An Analytical Application

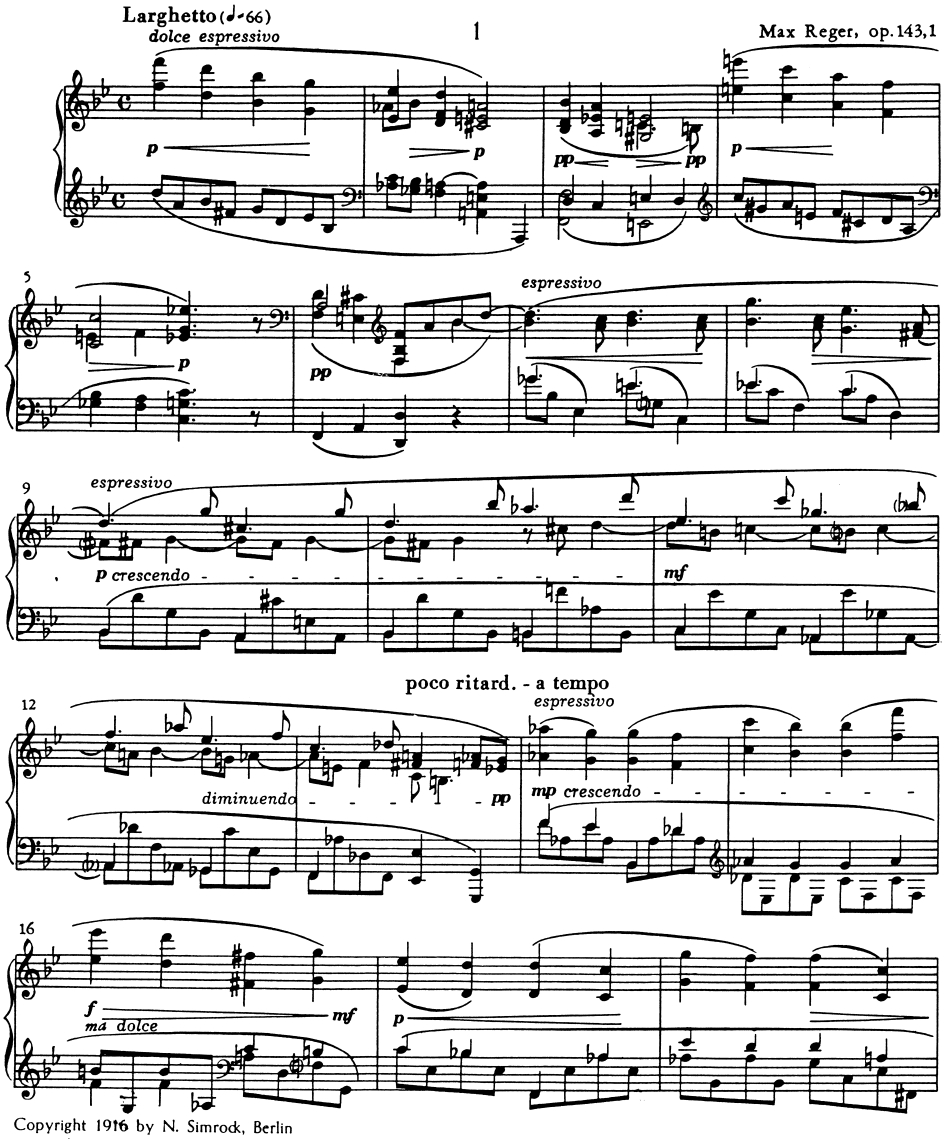
I will now turn to the piece by Reger to demonstrate more specifically some ways in which Neo-Riemannian theory can serve to explain certain passages in late-Romantic music. Neo-Riemannian theory will probably never completely replace the more traditional analytic methods applied to this repertoire. There may be pieces that could be analyzed effectively using Neo-Riemannian theory alone, but often a methodological eclecticism is more appropriate. I do not want to put a piece of music in a kind of analytic straitjacket, in which the theory is guiding the understanding of the piece, as opposed to the piece deciding which methods to use. Neo-Riemannian theory is a useful tool for describing what is happening in passages that are triadic, yet seem to lack tonal coherence. Most often these passages can be assigned a linear role within a functional context—or at least appear in works in which phrases and sectional divisions are articulated by functional cadences—so the Neo-Riemannian approach is best used in conjunction with a functional perspective in these cases.

Max Reger's music provides excellent examples of the sorts of passages most suitable for, or susceptible to, the Neo-Riemannian approach. In his *Music in Transition* Jim Samson points out quite correctly that Reger is "a composer whose harmonic practice owed as much to Brahms as to Wagner […] His music inclines rather towards a compression of chromatic, but for the most part *triadic* harmonies within a short time-span and a single tonal region."[5] The triadic property is important here. While often triadic and formally straightforward, much of Reger's music has proved quite resistant to standard tonal analytic approaches. It is striking to note that not a single work of Reger's appears in the most common analytic anthologies—perhaps because Reger's music is so difficult to analyze.

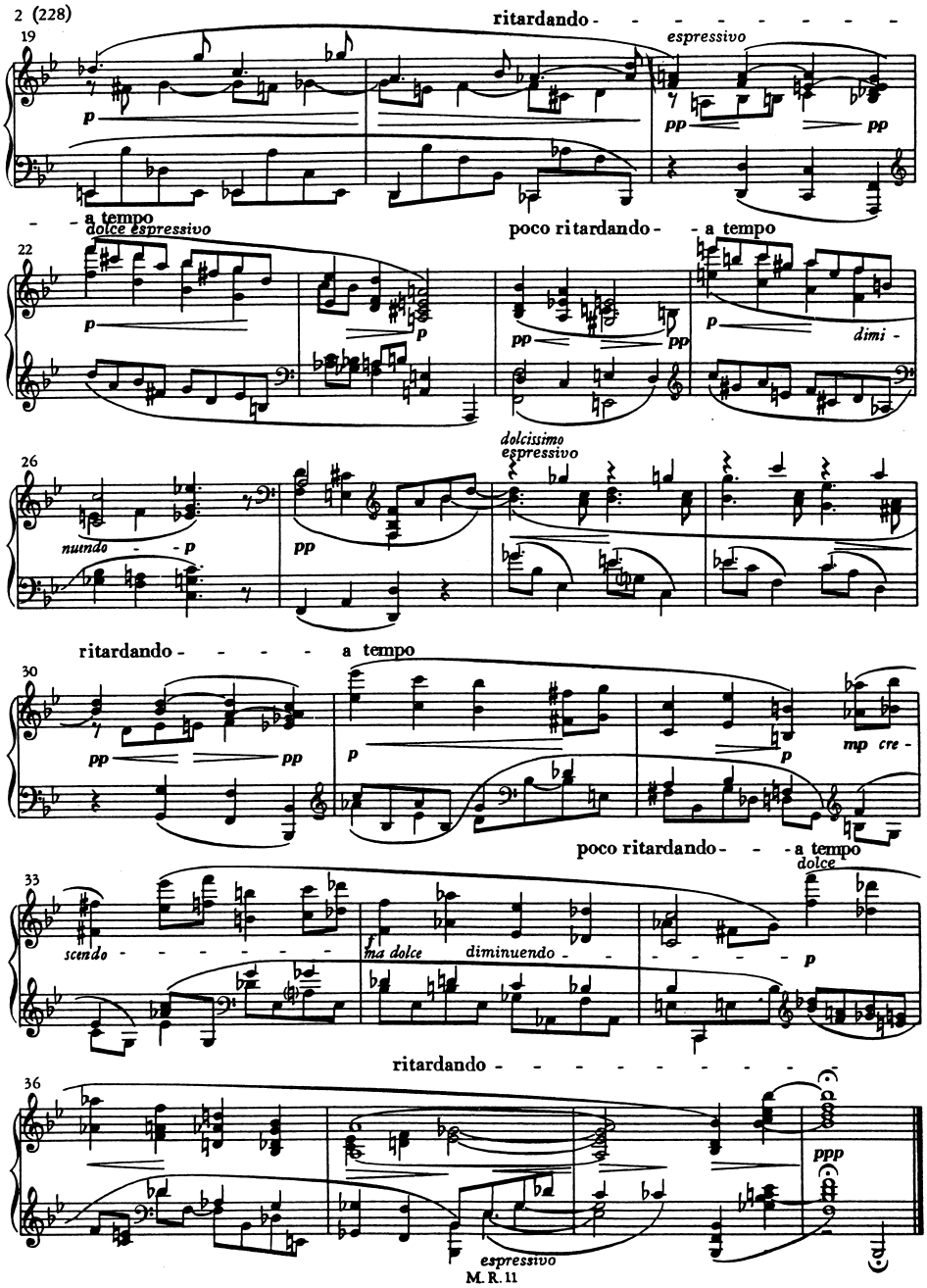
Träume am Kamin, Dreams at the Fireplace, op. 143 (see example 7 next pages), was written in 1915, one year before Reger's death. The first piece in this collection begins with a portion of an LR cycle: D minor, B-flat major, G minor, E-flat major, with applied leading tones on off beats separating the chords of the cycle. From E-flat major, we might expect the cycle to continue with C minor, A-flat major, F minor and so on. The expected C-minor triad is omitted, however, and the next triad we hear is the A-flat major triad that would follow that C-minor triad, if it were present. I believe the case for an LR cycle is convincing despite this omission since, if we have identified the cyclic pattern, we expect the A-flat chord at some point. Without reference to the cycle, the A-flat chord would be difficult to explain. The initial portion of the cycle could be interpreted as a progression from the D-minor tonic through a succession of pre-dominant chords, but it is not clear how the A-flat major triad could be accounted for in terms of its function within this diatonic context—other than as an apparent chord created by simultaneous non-chord tones

5. Samson 1977 p. 6

Max Reger *Träume am Kamin* op. 143/1 (from *Zwölf kleine Klavierstücke*).



Example 7


2 (228)
19
ritardando - - - - - - - - -
espressivo
p
pp
pp
- - a tempo
dolce espressivo
poco ritardando - - a tempo
22
p
p
pp
pp
p
dimi -
26
dolcissimo
espressivo
nundo - - p
pp
ritardando - - - - a tempo
30
pp
pp
p
p
mp cre -
poco ritardando - - - a tempo
dolce
33
scendo - - - - - - -
f
ma dolce
diminuendo - -
- - - - - p
ritardando - - - - - - - - -
36
ppp
espressivo
M. R. 11

embellishing the move from the E-flat major triad to the D-minor triad on the second beat of the second measure.

Since the LR cycle will run through all twenty-four major and minor triads, it has to be interrupted to avoid monotony. This is done through the introduction of the D-minor chord in bar 2. If the cycle had been maintained, this chord would have been an F-minor triad. In traditional Riemannian theory, the chord Reger uses could be labeled as an F-major triad in which the fifth has been replaced by a sixth. This is plausible, since F is strongly emphasized both by its appearance in the bass and by its doubling in the alto voice. However, a more likely interpretation is that this chord is in fact the D-minor tonic. This D-minor triad then gives way to a half cadence on A on the third beat of the measure, bringing the opening gesture to a close.

This introductory theme or gesture will appear several times during the course of the piece, with and without the cyclic harmonization. At the recapitulation in measure 22, for example, the harmonization features the same LR cycle used at the opening—just as one would expect. In the coda, at measure 35, the falling theme recurs in altered form and the harmonization is changed, perhaps to avoid the excursions into remote key areas associated with the cyclic harmonizations. Here the gesture begins in B-flat minor and leads to B-flat major.

To return to the beginning of the piece, following the Dominant A-major triad in bar two, there is a deceptive cadence to a B-flat-major triad, which also functions as a Neapolitan sixth and thus reverses the function of the A-major chord from Dominant to Tonic. This reading makes the cadence on the dominant seventh on E in the following bar quite logical. Reger uses chords that belong to the key, but in an order that does not follow traditional harmonic rules. The initial theme returns as an RL cycle, now in A minor: A minor—F major—D minor, then the expected B-flat-major triad is missing. Rather than skipping ahead to the next member of the cycle, G minor, as the original statement of the theme did, the cycle is abandoned here: on the first beat of measure 5 we find a G-flat in the bass (instead of the perhaps expected G-natural) and that G-flat supports the altered dominant of the following F-major triad, which is in turn followed by a C-minor triad. The C-minor triad carries pre-dominant function—Subdominant function in Riemannian terms—and creates the expectation that a cadence on B-flat will follow. The C-minor triad thus marks the end of the first two phrases while at the same time implying an immediate harmonic goal for the continuation of the piece. The expected cadence in B-flat does not materialize, however; instead when the B-flat-major triad does appear in measure 6, it is as part of a deceptive cadence in D minor, reminiscent of measures 2 and 3. The clear arrival on B-flat does not occur until the recapitulation at bar twenty-two.

The continuation after measure 6 makes sense from a traditional point of view, although we get some help from Neo-Riemannian theory, and as I will show later, it will open up further possibilities for the theory. Measure 7 is difficult to understand: Which notes are structural and which are dissonances? I have selected the notes in

the left hand as constituting the fundamental harmonic structure. These chords comprise complete harmonies, and the initial D and B-flat in the right hand are also de-emphasized since they are held over from the previous bar. Here the succession of third-related chords, as in bar one, is broken up into pairs of chords. The chords are not related through R or L operations, however, since there is no common tones held between the first pair of triads: E-flat minor—C major, and only one between F major—D major. And, this chord progression could be understood within traditional harmony as well: as a 5–*6* sequential pattern with applied dominants.

Measures 9 through 11 feature a progression from G minor to C minor, and once again, the C-minor triad does not lead to a cadence in the tonic B-flat major. Instead, it marks the beginning of another LR cycle in measure 11, moving from C minor, to A-flat major, which is then prolonged in measures 12 and 13 and followed by the expected F minor in measure 13. Reger then breaks off the cycle and instead moves to an incomplete D-major chord (without root), which resolves to a chord that combines the two chords G major and C minor on the fourth beat of measure 13.

I will conclude my discussion of the Reger piece here. There is not much more to talk about from a Neo-Riemannian point of view. There are, of course, a number of other features to talk about in this piece, for example, contrapuntal and motivic aspects, the way in which Reger displaces the chord tones and the way in which the motifs are transformed. Measures 14 through 21 incorporate outer voice tenths from original theme and descend into B-flat in measure 20. The rest of the piece is essentially a repetition of the first half.