Hindemith's 'Mathis der Maler': A Parable for our Times

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The musical fortunes of the German composer Paul Hindemith (1895-1963) waxed and waned in his own lifetime. The recent centenary of his birth, however, has brought opportunities for re-assessment of both the composer and his work, and much interest has been focussed on his masterpiece, the opera 'Mathis der Maler' ('Mathis the Painter'). Two recordings of this work are now available on compact disc,[1] and the Royal Opera produced the first ever British staging of the work on what would have been Hindemith's hundredth birthday. 'Mathis der Maler' has been revealed to be an enormously powerful music-drama, remarkable no less for the historical individual who inspired it and for the circumstances in which it was produced than for the beautiful music which it contains. Hindemith wrote his own libretto for this opera, which enabled him to put forward in it a number of his own ideas about both art and music, and also to raise profound spiritual issues. In its exploration of such themes, 'Mathis der Maler' has a relevance that transcends Hindemith's own day, touching on issues both contemporary and timeless. To explain the motivation behind such a remarkable work, it is necessary to set it in the context of Hindemith's life, and of his theories about music.

Hindemith was a precocious musical talent, playing violin and viola in orchestral and chamber ensembles from an early age. He rose to prominence as a composer in the years after the First World War, and his music was much performed, in Germany and further afield, during the 1920s. He held important teaching posts, in Berlin and in Ankara, and his pedagogical work ultimately resulted in the production of several books on composition. In the 1930s, however, Hindemith was branded a 'cultural bolshevist' by Goebbels, and his music was condemned by the Nazis as 'degenerate.' Hindemith's position in Germany grew increasingly precarious as the Nazis exerted more and more control over the arts and over important teaching appointments. It was during the tense years 1933-1935 that he wrote 'Mathis der Maler.' Nazi opposition meant that no German opera house was able to stage the new opera, however, and it received its first performances in Zurich in 1938. Hindemith left Germany in 1937 and settled in America, taking American citizenship and accepting a professorship at Yale. In 1953 he

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returned to Europe and settled in Switzerland, where he lived until his death in 1963.

Hindemith's religious sensibilities are difficult to pin down. He was baptised and confirmed as a Protestant, but seems to have had little time for most traditional forms of religious expression. He has been described as agnostic, but at least one biographer has repudiated this label: 'He preferred to remain spiritually free, sympathetic to all speculations but committed finally to none. For this state the word agnostic is too negative. Hindemith, as both life and works show, was in the widest sense a religious man.'[2] He certainly set a number of religious texts to music, and his last work was an *a capella* mass setting, although the motivation for this has been variously attributed to the influence of his wife (who was a devoted Roman Catholic), or simply to this work being a 'manifestation of Hindemith's connections with his musical roots.'[3]

Although he seems not to have been religious in any traditional sense, Hindemith's writings show clearly that there was a marked spiritual component in his character. His letters, a selection of which have recently been published, are largely concerned with practical musical and financial affairs and reveal little of the personal feelings of their author: their overall tenor is such as to bear out Hindemith's own dictum, that 'There are only two things worth aiming for: good music and a clean conscience.'[4] However, in a series of lectures delivered by Hindemith at Harvard in 1949-1950, and subsequently published as 'A Composer's World: Horizons and Limitations,' Hindemith reveals rather more of his artistic and spiritual *credo*. In discussing music, he draws attention to its spiritual dimension, and points out the ethical force that it possesses as a consequence. He examines various philosophical approaches to the understanding of the power of music, and in particular highlights two, which he sees as diametrically opposed in terms of their understanding of the way in which music acts upon its listeners.

From St Augustine's *De Musica Libri Sex*, Hindemith notes the author's emphasis on the spiritual power of music, and on the necessity of the hearer's participation in releasing that power:

> We receive [music's] sounds and forms, but they remain meaningless unless we include them in our own mental activity and use their fermenting quality to turn our soul towards everything noble, superhuman, and ideal. ... The betterment of our soul must be our own achievement, although music is one of those factors which, like religious belief, creates in us most easily a state of willingness towards such betterment. In short, we must be active.[5]

From Boethius' *De Institutione Musica*, Hindemith derives the opposing view of music, that it assumes a dominant force in shaping human moral and spiritual awareness:

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> In the relationship of music and the human mind the position of forces has now been changed: music has become the active partner; our mind is a passive receiver and is impressed and influenced by the power music exerts. ... Music abandons its role as a modest aid to moral growth and assumes gubernatorial rights.[6]

Despite these approaches being at opposite extremes to one another, and the danger that the Boethian approach might lead to degeneration of the listener's critical faculties, Hindemith comments, 'Either of these philosophies can lead us to the loftiest goals .... the listener may in either way find his most sublime satisfaction.'[7]

In addition to these remarks concerning the power of music, Hindemith writes fascinatingly on the subject of musical inspiration, which is often perceived to be a spiritual process. He describes it in the following terms.

> The word 'idea' is a very vague term for what we really mean when we talk of the composer's creative imagination. The German word *Einfall* is the perfect expression needed in our situation. *Einfall*, from the verb *einfallen*, to drop in, describes beautifully the strange spontaneity that we associate with artistic ideas in general and with musical creation in particular. Something—you know not what—drops into your mind—you know not whence—and there it grows—you know not how—into some form—you know not why.[8]

It seems clear that, for Hindemith, there is a definite other-worldly provenance to music, such that the inspiration for it cannot be ascribed to purely physical or psychological mechanisms.

Hindemith also understands music as an expression of natural forces and natural harmony. He writes approvingly of the ancient Greeks' view that music is intimately related to 'The basic concepts of time and space .... which, in their minds, was constructed in the same proportions as the overtone series, so that measure, music and the cosmos inseperably merged.'[9] This leads to his rejection of methods of composition that are based on arbitrary, man-made rules:[10] for Hindemith, this is musical nonsense, since composition can only be based on music's own laws, and these are inherent in the very nature of music itself. He speculates that there may be 'some sound foundation' to the idea of 'A universe whose laws of construction and operation are complemented by a spiritual reflection in musical organisms.'[11] This view of the nature and provenance of music is voiced particularly strongly in Hindemith's last major opera 'Die Harmonie der Welt' (first performed in 1957), although it may also be found in 'Mathis der Maler,' as we shall see.

Hindemith closes 'A Composer's World' with the following expression of his vocation as a composer:

> This life in and with music, being essentially a victory over external forces and a final allegiance to spiritual sovereignty, can only be a life of humility .... The ultimate reason for this humility will be the musician's conviction that beyond all the rational knowledge he has amassed and all his dexterity as a craftsman there is a region of visionary irrationality in which the veiled secrets of art dwell, sensed but not understood, implored but not commanded, imparting but not yielding. He cannot enter this region, he can only pray to be elected one of its messengers.[12]

As Hindemith's biographer Geoffrey Skelton has commented, these words are 'As near as he ever came to a direct statement of his religious beliefs.'[13]

We should not be surprised if we find Hindemith's ideas given expression in his compositions. Nor should it surprise us to see an opera like 'Mathis der Maler' used for such a purpose: no less than any other art form, opera has been a medium in which spiritual and theological ideas have been advanced and discussed.[14] The plot of 'Mathis der Maler' is concerned with the life and work of Matthias Grünewald, the sixteenth century German painter. He lived in troubled and violent times, as the Peasant Wars raged in Germany, and as Luther and others sought to reform the Church. Grünewald's most famous work is the altarpiece which he painted for the monastery of St Anthony at Isenheim, Alsace, and it is images derived from this altarpiece which inspired much of Hindemith's opera. Consisting largely of scenes from the lives of Christ and of St Anthony of Egypt, the multiple panels of this altarpiece are extraordinary for their juxtaposition of scenes of luminous beauty and scenes of brutal violence. A bright orchestra of smiling viol-playing angels is depicted in one panel: a hideously distorted and scarred Christ hangs crucified in another. Radiant depictions of the Nativity and the Resurrection are set alongside a brutal temptation of St Anthony, his hair pulled and his flesh torn by very physical demons, whilst an anguished figure, his distended torso covered in bloody sores, looks on. This figure reproduces the symptoms of 'St Anthony's fire,' ergot poisoning, which was treated in a hospital run by the order of St Anthony: doubtless the image of this figure, like that of the mutilated Christ, was created by Grünewald from the victims of disease and war whom he had personally encountered.

'Mathis der Maler' opens with a prelude which Hindemith titled *Engelkonzert* (Concert of Angels). In addition to immediately establishing the relationship between the opera and Grünewald's altarpiece through its recalling of one panel of the latter, this title also tells us that we are dealing with metaphysical as well as historical subject-matter. Mathis has just reached the end of a sabbatical, and is pondering his art. 'Have you fulfilled the task that God imposed?' he

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asks himself. 'Is what you create and paint enough, or are you only thinking of your own advantage?'[15] Moved by the plight of the peasants through his conversation with their leader, Schwalb, he desires to join their cause: 'In the face of such appalling misery, we can only side with the oppressed,' he tells his employer, the politically-vacillating Cardinal of Mainz, from whose service he resigns. The Cardinal is beset by religious turmoil in his lands as the Lutheran cause advances there, and also by financial worries. He is counselled to solve his political and financial problems at a stroke by marrying the daughter of a wealthy Lutheran citizen. Although inclined to show leniency towards the Lutherans, the Cardinal feels obliged to authorise the burning of books confiscated from them: the burning is duly carried out by his officials.

Mathis, meanwhile, has joined the peasants, but grows disillusioned on witnessing them maltreat and murder a captive Count. He prevents them from further abusing the Count's widow. The peasants are defeated in battle and Schwalb is killed: Mathis himself escapes only through the intercession of the Countess whom he had saved. He resolves to have no more to do with violence, but to return to his art. 'One man alone was given the cross of the world to bear. His death wiped out the crimes of nations and of time. And you, feeble man! You wanted to redeem. You wanted to free your brothers from their chains.' The Cardinal decides to consider marriage: on realising that it is Ursula, whom he knows well, and who is in love with Mathis, who is prepared to undergo this step with him for the sake of advancing the Lutherans' cause, he is so moved that he decides to permit the Lutherans their religious freedom, whilst he himself renounces worldly life in favour of living as a hermit.

Mathis flees to the Odenwald, along with Schwalb's daughter Regina. She is still horrified at the recent violent death of her father, and he seeks to comfort her. 'Old legends wove pious pictures, that reflect what is above us,' he tells her. 'And sounds speak even more devoutly, for music, born in innocence, bears traces of its origins in Heaven.' Regina responds, 'The world is full of the music of God, which finds its echo in people's hearts.' As Regina sleeps, Mathis re-enacts the tortures endured by St Anthony in the Isenheim polyptych. He is visited by various characters from the previous scenes of the opera in allegorical guises. Finally, the Cardinal appears as St Paul the Hermit, and comforts Mathis, pointing out to him the nobility and inescapability of his calling as an artist.

> You were ungrateful and unfaithful to deny God's gifts. You denied the people everything within yourself by joining them, and so betrayed your calling. Turn back to both: sacrifice all you create to God, so he may work through all your work. ... All you have sought and suffered gives your work the grace of immortality. Go forth and create.

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The two conclude in an ecstatic duet: 'We cannot escape the sphere where we were born, for all our paths lie ceaselessly within it. Over us, a wider sphere is seen: the power that sustains us. If all that we begin is to succeed, our deeds must be directed to both centres. Let us give thanks to the earth. Let us praise heaven. Alleluia!' Mathis returns to his work, and finally, worn out with effort, bids farewell to his painter's equipment in preparation for his death.

The relevance of 'Mathis der Maler' to Hindemith's own age is strikingly apparent: indeed, the opera is frequently seen as Hindemith's plea for the autonomy of the artist in re-creating, re-establishing and, when necessary, criticising the society in which the artist lives. Moreover, it is not just artistic freedom but freedom of thought in general which is the concern of the opera. The terrible relevance of the opera's book-burning scene to the contemporary situation in Hindemith's Germany hardly needs underlining. In addition to these contemporary relevances, the theme of artistic creativity, and its relationship to the wider society in which the artist is set, is also explored, as we have seen. The theme of the sublime provenance of artistic creation, and of music in particular—something which formed so clear a part of Hindemith's own *credo*—is likewise emphasised. From this perspective, we may see that the opera deals also with timeless social and spiritual themes.

In addition, the relevance of 'Mathis der Maler' to the 1990s has been stressed. A notable example of this approach to the opera is that of the American Peter Sellars, who directed the Royal Opera performances mentioned above. Sellars insists that 'Opera has a civic function.'[16] In approaching 'Mathis der Maler' he emphasises parallels between political events in 1930s Germany and recent political developments in Western societies, particularly America, pointing by way of example to Proposition 187, recently passed by voters in California. This motion denies healthcare, emergency medical treatment and basic education to the children of illegal immigrants. 'It's just like 1933—except that, when the Nazis passed their law against the overcrowding of schools, it applied only to secondary and university level, because even Nazis believed that every human being deserves an elementary education. So the voters of California have gone one step further.'[17] Sellars adds, 'All my life I grew up with the question: why were the German people silent? And now, in my own life, I have to ask the question: why are the American people silent? As artists, we occupy one of the last public spaces .... we can't not notice it's happening, so how do we respond?'[18] As one critic has put it, 'The National Socialist movement in Germany was obliterated by the war, but the forces of reaction which would destroy freedom of both conscience and expression remain with us.'[19]

Sellars also acknowledges a Christian underpinning of his work. He

points out the healing power of art like that of Grünewald and Hindemith: 'That is, for me, the first tenet of religious art—that it's not about distance, it's not about admiring something outside yourself. It is actually about taking something into yourself as deeply as possible, where it enters your life.'[20] This, Sellars maintains, is akin to an act of communion in the Christian sense.

Sellars' staging of 'Mathis der Maler' was widely criticised for emphasising too many of its director's ideas and too few of Hindemith's.[21] This is a common enough criticism directed at radical contemporary stagings of both operas and plays. In the case of 'Mathis der Maler,' however, the opera was originally conceived as a parable, its historical subject-matter obviously chosen for its contemporary relevance to Hindemith's day. Staging the work in such a way as to stress its relevance to the present must therefore be one of the most faithful ways of performing it in our own day. It was produced in a time of tumult, took as its inspiration a time of tumult, and so it is perhaps unsurprising that it should seem admirably suited to addressing that which is tumultuous in society today.

Whether or not an interpretation such as Sellars' is regarded as persuasive, it cannot be denied that 'Mathis der Maler' is a complex work, which brings together political, social, moral and theological themes. It addresses such issues as action against social injustice, the nature and inspiration of art, and the activity of men and women in fulfilling their God-given vocations; and all of these themes are brought together and embraced by the agony and ecstasy of the Isenheim polyptych. Small wonder that this work should provide both an inspiration and a challenge to all those who seek to explore such issues today. Just as Grünewald's masterpiece remains as moving in our day as it was in Hindemith's and in his own, so Hindemith's masterpiece is a parable for our times—a work which is as powerful in our day as it was in its composer's.

1 These recordings are conducted by Rafael Kubelik (EMI 5 55237 2) and by Gerd Albrecht (Wergo WER 6255-2). In addition, there are numerous recordings available of the Mathis der Maler Symphony, composed in advance of the full opera and consisting of music from it.

2 G. Skelton, *Paul Hindemith: The Man Behind the Music* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1977), p. 293.

3 G. Rickards, *Hindemith, Hartmann and Henze* (London: Phaidon, 1995), p. 166.

4 *Selected Letters of Paul Hindemith*, ed. and tr. G. Skelton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 122.

5 P. Hindemith, *A Composer's Word: Horizons and Limitations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 5.

6 Hindemith, *A Composer's World*, p. 7.

7 Hindemith, *A Composer's World*, pp. 11–12.

8 Hindemith, *A Composer's World*, p. 57.

9 P. Hindemith, *The Craft of Musical Composition*, quoted in Skelton, pp. 145–146.
10 Hindemith's attacks on 'atonal' composers have themselves been severely criticised: see, for example, D. Mitchell, 'The World of Paul Hindemith,' in *Cradles of the New: Writings on Music 1951–1991* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 70 ff.
11 Hindemith, *A Composer's World*, p. 102.
12 Hindemith, *A Composer's World*, pp. 220–221.
13 Skelton, *Paul Hindemith*, p. 257.
14 See, for example, M. Fuller, 'Some Expressions of Spirituality in Contemporary British Opera' (*Modern Believing*, January 1994, p. 6 ff): 'Spirituality in Post-War British Opera' (*New Blackfriars*, November 1994, p. 524 ff).
15 All quotations from the libretto of 'Mathis der Maler' are taken from the translation by T. Ashley (Royal Opera Texts, 1995).
16 A. Clements, 'Peter Sellars' (*Opera*, November 1995, p. 1262).
17 Interview with Peter Sellars, *The Independent*, 18th November 1995.
18 ibid.
19 T. Ashley, 'An Act of Necessity,' in Royal Opera House programme book for 'Mathis der Maler' (1995), p. 27.
20 Peter Sellars, in an interview broadcast on BBC Radio 3, 28th November 1995.
21 Newspaper reviews almost without exception commented negatively on Sellars' staging. A more sympathetic view was expressed by John Allison in *Opera*, January 1996, pp. 104–109: 'The updating of Hindemith's opera does nothing to undermine it ... [Sellars' updatings] are the work of someone who believes passionately in the power of opera and its ability to comment on the human condition.'

Writing of(f) Victims: hors texte

Paul Fletcher

Introduction

Particular thinkers and their work seem to create significant intellectual waves at particular times and thus determine and define subsequent inquiry. We all know of the powerful consequences of Kant's reading of Hume, but even more startling is the effect that Hegel had on the seventeen year old Ernst Bloch: 'I read the *Phenomenology of Spirit* erotically—as I wrote at the time "the spiritual nightingale is singing within" in this park, this wilderness—and that is how I understood the *Phenomenology* as I have never understood it since'.[1] One could respond to Bloch's experience of the *Phenomenology* with the suggestion that he would have been better off reading Freud, but there is no doubting the excitement of an intellectual encounter that transforms our way of seeing the world. While Jean-Luc Marion's book, *God Without Being*[2], cannot be placed in the same league as Hegel's

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