

MODERNIZING INSTRUMENTATION IN FERDINAND REBAY'S *GROSSES DUO IN A-MOLL*

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1. Introduction

The original Austro-German repertoire for guitar duo in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is vast. However, as most of it was written for and within amateur environments, overall it lacks the formal scope and substance seen in the wider, mainstream chamber music tradition of the period (Mantovani 2019: 310-11). In this lecture-recital, I will talk about and perform one of the very few Romantic sonatas written for guitar duo, perhaps the most remarkable of them. In the course of this presentation, I will briefly introduce the composer Ferdinand Rebay, situate the *Großes Duo in a-Moll* within the guitar repertoire, investigate the limitations of its original instrumentation, and explain my own creative approach to bring the work to life with my ensemble, the NOVA Guitar Duo.

My methodology was developed with score and instruments on hand. I started by recognizing the peculiarities of the piece's unique instrumentation and what sort of challenges it posed when performed on modern instruments. Next, I devised solutions by not only adapting the musical text but also modifying tuning, so the music could be realized in an idiomatic and haptically comfortable way. Finally, I took a step further by redistributing the melodic material in order to explore my ensemble's characteristics. At a core level, this process demanded decisions akin to those necessary when adapting music written for early plucked instruments to the guitar, playing music for clavichord or harpsichord on a modern piano, or yet Baroque or Classical orchestral music on a modern orchestra.

2. Ferdinand Rebay (1880-1953)

I start by bringing your attention to the fact that, although stylistically I label this piece as a Romantic sonata, it was written in as late as 1940. Rebay belonged to a group of lesser-known Austrian composers such as Franz Schmidt (1874-1939), Joseph Marx (1882-1964), and Egon Kornauth (1891-1959), who chose to continue a nineteenth-century tradition in Modernist times. I will later explain why, even if anachronistic, Rebay's music occupies a key position in the repertoire.

Ferdinand Rebay was born in Vienna from a middle-class family. He was musically educated at the Heiligenkreuz Abbey and the Vienna Conservatory, where he studied with Robert Fuchs (1847-1927), a personal acquaintance of Brahms. His traditional musical education and influences resulted in a rather conservative tonal idiom and a preference for conventional forms, such as the sonata. After graduating in 1904, Rebay quickly became established as a vocal composer, having also conducted two traditional choirs in Vienna, the Schubertbund and the Vienna Choir Association. In 1921, he was appointed professor of piano at the Vienna Academy (the former Conservatory), a job he kept until retiring 25 years later. It was there that Rebay acquainted himself with the guitar through Professor Jakob Ortner (1879-1959), later establishing a lifelong artistic partnership with his niece and Ortner's former student Gerta Hammerschmid (1906-1985).

Rebay's first works for guitar date from 1924, which places him as a pioneer among the non-guitarist composers that started to write for the instrument in the 1920s. A unique trait emerges from his almost 400 works involving the instrument: he wrote more than 30 sonatas or sonata-structured works, most of them chamber music. These are extended pieces in three or four movements, inviting the guitar to join a nineteenth-century Austro-German Romantic tradition to which it formerly did not belong.

3. The *Großes Duo in a-Moll*

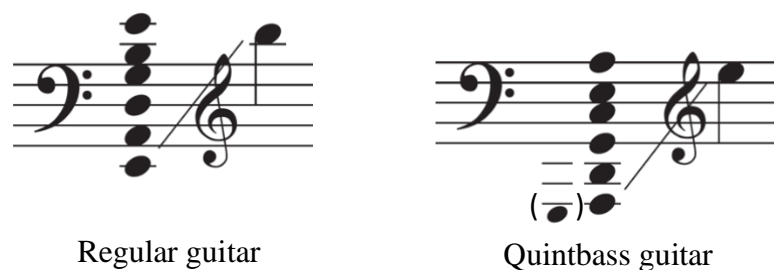
The singularity of the *Großes Duo* can only be properly measured when compared to the original guitar repertoire of the nineteenth century. Although an early guitar sonata tradition did exist in the first decades of that century, both solo and chamber music, it practically disappeared after the 1840s. This coincided with the codification of the sonata in composition manuals such as those by Reicha, Marx, and Czerny, as well as further associations of the genre with greatness and prestige (Rosen 1988: 3). Around that time, the guitar gradually lost space in the mainstream music-making and its activity became restricted to the niche of the guitar clubs, which mostly cultivated music written by guitarist-composers aiming at an amateur market. Their repertoire included entertaining and unpretentious guitar duos such as those by Adam Darr (1811-1866), which perpetuated the style of his forerunners rather than advancing the repertoire (Huber 1995: 213-14).

Rebay's *Großes Duo*, in contrast, is a true Romantic sonata grounded in the mainstream Austro-German tradition, bringing to the guitar duo repertoire an unforeseen degree of sophistication. Nevertheless, even considering today's increasing interest and availability of Rebay's guitar music, this piece is rarely performed and the reason for that lies in its original instrumentation.

3.1. Instrumentation issues

The piece is scored for a regular guitar and a quintbass guitar, a near-obsolete instrument which was nevertheless popular in German-speaking countries during Rebay's time. Riegler (1912/1913: 100) stated that the instrument was created around 1910 in response to the needs of the Munich Guitar Quartet. According to Heinrich Albert (1870-1950), its string length was 70cm, therefore slightly longer than that of a regular guitar (Albert 1924: 7). Figure 1 shows the tuning of the quintbass guitar in comparison with that of the regular guitar. As suggested in the figure, it could optionally have a seventh string tuned to [G'], however, unstopped and running parallel to the fingerboard.¹

Fig. 1. Tunings and ranges of the regular guitar and the quintbass guitar



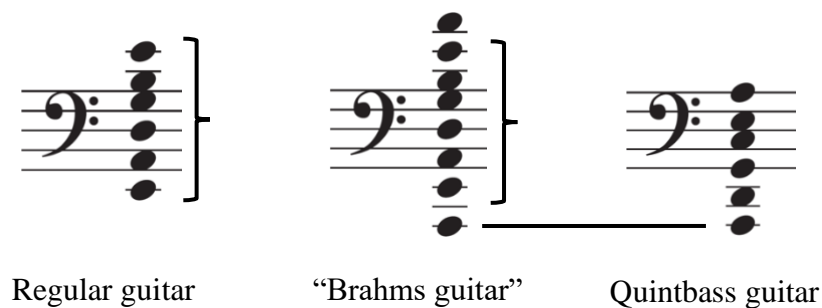
Rebay's writing in the *Großes Duo* makes use of the bass register of the quintbass guitar in such a way that would be impossible to reproduce with two regular guitars. Transposing the piece a fifth above, for example, would enable the bass part to be played on a regular instrument but would also make the treble part excessively high, besides losing the depth provided by the lower range.

3.2. Modernizing instrumentation

¹ Pitches are represented within brackets and using the Helmholtz notation.

The NOVA Guitar Duo uses an extended range, 8-string guitar (aka “Brahms guitar”), in addition to the regular 6-string guitar. This was an instrument invented in the 1990s by the Scottish guitarist Paul Galbraith in collaboration with English maker David Rubio, stretching the guitar range on both the treble and bass ends (Galbraith 2019: n.p.). As seen in Figure 2, the inner strings are tuned the same way than the regular guitar, with an extra high string tuned to [a'] and an extra low string generally tuned to [A']—which is also the lowest string of the quintbass guitar. Therefore, by using the “Brahms guitar”, the issue of range in Rebay’s *Großes Duo* would apparently be solved.

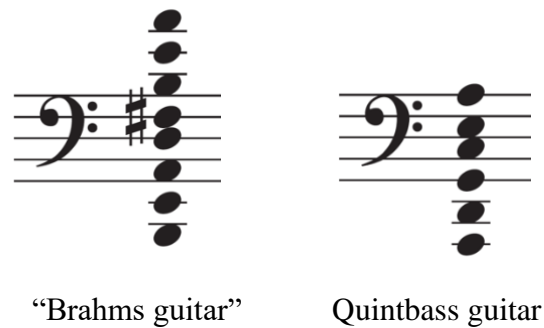
Fig. 2. Tunings of the regular guitar, “Brahms guitar” and quintbass guitar



However, the different intervallic relationship between the two instruments remained an issue, particularly for keeping idiomatic fingering patterns in chordal passages. In many instances, this difference led to awkward fingering and even a few unplayable chords. Apart from retuning all but the lowest string one step below—which proved highly impractical—the solution came by adapting the music to the instruments, instead of the instruments to the music.

The first step was to transpose the whole piece a major second higher. Then, I employed a simple *scordatura* by raising the lowest string a whole step to [B'] and lowering the third string a half step to [f#], as seen in Figure 3. This way, I achieved the same intervallic relationship of the quintbass guitar in the lower six strings and therefore could employ the original fingering patterns.

Fig. 3. Tunings of the “Brahms guitar” (after *scordatura*) and the quintbass guitar



Once the problems of range and idiomatic playability were solved, the piece could then be performed in its new keys. However, as it was originally written for two instruments tuned a fifth apart (such as a violin and a viola), the quintbass guitar part remained at what would be the normal range of the pianist’s left hand. In our case, given the fact that the “Brahms guitar” still counts with two extra high-strings when compared to the quintbass guitar, there would be little reason for not having it perform in the high register as well. Therefore, I decided to have a more conversational approach, partially inspired by a nineteenth-century domestic chamber-music style which is also congenial to Rebay (Sumner Lott 2015: 82; Mantovani 2019: 126-28).

In fact, a branch of the original nineteenth-century guitar duo repertoire had no obvious hierarchy between parts, with both instruments continuously exchanging melodic material at the same octave. I felt it natural to apply this idea to the *Großes Duo* as well, not only because the music often features repetitions of thematic material but also because this non-hierarchical approach is adopted in the NOVA Guitar Duo’s arrangements. It makes the music more attractive to the performers as well as to the audience, who may enjoy a frequent exchange of roles as opposed to a situation in which one of the performers takes the lead most of the time.

4. Summary

In short, my solution to bring Ferdinand Rebay’s *Großes Duo in a-Moll* to life was to transpose the piece a step higher, devise a *scordatura* pattern for the “Brahms guitar” which allowed the same idiomatic realization as with the quintbass guitar, and rebalance melodic material in order to better explore the NOVA Guitar Duo’s instrumentation. It demanded a

performer-oriented creative approach which privileged realization convenience over strict deference to the text.

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