

# MUSIC FROM A LIMINAL ERA

MAX REGER (1873-1916) 12 Organ Pieces, op. 59 (1901)  
Svein Erik Tandberg - Organ





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The front of this digital recording is a photo montage. Originally, it was created by the Max-Reger-Institut in Karlsruhe in Germany for an exhibition in Paris in 1987. It shows the composer Max Reger between two tracks at a railway station. On the information boards above each track, showing the direction for each of the oncoming trains, one reads “19 th century” the other “20 th century.” Reger’s artistic platform was not just the dialogue between eras. The montage illustrates that Reger is at a turning point, a liminal space between two eras, and integrates sometimes conflicting elements from both.

In his Twelve Organ Pieces (Zwölf Stücke für Orgel), opus 59, which can be heard on this recording, he brings together various threads from the history of music, all of them organized around the central figure of Johann Sebastian Bach. Rooted in the so-called character pieces of the 19 th century, Reger’s movements are marked by progressive harmonies and bold chordal connections. Avant-garde is lurking just around the corner.

I have chosen to record this work in Slagen Church in Tønsberg, Norway. I did so primarily because of the organ’s sonorous properties and the acoustic conditions of the room. I also see the recording project as the «echo» of my 42 years of employment at Slagen Church as organist and choir master. During this time, I organized a number of large organ concerts with prominent performers from both Norway and abroad. Several of the organists simultaneously made recordings of works by Reger for the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation.

These experiences have given me a unique perspective on the various interpretive trends to which Reger’s music has been subjected. As approaches to organ building and performance have evolved since his day, the questions have always been which type of instrument, and which kind of performance can do Reger’s music justice. Naturally, the way these questions have been answered by individual performers has created a wide array of interpretations of Reger’s organ music.

## **Symbolic touch points**

There are symbolic points of contact between Reger’s music and the recording location. Slagen Church was completed in 1901, the same year that Reger completed his twelve organ pieces in opus 59. This is the historic connection between Reger’s music and the church building in Slagen. Despite being created in the same year, changing aesthetics and historical trends have left their mark on both.

A piece of music is never finished. To survive as an expression of living art, it must be actualized by the musicians who play it. It constantly requires new interpretations. After the work has been completed by the composer, it embarks on a journey through time and space and meets new musicians, critics, and listeners in other cultural settings. It is often compared with new musical works that have a different aesthetic anchoring, and these naturally influence how the older music is interpreted. In this way, a piece of music represents something that is both unchanging and in a continual process of radical change.

A church building never goes on journey as a piece of music does. It has a static form and is not going anywhere. Nevertheless, from time to time, it is overtaken by a new zeitgeist. This happened with Slagen Church when, in the 1950s, extensive restoration work was undertaken.

The desire was that the church's interior should have a richer pictorial symbolism in keeping with the artistic ideals of the time. Changes in both the perception of Reger's work and the church room in which it was recorded means that they speak to each other on multiple levels. In a sense, they have a parallel stylistic history.

### **Character pieces**

The character piece genre left a deep mark on 19th-century musical life and was composed for many different instruments and ensembles. The piano played an important role in this context. This was not only music for concert halls, but also for the home and piano lessons. A significant pianist, Reger wrote many pieces within the genre. In order to make the material known, he gave concerts throughout Germany and won acclaim for his sensitive interpretation. He also wanted to translate the expressive world of the character piece to the organ. When C. F. Peters Verlag in Leipzig agreed to publish his twelve organ pieces in opus 59, it was almost certainly in the hopes of realizing robust sales among the many organ players of the time, which happened.

Today, Reger represents a musical heritage that any serious organist must contend with, no matter the trends of the moment. Several of the pieces in this recording must be considered canon in his oeuvre, while other works have provided an important educational gateway into the world of Reger's compositions for organ. He emphasized that the purpose of composing opus 59 was to offer performers and listeners a more accessible version of his musical language. Nevertheless, he gave it his own unmistakable signature. As a cyclical work, these pieces highlight something deeply human. They include both heaven and earth in the forms of sacred and profane motifs, but for Reger there was no contradiction. Like any skilled artist, he was able to alchemize the tension of these poles into something original and unified. The work was published in two booklets with six pieces in each.

The work includes compositions with titles such as Intermezzo, Capriccio and Melodia. These are forms that are well known from the era's piano literature. In contrast, the cycle's three pieces Präludium, Pastorale, Canon, Toccata and Fugue are more clearly rooted in a classical organ style. In the first booklet, the Toccata in D minor, together with the Fugue in D major, are certainly the most played. Above all, the toccata shows how new and challenging Reger's musical language was for his time, and how imaginatively he treats a free form. The music has a suggestive drive with an immediate appeal to the listener.

The fugue forms a contrast to the previous movement. While the toccata unfolds with rhapsodic intensity, the fugue opens with an air of calmness. The form is easy to grasp. The theme has a symmetrical structure and is rhythmically simple. Rising to a high note, it descends and resolves into the dominant key, developing through an accelerating tempo, an increasingly advanced harmonic, and a condensed voice leading. The final chords have a dazzling effect and have been described as «looking straight into the sun».

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Photo: Tonny Krokengen  
Registerpanel in Slagen Kirke



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## Trypichon

The work's «trypichon», Kyrie eleison (No. 7), Gloria in excelsis (No. 8), and Benedictus (No. 9), which are printed in the second booklet, also belong to Reger's best-known pieces. They show influence from contemporary symphonic poetry, and No's. 7 and 9 can be said to have a programmatic content. In the Kyrie eleison, Reger depicts a drama of the soul as the composition is based on a fragment from the Lutheran penitential hymn Aus tiefer Not («De profundis»).

A heavy darkness opens the piece. After two powerful discharges which are contrasted with the piece's lyrical motifs, Reger ends the movement with an atmosphere of resignation and surrender, finishing with a sustained E minor chord. Perhaps the musical expression here can best be understood as a psychological dialectic: the darkness of fallen human nature grappling with the hope of redemption.

In the following movement, Gloria in excelsis (Glory be to God in the highest), Reger's music is triumphant with the opening formula of a Gregorian gloria, a theme he treats with bracing contrapuntal movement. Benedictus, likewise, is a pearl of musical religious expression. Reger is here in a deep religious state, spanning both liturgical and mystical modes of spirituality as he leads the listener from quiet contemplation to glorious hosannas, and back to a vision of adoring seraphim. In the six-part Te Deum which concludes the work, Reger takes the lines back toward Renaissance compositional techniques. With its stylistic diversity, opus 59 represents Reger's organ aesthetic in a nutshell.

### **About the recording project**

Max Reger's organ music has been central in my life as a musician and in my education at the Norwegian State Academy of Music. There, I received invaluable guidance from my main teacher, Oslo's cathedral organist Rolf Karlsen (1911-1982), and, on a couple of occasions, from his predecessor, Arild Sandvold (1895-1984). Sandvold was a student of the legendary German organist Karl Straube (1873-1950) who was the same age as Reger. Straube was the first organist to play Reger's music in public and is regarded as Reger's original interpreter.

In 2001, I became a doctoral student at the Academy of Music and Drama in Gothenburg where I completed my dissertation in 2008. The subject was improvisation, both from practical and theoretical perspectives. During this time, I contacted Franz Lehrndorfer (1928-2013), one of Europe's leading improvisational artists on the organ, whom I engaged as an artistic mentor. Lehrndorfer, who was cathedral organist in Munich and a professor at the city's Hochschule für Musik und Theater, was also known as a premiere interpreter of Reger's organ music. This rare opportunity allowed me to study several of Reger's compositions in depth, including opus 59.

Though more than 20 years have passed since my days in Munich with Lehrndorfer, this recording can be considered the fruit of that study. I have taken as a starting point the many notations I made in the music score, including analysis of musical structure and content, as well as the many interpretative suggestions that Lehrndorfer conveyed to me. Some time ago, I realized that no organist in Scandinavia had made a complete recording of the twelve pieces in Reger's opus 59.

As 2023 marks the 150th anniversary of Max Reger's birth, I decided to record the work on the organ in Slagen Church. Two colleagues and fellow organists deserve special recognition: Tonny Krokengen acted as sound technician and producer, and Wenche Henriksen was co-producer and registration assistant. In addition, Magne Sjemmedal was sound engineer for the recording. I owe them a great debt of thanks for a rewarding collaboration.

### **The organ in Slagen church**

The organ in Slagen Church was built in 1973 by the Norwegian firm J. H. Jørgensen Orgelfabrikk, Oslo, while the pipework was designed by organ builder Herwin Troje, Goethenburg. The organ was built according to what I would describe as classical ideals. The organist here plays a tracker action instrument that provides direct contact with the pipework. With voices rich in overtones, the contrapuntual structure in polyphonic music can be clearly reproduced.

Behind the organist there is a Rückpositif in the parapet of the organ loft, which means that solo registers can be clearly heard. In addition to the classically inspired registers, a swell work was also built (among other elements) with characteristic reed voices. In this way, music from several eras can be given justice. In 1978, the instrument was revoiced by organ builder Paul Ott, Göttingen, Germany. The firm Ryde & Berg, Fredrikstad, carried out a comprehensive restoration and revoicing of the instrument in 2011. The organ in Slagen Church has been featured numerous times in concert productions for Norwegian National Broadcasting.

**Text: Svein Erik Tandberg**



Photo: Tonny Krokengen  
The Organ in Slagen Kirke