

CD MASTERS

BBC Radio 3, weekdays 10.05-11.30am



RESURRECTING A GREAT ROMANTIC

Rob Cowan (above) makes a compelling case for Reger's orchestral music with recordings from the likes of Karl Böhm and Gerd Albrecht

I've often thought of the German composer Max Reger (1873-1916) as the missing link between Brahms and Bruckner, a beefy Romantic with a penchant for drama and a huge capacity for humour. And yet the received opinion on Reger is of a dry, colourless, even over-productive – and certainly humourless – pianist. Our CD Masters 'Reger Orchestral Music' Week (30 July-3 August) aims to put the record straight.

Reger's ability to conjure huge soundscapes gave birth to a *Symphonic Prologue to a Tragedy* that alternates monolithic climaxes with fervid orchestral activity, the kind you commonly find in Respighi and Strauss, though in Reger's case a nobility of spirit keeps bombast off the agenda. Leif Segerstam's BIS recording with the Nürtingen Symphony Orchestra is probably the best we have. The *Mozart Variations* bring the Brucknerian axis to the fore. Reger ends the piece with a gargantuan fugue, as lovable as it's over the top, and beautifully played on a vintage DG recording by the Berlin Philharmonic under Karl Böhm. Thinking in terms of other variations from the period, only Elgar's (*The Enigma*) and Delius's (*Brigg Fair*) run it close.

Reger's best orchestral work revolves on a lyrical axis: the *Serenade*, for example, a gorgeous piece that scores a hit whenever I programme it. Quite apart from its strong thematic content, the *Serenade* switches mood by the minute and calls on a rich harmonic vocabulary that, at times, anticipates classic Hollywood sound-

tracks. The performance I've chosen for CD Masters has Hermann Scherchen at the helm, deaving hard but relaxing where necessary. It's a real gem. And if you think the idea of a Reger 'ballt suite' is a contradiction in terms, then make sure to listen in on 2 August, when Osnabrück conducts the Berlin Staatskapelle in what is probably the work's best ever recording.

Listen in particular to the aching nostalgia of 'Pierrot and Pierrette', to the way it segues into an unexpected 'Valse d'amour'. It's pure Golden-Age Vienna, though the many harmonic quirks are typically Regerian.

But perhaps the most beautiful of all Reger's orchestral works is 'The Hermit with the Violin' from the *Four Böcklin Portraits*, a serene narrative full of mystery and yearning. I've programmed the piece for July 30 in a memorable Berlin recording under Gerd Albrecht. Back in December 1985, Wilhelm Furtwängler and the Berlin Philharmonic brought 'The Hermit' to Birmingham, Sheffield, Newcastle and London. Tragically, they never recorded it but Albrecht's performance gives us some hint of what those performances might have sounded like. Reger's 'Isle of the Dead' is from the same cycle, and it's very different to Rachmaninoff's more mobile alternative. Again, Albrecht conducts with conviction. ■

Listeners can submit comments about the programme online at www.cdmasters.co.uk. Rob Cowan is contributing editor of Gramophone magazine



A BEEFY ROMANTIC WITH A PENCHANT FOR DRAMA AND A HUGE CAPACITY FOR HUMOUR

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Die BBC bot im Sommer eine Woche lang täglich eine Vormittagsstunde nur Reger – eine Leistung, wie sie von anderen Rundfunksendern in derartiger Konsequenz nur sehr selten angegangen wird. Zwar mag Rob Cowans Kenntnisstand in Sachen Reger nicht unbedingt allerhöchsten Ansprüchen genügen, allein es ist das Engagement, das zählt.

Der hier abgedruckte Artikel erschien im August-Heft 2001 des BBC Music Magazine und erscheint hier mit freundlicher Genehmigung.