

twentieth-century analysis: essays in miniature

by lothar klein

PAUL HINDEMITH: *His Rise and Fall*. History has suggested that the surest way in which any composer may achieve recognition is to die. Unfortunately, the truth of this comment is borne out in fact. Many composers responsible for our century's music history—Berg, Bartók, Ives, Varèse, Webern, and Schoenberg—are only now receiving their deserved attention. "They were ahead of their time" is the usual (and correct) phrase explaining belated respects. But what of the "grand" composer whose soaring fame plummets upon his death? Musical lions of one age, for example, Cherubini (considered the finest composer of the day by Beethoven), Rubinstein, and Schreker ("the most conspicuous melodramatic figure since Wagner," to quote Grove's), are often quickly tamed. Changing tastes, new emotional orientations, and social restructuring level the work of all but the very greatest composers. During periods of virulent musical change, the mortality rate for celebrities is high. Paul Hindemith is a case in point.

No musician of any age enjoyed greater honor or influence than did Paul Hindemith during his lifetime. Yet, since his passing three years ago, that reputation of classical dimensions already seems on the wane. Why? In times of change it seems axiomatic that the greater the man, the less he is understood by his contemporaries. Sentimentality decrees only revolutionaries are so condemned; conservative composers, however, are prone to the same occupational disease. Mu-

sical fortune is fickle, and appraisals of greatness are too often based on mere personal sympathy or antipathy. The rhyme or reason behind stylistic evaluations seems no more predictable than vicissitudes of the hemline.

Propaganda by aesthetic cartels always makes it difficult to size the true measure of a man. The accomplishments of Paul Hindemith, musical and ideological, are too monumental to be ignored by a civilization depending on computerized composers and topless cellists for musical sustenance. What are Hindemith's contributions to our age, and, more important, how do these affect our younger composers? Hindemith's career, his music and ideals, personally considered, may illuminate the success and failure of more recent music.

If there were ever a complete musician, Paul Hindemith was surely that man. Composer, theorist, scholar, conductor, violinist, and teacher, Hindemith excelled in whatever role he chose to perform. His total commitment to music is legendary, but the basis for the legend was hard-earned. As other composers before 1900, Hindemith experienced the glory and disgrace of Romanticism. Unlike cloistered composers of today, Hindemith fought for survival as a cafe and opera-house musician in post-World War I Germany. As a young man, no musical event escapes his curiosity and all encounters are profitably transformed into a thick-skinned music of boisterous originality. Traditional greatness, Bee-

thoven's fist-shaking gesture, is not his concern; parody and nose-thumbing are his inspirations. Music conceived with no other purpose than spur-of-the-moment music-making, he modestly coins *Gebrauchsmusik*. In 1925, aged thirty, Hindemith is hell-bent on being "Peck's bad boy" of European music. With the Hitlerian onslaught, Hindemith, the "cultural bolshevik" leaves Germany. The year 1936 finds him in Turkey, where he establishes a governmental music education curriculum; in 1940, with Schoenberg, Bartók and Stravinsky, he arrives in the United States.

Hailed as the composer of *Mathis der Maler*, an operatic masterpiece, Hindemith, unlike Bartók and Schoenberg, does not have to job-hunt. Self-educated, lacking doctoral pedigree, but the author of an important theoretical text, *The Craft of Musical Composition*, Hindemith and his laurels attract the halls of ivy. As professor of composition at Yale, he becomes Delphic oracle to flocks of young composers. Like Schoenberg, Hindemith deeply feels the need for re-ordering musical materials; Schoenberg's twelve-tone formulations, however, horrify him in their arbitrariness and disregard for what Hindemith believes to be inviolable musical laws. The *Craft* becomes gospel in combating twelve-tonery. Its approach is empirical, examining music's acoustical and physical properties. The overtone series contains the spectrum of Hindemith's sound-world, a polyphony of mathematical organization unveiling the fundamen-

tal laws of nature in the purity of the major triad. These findings were not speculative aesthetic fictions, but rationally perceivable. Tonality was given eternal life and its importance compared as equivalent to the gravitational pull of the earth. Hindemith had all the answers, he had settled matters and, as critics maintain, taken all the mystery out of music. Worse yet, he was indicted, quite unfairly, of composing only to justify his promulgations. Once accused of "musical gangsterism," Hindemith had gone straight.

Every major twentieth-century composer has seemingly experienced a crisis in his musical vocabulary, necessitating a technical transfusion. Webern and Schoenberg found salvation in believing that twelve tones could be related only to one another, Varèse discovered a kinship between science and music, while Stravinsky's pragmatics on occasion forced him to become a musical taxidermist. (Charming as they are, Stravinsky's homage to Pergolesi, Grieg, and Tchaikowsky bypasses the problems of technical-historical development.) Hindemith's conclusions in the *Craft* reconfirm the tonal traditions and attitudes of nineteenth-century German symphonists. Principles of tension eliciting repose, the relationship of dissonance to consonance and, above all, continuity and stability, are lauded as indispensable criteria for a meaningful music. Hindemith's style of the thirties and forties is triumphantly uneclectic; contact with its unique characteristics inevitably stamps young composers like conveyor-belt products. Although other music holds more interest for the young today, no composer of Hindemith's period exhibits greater purity of style. Schoenberg and followers, depending on musical evidence from the past (often difficult to substantiate), sought a music of the future; Stravinsky's neoclassicism redefined the past; and Hindemith succeeded in extending tradition.

If insolence characterizes Hindemith's early compositional career, grave dignity marks its maturity. The jester's swaggering arrogance assumes the guise of medieval humanism. Cynicism turns to serene warmth, and jokes are forgotten

for philosophical discourse. Penitence plays no part in this conversion, and the jester's wit does not turn to mumbling mysticism. No work better exemplifies this union of super intellect and deep humanistic fervor than Hindemith's opera *Die Harmonie der Welt* (1951). The opera's title derives from a theoretical work, *Harmonia Mundi*, by the seventeenth-century astronomer Johannes Kepler. Kepler is the protagonist of the opera, which depicts the astronomer's life and work. Just as the ancients believed music could reveal the secret harmonious structure of the world, so Kepler

This article is the sixth in a series of "Essays in Miniature" featuring important musical compositions and developments of the twentieth century. The series includes analyses of works by Schoenberg, Hindemith, Stravinsky, Stockhausen, Cage, and others. The author is Assistant Professor of Theory-Composition, Department of Music, The University of Texas, Austin.

sought for laws governing planetary motion in the mathematics of music. Hindemith identified, philosophically and personally, with the astronomer. A symphony, *Die Harmonie der Welt*, extracted from the opera, radiates the profundity of Hindemith's search for cosmic, divine harmony.

The symphony takes inspiration from Boethius' *De Institutione Musica*. Boethius, writing in the sixth century, notes that "music is a part of our human nature; it has the power either to improve or debase our character." Music is divided into three categorical functions by Boethius which Hindemith observes as movement titles. *Musica Instrumentalis* corresponds to modern instrumental and vocal music; *Musica Humana* harmoniously unites reasoning faculties with corporeal existence, mind and body; *Musica Mundana* is the harmony of the universe regulating the heavens, time, and the earth. Only the first category was audible for Boethius, but space telemetry today admits a buzzing music of the spheres. Hindemith's genius audibly realizes all three categories.

Paul Hindemith, beyond doubt, sought alliance with the past, not out of nostalgia, but because he was convinced that music of the Euro-

pean symphonists contained eternal values. This conviction places him within the Establishment. These views were embodied in his teaching, and Hindemith devoutly integrated teaching with creative activity. A martinet, Hindemith's faith in his views was taken for close-mindedness. Inevitably, younger listening generations of composers have come to regard Paul Hindemith as a father-figure to be resented. As a member of the Establishment, his attitudes, quite naturally, are creatively suspect. In his composition rationale, Hindemith spoke as a Cartesian, in his musical moralizing and concern for the demonstrable (which he equated with ethical values), he spoke as an impassioned Kant. Without rational order there can be no valid creation. As day follows night, so periods of rational creative impulse, the classic spirit, alternate with the urgency of the Romantically irrational. An era worshiping the subconscious Muse is not attracted to Hindemith. Composition today denies him and is attracted to those very forces he deemed chaotic.

Prevalent notions unjustly label Hindemith academic. To villify a man for embracing his own ideas seems no more fair than censuring Bach for not being more frequently chromatic than he chose to be. Hindemith's presence in word and tone is still with us; his scathing criticism of music other than his own inflicted wounds which have not healed. Ignoring partisan politics, one cannot but admire the strength and balance inherent in his work. Familiar musical gestures emerge with renewed nobility, a nobility made possible because the composer recognized the varieties of emotion possessing the whole man. If his music bores us, then Mozart and Beethoven should do the same. Great music does not change; people do. Hindemith's music inhabits a world of universal sanity. Should his music disappear, then our Western humanism will enter its dotage. The reasons for Hindemith's current disrepute are, one suspects, not musical but polemical. Perhaps the real reason for his intellectual exile is that he reminds us uncomfortably that today's revolutionary is tomorrow's conservative. ■