

Sigfrid Karg-Elert

(1877-1933)

An introduction to his keyboard music

Sigfrid Karg-Elert – Timeline

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| 1877 | Siegfried Theodor Karg born at Oberndorf am Neckar in Bavaria on November 21 st , the youngest of twelve children. His father, Johann Jacob, was a book dealer (or a newspaper editor and publisher) and his mother, Marie August (née Ehlert). Johann was Catholic and Marie Protestant. |
| 1882/3 | The family move to Leipzig. Siegfried composes a cantata and begins piano lessons. |
| 1889 | Death of Siegfried's father. |
| 1896 | The composer Emil von Reznicek is impressed by Siegfried's gifts and arranges three years free tuition at Leipzig Conservatory. He supports himself by playing in bands and café orchestras. |
| 1899 | Siegfried's Piano Concerto (with the composer as soloist) is performed: as a result he is given two further years of free study at the Conservatory, enabling him to graduate. |
| 1901 | He works as a piano teacher in Magdeburg. His employers persuade him to change his name, adopting a variant of his mother's maiden name and adopting the Swedish spelling of his first name, hence <i>Sigfrid Karg-Elert</i> . |
| 1902 | Appointed Head of the master class at Magdeburg Conservatory but finds the work uncongenial, so he abandons teaching and decides to devote himself to composition. |
| 1904 | Meets one of his musical heroes, Edvard Grieg, who recommends him to the publishers Novello and Carl Simon. |
| 1906 | Carl Simon offers him a lifetime publishing agreement for his harmonium music. His new status as an increasingly widely-published composer results in performances from the likes of Busoni, Kreutzer and Reger. |
| 1910 | Marries Luise Kretzschmar (1890-1971). Publishes his first organ work: <i>Choral Improvisationen</i> , op.65. |
| 1914 | Daughter Katharina (Kitty) is born. Composes <i>Homage to Handel</i> , dedicated to the Royal College of Organists in gratitude for his election as an honorary member and 'as a symbol of the close ties which bind English and German music.' |
| 1915 | Enlists in the army, playing various instruments in regimental bands. During this period his music for solo flute and clarinet is written |
| 1919 | Appointed instructor of music theory and composition at Leipzig Conservatory. |

- 1920-26 Not a happy period. His music is heavily criticised in Germany for its ‘internationalism’ and, in particular, French influence. He is branded a Jew, even though he is not, and feels vulnerable.
- 1930 His only visit to the UK in May for the Karg-Elert Festival, based at the London church of St. Lawrence Jewry, organized by his close friends and supporters, Nicholas Choveaux, Godfrey Sceats and Archibald Farmer.
- 1932 Persuaded to undertake a disastrous recital tour of the US sponsored by the Wurlitzer Company. He was ill, suffering with diabetes (at that time incurable) and no match for the likes of Dupré, Lemare and Vierne who preceded him.
- 1933 Health deteriorates rapidly and, following a stroke, dies in April in Leipzig at the age of 55.

Karg-Elert’s musical personality

In his obituary (Musical Opinion, May 1933) the composer’s great friend and champion in the UK, Archibald Farmer, writes: ‘For more than twenty years a new work by Karg-Elert has been an event of the first importance to organists. . . From the moment that the Sixty-six Chorale Improvisations appeared, it was evident that a new star had arisen for organists. Later work deepened the impression.’ He goes on to list the works he considers to be particularly significant:

Symphonic Canzone and *Symphonic Chorales*

Pastels from the Lake of Constance, *Pastels* op.92 and *Cathedral Windows*

Partita, *Triptych*, *Kaleidoscope* and *Music for Organ*

These, along with a ‘quantity of smaller but not less interesting pieces, definitely place him among the elect in the literature of our instrument. They present that rare combination of originality, quantity and variety which signalises the truly great opus.’

There are several important points to be drawn from this warm appreciation. Farmer recognises that it is as a composer of organ music that Karg-Elert will be remembered (although he acknowledges the composer’s contribution to the repertoire of other instruments earlier in his tribute.) By listing the works he considers to be of particular importance he sends us back to the scores, where we encounter, on first sight, an apparently bewildering variety of styles, ranging from the extreme chromaticism and virtuosity of the *Symphonic Chorales*, through the intensely sensuous impressionism of the *Pastels*, the incense-laden *Cathedral Windows* and back to the much more traditional *Partita* and *Music for Organ*. Karg-Elert, it seems, is something of a musical chameleon.

His early works, such as *Reisebilder* (Travel Pictures) (1895) for piano owe so much to Grieg that it’s hard not to see it as another collection of the Norwegian’s Lyric Pieces. Formally, the collection seems to have its origins in Schumann’s *Waldscenen* (Forest Scenes). Karg-Elert writes rewardingly for the piano and each of the eight miniatures is a joy to play. On the other hand, a piece like *Nordlicht* (Northern Lights) (1903) shows the clear influence of Debussy and the early stirrings of the composer’s journey towards impressionism.

It’s at this time (1903) that Karg-Elert falls in love with the harmonium. This is not the same instrument which was often found in chapels and mission halls to thump out hymns and choruses, but the ‘art-harmonium’, constructed most famously by Victor Mustel of Paris. Sadly, the National Reed Organ Museum at Saltaire closed in 2011 but those of us who were privileged to sample Phil and Pam Fluke’s superb collection will never forget the experience. Jonathan Scott, a fine harmoniumist and owner of a lovely fully-restored 1904 Mustel explains the attraction of the instrument: ‘[it] possessed the tonal qualities of a pipe organ and the expressive control of a string instrument. The instrument had multiple stops, like an organ, and a divided keyboard so that the player could choose different pitches and timbres

in the treble and bass of a single keyboard.’ Some attributes of the harmonium seemed to appeal especially to Karg-Elert: ‘prolongement’ which allows a note to sound a drone without the need to keep it pressed down; ‘percussion’ – a set of metal bars which were struck at the start of each note; ‘bells’ or tuned chime-bars and, most of all, ‘expression’ which allowed the player to control the volume by means of the bellows pedals. These days, the art-harmonium is recognised as a serious musical instrument in its own right and a number of music colleges possess one. Vierne composed his 24 Pieces in free style for the instrument and there have been many other ‘serious’ composers to have written for it but none as prolifically and imaginatively as Karg-Elert. Although much of his output for the instrument is, on paper at least, not unduly demanding, his two Harmonium Sonatas are of almost transcendental difficulty and only playable by the most accomplished virtuosi.

Although he never held a position as a church organist and was, by most accounts, a pretty mediocre organist, in 1907 he began the collection of 66 chorale improvisations based on Lutheran Church hymn melodies, most famous of which is, of course, his *Marche Triomphale* on *Nun danket alle Gott*. It’s hard to believe that this set of six volumes is Karg-Elert’s first composition for organ with pedals. There is a huge variety of styles and treatments, ranging from large-scale fantasias, improvisations, dance forms, ground basses, canzonas and toccatas. In fact there is enough worthwhile material in these 66 pieces to keep most of us gainfully engaged for the rest of our days. The writing is unfailingly idiomatic and accomplished and by no means are all the pieces hugely difficult to play.

The movements are arranged according to the seasons in the Church year, starting with Advent and Christmas and working through to Ascension and Whitsun in volume four. The fifth volume makes use of hymns for Reformation, repentance, Communion and All Souls while the final volume concerns itself with Confirmation, Marriage, Baptism and harvest. Obviously, many of the hymn-melodies on which the pieces are based will be unfamiliar to us now but as they are so often in heavy disguise anyway, it doesn’t really matter.

No.50 from volume five is particularly beautiful and deeply poignant. It’s based on *O Gott, du frommer Gott* (O God, thou faithful God) and was composed on November 13th, 1908 in memory of the composer’s mother who had died that day. The echo effects recall Brahms’s final chorale prelude and the mood is unvaryingly tranquil. Over the notes of the melody Karg-Elert has inscribed the text (in translation): *Oh grant that at mine end Christ’s death may me inspirit; My soul to Thee shall rise and holy joys inherit: And grant my body here a Christian resting place, In tranquil rest to sleep for ever in Thy grace.*

I mentioned earlier that one of the fruits of the composer’s meeting with Grieg in 1904 was the latter’s recommendation to the publishers Carl Simon and Novello. In the light of future events, the relationship with Novello was to prove an important one and amongst the first titles to be published in this country were the *Trois Impressions* op.72 of 1909, written whilst the composer was still working on the 66 *Chorale Improvisations*. The French title is out of respect for the dedicatee, Alexandre Guilmant and, presumably, in the hope and expectation that the great international recitalist would play them! Not only the title, but the music itself is perfumed with Gallic sensuality and with these three pieces we encounter Karg-Elert the impressionist.

This brings us to what, in my humble opinion, is one of Karg-Elert’s masterpieces. *Homage to Handel* is enormous: 54 variations on a ground bass from the last movement of Handel’s G minor keyboard suite. The choice of the Anglo/German Handel is deliberate. In 1914 he was elected to honorary membership of the Royal College of Organists and the work is, in the composer’s own words, ‘an expression of thanks for the honour. The memory of the great master Handel, whom both England and Germany claim as their own, has been invoked as a symbol of the close ties which bind English and German music.’ (Ironical indeed: within a few short weeks our two nations would be at war!)

Here we see and hear Karg-Elert’s total mastery of pretty much every aspect of composition. The tonal basis of the Handel (which is just four bars long) imposes a discipline on the harmony and yet, within the

obvious restrictions of a repeated ground bass, Karg-Elert achieves an almost infinite variety of textures and colours. The piece would have been impossible or, at the very least, very nearly so without at least two assistants to change the registrations and, even with a sequencer and an array of general pistons, it's hard to avoid the occasional hiccup between variations.

Homage to Handel is in three large sections: variations 1-19 are a gradual crescendo, culminating in a brief quotation from Handel's *Hallelujah!* Variations 20-28 use only delicate registrations, recalling 'the olden style'. Variations 29 – 54 effectively describe the evolution of the organ, starting with the 'portative' and concluding with the full resources of the then 'modern organ'. The 54th variation combines three themes drawn from the Handel G minor suite on which the work is built.

Where do we go after that? Well, Karg-Elert composes nothing further for the organ until three years after the war when he produces what is arguably his most chromatic work, *Seven Pastels from the Lake of Constance*, op. 96, of 1921. In these intense movements he stretches tonality just as far as it can go and the occasional use of the whole-tone scale only serves to emphasise the harmonic rootlessness of the music, but then again, how better to describe the constantly-changing face of the lake? We are almost into the realms of the atonality which drove Schoenberg to devise his serial system of composition and yet somehow there's always that feeling of tension and release, like the gentle rippling on the surface of the water. Karg-Elert seems to have an imaginary organ in his mind with a limitless palette of colours available, making things just a tad tricky for the poor organist faced with the majority of instruments he or she is likely to encounter! Forgetting for a moment the science and the gymnastics, a movement such as *The mirrored moon* gives us a sublime musical portrayal of the moon shimmering on the dark waters of Lake Constance.

For his next major organ work Karg-Elert turns to a somewhat unexpected source for his inspiration – Gregorian chant – and, it seems to me, retreats from the extreme chromaticism of the *Seven Pastels*. By now, his music has lost what little favour it may have had in his native Germany and both the *Pastels* and *Cathedral Windows*, his opus 106 of 1923, were published in this country.

As you can see from the timeline Karg-Elert's father was a devout Catholic and so it's not too hard to see why he would be attracted to the traditional plainsong melodies of the Roman Church and to cloak them in what we might term 'musical incense'. There are some real treasures amongst the *Cathedral Windows*, not least is his haunting treatment of the Christmas chant *Resonet in laudibus* (sometimes adapted to fit the words of 'Joseph dearest, Joseph mine.' There's also a colourful version of *Adeste, fideles* (better known as 'O Come, all ye faithful') but perhaps the loveliest is the sixth 'window' *Saluto angelico*. It's actually based on a chant for the *Ave Maria* but in this instance Karg-Elert's subtitle gives the clue as to what was in his mind when writing this heavenly music: he calls the work 'Polychromatic windows from ancient cathedrals' so, perhaps, he wants us to visualize the sunlight streaming through mediaeval stained glass depicting the visitation of the Angel Gabriel to the young Virgin Mary. The music is still chromatic, yes, but this is more restrained, more disciplined, and, to my ears at least, seems to foreshadow Tournemire or even Duruflé.

Karg-Elert's last years were not happy. Despite being a respected teacher at the Leipzig Conservatory his music was largely ignored in his native Germany. In a lecture given in 1998 the Australian organist and musicologist Harold Fabrikant posits a number of reasons for this: Karg-Elert was known to be outspoken and his eccentric appearance, together with his strong links with England and France led him to be treated with suspicion. The 'twenties and 'thirties coincided with growing antisemitism and, unbelievable as it now seems, he was thought to be Jewish, mainly, it would appear, because of his appearance. The evidence for this is that he is listed in the 1933 'ABC of Jews in Music' (which was produced as part of the Nazi boycott of anything Jewish).

Karg-Elert suffered from consistently unflattering reviews in Germany who, in Fabrikant's words, 'roundly condemned everything he did.' His lifelong fascination with the harmonium did him no favours, being dismissed by his contemporaries such as Reger and Karl Straube as a 'second-rate' instrument.

Finally, the period of Karg-Elert's greatest organ music coincided with the beginnings of the Orgelbewegung (organ reform movement) in which the huge, Romantic instruments necessary for the proper performance of his frequently complex music were rapidly falling out of favour, to be replaced by much smaller, 'neo-baroque' instruments.

The one bright spot was the appreciation and support he enjoyed in this country which reached its peak in 1930 with the Karg-Elert Festival in London. However, his health declined rapidly from then onwards. At that time the diabetes from which he suffered was a death sentence and this, coupled with his extreme unease at the seemingly unstoppable rise of Hitler's Nazis, produced music of rage (*Passacaglia and Fugue on BACH* op.150 (1931)) and extreme dejection (*Partita Retrospettiva* op.151 (1932)). The ill-advised tour of the US in 1932 only served to make matters worse: he was not a concert recitalist and there can be little doubt that the stress of trying to be someone he clearly was not, was a contributory factor to his death from a stroke in the following year at the age of 55.

Rather than concluding with the gloom-laden music of these sad last few years, let's return instead to his opus 144, *Kaleidoscope*. The only time the composer visited this country was for the festival of his music in May 1930. The festival was based in the church of St. Lawrence Jewry in London and was organised by three of his friends and admirers, Archibald Farmer, Nicholas Choveaux and Godfrey Sceats. The festival was a great success and was well supported. (Apart, that is, from the final recital by Godfrey Sceats during which Karg-Elert did not conceal his displeasure and his groans could be heard all over the church!) Dedicated 'To my dear friend Archibald Farmer with gratitude' *Kaleidoscope* was written in just three days on the composer's return home after the festival. It is in effect a four-movement sonata and was performed for the first time by the dedicatee, Archibald Farmer at the first recital of the newly-formed Organ Music Society on May 5th, 1931. Published by Oxford University Press the registration suggestions are for a British organ and Farmer has written that it represents Karg-Elert's very positive reaction to English organs and organ-playing. It almost beggars belief that this glorious music had to wait until 1974 for its first recording by Michael Austin on the organ of Birmingham Town Hall. This is the composer in a sunny mood and that is how I hope we can remember him.

Assessment as a composer

If Karg-Elert had poured his genius into writing symphonies or opera he would probably be considered among the greats of his time. The fact that he chose the harmonium, organ and, to a lesser extent, the piano as vehicles for his expression, has resulted in his largely being ignored or forgotten. His contribution to the repertoire of the harmonium is without equal and is now being taken seriously for the first time in the best part of a century. His organ works rank along with the very best in the first thirty years of the twentieth century. He is frequently the equal of his contemporary Max Reger and often his superior in terms of contrapuntal skill, quality of invention and depth of vision.

Much of his music is technically demanding and requires an organ of large resources but there are also many shorter works which are beautifully crafted, rewarding to play and not unduly difficult. Most of the harmonium music will transfer well to the organ. There are some suggestions below.

Having said that, I would strongly counsel getting to know his finest work through the medium of recording. Stefan Engels has now completed his landmark CD recording (on 16 discs) of all the Karg-Elert organ music on the Priory label. Maybe you and I will never be in a position to play much of this repertoire but at least we can now enjoy someone playing it for us! In addition, do try to get hold of a recording of some of Karg-Elert's delightful music for the art harmonium. I guarantee you will find it a revelation!

Karg-Elert represents a culmination of an extreme late-romanticism, laced with a heavy dose of impressionism. He doesn't really have much influence on the generations of composers following him

although, having said that, the one composer with whom Karg-Elert shares much in common is Olivier Messiaen. Particularly in Messiaen's early music we find the same rich harmony, rhythmic freedom and, of course, birdsong. In works such as *Le Banquet Céleste* (1926) and *Alleluias sereins* (from *L'Ascension*) (1933/34) it's more than possible to hear echoes of Karg-Elert's *Cathedral Windows*. Even as late as the monumental *Turangalila* Symphony of 1948 the 'purple' patches of a movement like *The garden of the lovers' sleep* recalls the heavily-prefumed pages of the *Pastels from the Lake of Constance*. The reaction against Karg-Elert's ultra sensuality can be most clearly heard in the music of Paul Hindemith and others such as Max Drischner, Ernst Pepping, Johann Nepomuk David, Josef Ahrens and Hugo Distler who responded to the *Orgelbewegung* or organ reform movement with music devoid of Karg-Elert's complex registrational colours and with austere scores of almost clinical precision. I think that it's reasonable to suggest that natural backbone of the Germanic organ tradition is Max Reger, not Karg-Elert. If Karg-Elert's music is a soft, perfumed silk cushion, that of the next generation is a glass of ice-cold water. (And, of course, a drink of cold water is a whole lot more refreshing on a hot day than a perfumed silk cushion!)

Some easier music by Karg-Elert

It's not all bordering on the impossible! The pieces listed on the next page are all freely and legally downloadable from www.imslp.org Many of the harmonium pieces will transfer well to the organ and, in some cases, are a little easier as the pedals can help with the sustained bass notes. All can be tackled on a modest instrument despite the composer's often excessive and unrealistic registration requirements. Titles with an asterisk (*) are on two staves and originally for harmonium.

*Sechs Skizzen (Six Sketches) op.10 for harmonium

*Aquarellen (Five characteristic pieces) op.27

Sixty-six chorale improvisations op.65:

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| Book 1: | Freu dich sehr, O meine Seele |
| | Mit Ernst, O Menschenkinder |
| Book 2: | Sollt ich meinem Gott nicht singen |
| Book 4: | Gott des Himmels und der Erden |
| Book 5: | Schmücke dich, O liebe Seele |

Twenty preludes and postludes op.78:

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| Christe, du Lamm Gottes |
| Machs mit mir, Gott, nach deiner Güt |
| Nun sich der Tag geendet hat |
| Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme |

*Thirty-three Portraits op.101 – All are well worth exploring (and great fun, too) but nos. 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 11, 13, 15, 24 and 27 are amongst the least demanding. No. 33 (*Subtle perfume of the magic flower*) might appear a bit of mystery but read the title backwards and compare this with the dedicatee . . .

Sempre Semplice op.142:

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| Book 1: | In modo dorico |
| | Litanei |
| | Tenebrae |
| Book 2: | Before the image of a saint |

Eight short pieces op.154: *Melodia monastica*

Adrian Self - June 2019