

WALTER FRISCH (New York/USA)

Historicist Modernism in Reger's *Bach* and *Beethoven Variations*

The term 'historicist modernism' refers to the way Reger – distinctively among his contemporaries in the years around 1900 – forges a contemporary musical language from a distinctive engagement with the music of the past, especially the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Johannes Brahms.¹ In this essay, I will focus especially on two major works of Reger, the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Bach*, op. 81, and the *Variations and a Fugue on a Theme of Beethoven*, op. 86, both from 1904. These compositions project historicist modernism with a special directness, even an urgency.

Musical historicism is not the same as conservatism, as Carl Dahlhaus reminded us:

Konservatismus geht in Historismus über, sobald das Überdauern von Vergangenheit in der Gegenwart in eine Reflexion hineingezogen wird, aus der die Einsicht oder das Gefühl resultiert, daß Vergangenes gerade in seinem Vergangensein – und nicht etwa, weil eine Substanz sich unverändert durchhält – einen wesentlichen Aspekt der Gegenwart darstelle. . . . Vergangenheitsbewußtsein bildet nicht einen Gegensatz zu ästhetischer Vergegenwärtigung, sondern ein Teilmoment von ihr.²

Historicism fully acknowledges the pastness of the past without seeking to preserve, imitate, or recreate it. In historicism, a work or a technique from the past becomes an integral part of the present. Historicism exaggerates, even celebrates, the distance with the past, rather than collapsing it.

Reger's model for this kind of historicism was above all Brahms. Reger wrote of Brahms, "Was Brahms die Unsterblichkeit sichert ist nie und nimmer mehr die Anlehnung an die alten Meister, sondern nur die Tatsache, dass er neue ungeahnte seelische Stimmungen auszulösen wußte auf Grund

¹See Walter Frisch, "Reger's Historicist Modernism", in: *Musical Quarterly* 87 (2004), pp. 732–748; and Frisch, "Reger's Bach and Historicist Modernism", in: *19th-Century Music* 25 (2002), pp. 296–312.

²Carl Dahlhaus, "Grundlagen der Musikgeschichte", in: Carl Dahlhaus, *Gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg. von Hermann Danuser, Laaber: Laaber Verlag 2000, vol. 1, p. 71.

seiner eigenen seelischen Persönlichkeit."³ In other words, for Brahms the past is not a crutch on which one leans, but rather a source of inspiration to create something new.

A fine example of historicist composition from early in Brahms's career is the Organ Fugue in A-flat Minor, WoO 8, composed in 1856 as part of his counterpoint exchange with Joseph Joachim. This fugue is a classic counterfugue or *Gegenfuge*, in which the answer to the subject is already in inversion and in which the two countersubjects are treated similarly. The young Brahms infuses the most intricate baroque counterpoint with an advanced Romantic sensibility of harmony and tone color.

As Brahms matured, this historical sensibility developed in many ways. Perhaps the most famous example from later in his career of what we might call his 'historicist romanticism' is the finale of Fourth Symphony (1885), a chaconne based on an eight-measure melody subjected to 30 variations. The finale of Brahms's Fourth Symphony had an enormous impact on later composers. Anton Webern's Passacaglia, op. 1, is one prominent example. In 1895 the young Max Reger composed an Organ Suite, op. 16, with a passacaglia finale in same key as Brahms, E minor. This was the work he sent to Brahms and that initiated their brief relationship.

Reger's organ suite is the work of a young man full of ideas and musical technique, but overall it doesn't really transcend his models. He might be said to be flexing his historicist muscles, which are not yet very well trained or controlled. What the passacaglia also shows is Reger's interest in the variation form as a powerful means of historicist expression.

This interest returned in full force during the period 1903 to 1905, when seven Reger works make use of the theme and variation form (Table 1). The structure of theme and variations held a special attraction for Reger at this time, I believe, because it offered the greatest range of possibilities for historicist modernism, specifically for a mixing or juxtaposing of various techniques or compositional styles. This juxtaposition is especially apparent in the two works that I would argue represent the summit of Reger's historicist modernism, both written in the summer of 1904: the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Bach*, op. 81, for solo piano; and the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Beethoven*, op. 86, for two pianos four hands.

³Max Reger, "Degeneration und Regeneration in der Musik", in: *Neue Musik-Zeitung* 29 (1907), reprinted in *"Die Konfusion in der Musik": Felix Draeseke's Kampfschrift von 1906 und ihre Folgen*, hrsg. Susanne Shigihara, Bonn: Gudrun Schröder 1990, p. 256.

Table 1: Reger Variations 1903–1905

1903	op. 73	Introduktion, Variationen und Fuge über ein Originalthema (Orgel)
1904	op. 74	Streichquartett d-Moll, III. Satz
1904	op. 77a	Serenade für Flöte, Violine, und Viola, II. Satz
1904	op. 78	Sonate für Violoncello und Klavier, III. Satz
1904	op. 81	Variationen und Fuge über ein Thema von Joh. Seb. Bach (Klavier)
1904 [orch. 1915]	op. 86	Variationen und Fuge über ein Thema von Beethoven (zwei Klaviere)
1905	op. 84	Sonate für Violine und Klavier, III. Satz

These are two works of which Reger was immensely proud and which he placed on the same musical level. He called op. 81 “das Beste, was ich bis jetzt geschrieben habe.”⁴ And of the Beethoven variations he wrote: “qualitativ steht op. 86 dem op. 81 mindestens gleich.”⁵ In an important sense the two works form a pair in which Reger at once pays historical tribute to and in a more modern sense reimagines the work of two of the masters he most admired, Bach and Beethoven. In 1915, Reger arranged (and abbreviated) the Beethoven variations for orchestra.

Reger sometimes programmed the Bach and Beethoven variations together on a single concert program. The Bach variations would be played at the beginning by one of the pianists that championed Reger’s music, such as August Schmid-Lindner or Henriette Schelle. Then at the end of the program Reger would join the pianist to play the second piano part in the Beethoven. The works were thus like giant ‘book ends’ at the concert.

⁴Max Reger, *Briefe an Karl Straube*, hrsg. Susanne Popp, Bonn: Dümmler 1986, p. 63.

⁵Max Reger, *Briefe an die Verleger Lauterbach & Kuhn*, Teil 1, hrsg. Susanne Popp, Bonn: Dümmler 1993, p. 359.

Or as one critic wrote, the two works stood “wie zwei Memnonskolosse am Ein- und Ausgang des Konzertes”.⁶

This programming encouraged critics to compare the two works, something that Reger clearly anticipated. Most critics found the Bach variations immensely challenging, but also rewarding, to hear. At the end of the evening the Beethoven variations came as a kind of relief, as something more immediately enjoyable and attractive. In the journal *Die Musik* the critic Rudolph Breithaupt placed both works at the highest level of Reger's music:

Den grössten Eindruck hinterliess Max Reger mit seinen neuen ‘Variationen und Fuge über ein Thema von J.S. Bach,’ op. 81, sowie über ein Thema von Beethoven op. 86 für zwei Klaviere. . . . Diese beiden Werke können für die Entwicklung der absoluten Musik von entscheidender Bedeutung werden; denn nicht allein die stupende technische Meisterschaft, die unerschöpfliche Kraft in der Erfindung origineller Formen und Formmittel, die klanglichen Kombinationen interessieren hier, als vielmehr der Wille und das Ringen nach einem grossen Ausdruck.⁷

Hugo Leichtentritt had a similar opinion:

Mit ihnen allein [opp. 81 und 86] hätte Reger sich in die Reihe der großen Meister gestellt. Angesichts solcher überragender Leistungen hat die Kritik bescheiden zurückzustehen. Da ist nichts zu kritisieren; es ist nur mit wahrer Freude laut zu verkünden, daß uns wieder so Großes und Schönes geschenkt ist, daß in unserer Zeit sich Kräfte regen, die zur Hoffnung berechtigen, unsere Kunst werde nicht ärmlich zurückstehen gegen die große Vergangenheit.⁸

A critic for the *Musikalisches Wochenblatt* evaluated the two works in a way that specifically, if also somewhat grudgingly, highlights their historicist modernism:

Deutlicher denn je verrät Max Reger mit seinen jüngsten Werken [opp. 81 und 86] seine Absichten und Ziele. Form und Inhalt weisen

⁶Max Vánca, *Neue musikalische Presse* (Wien) 14 (1905), p. 70. I am very grateful to Jürgen Schaarwächter of the Max-Reger-Institut for providing me with this and other contemporary reviews of Reger's opp. 81 and 86 cited in this essay.

⁷*Die Musik* 4 (1904/05), vol. 15 (3rd quarter), № 13 (April 1905), p. 58.

⁸Hermann Wilske, *Max Reger: Zur Rezeption in seiner Zeit*, Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel 1995, p. 199.

darauf hin, dass dieser scheinbarer Allermodernste unmittelbar an unsere Altmeister Bach und Beethoven anknüpfen will. Aus deren Geiste schienen die hochwertigen Schöpfungen Reger's geboren.⁹

One element that distinguishes both the Bach and Beethoven variations is the nature and scope of their themes. Reger's models, especially Beethoven's *Eroica* and *Diabelli Variations* and Brahms's *Handel Variations*, tended to be based on short themes that were often in binary form. By contrast, the themes for Reger's Bach and Beethoven variations are much more complex. For the Bach variations, the theme, suggested to Reger by Schmid-Lindner, comprises the entire fourteen-measure opening instrumental ritornello of the duet "Sein' Allmacht zu ergründen" from Bach's Cantata 128, *Auf Christi Himmelfahrt allein*. For the Beethoven set, Reger chose a complete piece – the Bagatelle op. 119, № 11, comprising four different phrases that with extensions and repetitions extend 22 measures.

The nature of these themes, or really 'theme complexes', stimulated Reger to write variations that range widely over different keys, meters, and musical styles. In each case, Reger mostly forgoes keeping intact the basic structure of the original theme. Instead, he chooses individual elements or motives from the themes that are often treated in the style of a fantasy or improvisation.

I will focus mainly on the Bach variations, but I will make a few observations about the Beethoven set in its original form for two pianos. Here (see Table 2) we have twelve variations and a fugue. The disposition of keys is unusual. Reger spends very little time in the home key of B-flat. After the theme, he moves to G major, then C minor. He returns to B-flat only in Variations 4 and 8 (and quite obliquely in var. 8) and then in the two last variations as he prepares the final fugue. Other keys are quite remote from the tonic, especially D major and B-minor. Parallel to the tonal wandering is Reger's treatment of the theme, which becomes more abstract and distant through variation 9, often featuring just elements of the head motive.

⁹ *Musikalisches Wochenblatt* 36, № 24 (1905), p. 472.

Table 2: Max Reger, Variationen und Fuge über ein Thema von Beethoven, op. 86

Form	Tonart	Tempo	Taktart
Thema	B-Dur	Andante	C
Var. 1	G-Dur	Un poco più lento	C
Var. 2	c-Moll	Agitato	12/8
Var. 3	F-Dur	Andantino grazioso	4/8
Var. 4	B-Dur	Andante sostenuto	C
Var. 5	b-Moll	Appassionato	9/8
Var. 6	D-Dur	Andante sostenuto	3/4
Var. 7	d-Moll	Vivace	C
Var. 8	Ces-Dur → B-Dur	Sostenuto	C
Var. 9	h-Moll	Vivace	C
Var. 10	d-Moll	Poco vivace	6/8
Var. 11	B-Dur	Andante con grazia	2/4
Var. 12	B-Dur	Allegro pomposo	C
Fuge	B-Dur	Allegro con spirito	C

These kinds of compositional procedures are even more prominent in the Bach variations. As suggested earlier, 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 (see Table 3).

As Elmar Budde remarks, Reger's op. 81 presents a "ein merkwürdiger Paradox: dass Reger über ein Thema Variationen schreibt, über das man im Sinne des traditionellen Erwartungshorizontes keine Variationen schreiben kann."¹⁰ I would also like to acknowledge here the fine essay on the Bach

¹⁰Elmar 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*, hrsg. von Susanne Popp und Susanne Shigihara, Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel 1988, p. 129.

variations by Egon Voss, who suggests a number of historical models and ways of hearing or analyzing the piece that correspond or resonate very much with my own.¹¹

Table 3: Max Reger, Variationen und Fuge über ein Thema von Bach, op. 81

Form	Tonart	Tempo	Taktart	Beziehung zum Thema / Stil
Thema	h-Moll	Andante	6/8	historisch
Var. 1	h-Moll	L'istesso tempo	6/8	nah, historisch
Var. 2	h-Moll		18/16	nah, historisch
Var. 3	h-Moll	Grave assai	6/8	fern, zeitgenössisch
Var. 4	h-Moll	Vivace	6/8	nah, historisch
Var. 5	h-Moll	Vivace	6/8	fern, historisch
Var. 6	h-Moll	Allegro moderato	2/4	nah, historisch
Var. 7	h-Moll	Adagio	6/8	nah, historisch
Var. 8	C-Dur	Vivace	6/8	fern, zeitgenössisch
Var. 9	H-Dur	Grave e sempre molto espressivo	18/16	fern, zeitgenössisch
Var. 10	gis-Moll	Poco vivace	6/8	fern, zeitgenössisch
Var. 11	cis-Moll	Allegro agitato	2/4	fern, zeitgenössisch
Var. 12	H-Dur	Andante sostenuto	6/8	fern, zeitgenössisch
Var. 13	h-Moll	Vivace	2/4	fern, zeitgenössisch
Var. 14	h-Moll	Con moto	6/8	nah, historisch
Fuge	h-Moll → Dur	Sostenuto	C	historisch und zeitgenössisch

Although the scheme and succession of tonalities is in some ways more conservative than in the Beethoven variations – Reger spends more time in

¹¹Egon Voss, “Stein des Anstoßes: Zu Max Regers *Bach-Variationen* op. 81”, in: *Reger-Studien 7: Festschrift für Susanne Popp*, hrsg. von Siegfried Schmalzriedt und Jürgen Schaarwächter, Stuttgart: Carus 2004, pp. 219–228.

the home key in the Bach variations – the composer avoids the traditional trajectory that places the more remote variations exclusively later in the piece. On Table 3 I have labeled as ‘nah’ a variation that follows the original ritornello closely at least as to the sequence of thematic ideas. The ones I have labeled ‘fern’ abandon the ABC formal structure. In these variations, one has the impression that fragments of the original theme are being cited, recollected, or mediated upon, rather than ‘varied’.

I will give just a few examples. Variation 3 – begins with very free music, then the A theme emerges in bass only to be interrupted two times by a dissonant outburst that seems unrelated to any aspect of the original ritornello. Only at the very end does the last, cadential part of the original theme reappear and close off the variation. Variation 8 is about as remote from the original theme as you can get. It is in C major, and there is no direct citation of theme, as in Variation 3.

A different but related way of thinking of op. 81 is that there is an implied past and present. The past (what I label as “historisch”) 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. 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 (“zeitgenössisch”) – the present of 1904.

The fugue really combines “historisch” and “zeitgenössisch” in a way that culminates this monumental set. 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. Any attempt on the part of a listener to follow the standard narrative of a variation set is thus thwarted.

We know that Heinrich Schenker strongly disapproved of the Bach variations, devoting in *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik* an entire analysis of the work as a “Gegenbeispiel”. He felt that Reger had confused variation form with a fantasy on individual elements of the theme. The result is incoherent and arbitrary.¹² Schenker clearly had little understanding of Reger’s complex historicism as manifested in the Bach Variations.

¹²Heinrich Schenker, *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik*, München: Drei Masken Verlag 1926, vol. 2, pp. 171–192.

The period around 1903–1904 has been described by Susanne Popp as being for Reger’s musical style “auf dem Zenit der Komplikation”. She has described the Violin Sonata, op. 72, as “eine musikalische Selbstaussage über die Künstlerproblematik”, which has also been seen as characteristic of the contemporary novels by many German writers.¹³ With the Bach and Beethoven variations, I think, we have a different kind of ‘künstlerische Aussage’. To my mind, Reger is not thumbing his nose – *er dreht nicht die Nase* – at the critics. Rather, with the fragmentation of the variation form and the elements of the theme, he is acknowledging the contingency and fragmentation of contemporary musical language.

To my mind, the nature of the Bach and Beethoven variations reflects a musical *Sprachkrise* very much analogous to what some contemporary writers acknowledged. The most famous expression of this *Sprachkrise* is that of Hugo von Hofmannsthal in the Chandos-Brief of 1902, almost exactly contemporary with Reger’s variation works. Here Hofmannsthal describes Chandos’s increasing inability to use language to communicate the human experience. The author can no longer express himself in any meaningful fashion:

Es gelang mir nicht mehr, sie mit dem vereinfachenden Blick der Gewohnheit zu erfassen. Es zerfiel mir alles in Teile, die Teile wieder in Teile und nichts mehr ließ sich mit einem Begriff umspannen. Die einzelnen Worte schwammen um mich; sie gerannen zu Augen, die mich anstarrten und in die ich wieder hineinstarren muß: Wirbel sind sie, in die hinabzusehen mich schwindelt, die sich unaufhaltsam drehen und durch die hindurch man ins Leere kommt.¹⁴

Similarly in Reger’s variations, we have a sense that all falls into pieces, and that even though there is a central musical theme, it cannot unite or encompass (‘umspannen’) these fragments.

Yet Reger does not necessarily share the despair of Hugo von Hofmannsthal in the face of the disintegration of meaning. In the Bach and Beethoven variations, we sense that he is almost heroically struggling against fragmentation. He acknowledges it, presents it – but then especially in the triumphant final fugues, seeks to overcome it.

¹³Susanne Popp, *Max Reger: Werk statt Leben*, Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel 2015, p. 189.

¹⁴Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke*, Berlin: Fischer 1924, vol. 2, p. 181.

However we choose to explain the complex temporal-structural frameworks of the Bach and Beethoven variations, it is clear that Reger writes directly into them 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, in ways that mark him as a great historicist modernist.