



Bach-Reger Transcriptions for Piano Duet: Brandenburg Concertos Nos. 1-6 & Organ Works

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“Mommy! Mr. Reger is picking on me again! He said I was [sob!] a pedestrian blockhead! And I wasn’t even walking! I was riding in the back seat!” Then I woke up.

But that dream was also a prophecy: Max Reger, a composer who gets many more pages in music reference books than people standing in line waiting to buy recordings of his music, eventually called me a pedestrian blockhead. This was an epithet he reserved for anyone who disagreed with his approach to the music of Bach. Carefully placing his monocle in full Charlie McCarthy position, and staring at me with the expression of a kipper who thought he owned the world but suddenly found himself on a plate, skewered by a 24k gold fork, continued: “I am alerting you in advance that my perhaps ‘too personal’ way of playing, and accordingly of editing Bach will very much challenge the objections of the pedestrian blockheads ... they will consider my many nuances ... too modern and entrench themselves behind the wall of mental laziness, insisting that Bach should be played classically! Such people, who are more Catholic than the Pope, [Oh my, I hope the long line of rabbis and cantors from whom I am descended never see this! DR] cannot be helped.” Oh, I don’t know—maybe I am a pedestrian blockhead. That would explain why I have so much trouble finding a hat that will fit me.

One of his colleagues says that Reger was “... capable of expressing, in the most radical way, the idea that the work he had beneath his hands was at that moment his property.” This is a very serviceable idea, and no doubt occurred to the pickpocket who had liberated my wallet while I was in Riverside, California staring with fascination at the Parent Orange Tree (one of, and perhaps the only, tourist attractions in that city).

So, as you see in the headnote above, Reger found the time to transcribe lots of Bach’s music, including all of the Brandenburg Concertos, for two pianos. This was immensely valuable, for it had the potential to bring this great music to people all over the land, who lived far from the big cities and couldn’t go to concerts, and therefore were doomed to musical ignorance (unless they somehow found the power to go out and buy a record player or a radio—Reger lived well into the 20th century).

So nobody really needed a piano reduction. Well, what did it accomplish? I’m sure that whenever it was played, many audience members thought to themselves, “Wow! It sounds sort of like the Brandenburg Concertos!” and then, around the middle of the second movement, those ideas morphed into the chances that they’d be selling sandwiches during the intermission. So at least this music boosted the take at the concession stand.

Because, after all, the Brandenburgs are totally dependent upon the orchestration.

The Brandenburg No. 2 without the high trumpet? It's like the difference between a veterinarian and a taxidermist (with a taxidermist, you get your dog back). Bach was as great an orchestrator as he was in every other phase of music. And if somehow we could arrange to have him listen to this disc—well, Bach told his dear son C. P. E. (known affectionately in the family as Seepy) that his music faded, like Prussian blue; just think what he'd say to Reger.

If you're a part of a piano duo, you might want to play some of this music as a stunt. But contemplating the level of difficulty, you'd better leave plenty of practice time, and you'd better be at least as good as the consummate pianists, Norie Takahashi and Bjorn Lehmann, who play flawlessly, at breakneck speed, and as if they were Oscar Peterson seeing how many notes he could cram into a measure of 4/4 time.

Well, you will know immediately whether or not you want this recording, and if you do, it will never be played better than it is here.

