

Beyond the *Nun Danket* of Sigfrid Karg-Elert

On the 80th anniversary of the composer's death

By John A. Stallsmith



Sigfrid Karg-Elert

Some composers' reputations, such as those of Bach and Mozart, are secured by their masterpieces in various genres. Some composers are remembered for their contributions to specific genres, such as Verdi in opera, Chopin in piano miniatures, and many favorite organ composers. Still other composers are remembered for a single composition that becomes their signature piece. Such is the case with Sigfrid Karg-Elert and his organ improvisation on "Nun danket alle Gott." (It should be noted that many flutists are familiar with Karg-Elert's *Flute Etudes*.)

"Nun danket" is found in the collection *Sixty-Six Chorale Improvisations*, opus 65, number 59, and is cast in da capo form. The popularity of this piece is entirely understandable. It uses a chorale tune that is familiar to European and American listeners; it is concise and avoids the rambling found in some of the composer's other works; its sound is full and impressive and it lies well for the player's hands and feet. This is an effective piece for the organ that is well written and has been well received.

Karg-Elert's output is so large and varied that many musicians have not taken the time to explore his other compositions. His list of works includes 158 with opus numbers, and more than 90 without. Instrumental pieces include solos, duos, trios, and various combinations of string, woodwind, and keyboard instruments. Vocal and piano pieces are prominent, with a smattering of choral and orchestral compositions. Many works comprise multiple movements or are collections of individual pieces, making the total output quite large.

Organ and harmonium dominate Karg-Elert's output. More than 73 numbered works and about two dozen unnumbered are spread throughout Karg-Elert's career. These include several collections of studies and didactic works for the harmonium. Given this large body of work, it is difficult to know where one might begin. There has been recent interest in his works, including pieces appearing on recital programs and recordings. The Karg-Elert Archive (www.Karg-elert-archive.org.uk)

actively promotes the composer's music and published a *Werkverzeichnis* in 1984. Harold Fabrikant has edited three collections of letters to and from the composer, and translated his massive theoretical comprehensive into English. All six volumes of *Chorale Improvisations*, opus 65, are now available as free downloads, and many other works are available in new and/or reprint editions. It may be time now to consider some other pieces by Karg-Elert that should find their way into the repertoire.

Biography

Born November 21, 1877, in Oberndorf, Germany, Sigfrid Karg was the son of a Catholic father and a Protestant mother. According to biographer Godfrey Sceats, Karg-Elert combined his surname along with his mother's maiden name at the request of an academy where he taught for a short time. In 1883, the family moved to Leipzig, where Karg-Elert's father died in 1889. In his 1968 dissertation, Stephen Edward Young notes that because the family was poor, the determined young man began educating himself. As a promising pianist he earned the respect of many, including Edvard Grieg, and was able to secure a scholarship at the Conservatorium at Leipzig. Sigfrid Karg-Elert not only played the piano and several wind instruments but also demonstrated a growing talent for composition. This ability to compose later led him to his career, that of teaching composition.

Karg-Elert composed for and performed on the harmonium throughout most of his life. The attraction to this instrument led to a professional and personal relationship with the publisher Carl Simon, who offered Karg-Elert a lifetime publishing contract in 1906. Perhaps the harmonium afforded the young composer a colorful means of expression that greatly influenced his treatment of the organ.

The first organ work by Karg-Elert, *Choral-Improvisationen*, opus 65, was published in 1910. This collection employs common Lutheran chorales in traditional organ settings. Trios, fugues, chaconnes, and chorale fantasies constitute most of the set. This work enjoyed great success in England and the United States but had only a short-lived popularity in Germany.¹

In 1916 Karg-Elert succeeded Max Reger as professor of composition at

the Conservatorium at Leipzig. This prestigious position, however, did little to further his professional career.

I have the pleasure of being held in the highest esteem everywhere, it is true, but my complete, goal-winning entrance is lacking, because our leading German organ virtuosos: Straube, Paul Gerhardt, Walter Fischer, Irrgant, Sittard and so on, do not study new works now.²

Karg-Elert believed that Straube undermined his efforts to secure church positions and have his music performed. "But does one not need great resignation if one finds one's own creations are not at all appreciated in one's own country. . .?"³ Karg-Elert found more receptive performers and audiences in England, America, and Australia while he was trapped in the social and economic degradation of Germany in the years after World War I. According to Sceats, during the 1920s Karg-Elert's reputation in Germany was further damaged by rumors that he was of Jewish descent.⁴

Although Karg-Elert was not known as a great organist, in 1932 the Wurlitzer Organ Company sponsored him to play his own organ works in a North American tour. Three months of travel and performance overwhelmed the aging professor, and, upon return to Leipzig, his health began a rapid deterioration. Following a short period of activity, in February of 1933 he suffered a stroke that resulted in his death on April 9 of the same year.

As we enter the eightieth anniversary of Karg-Elert's death, many more of his works should find their way into the organ repertoire as both concert and service music. As a long-time admirer of Karg-Elert's work, I would like to offer a few suggestions for players to pursue. I have compiled a short list of works of differing lengths and difficulty for readers to consider.

Many of Karg-Elert's organ compositions are large, heavy works much in the tradition of his predecessor Max Reger. Most of these pieces are original in nature and contrapuntal in development. While some of these pieces may be attractive to highly skilled players and theorists, they are probably not the best place for most players to begin their experience with this composer.

Easier repertoire

I have three suggestions that are easy to play and require minimal preparation. "Jesus, meine Zuversicht," from the collection *Zwanzig Prae- und Postludien*, opus 78, no. 10, has a texture reminiscent of Bach's famous "Air." The right hand plays a decorated version of the melody over the two-part harmony of the left hand and a walking bass in the pedal.

The piece is delicate and attractive, requires no registration changes, and is not difficult to prepare (see Example 1).

"Freu dich sehr, o meine Seele," opus 65, no. 5, is an easy, succinct piece in a lilting 3/4 meter marked "Alla Sarabanda." The piece uses simple registration changes of soft sounds and a clarinet solo at the end. Easily prepared, this piece demonstrates the delicate sounds of the instrument.

"O Gott, du Frommer Gott," opus 65, no. 50, is similar to "Freu dich" in several respects. The texture is consistently four- and five-voice including the pedal. The registrations call for two manuals with a double echo; that is, a softer version of the soft sound. The tempo is slow and the chromaticism is colorful but not overwhelming (see Example 2).

Slightly more difficult is "Schmücke dich, O liebe Seele," opus 65, no. 51. Three manuals are indicated, although the piece can be registered on two, and the texture is more chromatic than the pieces discussed above. There are some more difficult reaches for the hands, but the pedal part is quite easy. This piece displays the composer's harmonic and melodic style in a concise and direct way that should appeal to most players of Romantic music.

Moderately easy pieces include "Allein Gott in der Höh" from the opus 78 collection, no. 1. This festive setting is built of phrase fragments, which are often sequenced. Only general dynamics are given. Quarter and eighth notes are most prevalent, with only a few beats of sixteenths and thirty-seconds. The majestic ending includes a short passage of double pedal. The setting is concise at just two pages and is an effective full organ sound that players will enjoy. There are several other pieces of varying difficulties in the opus 78 collection that would be valuable service music.

More difficult works

Moderately difficult pieces include the *Trois Impressions*, opus 72. "Clair de lune" is the second of the three pieces and is a fine example of Karg-Elert's Impressionist style. The opus 72 pieces reflect a French influence and style through the use of whole-tone scales and the French titles. "Clair de lune," a delicate monothematic movement, employs Karg-Elert's favorite French registrations, celeste and solo 8' flute. The phrase-oriented theme is developed consistently. A brief contrasting section, measures 13 through 15, increases rhythmic interest by dividing six eighth-note groups into simultaneous groups of two and three. A concise 27 measures, this piece blends lush harmonies, subtle registrations, and careful use of rhythm and texture together beautifully to create an effective and provocative piece.



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Example 1. *Jesus, meine Zuversicht*, op. 78, no. 10

Semplice e divoto (♩=48)

sempre legato

manual: (Aeoline 8' oder Violine 8' + Flautino 4')

Pedal: Gedacktbas 16' und Dolce 8' + C. II

Example 2. *O Gott, du Frommer Gott*, op. 65, no. 50

The registrations call for a three-manual organ; however, with judicious use of pistons, a well-equipped two-manual organ would serve equally well. This piece is only moderately difficult but highly effective (see Example 3).

“Lobet den Herrn mit Pauken und Zimbeln Schoen” (Praise the Lord with the Drums and Cymbals), opus 101, is marked “Alla Handel.” This neo-baroque style piece is grand and celebratory and more substantial at five pages. Dynamic indications point to the manual changes, and the middle section provides more detailed tonal directions. The harmony is conservative and predictable. Sixteenth-note motion dominates the texture and parallel thirds are prevalent. If you are looking for a triumphant setting for a festive occasion, give this piece a try.

Karg-Elert was so inspired by the story of passengers singing “Nearer, My God to Thee” (*Näher, mein Gott, zu Dir*) as they prepared to go down with the Titanic that he composed a *Choral Improvisation on the ‘English Choral,’* which is now available from Cathedral Music. The piece is more substantial at eight pages and uses the familiar tune faithfully. The first variation shifts the melody into triple meter. The theme is heard through diverse textures, key changes, and a myriad of organ sounds, building to a dramatic declamation in F major before ending peacefully. This piece is playable on two manuals, moderately difficult, and highly recommended.

A more daring piece of moderate difficulty is “Resonet in Laudibus,” from *Cathedral Windows*, opus 106, no. 3. This collection contains six pieces that blend together the cantus firmus traditions of Germany with Gregorian

melodies and Impressionist techniques. This piece uses two fixed pitches and several registration changes, which require a three-manual instrument. The rhythm reinforces a convincing 5/8 meter for much of the piece. Motives are built upon each phrase of the cantus firmus, often repeated, leading to a clear pedal solo of the cantus firmus in the middle section. There are numerous changes of sound and manual. This is a unique and most interesting use of the instrument and a challenge to play well (see Example 4).

“Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott,” opus 65, no. 47, is a concise chorale-fantasy to rival any. Sweeping scales (often chromatic), crushing chords, cascading arpeggios, complex harmonies, and sectional statements of each phrase present this familiar tune in its entirety only once. The style of no. 47 is characteristic of the later symphonic chorales of opus 87. The melody is often found in the pedal below thick harmonic textures. Registrations range from full organ to pianissimo and make good use of the crescendo pedal (*rollschweller*). This piece is impressive but not excessively long. Technically demanding, this work is for serious players only (see Example 5).

Finally, for advanced performers, consider “In dulci júbilo,” opus 75, no. 2. This chorale-fantasy is a complete development of the tune in the hands of a mature and confident composer. Complex textures include double pedal, an accompanied canon, chromatic scales and runs, and thick harmonic clusters. The piece includes three complete statements of the melody and a middle section that develops fragments, building to a dramatic conclusion. Playable on two

Tranquillo e sempre delicato (♩=80)

pp misterioso

Example 3. *Clair de lune*, op. 72, no. 2

(fixed)

Sw.

Sw. closed

Voix. Gel.

Ch. Flute 8'

p soave

pp (sempre Sw.)

rit.

Example 4. *Resonet in Laudibus*, op. 106, no. 3

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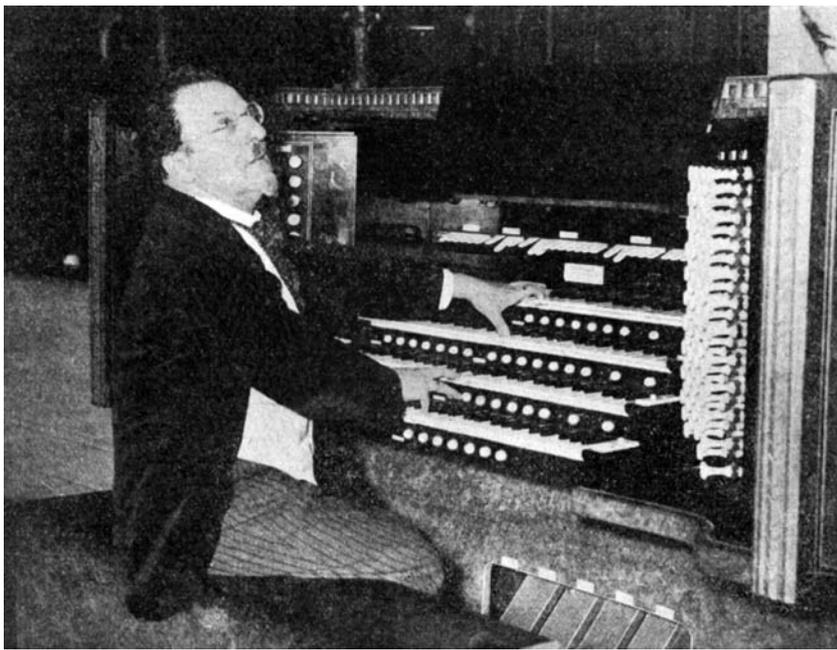
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Sigfrid Karg-Elert at Moller organ in Waldorf-Astoria (THE DIAPASON, February 1932, p. 1)

manuals, the piece benefits from larger instruments with multiple plenums. Like the “Ein feste Burg” setting above, the piece is not excessively long at just eight pages. The treatments are thoughtful and comprehensive. This is a masterful composition that should be considered by advanced players.

Conclusion

Sigfrid Karg-Elert was a prominent and prolific composer at a time when German composers were overshadowed by their more popular French contemporaries. Karg-Elert's music is vast in quantity and diverse in style. He offers players of varying skill levels a wealth of quality works to draw upon. Much of his music is now readily available through publishers and Internet sites as described below. I hope that more of his music will find its way into the performer's repertoire and lead to a new examination of this composer's place in the organ world and music in general. ■

John A. Stallsmith is a teacher, performer, conductor, composer, and author who lives and works in Alabama. He earned the BM degree from Youngstown State University, the MM from the University of Kansas, and the DMA from the University of Alabama. His teachers have included Ronald L. Gould, James Higdon, and Warren Hutton. His doctoral dissertation was “Impressionist Organ Works of Sigfrid Karg-Elert,” the University of Alabama, 1993.

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———. “The Organ Works of Karg-Elert.” *Musical Times*, 68 (1027): 832-33.
Young, Stephen Edward. “The Organ Works of Sigfrid Karg-Elert.” PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1968.

Notes

1. Young, *Organ Works of Karg-Elert*, 6.
2. Fabrikant, *Harmony of the Soul*, 19.
3. *Ibid.*, 31.
4. Sceats, *Musical Times*, 832.

Organ Works in Print

Breitkopf & Härtel
66 Chorale-Improvisations, op. 65
14 Chorale-Improvisations from op. 65
Trois Impressions, op. 72
20 Preludes and Postludes, op. 78
3 Symphonic Chorales, op. 87
Cathedral Windows, op. 106
Triptych, op. 141
3 Pieces, op. 142
Sempre Semplice, op. 142 (I)
Symphony for solo organ in F-sharp Minor, op. 143

Cathedral Music (organ and harmonium works)
Sonnenaufgang, op. 7/1
Fünf Miniaturen, op. 9
Morgensegen, op. 10/1
Drei Sonatinen, op. 14
Elegy in A minor, op. 18/2
Passacaglia in E-flat Minor, op. 25B
Acht Kompositionen, op. 26
Aquarellen, op. 27
Angelus, op. 27/5B
Scènes pittoresques, op. 31

Example 5. *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*, op. 65, no. 47

Monologe, op. 33
Benediction, op. 33/4B
Improvisation in E, op. 34B
Sonata 1 in B Minor, op. 36
Sarabande, Bourree & Musette, op. 37B
Phantasie und Fuge in D, op. 39B
Sonata 2 in B-flat Minor, op. 46
Canzone in G-flat, op. 46/2B
Trostungen, op. 47
Renaissance, op. 57
Praeludium Festivum, op. 64 (ii)4B
Tondichtungen, op. 70
Trois Impressions, op. 72
Chaconne and Fugue-Triology, op. 73
Chorale Preludes, op. 75
Funerale, op. 75 (i)
Homage to Handel, op. 75 (ii)
Intarsien, op. 76
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Three Pastels, op. 92
Seven Pastels from Lake Constance, op. 96
Partita in E, op. 100
Portraits, op. 101
Impressionen, op. 102

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Sieben Idyllen, op. 104
Three Impressions, op. 108
Triptych, op. 141
Sempre Semplice, op. 142
Three New Impressions, op. 142 (ii)
Kaleidoscope, op. 144
Music for Organ, op. 145
Partita Retrospectiva, op. 151
Eight Short Pieces, op. 154
Sursum corda, op. 155/2
Sequence 1 in A Minor, W 8
Sicilienne in A, W 10
Sequence 2 in C Minor, W 12
Näher, mein Gott, zu Dir (Nearer, My God, to Thee), W 17

Internet sources for Karg-Elert's music
Free-Scores.com
IMSLP/Petrucchi Music Library: imslp.org

Numerous scores of Karg-Elert's piano and other instrumental music are available from Cathedral Music as well as the above Internet sources.

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