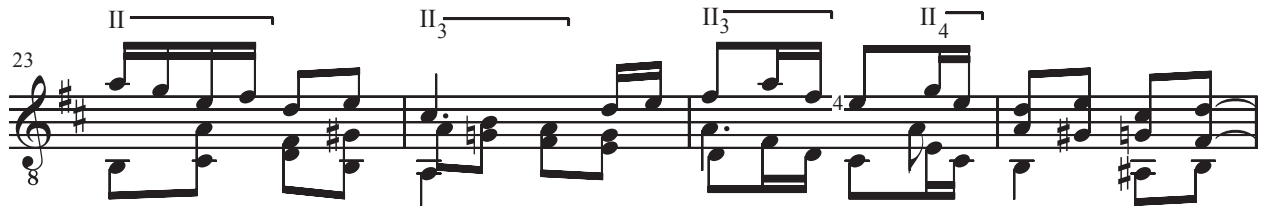
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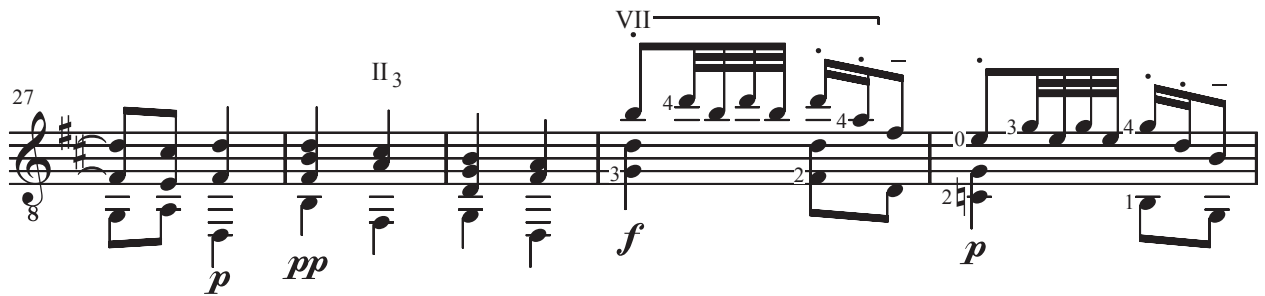
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mf *p* *ritard.* *a tempo*

III II₄ h—II III II₃ II₃ II₄ VII III ② III ② h—

19 

23 

27 

32 

36 

39 