



# Reviews

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USING THE SECTION CDs and DVDs are arranged alphabetically by composer; multi-composer albums by artist or title; books by title.

## The beating heart of Reger

Max Reger is often viewed as the boring, academic offspring of Bach and Brahms. But he did have a heart, as **ANDREW MELLOR** is delighted to discover



**REGER**  
*Choral Songs*  
Consortium/  
Andrew-John Smith  
VOCAL  
HYPERION CDA 67762  
★★★★★

This was a surprise. The Disc of the Month occupying these pages was supposed to be John Eliot Gardiner's beautiful recording of devotional choral works from Renaissance Spain (see page 71). But then this CD arrived. And with the sincerest of apologies to Gardiner, we simply had to give it top billing. It's one of those recordings that immediately stops you in your tracks. The performances are fine indeed, but more than anything, it's the music itself that strikes you – it's both utterly unique and breathtakingly beautiful.

Which was a little surprising, given the reputation of its composer Max Reger. The highfalutin musical know-it-all will be quick to laugh Reger off as a composer of stodgy, finger-twisting keyboard works. But for all his academic rigour – he studied the music of Bach and Brahms to the point of obsession – Reger actually became something of an old softy when faced with the rich, emotive poetry of the great German Romantics.

One of whom was Joseph von Eichendorff. It was he who penned the stanzas Richard Strauss so movingly set in his song *Im Abendrot* (the last of the *Four Last Songs*). When Reger read Eichendorff's poem *Der Einsiedler* (*The Hermit*) – typical of the author in its depiction of a troubled soul seeking refuge in nature – it prompted the creation of a song for baritone soloist, choir and orchestra. Later on, Reger made a piano transcription of the orchestral score. It may sound strange, but that pared-down arrangement

actually adds something: a sharper focus, a greater sense of the whimsical and an opportunity to hear the somehow more contemporary sound of a piano underlying a small vocal ensemble.

*The Hermit* forms the first track here, and its 12-minute span alone is something I'll treasure for years to come. It sounds like a piano nocturne to begin with, until suddenly, as if from nowhere, a languorous choral chord glides onto the piano underlay. As Eichendorff talks of 'quiet night...the comfort of the world', the voices slip and slide smoothly through unexpected keys, gently encouraged by a breakaway baritone soloist. It's exotic, luxurious, unusual and so very evocative.

It all sounds, in fact, a long way from our accepted view of Reger's music as stodgy and overbearing. There are even glances towards Fauré, that creator of such light and pure choral textures. But also of interest right now are the premonitions of Eric Whitacre and John Rutter in Reger's restful cadences and bluesy harmonies. It's only the indelible imprint of Brahms and Wagner that reminds you this is mostly 19th-century music.

Three short song cycles for choir follow *The Hermit* – some unaccompanied, others with piano. In his *Three Six-Part Choir Songs* Reger divides the choir's altos and basses in two; the result is a luxurious, bottom-heavy texture like flavoured clotted cream. But the message of the music is serious and moving: in the third song Reger sets a text by Nikolaus Lenau, a poet whose doomed passion for a



Chamber choir Consortium steps up and delivers for Max Reger

DISC OF THE MONTH

married woman drove him to insanity.

It's here that Reger's music starts to move from inherent yearning to palpable despair. To bring that off, you need a choir that isn't just technically accomplished but can also conjure intense drama, and Andrew-John Smith's group is perfectly suited to it. The voices blend well but are never overly polite; this is passionate rather than devotional, and you sense the fine gradations of the composer's emotional intensity.

“ This is one of those CDs that stops you in your tracks

There's so much else, too – from the jaunty feel of Reger's songs for women's voices to the darkness and faint hope of his secular *Requiem*, written as the First World War raged in Europe. There isn't room to recount the many special musical effects conjured by Reger and by the singers of Consortium, but neither is there much point. This music is so alluring and moving precisely because it defies description. Which is exactly what makes this CD unmissable. ■

### WHY YOU'LL LOVE THIS

■ **IN THE DETAIL** Smith and his colleagues have planned every phrase they sing here. For the most obvious example, listen to their shaping of the last chord of the song *Frühlingsblick*

(track 4), which seems to travel to a place of perfect peace. ■ **SOPRANOS** Consortium's sopranos provide special moments everywhere. Try the breath-tinged warmth of their

top note at 3'23 in *Schweigen* (track 2) or the way they respond to the sudden dropping-away of the piano in *Trost* (track 5). ■ **SPEED CHECK** Smith sets tempi that perfectly match Reger's

undulating rhythms, but he pulls and pushes at them, too, creating a feeling of time-stopping reflection. When singers and pianist Christopher Glynn suddenly slow as one, it's magical.