

## Traces of Delicate Lyricism among "Sausages, Kohlrabi Stew and Plum Pudding"? On possible Grieg-influences in Max Reger's Chamber music

Max Reger (1873–1916) is not a frequent name in the Grieg literature. The reasons why are many. Firstly, Reger, who was practically unknown as a composer before 1904, belongs to the generation *after* Grieg and hence he was never considered likely to have given any kind of influence *on* Grieg and his music. Secondly, in Norway Reger was never to be considered as a "big name" in music history. Why then should Norwegian scholars take the trouble to search for "Griegian" influences in his music, as they have done in the music of Debussy, Ravel and Bartók? Last not least: Grieg himself seems to have rejected Reger's music totally.

In the last two years of Grieg's life Henri Hinrichsen, who ran the publisher firm C.F. Peters, was eager to bring Reger and Grieg together. In this period Hinrichsen failed in helping Reger out of an unfavourable contract to the publishers Lauterbach & Kuhn, but still he was able to publish some of Reger's works, among which the most prominent was the Piano Quintet (Op. 64), undoubtedly one of the least "understandable" work Reger ever wrote. Hinrichsen sent it to Grieg for Christmas 1905, but Grieg replied 6<sup>th</sup> January 1906: "Vielen Dank für das Regersche Quintett. Das ist allerdings 'Plumpudding'." In a letter to Julius Röntgen a couple of weeks later (21<sup>st</sup> January 1906), Grieg repeated his negative view on Reger:

Deine Bewunderung von Reger hängt auf das Engste mit Deiner "Deutschheit" zusammen. Peters hat mir ein Klavierquintett von ihm geschickt, das so tendentiös polyfon ist, dass *ich* es wenigstens nicht verdauen kann. Ich habe immer Polyfonie als *Mittel*, nicht als *Zweck* aufgefasst. So ist es bei den

grossen Meistern. Da steht immer Polyfonie und Homofonie in schönster Harmonie. Das ist mein Ideal und wird es immer bleiben.

Dass man jetzt Wagners arrogante Längen auf die Kammermusik überträgt! Durch Längen zu imponieren, ist doch billig! Durch Compliziertheit ebenfalls. Aber ich verstehe überhaupt Nichts, weil ich Norweger bin, das muss das Geheimniss sein. Was jetzt kommen *muss*, ist weiss Gott nicht was noch Complicierteres! Darauf schwöre ich! Und damit schliesse ich!

It is interesting to note that Grieg seems to describe Reger's style as particularly "German". His reactions are in fact very similar to German critics like Rudolf Louis, who accused Reger of "Ueberfülle und Ueberladenheit". After listening to Reger's Beethoven Variations (Op. 86) in Amsterdam, Grieg goes on with the same view on Reger in his diary of 8th May 1906:

At denne Musik tiljubles i Tydskland som genial er et sørgelig Tegn på Dekadence. Det er blytung Forstoppelse, intet Andet. Det er oprørende at bane sig frem på den sunde Naturs Bekostning. Jeg er liberal, ja til det Yderste og dømmer ikke efter første Gangs Høren. Men her gjør jeg en Undtagelse, thi dette storsnudedede Væsen gjorde mig rasende. Hvad er dog Teknik andet end Middel? Og hvad er det så for en Teknik? Overfyldthed af Polyfoni, Mangel på Lys og Luft. Hvad nytter så et enkelt Glimt i dette Øde? —

When Grieg visited Leipzig in spring 1907, he actually joined Reger and his wife at a dinner at Hinrichsen's. After this first and only meeting Grieg stated in a letter to Frants Beyer 19<sup>th</sup> April 1907, just a few months before he died:

Kommer netop hjem fra Middag hos Hinrichsen (Peters), hvor jeg traf en af de moderne 'berømte', ja pludselig berømte tyske Komponister, Max Reger, der laver Kålrabistap og Pølser til 1ste Ret og Plumpudding til 2den.

As stated by Helmut Wirth—author of the mainly biographical article "Max Reger und Edvard Grieg" (1971)—Reger’s view on Grieg was a much more positive one, especially in his early career. Grieg's music was widely known in German homes and was often played on concerts in the spa town of Wiesbaden, Reger's hometown 1890–98. On the manuscript to his Piano pieces *Grüße an die Jugend* (1898) Reger has written: “Meister Edvard Grieg verehrungsvoll zugeeignet”. Composed as a fughetta on the tones *E-d-(v-)a-(r-)d G-(ri-)e-g* the first of these pieces has an even closer and symbolic affinity to Grieg.



*Max Reger: GrüÙe an die Jugend (1898), Grieg-Anagram*

One has to search through the anagram to see the connection to Grieg in this piece. Much more evident is the Grieg-influence in the finale of Reger's second Sonatina for the Piano, in which the bars 1–3 (and similar places in the movement) strongly resembles "The Hall of the Mountain King" from the incidental music to *Peer Gynt*:



*Max Reger: Sonatina No 2, Op. 89 (1905), 4<sup>th</sup> movement, beginning*

Another striking example of Reger's use of Griegian elements in his music can be found in the 4<sup>th</sup> movement of his third Sonata for Violin Solo, Op 42 No 3 (1899). In the measures 24–25 (and similar places) not only the empty fifths, but also the

melodic pattern in which the melody jumps from the leading tone, might give allusions to music by Grieg, i.e. the Lyric piece "Homeward" (Op 62 No 6):



*Max Reger: 3<sup>rd</sup> Sonata for Violin Solo in B minor, Op. 42 (1899), 4<sup>th</sup> movement, measures 22–31*

In my research on Reger's Chamber Music I have found Grieg-influences more or less evident in several works. In his very first chamber music work, a String Quartet/Quintet in D minor, written before he turned 16 (1889), the main theme of the finale ends abruptly with the so called "Grieg motif" already in measure 2:



*Max Reger: String Quartet in D minor (1889), 3<sup>rd</sup> movement, beginning*

The young Reger emphasizes the motif not only by using it as a kind of "end formula" in the measures 2 and 5, but repeats it like an "echo" in the following measures. Hence he has undoubtedly thought it to be one of the most important musical thoughts in this movement, what is even more striking in the bars 62–66 of the same movement:

*Max Reger: String Quartet in D minor (1889), 3<sup>rd</sup> movement, measures 60–67*

In all the five measures 62–66 the Grieg motif is the only one musical thought in use.

Another quite striking reference is—as pointed out by Robert Gläser (p. 69)—the parallel between Grieg's Cello Sonata and Reger's Second Cello Sonata in G minor Op. 28:

*Max Reger: 2<sup>nd</sup> Sonata for Violoncello and Pianoforte in G minor, Op. 28 (1898), 1<sup>st</sup> movement, measures 101–104*

The Grieg motif has a very prominent place in this work, the most significant being when Reger isolates the motif in the development section of the Finale:

The image shows a musical score for Cello and Piano. The Cello part is in the upper staff, and the Piano part is in the lower staff. The Cello part features a hemiola rhythm with notes G2, B1, D2, E2. The Piano part features a complex rhythmic pattern with triplets and dynamic markings from *ff* to *p*.

Max Reger: 2<sup>nd</sup> Sonata for Violoncell and Pianoforte in G minor, Op. 28 (1898),  
4<sup>th</sup> movement, measures 54–57

Another example is to be found at the very end of the work, as the cello is playing a hemiola (the same notes as the first four in the example above).

Another striking use of the "Grieg motif" pointed out by Gläser is the opening theme of the third String Quartet (Op 54, No 1):

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the 1st movement of Max Reger's 1st String Quartet in G minor (1900). The score is for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The tempo is *Allegro agitato*. The Cello part features a hemiola rhythm with notes G2, B1, D2, E2. The Violin I and II parts feature a complex rhythmic pattern with dynamic markings from *p* to *ff*.

Max Reger: 1<sup>st</sup> String Quartet in G minor (1900), 1<sup>st</sup> movement, beginning

Another Reger expert, Herbert Müller, has emphasized the musical connections between Grieg and Reger in his dissertation "Studien zu Regers Personalstil an Hand seiner Violin-Klavier-Sonaten" (Wien 1964). He not only states that Reger appreciated Grieg's violin sonatas, but also points out several traces of stylistic influence from the latter in Reger's own nine violin sonatas. In some of his examples Müller might be too eager to demonstrate connections to Grieg, but he as well as the Reger-biographer Guido Bagier (1923, p. 258) draw special attention to

the astonishing melodic sequencing of the "Grieg motif" in the first movement of Reger's fourth sonata (op. 72, 1903):

The image shows two systems of musical notation for measures 77-88 of the first movement of Max Reger's 4th Sonata for Violin and Piano, Op. 72. The top system is for Violin and Piano, and the bottom system is for Violin and Piano. The violin part is marked 'sul G' and 'molto espress.' with dynamics ranging from *pp* to *f*. The piano part features chords and triplets, with dynamics from *pp* to *f*. The score includes a 'crescendo' marking and a 'f e sempre crescendo' marking in the final measures.

Max Reger: 4<sup>th</sup> Sonata for Violin and Pianoforte in C major, Op. 72 (1903), 1<sup>st</sup> movement, measures 77–88

The melodic motion is the Grieg motif, but the harmonization with parallel minor triads is not very "Griegian". Still such harmonization makes the listeners pay special attention to the place. Two very famous motifs follow in the last two measures of the example, the anagrams for sheep (*S-c-h-a-f-e*) and monkey (*A-f-f-e*), which are to be interpreted as Reger's view on his critics.

For some reason the use of the "Grieg motif" in the very beginning of the third movement of the same Sonata is not mentioned by Gläser, maybe because it is notated *f#-f-c#*:

*Max Reger: 4<sup>th</sup> Sonata for Violin and Pianoforte in C major, Op. 72 (1903),  
3<sup>rd</sup> movement, beginning*

My last Reger-example is even more peculiar, just to show how far you could go on and go on to show "influences" from one composer to another. It is the beginning of one of his "wildest" works, the third Cello Sonata, Op. 78 (1904). Bear in mind that this is a work within the very "wild Reger" style that caused Grieg to give his non-favourable statements about his younger colleague:

*Max Reger: 3<sup>rd</sup> Sonata for Violoncell and Pianoforte in F major,  
Op. 78 (1904), 1<sup>st</sup> movement, beginning*



Could anybody point out the Grieg motif after listening to this? I doubt it! You would have to search through the score. And even if you recognize the motif, the connection to Grieg and his music is not longer there.

In a post-wagnerian chromatic musical language like the one developed by Reger, musical elements like the "Grieg motif" could be explained as a result of pure musical-logic processes, especially when it appears as pairs of minor seconds with a minor or major third as interval between them (e.g. *c-b-g-a flat* or *c-b-g-f sharp*). Having the melody constructed in this way is a technique which—as the late Rainer Cadenbach has pointed out in his article "Ein Weg, der 'eher zu einem Ziele führt als all die neuen Wege'" (1988)—can rather be seen as Reger's own "leitmotif". Along the same lines, Carl Dahlhaus has emphasized the frequent use of a "Konfiguration von zwei (steigenden oder fallenden) Halbtonschritten mit variablem Zwischenintervall" already in Beethoven's late string quartets. On the other hand, many features of Reger's music, i.e. the frequent and deliberate use of melodic anagrams like *E-d-(v-)a-(r-)d* *G-(ri-)e-g*, *B-a-c-h*, *S-c-h-a-f-e* and *A-f-f-e*, could barely be said to fall into the category of pure musical elements. In many cases one has to consider and reconsider several times while studying the relation between structure and meaning in Reger's music. The question of direct and/or indirect influences from Grieg is only one of them.

## Literature

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