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Those of us who frequent viola recitals often complain that while the repertoire for the instrument is vast, in the concert hall just a few works are constantly recycled. Even at specialist events I have never encountered Max Reger's B flat Sonata for viola and piano, op.107, and only rarely have I heard any of his three solo Viola Suites, op.131d. Yet the Sonata is a major piece of much beauty and the first Suite in G minor is one of the handful of great works for a solo string instrument, fit to be mentioned in the same breath as those by Bach, Bartók and Hindemith. Indeed the latter mentioned his debt to Reger on more than one occasion.

Max Reger (1873–1916) was a magnificent pianist of infinite delicacy – his sensitivity rather at odds with his bullish Bavarian looks – but he often told his wife Elsa that he would have liked to be a violinist. He created a vast amount of music for solo violin, as well as a violin concerto and a number of sonatas for violin and piano; and he counted leading fiddlers of his era among his close colleagues: Adolf Busch, Walther Davisson, Bram Eldering, Carl Flesch, Karel Halír, Gustav Havemann, Karel Hoffmann, Hugo Heermann, Josef Hösl, Henri Marteau, Waldemar Meyer, Palma von Pászthory, Henri Petri, Robert Reitz, Julius Ruthström, Alexander Schmuller, Ossip Schnirlin, Hans Treichler and Carl Wendling.

For the viola Reger showed a partiality as early as his op.2, an excellent trio for piano, violin and viola. Hearing one of Brahms's Clarinet Sonatas in 1900, he said: 'Fine, I'll write two things like that too' and within a fortnight produced a pair of works, his op.49. Although he did not think of them as being for viola as well, they have been successfully recorded on viola by Barbara Westphal and Josef Kluson, in very similar performances. In late 1908 and early 1909 Reger returned to the idea of a Clarinet Sonata and produced a large-scale one in B flat, op.107. This time he did follow Brahms's example and a version for viola duly appeared. (Like Brahms, he also made a violin edition; but as with the Brahms sonatas, the music loses some of its character on the higher instrument – violinists who are interested will find a recording in the ongoing CPO series of Reger violin sonatas by Ulf Wallin and Roland Pöntinen.)

Unlike Brahms, Reger did not rearrange the clarinet part to make it more viola-like: he contented himself with adjusting phrasing and articulation, so what emerged was a big sonata with a monodic viola part and all the chordal interest in the piano part. I feel sure that this was a conscious artistic decision, as Reger's last and finest violin sonata with piano, the C minor, op.139, also avoids double or multiple stopping. The B flat Sonata is permeated by a haunting eight-note phrase which is cleverly varied: it is most obvious in the first, third and fourth movements. Reger often composed witty scherzos but on this occasion his second movement is an unusual alternation of fast-slow-fast-slow: the eight-note motif is not clearly in evidence although its influence is felt. The third movement is a beautiful Adagio. At the end of the charming, easy-paced finale, Reger brings back the theme of the Adagio followed by the eight-note motif, to make a satisfying close. Reger himself usually played the B flat Sonata with clarinetists but took part in three viola performances, the first one on 3 March 1910 with Schnirlin (who on 31 October 1909 had given the viola premiere in Berlin with Elsa Rau).

For me, the most remarkable thing about this beautiful sonata is that it never reminds me of Brahms. Reger's melodic and harmonic profile is so much his own by this time that no comparisons (or apologies) need to be made. As I see it, the sole interpretative problem concerns the opening movement (Moderato). Of the eight recordings I know, four – by Ulrich von Wrochem (Rusty Records), Ulrich Koch (Bayer), Barbara Westphal (Bridge) and Josef Kluson (Praga) – take around

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10:30 minutes. Nobuko Imai (BIS) and Tanja Schneider (Ars Musici) take a minute longer; and both Ivo van der Werff (ASV) and Paul Cortese (Posh Boy) take about 13 minutes. You might expect the consensus to rule and the four fastest, most coherent performances to be the most credible; but for me, Imai and her impressive pianist Ronald Brautigam convey more of the Regerian wistfulness at the heart of the music than anyone else. The excellent Schneider also inclines me to this medium tempo: well recorded and well balanced with pianist Vassilia Efstathiadou, she has a beautiful tone but is just a tad unsafe in the high register. I find van der Werff's and Cortese's performances too diffuse and the latter's is unpleasantly recorded, emphasising the sense of strain in his A string tone. The most imaginative pianism comes from Sachiko Kayahara, partnering Kluson, in fact this violist, well as he plays, trails in the wake of his pianist. Westphal and her pianist Jeffrey Swann try to force the pace at several points in the Sonata, perhaps attempting to make something 'happen'. I am more convinced by the way Imai and Brautigam let the climaxes arise naturally from the musical flow. Ulrich von Wrochem and his pianist Wolfram Lorenzen are pretty plausible, too. Ulrich Koch's 1989 performance is full of understanding but the partnership with his wife Sachiko Nakamura is a little slack in tension and he gets far less out of the Adagio than Imai.

The three solo Suites, op.131d, come from the last summer of Reger's life, in 1915, and are contemporary with his three superb Cello Suites but simpler, reflecting a general simplification of his music in his last period when he lived at Jena. Reger contents himself with double-stops or three-note chords apart from points in the second and fourth movements of the G minor Suite where he goes into four voices. He was acquainted with quite a few violists but only two of the Suites were dedicated to string players, the violinists Richard Sahla and Josef Hösl. All three Suites were premiered by Else Mendel-Oberüber at the Bechstein Hall, Berlin, on 9 October 1917, 16 months after Reger's death. They were published at a bad time, in the midst of the Great War, and even such a viola champion as Lionel Tertis did not know about them until, in his old age, Paul Doktor acquainted him with them. When I mentioned them to the great Czech violist Milan Skampa, he said tersely: 'The G minor is derivative of Bach and the other two are derivative of the G minor.' I see what he meant, but 'derivative of Bach' applies to virtually all later music for solo stringed instruments. Certainly the G minor is the pick of the bunch. It is in slow-fast-slow-fast form: an exploratory, declamatory *Molto sostenuto* is followed by a scherzo and trio (*Vivace*), an *Andante sostenuto* – with one of the most beautiful themes ever written for a solo stringed instrument – and a *moto perpetuo* (*Molto vivace*). The Third Suite, in E minor, has a similar scheme but the Second, in D major, has a faster opening movement, a skittish *Con moto*, and so Reger reverses the order of the inner movements – the scherzo's trio is a beautiful *barcarolle*.

The G minor Suite was recorded several times on LP, starting in 1966 with a serviceable rendering by Werner Kloor (Da Camera Magna). The legendary Czech player Ladislav Cerny (Panton), closely connected with Hindemith, is idiosyncratic as usual but finds all sorts of little details – I am not sure about his speeding up and slowing down in the finale but he brings it off brilliantly. The young Yuri Bashmet (Melodiya) produces terrific depth of tone and amazing variations of tone and dynamics, with splendid articulation (this 1977 performance is far preferable to Bashmet's 1990 recording with the Moscow Soloists on an RCA CD – the orchestration by Victor Poltoratsky romanticises the Suite, removing the austerity that, paradoxically, is one of its attractions, and in the trio of the scherzo the scoring is revolting). Two brilliant solo viola LPs contain all three Suites between them: Walter Trampler (RCA) gives searching interpretations of nos 1 and 3 with splendid tone and marvellous rhythm in the faster movements; and Dino Ascioffa (Italia) emits fine tone in the D major but is almost too precise and pedantic in places – at least, as an Italian, he gets the little *barcarolle* right. The Max-Reger-Institut has a 1986 French Radio tape of the E minor Suite by the American violist Eric Shumsky (whose father Oscar used to play some of the solo violin music). I think

Shumsky Jnr underplays the Moderato first movement: his faster tempo enables him to shape it firmly but also contributes to an almost casual impression. The other movements are excellent.

Five separate performances of the G minor Suite are known to me on CD. Rainer Moog (Live Notes) is probing and exploratory in the first movement, achieves nice echo effects by adroit variations of dynamic in the scherzo and makes the most of Reger's wonderful melodic invention in the third movement, capping a memorable performance with a captivating finale. Kazuhide Isomura of the Tokyo Quartet (MusicMasters) gives a very well shaped reading, missing some of Moog's depth. Both Karel Dolezal (Arta) and Zahari Tchavdarov (BIS) drag the first movement out to five minutes but I enjoy the former's firm tone on a 1749 J.G. Hellmer and the latter's lively recording, in which you almost see the bow hitting the string in the scherzo. Ultimately Tchavdarov lacks the charisma of some rivals, as does Hungarian-born Robert Verebes, whose 1992 recording (SNE) finds him as musical as ever but a little past his best.

Of those offering all three suites, five players stand out for tonal finesse, phrasing, judgment of tempo and depth of characterisation. The German-born, Romanian-trained Ernst Wallfisch made his recording as long ago as 1969 but it sounds fine (Da Camera Magna): the performances bespeak the probity, clarity, delicacy and warmth that were features of this much-loved artist's playing, along with a welcome element of wit. In 1977 Luigi Alberto Bianchi, playing a magnificent 1595 Brothers Amati that was later stolen and never recovered, brought a new degree of virtuosity, tonal resource and chiaroscuro to the Suites, with a sense of fantasy in the more rhapsodic movements (Dynamic). His recording still stands as a landmark in solo viola playing. Then there is the superbly accomplished 1981 version (Signum) by the Hamburg-based Japanese virtuoso Hirofumi Fukai, whom I recall as a most engaging recitalist. Two digital recordings are exceptional: from 1998 the elegant but probing performances by the French violist Pierre Franck (Disques Pierre Verany); and from 2001 the typically sensitive readings by Nobuko Imai, on the same disc as her superior Sonata (BIS). I am glad to have all of them but if pressed, I might opt for Bianchi, who also contributes a 1992 digital recording of Reger's great A minor solo Violin Sonata (the one with the Chaconne).

Honourable mentions go to Hideko Kobayashi with her burnished tone and technical control (Telos), Vladimír Bukac with his admirably clean execution and excellent taste (Calliope) and Cortese, whose Suites are better played and recorded than his Sonata. The Scots-born session player George Robertson makes a pleasing impression without really being stimulating (ASV); and the Finnish violist Jouko Mansnerus is not in the running (Sibelius Academy). Listening closely to all these versions has again brought home to me what splendid music there is in the Suites, all three of which can be played in not much more than half an hour.

A tiny postscript. Reger promised a fourth Suite to Karl Doktor (father of Paul) but did not live to compose it. Doktor mentioned this loss to his quartet leader Adolf Busch when they were on a train journey in Italy in February 1924, whereupon Busch took out manuscript paper and wrote two movements of a Suite in A minor, completing it on the return journey. Busch's lovely little tribute to Reger departs from its models (or, to put it another way, moves closer to the original source, Bach) in having a Sarabande for its third movement and a Tempo di Bourée for its finale. In an affectionate reference to his master's liking for complicated opus numbers, the composer heads his manuscript 'Meinem lieben Karl Doktor zur Erinnerung an Vicenza-Padua und zurück, op.0.75m' (the violist adds a note to the effect that on this occasion the Busch Quartet travelled first class). The actual opus number is 16a, quite Regerian enough. The A minor Suite is published by Amadeus, in an edition by Paul Doktor, and in 2006 the Swiss violist Friedemann Jähnig recorded it (Müller & Schade MS 5045/2).

Viola Sonatas, op.49 & op.107:

Barbara Westphal & Jeffrey Swann
Josef Kluson & Sachiko Kayahara

Bridge BCD 9075
Praga PRD 25015-2

Viola Sonata, op.107:

Ulrich von Wrochem & Wolfram Lorenzen
Ulrich Koch & Sachiko Nakamura
Ivo van der Werff & Simon Marlow
Tanja Schneider & Vassilia Efsthadiadou

Rusty Records RRCL 606626
Bayer BR 100 085 CD
ASV CD DCA 976
Ars Musici AMP 5034-2

Op.107 & op.131d nos 1–3

Nobuko Imai (with Ronald Brautigam in op.107)
Paul Cortese (with Angel Soler in op.107)

BIS BIS-CD-1211
Posh Boy 8167-2

Three Viola Suites, op.131d nos 1–3

Ernst Wallfisch
Luigi Alberto Bianchi
Hirofumi Fukai
Pierre Franck
Hideko Kobayashi
Vladimír Bukac
George Robertson
Jouko Mansnerus

Da Camera Magna DaCa 77 504
Dynamic CDS 383
Signum SIG X38-00
Disques Pierre Verany PV799101
Telos TLS 004
Calliope CAL 9285
ASV CD DCA 875
Sibelius Academy SACD-8

Nos 1 & 3 only

Walter Trampler

RCA LSC 2974

No.1 only

Werner Kloor
Ladislav Cerny
Yuri Bashmet
Zahari Tchavdarov
Robert Verebes
Karel Dolezal
Kazuhide Isomura
Rainer Moog

Da Camera Magna SM 92704
Panton 11 0430
Melodiya S10-09467/8
BIS BIS-CD-081
SNE SNE-562-CD
Arta F1 0082-2
MusicMasters 7052-2-C
Live Notes WWCC-7424

No.2 only

Dino Asciolla

Italia ITL 70016

No.3 only

Eric Shumsky

Max-Reger-Institut tape (1987 broadcast)

No.1 only (orch. Poltoratsky)

Bashmet & Moscow Soloists

RCA RD 60 464

Im nächsten Heft: Reger und Otto Jägermeier; Diskografische Anmerkungen zu den Werken für Klarinette und Klavier u. v. m.

Wir freuen uns sehr über Kommentare und Anregungen, über Beiträge wie auch Mitteilungen über stattgehabte und noch stattfindende Veranstaltungen. – Redaktionsschluss für Heft 17 ist der 30. August 2008.