

Josef Rheinberger (1839-1901)

A brief outline of his life:

- 1839 Josef Gabriel Rheinberger born on March 17th in Vaduz, Liechtenstein
- 1846 Organist of the Florins Chapel, Vaduz
- 1847 His first composition is performed - a mass for three voices and organ
- 1851 Enters the Munich Conservatory
- 1854 Earns his living as an organist and from 1864 as Répétiteur at the Court Theatre
- 1860 Appointed composition teacher at Munich Conservatory (where he remains until shortly before his death). Amongst his many pupils are Horatio Parker, William Berwald, Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari, Engelbert Humperdinck and Wilhelm Furtwängler
- 1867 He marries one of his students the widowed poetess Franziska (Fanny) von Hoffnaaß, née Jägerhuber (1831-1892) who writes the texts for many of his choral works
- 1869 His opera, The Seven Ravens, is performed at the Court National Theatre
- 1870 Swelling in his right hand ends his career as an organist and pianist, despite several operations.
- 1874 Professor and Inspector at the Royal School of Music
- 1877 Director of the Royal Choir
- 1879 Awarded Knight's Cross of the Order of Holy Gregor by Pope Leo XIII
- 1892 His wife dies after a long illness
- 1894 His own illness forces him to resign as Court Music Director
- 1899 Awarded honorary Doctorate from the University of Munich
- 1901 Dies in Munich on November 25th and is buried in the Southern Cemetery
(Following the destruction of his grave during World War 2, his remains were removed to Vaduz, Liechtenstein, where he was interred in the cemetery close to his birthplace).

Rheinberger's Compositions:

There are 197 works with opus numbers including:

18 Masses

4 Requiems

2 settings of the Stabat Mater

36 motets

100 solo songs

Oratorios and stage works, including *The Seven Ravens*, *The Watchman's Daughter*, *Jest, Cunning and Revenge*, *Poor Heinrich*, *The Magic Word*, *The Star of Bethlehem* and *Christoforus* (these last two with libretti by his wife)

2 symphonies (the *Wallenstein* and the *Florentine*)

2 organ concertos

4 concert overtures

together with a fine piano concerto in Ab major and a large amount of chamber, piano and organ music.

Rheinberger's Organ Works:

20 sonatas:

1	C minor, Op. 27 (1868)	<i>Praeludium; Andante; Finale (Fugue)</i>
2	Ab, Op. 63 (1871)	<i>Grave-Allegro; Adagio espressivo; Finale (Fugue)</i>
3	G, Op. 88 (1874)	<i>Pastorale; Intermezzo; Fugue</i>
4	A minor, Op. 98 (1876)	<i>Tempo moderato; Intermezzo; Fuga cromatica</i>
5	F#, Op. 111 (1878)	<i>Grave-Allegro; Adagio-Allegro; Allegro maestoso</i>
6	Eb minor, Op. 119 (1880)	<i>Preludio; Intermezzo; Marcia Religiosa; Fuga</i>
7	F minor, Op. 127 (1881)	<i>Preludio; Andante; Finale (Grave-Vivo-Fugue)</i>
8	E minor, Op. 132 (1882)	<i>Adagio-Fugue; Intermezzo; Scherzoso; Passacaglia</i>
9	Bb minor, Op. 142 (1885)	<i>Praeludium; Romanze; Fantasia and Fugue</i>
10	B minor, Op. 146 (1886)	<i>Prelude & Fugue; Theme & variations; Fantasy & Finale</i>
11	D minor, Op. 148 (1887)	<i>Agitato; Camtilene; Intermezzo; Fugue</i>
12	Db, Op. 154 (1888)	<i>Phantasie; Pastorale; Introduction & Fugue</i>
13	Eb, Op. 161	<i>Phantasie; Canzone; Intermezzo; Fugue</i>
14	C major, Op. 165	<i>Praeludium; Idyll; Toccata</i>
15	D, Op. 168	<i>Phantasie; Adagio; Introduction & Ricercare</i>
16	G# minor, Op. 175	<i>Allegro; Skandinavisch; Introduction & Fugue</i>
17	B major, Op. 181	<i>Fantasia; Intermezzo; Introduction & Fugue</i>
18	A, Op. 188	<i>Phantasie; Capriccio; Idyll, Finale</i>
19	G minor, Op. 193	<i>Praeludium; Provençalisch; Introduction & Finale</i>
20	F, Op. 196 (1900)	<i>Praeludium; Intermezzo; Pastorale; Finale</i>

Shorter Organ Works:

Ten Trios, Op. 49

24 Pieces in Strict Style, Op. 123

12 Characteristic Pieces, Op. 156:

Preludio; Arioso; Canzonetta; Intermezzo; Visione; Duetto; In Memoriam; Pastorale; Lamento; Riposo; Passacaglia; Marcia Funèbre

12 Monologues, Op. 162

12 Meditations, Op. 167:

Entrata; Agitato; Canzonetta; Andantino; Preludio; Aria; Intermezzo; Alla Marcia; Thema variato; Passacaglia; Fugato; Finale

12 Pieces, Op. 174:

Romance; Scherzoso; Aspiration; Contemplation; Agitato; Improvisation; Solemn Festival; Duet; Ricercare; Evening Rest; Melodia; Ostinata; Finale

12 Trios, Op. 189

6 Short Pieces: *Prelude; Intermezzo; Epilogue; Canzonetta; Consolation; Trio*

Fugue in F minor

Much of Rheinberger's organ music is technically difficult but it is invariably rewarding, worthwhile to play and works well on any organ of two manuals and pedals. Below is a list (in approximate order of difficulty) of pieces which are not quite so tricky. Most of his organ music is available for free, legal download at: imslp.org/wiki/Category:Rheinberger,_Josef_Gabriel

The Novello editions (edited by Harvey Grace) are easier to read and are often more user-friendly than the original editions but they do include numerous editorial alterations.

A graded introduction to the organ music of Josef Rheinberger:

Trio in G minor, Op. 49, No. 1

Sonata No. 1 in C minor, Op. 27 - Andante

Sonata No. 3 in G, Op. 88 - Intermezzo

Prelude (No. 1 from Six Short Pieces)

Sonata No. 5 in F# minor, Op. 111 - Adagio

Sonata No. 4 in A minor, Op. 98 - Intermezzo

Sonata No. 3 in G, Op. 88 - Pastorale

Riposo (from 12 Characteristic Pieces, Op. 156)

Lamento (from 12 Characteristic Pieces, Op. 156)

No 1 (from Monologues, Op. 162)

Sonata No. 11 in D minor Op. 148 - Cantilene

Sonata No. 1 in C minor, Op. 27 - Praeludium

Trio in A minor, Op. 49, No. 3

Trio in C minor, Op. 49, No. 8

Sonata No. 12 in Db, Op. 154 - Pastorale

Sonata No. 8 in E minor, Op. 132 - Intermezzo

Sonata No. 8 in E minor, Op. 132 - Scherzoso

Critical assessment:

Of the twenty sonatas, No. 12 in Db is generally reckoned the finest overall, closely followed by No. 14 in C major and No. 17 in B major. Outstanding individual movements include the huge Passacaglia of No. 8 (Harvey Grace considers it superior to similar movements by Karg-Elert, Reger and even J S Bach), the Prelude and Fugue of No. 10 in B minor, the Cantilene of No. 11 in D minor, the Skandinavisch of No 16 in G# minor and the first movements of Nos. 7 in F minor and 19 in G minor.

Of the shorter pieces, Harvey Grace places the Monologues alongside The Little Organ Book of J S Bach: “. . . I know of no other set of short pieces in which so much is said in so small a space. There is not a weak number.”

The genius of Rheinberger lies in his ability to take old forms and to say something new and of his time. His craftsmanship is always superb and his contrapuntal skill second to none. Above all, from the point of view of the performer, his music is ‘absolute’ in that it works best on a small instrument where his beautifully-crafted musical lines can best be heard. His music does not depend on particular registrations (which may not always be available) or dramatic effects (which inevitably lose their effect with repetition). As a composer for the organ there has to be a valid claim that, in the 12th and 14th sonatas, he is up there with the best and, perhaps, Harvey Grace is not so wide of the mark in placing the shorter pieces alongside the best of Bach.

What others have said about Rheinberger:

Joseph Gabriel von Rheinberger, born in 1839, produced compositions of a high order in every department of modern music. He had a rich fund of invention, a sympathy with all that is best in modern music and a greater mastery over fugue and counterpoint than any of his contemporaries; his organ works are therefore masterpieces of pure music, on a level with the highest orchestral art of his day. He makes comparatively little use of modern mechanical resources for changing the registers . . . he seems to have discountenanced the idea of treating the organ in orchestral style. His sonatas are for the most part in three movements, the first and last of which are generally a prelude and fugue divided from one another by an intermezzo, constructed in two contrasting sections.

In the earlier works he sometimes uses fragments of plainsong in combination with the fugues, but he afterwards discards this device and trusts entirely to original work, while his mastery over the instrument seems to grow with each new sonata. - C F Abdy Williams - The Story of Organ Music (1905)

His organ sonatas were once declared to be *undoubtedly the most valuable addition to organ music since the time of Mendelssohn. They are characterized by a happy blending of the modern Romantic spirit with masterly counterpoint and dignified organ style.* —J. Weston Nicholl, Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (1908 edition)

As a composer he was remarkable for his power of invention, masterful technique, and a noble, solid style. Among his two hundred compositions are oratorios (notably "Christoforus" and "Monfort"); two operas; cantatas for soli, chorus, and orchestra ("The Star of Bethlehem", "Toggenburg", "Klärchen auf Eberstein" etc.); smaller works for chorus and orchestra; symphonies ("Wallenstein"), overtures, and chamber music for various combinations of instruments. Most important of all his instrumental works are his twenty sonatas for organ, the most notable productions in this form since Mendelssohn. Rheinberger wrote many works to liturgical texts, namely, twelve masses (one for double chorus, three for four voices a cappella, three for women's voices and organ, two for men's voices and one with orchestra), a requiem, Stabat Mater, and a large number of motets, and smaller pieces. Rheinberger's masses rank high as works of art, but some of them are defective in the treatment of the text. Joseph Renner, Jr., has recently remedied most of these defects, and made the masses available for liturgical purposes. - The Catholic Encyclopaedia (1913)

What is the most important contribution to the repertory of the organ since Bach's day?

A few years ago most organists would have answered 'The Sonatas of Mendelssohn,' and in a sense this might truly be said today. So far as really great composers were concerned, the organ had been neglected since Bach's death. . . In the matter of historical importance our question might be answered by the names of either Mendelssohn, Franck or Saint-Saëns. But the output of all three men is comparatively small and, on the whole, we must look elsewhere for the answer. I believe most organists familiar with the works will agree that the twenty Sonatas and the hundred detached pieces of Rheinberger are second in importance only to Bach's organ music. - Harvey Grace - *The Organ Works of Rheinberger* (1925)

These works (Organ Sonatas No. 7 & 8) are amongst Rheinberger's finest and show much of his greatness as well as hints of his weakness. His strongest point is his unfailing fluency in contrapuntal writing and his mastery of form, often showing originality in the latter direction. Thematic material, particularly second subjects, is generally tuneful and these two sonatas, in the main, avoid the banality to be found elsewhere. His work has been out of fashion, partly because of one writer's tendency to compare his work with, and to rank him as nearly equal to, Beethoven. He was not that, but he was a fluent writer who produced much valuable music and at least one movement of tremendous mastery, fit to be compared with any other example of passacaglia form. - Roger Fisher - *Notes to EMI recording of sonatas 7 and 8* (1972)

The German counterpart to Guilmant was Josef Rheinberger (1839-1901) and his Concerto in F, scored for the interesting combination of organ, three horns and strings, possesses the same engaging tunefulness, square phrasing and ultimately unmemorable quality of invention as his French colleague. - Arthur Wills - *Yehudi Menuhin Guide to the Organ* (1984)

The most important Catholic composer for the organ, Josef Rheinberger (1839-1901), whose twenty sonatas are a pivotal achievement. - Graham Barber - *The Cambridge Companion to the Organ* (1998)

Even today, the Rheinberger sonatas continue to divide opinion. Below are a few random comments picked up on the internet:

The trouble with Rheinberger is finding a sonata which has all movements of comparable quality: all too often they are let down by an over-sugary intermezzo or turgid final fugue.

Sonata no.1 in C minor: I can recommend this one as worth the work. It's pretty solid and well-written without getting either too tedious (which I how I find much Rheinberger) or 'sugary'! It also finishes well and impressively - even on a modest instrument.

I'd like to put in a good word for the f-minor sonata. It's a really marvellous piece, with beautiful tunes just everywhere. Feels good under the fingers, too.

I played a lot of Rheinberger and can recommend you the Sonatas 3, 4, 8, 11, 19 to start with. No. 4 is very easy to play and is very good music throughout. Nr. 8 is perhaps Rheinbergers most perfect Sonata, but the final Passacaglia has some technical difficulties to tackle (the penultimate page is really awesome to play). Nr. 11 suffers from a very weak Scherzo, but it has a gorgeous Fugue as final movement (but you cannot omit the Scherzo because the Scherzo-theme becomes one of the Fugue interludes...). Nr. 3 has the best fugue ever written by Rheinberger. It is vigorous and virtuous music which never fails to make a great impact on the audience.

BUT: Rheinberger didn't write only Sonatas. He composed a lot of "Charakterstuecke" (comparable in size to those of Reger). These collections contain some very nice music to discover. The "Visione" from op. 156 is particularly fine and can be played (like all of these pieces) even on a small organ.

Rheinberger's most popular works – the organ music – are really quite different from the works of contemporaries such as from Charles-Marie Widor, Louis Vierne, César Franck and Alexander Guilmant, but in some ways similar to Max Reger's very early work. What is appealing about Rheinberger's organ music is that he tends more toward clean lines and clear textures. At times it seems that these composers displayed a tendency to create dense, even opaque textures resulting in a sound similar to "pulling out all the stops and leaning on the keyboard". Little if any of this can be heard in Rheinberger's organ music.

- L.D. Lampson - www.classical.net

In conclusion

In the end, it doesn't really matter whether Rheinberger is a 'better' composer than someone else. Like most composers, he can sometimes be dull, sometimes a bit sentimental, perhaps, but his craftsmanship is invariably superb. His best work is well worth hearing or playing. If you can, try listening to his G minor Stabat Mater of 1890 or the hauntingly beautiful Abendlied. Despite the comment above by Arthur Wills, the Organ Concertos are hugely enjoyable.

Rheinberger understands that the organ is a subtle contrapuntal instrument, not a one-man orchestra, and he writes in a way which is deeply satisfying. He never requests specific registrations and the instruction for *crescendo* appears only once in the sonatas (Sonata 19). In a sense, all 20 sonatas are a revisiting of Bach's well-known Toccata, Adagio and Fugue in C and yet, within the basic parameters of this overall shape, he is endlessly inventive and, as Roger Fisher points out, the master of form.

Probably his best music is found in the fugues. He rarely sticks to a strict form but uses fugue as a vehicle for his febrile imagination.

Rheinberger never tickles the ear with fancy effects. His music is 'pure' and hardly ever illustrative. Maybe an appreciation of form, structure and balance comes with age and a gradual fatigue with clever and dramatic gestures. Rheinberger's organ music takes a natural place with the greatest contrapuntists who have understood the essential nature of the organ.

Although the organ repertoire is huge, it is also extremely uneven. We have crumbs from the table of the great men:

Mozart's 'mechanical clock' pieces
Mendelssohn's six sonatas and three preludes and fugues
Schumann's works for pedal piano
Brahms's eleven chorale preludes
Franck's nine organ pieces and three chorals
Elgar's Vesper Voluntaries and G major sonata
Hindemith's three sonatas

A handful of front-rank composers gave us some of their finest work in their organ compositions:

Dietrich Buxtehude (surely one of the most imaginative composers for the organ)
J S Bach (especially in the chorale preludes)
G F Handel (two sets of amazingly inventive concertos)
and, of course, several generations of French organist-composers from Widor to Messiaen, BUT,

Rheinberger, although perhaps not quite a composer of the first rank, has left us the richest legacy of top-class organ compositions since J S Bach. Perhaps it's time for organists to rejoice, embrace the rich fruits of his fertile mind and enjoy the craftsmanship of his deeply satisfying sonatas and shorter pieces.

Adrian Self - January 2015