

Arnold Schoenberg and Max Reger: Some Parallels

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On July 1, 1918, Alban Berg wrote to his wife:

Schoenberg has a marvelous idea, to start next season another society, setting out to perform musical works from the period "Mahler to the present" once a week for its members; perhaps, should the work be a difficult one, to perform it more than once (Berg, *Letters*, 1971, 225).

The organization was known as the *Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen* (The Society for Private Concerts). Its aim, as Alban Berg presented it in its prospectus, was:

... to give artists and art-lovers a real and accurate knowledge of modern music.

One circumstance, which contributes to a large extent to the relationship of the public to modern music, is that any impression they receive of it is inevitably one of unclarity.... The performances are for the most part unclear. And in particular the public's consciousness of its needs and desires is unclear....

... The desire to achieve clarity at last, and thus take into account such needs and desires as are justified, this was one of the reasons that moved Arnold Schoenberg to found the society (Reich, 1971, 120).

It is well known that Schoenberg quite often included works by Reger in the society's programs. Between 1918 and 1921, the years in which the society existed, 154 works by modern composers were performed, including 24 by Reger. His compositions were performed more frequently than anyone else's (for comparison's sake, only 16 works by Debussy were performed, 12 of Bartok's, and 12 of Schoenberg himself).

Schoenberg explained his approach to the concert programs in a letter to Alexander von Zemlinsky in October 1922:

... Reger must in my view be done often;

1. because he has written a lot;
2. because he is already dead and people are not yet clear about him. (I consider him a genius.) (Schoenberg, 1965, 80)

Schoenberg was already a great admirer of Reger in the first decade of the 20th century. In 1904, together with Alexander von Zemlinsky, Schoenberg founded the *Vereinigung schaffender Tonkünstler* (Society of Creative Musicians), which promoted the performance of modern works, including Reger's. We know from Frisch's research that:

Reger himself joined the *Vereinigung* in July and agreed to participate as a pianist (playing Bach transcriptions) in a concert on 20 February 1905. ¹

As is apparent from the *Vereinigung's* concert program of 20 January 1905 (a copy is held at the Arnold Schoenberg Institute), plans were changed somewhat for the February concert, which was now announced to include the Reger D-minor Quartet, op. 74. At the actual concert, however, the quartet was not performed; the Violin Sonata in C major, op. 72, was substituted, played by Arnold Rosé and Bruno Walter. (Frisch, 1993, 212)

Schoenberg later remarked how sorry he had been that he had not been able to better promote Reger's works. On August 7, 1932, in a note to himself, Schoenberg wrote:

It's amazing that I never did anything for Reger. But my friends know that I often planned to do something. I had some influence, but my influence was so negligible....²

Some of Schoenberg's remarks give the impression that he felt a kinship with Reger, regarding him as an artist in the same camp and a comrade in the struggle for innovative art paving the way for the future.

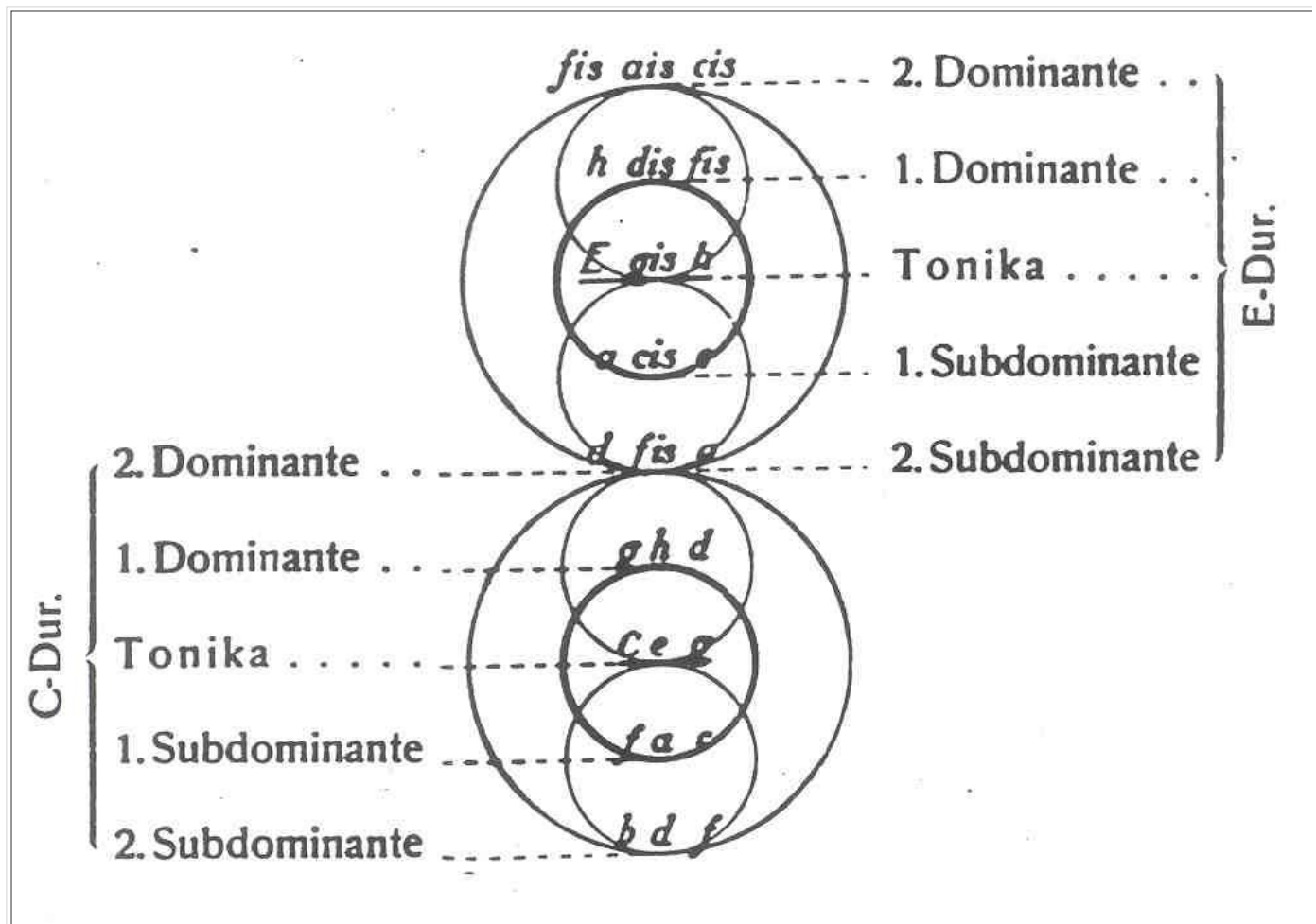
The most interesting aspect of the comparison between Schoenberg and Reger is their attitude toward harmony. In his 1934 article "Problems of Harmony," Schoenberg noted the two main problems of modern music: the problem of tonality and the problem of dissonance.

The two composers' attitudes toward tonality reflect quite clearly both the similarities and the differences between their musical outlooks. Both sought to invent a new musical language. Reger expressed his attitude as follows:

I say: Tonality as Fetus defined it fifty years ago is too limited for 1902. I consistently act in accordance with Liszt's statement: Any chord can be followed by any other chord. (*Neues Max-Reger-Brevier*, 1948, 76)

The expansion of the boundaries of tonality as interpreted by Reger and Schoenberg can be seen in the two tables. The first, which is Reger's, depicts graphically one of the laws of logic that he established for harmony. According to Reger, the relationship between C major and E major, for example, can be explained by means of the shared chord D-F#-A, which is the double dominant of C major and the double subdominant of E major. This is how Reger sometimes interpreted chords that were very far from the central tonic as double dominants or double subdominants.

Example 1



Hermann Grabner, *Regers Harmonik* (Muenchen: Halbreiter, 1920), p. 7

Two examples from pieces by Reger demonstrate that almost any chord can be justified:

Example 2

14. op. 89, Var. V. *Appassionato*.

f cresc.

harmonische Phrase

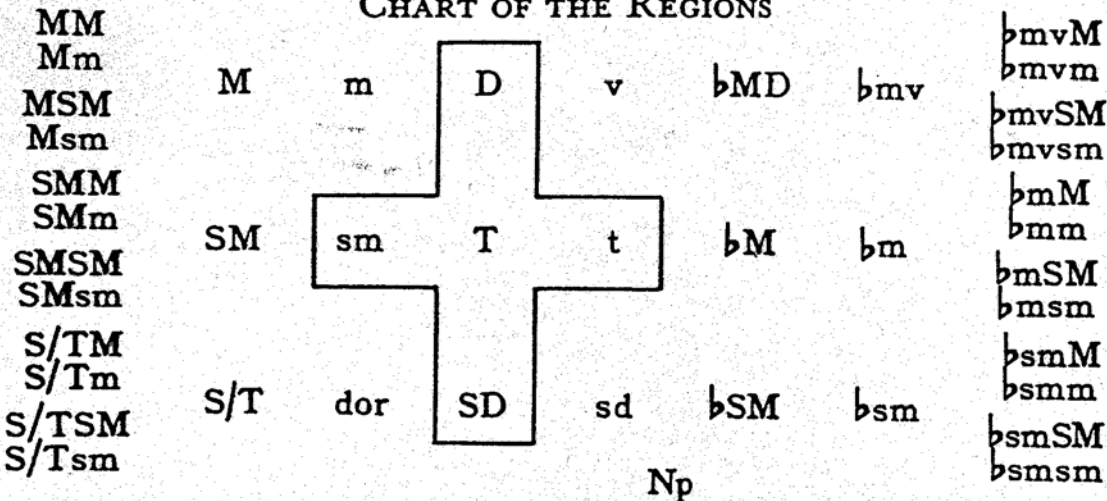
Tonika.
 Subdominante.
 Parallele der
 Subdominante.
 Neapolitanisch.
 Subdomin. zum
 neapol. Ces-Dur.
 Dominante.
 Dominante der
 Dominante.
 Dominante.
 Selbständ. Dom.
 d. Subdominante.
 Neapolitanisch.
 Domin. zum nea-
 politan. Ces-Dur.
 Neapolitanisch.
 Selbständ. Dom.
 des mit d. Subdo-
 minante terzver-
 wandten C-Moll.

Reger's laws of harmonic logic were published by his student, Hermann Grabner, who summarized his studies with Reger in Leipzig (Reger taught in Leipzig from 1907 until his death in 1916). From Grabner's writings, we know that Reger remained loyal to his system of tonal harmony until the end of his life.

According to Grabner, Schoenberg was very impressed with a booklet authored by Reger entitled *Beiträge zur Modulationslehre* (On the Theory of Modulation). Evidence of the similarity in the two composers' views on the expansion of tonality can be seen in the table that Schoenberg presents in his book *Structural Functions of Harmony*.

Example 3

CHART OF THE REGIONS



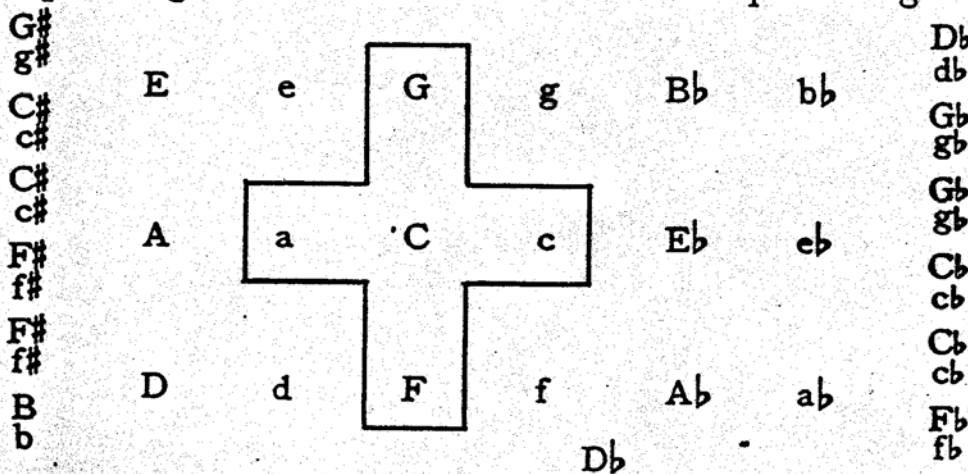
ABBREVIATIONS

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| T means tonic | Np means Neapolitan |
| D „ dominant | dor „ Dorian |
| SD „ subdominant | S/T „ supertonic |
| t „ tonic minor | bM „ flat mediant major |
| sd „ subdominant minor | bSM „ flat submediant major |
| v „ five-minor | bMD „ flat mediant major's dominant |
| sm „ submediant minor | bM „ flat mediant minor |
| m „ mediant minor | bSM „ flat submediant minor |
| SM „ submediant major | bmv „ flat mediant minor's five |
| M „ mediant major | |

[N.B. All symbols in capitals refer to major keys; those in small letters to minor keys.]

The first symbol always indicates the relation to the tonic. The second symbol shows the relation to the region indicated by the first symbol. Thus: **Mm** reads “mediant major's mediant minor” (in **C**, a minor region on **g#**); **SMsm** reads “submediant major's submediant minor” (in **C**, a minor region on **f#**); **bSM** reads “flat submediant minor's submediant major” (in **C** a major region on **Fb**), etc.

The tonics of the regions of **C** major are presented below, corresponding to the relations shown in the preceding chart.



Arnold Schoenberg, *Structural Functions of Harmony* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 20

Here the boundaries of tonality were broadened: C major includes all the triads of the 12 notes in the octave. *Structural Functions of Harmony*, first published in 1954, sums up Schoenberg's many years of teaching experience. However, if we go back in time to 1911, to his book *Harmonielehre* (Theory of Harmony), we find the term *extended tonality*, on which he comments ³:

... we can introduce into every key almost any property of other, quite distant keys.... Indeed, the key may be expressed exclusively by chords other than its own diatonic chords; yet we do not then consider the tonality cancelled. (Schoenberg, 1978, 29)

Here one can see the obvious similarity with Reger's ideas on the same subject, i.e., the expansion of the boundaries of tonality in the first two decades of the 20th century.

However, Schoenberg's statements are often related to his own practice as a composer. Based on his experience, he is sure that:

A piece can also be intelligible to us when the relationship to the fundamental tone is not treated as basic.... Many examples give evidence that nothing is lost from the impression of completeness if the tonality is merely hinted at, yes, even if it is erased. And—without saying that ultramodern music is really atonal: for it may be perhaps that we simply do not yet know to explain the tonality, or something corresponding to tonality, in modern music.... (Schoenberg, 1978, 128–129)

Reger did not mention such things when describing his laws of harmony, and this was not by chance. He thought that music without clear tonal centers could not make any sense—at least not for him personally. In a letter to the pianist August Stradal, a student of Liszt's and Bruckner's, he wrote:

I know the *Three Pieces for Piano* ⁴ by Arnold Schoenberg. I for one can't follow them. I don't know if these pieces can in any way be called "music" anymore. My brain is too old-fashioned for this. (Lindner, 1922, 335)

Remarks like these, coming from Reger, a great admirer of Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* (Transfigured Night), speak for themselves. When Schoenberg came up with the idea of the emancipation of dissonance and spoke about "the merely gradual distinction between consonance and dissonance" (Schoenberg, 1978, 386) and a new way of treating dissonance ("... the three alleged laws of dissonance treatment—descend, ascend, or sustain—were long ago overtaken by the hoary reality of a fourth law: skip away from the dissonance," *ibid.*), Reger was sure that "dissonance has meaning only if it is followed by consonance" (*Neues Max-Reger-Brevier*, 78).

Thus we see that the two men had similar views on tonality but were generations apart with respect to dissonance: Schoenberg's thinking was future-oriented, whereas Reger retained the norms of the late Romantic era. Schoenberg's innovations were much broader and more far-reaching than Reger's.

Another characteristic shared by the two composers seems to be the direct opposite of innovation. It can be expressed as a very specific sort of conservatism. Reger may be called a "conservative revolutionary," a term that Willi Reich, the biographer of Schoenberg and Berg, used in reference to Schoenberg. Reger and Schoenberg both felt a connection not only to Richard Wagner, ⁵ the leading innovator among their predecessors, but also to composers considered much more conservative, such as Johannes Brahms.

Despite his admiration for Wagner, it was Brahms whom Reger (in 1891) called the great Walhalla of his day. Later, in 1894, Reger referred to Brahms as "the greatest of living composers."

In Reger's words,

Brahms is nonetheless now so advanced that all truly insightful, good musicians, unless they want to make fools of themselves, must acknowledge him as the greatest of living composers.... The Brahms fog [*Brahmsnebel*] will remain. And I much prefer it to the white heat [*Gluthitze*] of Wagner and Strauss (Frisch, 1993, 3).

Reger's love for Brahms was manifested most clearly in the piano piece "Resignation," which was subtitled "April 3, 1897—J. Brahms+." Here Reger quotes the beginning of the second movement of Brahms's Fourth Symphony.

Example 4

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is for Piano, with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (G major). The time signature is 3/4. The music consists of a series of chords and melodic lines, marked with *ppp* and *una corda*. The bottom staff is for Pno., with a bass clef and the same key signature and time signature. The music consists of a series of chords and melodic lines, marked with *morendo*. The two staves are connected by a brace on the left.

This musical gesture symbolizes the respect that the young Reger had for his predecessor. But even more impressive is Reger's attitude toward Brahms as an innovator who used classical forms with amazing freedom of thought. Schoenberg, too, regarded Brahms not as a conservative, but as a very progressive artist. In his famous 1947 article "Brahms the Progressive," Schoenberg states:

Progress in music consists in the development of methods of presentation which correspond to the conditions just discussed. It is the purpose of this essay to prove that Brahms, the classicist, the academician, was a great innovator in the realm of musical language, that, in fact, he was a great progressive (Schoenberg, 1975, 401).

Among Brahms's many achievements, Schoenberg emphasized asymmetry as one of the characteristic features of Brahms's music. This idea was later further developed by Mahler, Reger, Strauss, and Schoenberg himself. Schoenberg considers such structures to pave the way for an unrestricted musical language, developmentally free—that is, paving the way for his ideal. Schoenberg believed that both he and Reger had invested a great deal of effort in inventing such a language.

In another article, "Criteria for the Evaluation of Music," Schoenberg mentions the idea of "developing variation" as a means of liberating modern music from simplistic, exact repetitions that even composers like Debussy and Puccini were "guilty" of using. In Schoenberg's opinion, Reger, Mahler and he himself had worked hard to become free of the monotony of exact repetitions of the same material. In this context, Schoenberg stresses Brahms's contribution to innovation in musical language.

But Brahms was not the only one of their "conservative" predecessors whom Reger and Schoenberg considered an innovator. They also regarded J. S. Bach as a composer who formed the basis for the future. In 1900 Reger said, "To me, Bach is the beginning and end of all music. All true progress is based on him." Schoenberg made many emotional statements about Bach, and even once jokingly stated his credo:

I used to say: Bach is the first composer with twelve tones. This was a joke, of course. I did not even know whether somebody before him might not have deserved this title. But the truth on which this statement is based is that the Fugue No. 24 of the first volume of the Well-Tempered Clavier, in B minor, begins with a *Dux* in which all twelve tones appear. I have tried to find another example of this kind, but have not succeeded. I could, however, check only a part of his whole work. (Ibid., 393)

In any case, to Schoenberg and Reger, Bach was an unflagging source of inspiration. Bach's era is reflected in their works in reminders of the *alte Stil* ("old style"). Each of them composed a piece entitled *Suite im alten Stil* (Suite in the Old Style)—Reger in 1906 and Schoenberg in 1934. Dika Newlin, one of Schoenberg's students, suggests that the two works might be related:

One looks at the movements of ... [Schoenberg's] Suite for String Orchestra ... and thinks of Reger. Schoenberg had always been interested in the music of Reger and had admired many things in it.... Certain phrases of Reger's style are recalled by the music of the Suite, with its busily moving counterpoint and its strongly chromaticized harmony based on

traditional foundations. (Newlin, 1947, 275)

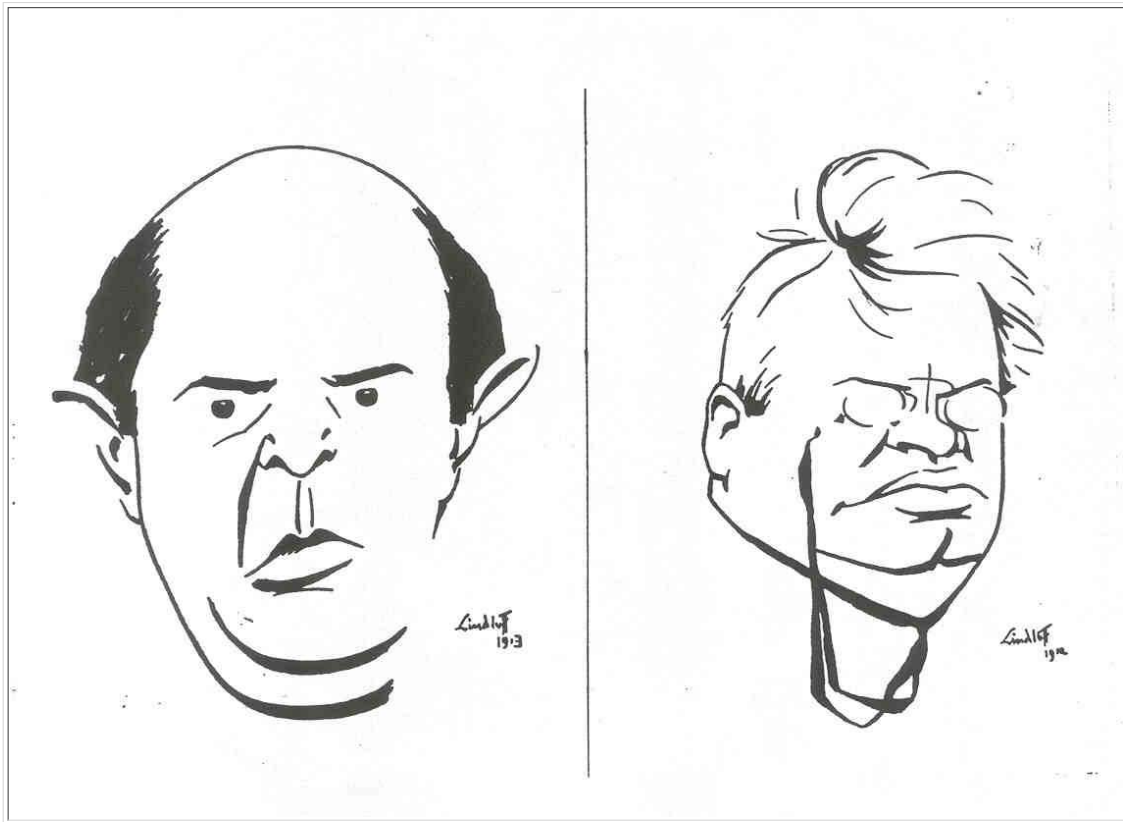
Reger and Schoenberg are also quite similar in terms of the disorientation caused by their music. Of course, both had admirers in their lifetimes, and today, too, there are people who are impressed by their work. (I am comparing neither their talent nor their historical importance; I am merely pointing out some common features in their works and personalities, which assured their legacies a similar fate.) Berg—Schoenberg's student—noted the discomfort caused by Schoenberg's and Reger's works, and gave his opinion in his 1924 article "Warum ist Schoenbergs Musik so schwer verständlich?" (Why is Schoenberg's Music so Hard to Comprehend?). Berg believed that the main reason for this difficulty is the structural asymmetry of the phrases and periods. This asymmetry, he maintained, is also what makes Reger's works hard to comprehend. In Berg's words:

... there is nothing new about a theme that avoids two or four-bar construction. On the contrary. As Bussler⁶ had said quite correctly, "Precisely the greatest masters of form [i.e., Mozart and Beethoven] like free and venturesome thematic construction and are not at all inclined to squeeze themselves into even-numbered combinations of bars. But how rarely we actually find this in the Classicists (with the possible exception of Schubert); and how utterly this ability ... was lost in Romantic music, in the music of Wagner and thus in the whole new German school (not counting the melodic style of Brahms's folksongs)... Mahler's music, and Debussy's, too (to include a master of quite another style) is almost exclusively two and four-bar in its melodic construction. The one exception—apart from Schoenberg—is Reger, who favours a rather free construction which, as he says, is reminiscent of prose. This is the reason for his music's relative lack of popularity. In fact, it is the only reason, I would assert, for neither the other attributes of his thematic writing (motivic evolution of crowded phrases), nor his harmony, nor his contrapunctal writing, are likely to keep his musical language from being understood. (Berg, 1971, 22).

In 1973, almost fifty years after the publication of Berg's article, Carl Dahlhaus published his article "Warum ist Regers Musik so schwer verständlich?" (Dahlhaus, 1973, 134), obviously referring to Berg. He believed that Reger's works were hard to comprehend because his aesthetic strategy was erroneous: due to the lack of diversity in the thematic material and the absence of contrast, listeners were unable to distinguish between themes and therefore had some difficulty in orienting themselves within the form. We know from the biographies of the two composers, however, that their contemporaries' frequent failure to understand them did not make them change their ways.

Two expressive caricatures of Reger and Schoenberg were printed in the German journal *Die Musik* in 1912 (Example 5).

Example 5



These caricatures seem to portray three traits shared by the two men:

- a strong, uncompromising character
- a quick temper
- self-assurance

They both could have agreed with Anton Webern's aphorism: "To live is to defend a form"; I consider this to be the most important shared message of Max Reger and Arnold Schoenberg.

NOTES

[1.](#) Frisch based his conclusion on letters from Oskar Posa to Schoenberg, 12 July and 26 August 1904, *Schoenberg Collection*, Library of Congress (Frisch, 1993, 212, n. 27).

[2.](#) This note belongs to the Arnold Schoenberg Institute. The text is published in *Max Reger. Am Wendepunkt zur Moderne. Ein Bildband mit Dokumenten aus den Beständen des Max Reger Institut*. Bonn, Bouvier Verlag Grundmann, 1987, p. 162.

[3.](#) All quotations are taken from the 1978 English translation (see Schoenberg 1978).

[4.](#) Reger is referring to *Three Pieces for Piano*, op. 11.

[5.](#) Reger once expressed his feelings as follows: "One doesn't speak about one's love to one's mother. When I heard Parsifal in Bayreuth for the first time at the age of fifteen, I sobbed for two weeks and after that became a musician" (*Neues Max-Reger-Brevier*, 1948, 23). Schoenberg was also influenced by Wagner during his early period, while composing his programmatic works; later, when he devised the 12-tone method, Schoenberg was more interested in Bach and aspired to achieve the same virtuosity in polyphonic texture.

[6.](#) Ludwig Bussler (1838-1900) was a German theorist who wrote about many musical subjects, including harmony, counterpoint and form. Bussler's theoretical works were widely accepted due to their practical focus. Schoenberg used Bussler's *Musikalische Formenlehre* in his teaching. See Janna Saslaw, "Bussler," *NGD* (2nd edition), 4:678.

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