

JOSEPH RHEINBERGER

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Joseph Rheinberger has for a very long time been only really known for his organ music. Certainly his contribution to the organ repertoire is of great importance. The high quality of his twenty organ sonatas and shorter organ pieces has ensured that his music is frequently presented in organ recitals and his sonatas have been recorded several times over the last three decades. But the musical public probably think of Rheinberger as a stuffy Victorian organist and a pedagogue not as a composer who wrote prolifically and effortlessly in many genres whose organ music form but a small but significant part. Even in terms of the organ Rheinberger was never stuffy and it is a pity that these works are so often presented on overblown Victorian organs when the music is, in fact, to be heard at its best advantage on much smaller, clearer instruments of the kind the composer would have known in many Munich churches where he performed and where his delicate part writing can come out properly. All this has stood against him in the eyes of posterity and it is sad to think of a composer so richly gifted and with so much to offer discerning music lovers of our own time should be so woefully neglected and misunderstood. Worse than this, he never enjoyed more than a parochial reputation even in his own lifetime. An arch-conservative at a time of traumatic innovation, he won the esteem of like-minded musicians of the day, but never the universal acceptance he deserved. His retiring nature and lack of ambition for self advancement contributed to his neglect. Perhaps it was his own fault.



Joseph Gabriel Rheinberger, the greatest composer ever to emerge from the tiny principality of Liechtenstein, hemmed in between Switzerland on the one side and Bavarian and the Austrian Tyrol on the other, was born in Vaduz on 17 March, 1839. He was an infant prodigy of extraordinary precocity, holding a post of organist at Vaduz Parish Church at the tender age of seven and making a sensation with the composition of a Mass in three parts with organ accompaniment at the age of eight, yet his parents were not musical and somewhat alarmed at their son's musical bent. His interest had been kindled by his elder sister's piano lessons, it being considered a right and proper subject upon which young ladies should receive tuition at the time and by the age of five he himself was receiving instruction from Sebastian Pohly, a retired schoolmaster from Schandens, and absorbing the techniques not only of piano and organ but also of theory and counterpoint. From that moment there was no stopping him. His extraordinary self-confidence has been well illustrated in Harvey Grace's important contribution on the composer published in Grove IV but ruthlessly and unnecessarily abridged in Grove V. Grace also edited Novello's edition of the organ sonatas. The performance of the early Mass led the Bishop of Chur to invite the boy to the cathedral in order to demonstrate his gifts, asking him to accompany on the organ a *Salve Regina* to be sung by the Bishop and the clergy. No sooner had the performance begun than the child stopped playing and admonished the Bishop for singing out of tune! His acute critical sense, even at so early an age, was demonstrated on another occasion when he nearly smoked out the congregation at Vaduz by throwing copies of some masses by his predecessor Buhler on the stove in the church because he disapproved of them. Truly an *enfant terrible*.

Rheinberger's real chance came about at the age of ten when turning the music for the leader of an amateur string quartet named Schrammel. During the tuning, the boy remarked that the A string sounded a semitone higher than his piano at home. The discovery of this acute sense of pitch encouraged Schrammel to persuade his father to allow the boy to undertake serious tuition from the choirmaster at Feldkirch, some times miles distant, as a resident pupil. The boy went to Feldkirch to study with Philipp Schmutzer for two years, yet retaining his position as organist at Vaduz and walking back home every weekend to fulfil his duties there. In 1850, when still only eleven years of age, he entered the Royal Conservatory at Munich as a student and remained there for the next four years, graduating with distinction in 1854.

It was in Munich that Rheinberger was to settle for the rest of his life. Taking on piano pupils to support

himself, he studied composition with Franz Lachner, the friend of Schubert and a prolific composer of conservative bent who fundamentally influenced Rheinberger's own style. Five years later, he succeeded his own piano teacher, Emil Leonard, at the conservatory as professor and the following year became professor of composition as well. In 1865 the Conservatory was reorganised and Rheinberger was appointed coach to the court theatre where he astonished everybody by sight-reading and transposing Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* simultaneously. During this time he was also much occupied as organist at the church of St. Cajetan and later at St. Michel's, and took up choral conducting, becoming director of the Munich Choral Society. In 1867, on the formation of the Royal Music School under the direction of Hans von Bülow, it is hardly surprising to find Rheinberger appointed as professor of organ and composition, the title of Royal Professor being conferred upon him shortly afterwards. His colleagues included Peter Cornelius and Franz Wullner. In 1877 Rheinberger succeeded the latter as director of the court church music resigning his post as conductor of the Munich Choral Society. Had ambition moved him, he could have accepted the post of director of the Hoch-Conservatorium at Frankfurt, but his loyalty to the Bavarian Court prompted King Ludwig II to bestow on him the order of knighthood of St. Michael. Other honours, too, came his way including the knighthood of Gregory the Great, conferred on him by Pope Leo XIII, to whom he had dedicated an eight part Mass, while the University of Munich bestowed on him an honorary doctorate on the occasion of his 60th birthday.

In 1867 Rheinberger married Franziska von Hoffnaass, a widow seventeen years his senior and a prominent poetess, singer and painter with social connections. She was an immense help to him not only in supplying texts for his many vocal compositions, but also in handling his extensive correspondence in foreign languages, in copying his compositions and acting as an astute critic of his works. Her open rejection of Wagner both as a man and musician was not without consequence. Rheinberger as director of the Royal Court Theatre between 1864–7 had enjoyed Wagner's esteem. From then onward he aligned himself with the more reactionary elements which rejected Wagnerian aesthetics and "the music of the future" and he turned away from opera although during his tenure at the Court theatre he had already made his mark with two notable dramatic works — *Die sieben Raben* and *Turmers Tochterlein*.

Hans von Bülow proclaimed Rheinberger to be an ideal composition teacher "unequaled anywhere in or near Germany", and some six hundred composition students flocked to Munich from all over the world to study with him during the last forty years of his life, most notable among them being Humperdinck, Wolf-Ferrari, Furtwängler and Chadwick, not to mention the physicist Max Planck. But his high reputation as a teacher has tended to overshadow his achievement as a composer. His compositions — and we may include his organ works among them — combine the then current traditions of Munich church music with that of the Viennese classics of an earlier age. Their clarity and classic structure and lack of emotional content mitigated against popularity at a time when not to worship at the shrine of Bayreuth was tantamount to mutiny. In 1892 his wife died and ill-health forced him more and more to retire from public life. He suffered from a lung complaint brought on by a mountaineering expedition. In his last years he became increasingly aware that his compositions had become outdated and unwanted. When he died on 25 November 1901, his remains were carried back to his native Liechtenstein and buried in the cemetery at Vaduz not far distant from the house where he was born sixty two years earlier.

Works by Rheinberger have become known such as the Romantic Sonata in F sharp minor, Op. 184, the magnificent Piano Concerto in A flat, Opus 94. There is also a Symphonic Sonata and two Organ Concertos as well as an early Symphony named *Wallstein*, op. 10, after Schiller. There is also a 53 minute Florentine Symphony, Op. 87. Two of his Masses have been singled out for special praise, the Mass in C for soloists, chorus and orchestra, Op. 169 and the Mass in F minor, Op. 159 for four voices and organ. His enchanting Christmas cantata *Der Stern von Bethlehem*, op. 164, to a text by his wife was recorded by the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra under Robert Heger with no less soloists than Rita Streich and Dietrich Fischer-Deskau. The Cello Sonata in C, Op. 92 was also recorded as were these other items more than two decades ago. Happily today there are many other recordings available including most of his chamber music, masses and concertos not to mention the organ works. The Nonet in E flat, Op. 139 also had an "early" recording together with a Nonet by Lachner and a piece by Cannabich.

The combination of flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, bassoon, violin, viola, cello and double bass is extremely rare and the number of significant works written for it can almost be counted on the fingers of one hand. The serenade-like quality of this combination is at all times most attractive and it is very surprising that composers have not be tempted to write for this medium. The first and most familiar example is Spohr's Nonet in F, Op. 31 which dates from 1813 which seems to have stood in splendid isolation until Franz Lachner's Nonet in F minor appeared in 1875. Rheinberger's Nonet dates from nine years later and is a gay, charming and tuneful piece, yet expertly crafted with a perfect understanding of the capabilities of the instruments in the scoring.

The stuffy organist and pedagogue of popular imagination wrote shortly before his death, "There is no justification for music without melodiousness and beauty of sound... music never ought to sound brooding, for, basically, it is the outpouring of joy and even in pain knows no pessimism".

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