

Notes on the Program

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Ragtime (Well-Tempered), for Large Orchestra Symphony, Mathis der Maler

Paul Hindemith

Paul Hindemith sowed plenty of wild oats during his apprentice years as a composer. In 1921, the year of *Ragtime (Well-Tempered)*, he included a fire siren and a canister of sand in the instrumentation for his Kammermusik No. 1, and provoked scandal by parodying both the words and music of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in his lurid comic opera *Das Nusch-Nuschi*. By 1929 he had managed to spotlight an apparently nude soprano at center-stage in his opera *Neues vom Tage*. During that decade he was also immersed in many other musical activities: playing viola in the Amar String Quartet, which championed new music along with the classics; serving on the program committee of the Donaueschingen Festival, a hotbed of the latest sounds; embarking on a lifelong fascination with early music (mastering the Baroque-era viola d'amore); even creating some of the first repertoire in the incipient field of electronic music.

However, the years following 1932 proved difficult for Hindemith. He did not immediately comprehend the threat posed by the rise of the National Socialist Party in Germany. Apparently assuming it would be a short-lived development, he went on expressing his personal anti-Nazi views and performing with Jewish colleagues, failing to recognize that his own wife's part-Jewish background might quash his career. In November 1934 the Kulturgemeinde, an independent organization that served as artistic guardian for the Nazis, effected a boycott on all performances of his music (claiming it reeked of "cultural Bolshevism"), and in January 1935 he was placed on a leave of absence from

his teaching position at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin.

By 1938 Hindemith's situation had grown so dire that he left for Switzerland, and in 1940 he proceeded to the United States. That autumn he joined the faculty of Yale University, where he remained until 1953 as professor of music theory and director of the Yale Collegium Musicum (the early-music ensemble). He became an American citizen in 1946.

In Short

Born: November 16, 1895, in Hanau, near Frankfurt, Germany

Died: December 28, 1963, in Frankfurt

Works composed and premiered: *Ragtime (Well-Tempered)*, composed 1921, incorporating a theme from Johann Sebastian Bach's Fugue in C minor from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book One (ca. 1720–22); premiered March 21, 1987, in Berlin, by the Radio-Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Gerd Albrecht, conductor. *Symphony, Mathis der Maler*, composed 1933–34; premiered March 12, 1934, in Berlin, by the Berlin Philharmonic, Wilhelm Furtwängler, conductor

New York Philharmonic premieres and most recent performances: these performances mark the first of *Ragtime (Well-Tempered)*, as well as its New York Premiere; *Symphony, Mathis der Maler*, premiered October 4, 1934, Otto Klemperer, conductor; most recently played, October 22, 2002, in Hong Kong, Lorin Maazel, conductor

Estimated durations: *Ragtime (Well-Tempered)*, ca. 4 minutes; *Symphony, Mathis der Maler*, ca. 25 minutes

and the next year he returned for a visit to a much-changed Europe. He remained a European at heart, and in 1951 he accepted an offer to teach at the University of Zurich, splitting his time between that school and Yale until 1953, when he settled in Switzerland for good.

But those tribulations lay ahead in the early 1920s, when Hindemith was eagerly experimenting with the wealth of musical styles available to open-minded composers, including the jazz that was causing such a stir in America. His *Suite 1922*, which remains in the active piano repertoire, is a keyboard suite analogous to those of the late Baroque, but with modern dances replacing the courantes, gigues, and other courtly dances of the earlier era. It concludes with a movement titled *Ragtime*, to which he affixed these “directions for use”:

Forget everything you have learned in your piano lessons. Don't worry whether you should play D-sharp with the fourth

or the sixth finger. Play this piece ferociously, but always very strict in rhythm, like a machine. Consider the piano here as an interesting kind of percussion instrument and treat it accordingly.

Those instructions might similarly serve another ragtime he had produced a year earlier, the *Ragtime (Well-Tempered)* played in this concert. It was an off-the-cuff piece that Hindemith wrote in versions for piano four-hands and for full orchestra. He made no pretense about its importance. “Can you also use Fox-trots, Boston, Rags, and other kitsch?” he had asked his publisher in 1920. “If I cannot think of any decent music, I always write such things.” This is a naughty musical prank in which jazzy modernism of a sarcastic sort serves as the framework in which the subject of the C-minor Fugue from J.S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book One* is buffeted about — the musically sacred in surroundings most profane.

Hindemith on Bach



Hindemith in 1923

Hindemith held Johann Sebastian Bach in the highest regard and often performed his music, but he protested against treating the Leipzig master like a fly in amber. In 1952 he published a little book about Bach, based on a speech he had delivered at a 1950 commemoration of the composer in Hamburg. He complained that biographers had so deified Bach that “he became the banal figure which meets our eyes every day: a man in a full-skirted coat, with a wig he never lays by.” But thanks to recent research, he argued, “the mythical being is beginning slowly to change back into a human being.”

In 1921 Hindemith had imagined that his own **Ragtime (Well-Tempered)** suggested how Bach might embrace the 20th century:

Do you think that Bach is turning in his grave? On the contrary: if Bach had been alive today he might very well have invented the shimmy or at least incorporated it in respectable music. And perhaps, in doing so, he might have used a theme from the *Well-Tempered Clavier* by a composer who had Bach's standing in his eyes.

In the wake of the Nazi upsurge, Hindemith composed a series of vocal works setting melancholy, even despairing, texts. Examples of such “inner emigration” can be found in the careers of a number of similarly disaffected German artists at that time, and many works were not proffered for performance until years later. His opera *Mathis der Maler* towers among them. Its title character — Mathis the Painter — is the German artist known as Matthias (or Mathis) Grünewald (ca. 1470–1528). Like Hindemith, Grünewald lived in troubled times: his sympathy with uprisings by German peasants cost him the support of his patron, the Cardinal-Archbishop of Mainz. He had rested in

oblivion for centuries when his work was rediscovered in the 1920s. Since then, his Isenheim Altarpiece, painted for a monastery in Alsace but now residing in the Musée d’Unterlinden in Colmar, has become one of the most famous images in all of art.

Hindemith was deeply touched by Grünewald’s situation, sensing its relevance to the Germany of his own time. From July 1933 through July 1935 he crafted the libretto and music for his opera, which evolved into a three-hour work comprising a prologue and seven ensuing scenes. It was in the midst of this project that Hindemith’s standing suddenly crashed, leading to the blacklisting of his music and the impossibility of producing

Sources and Inspirations

In a program essay for the premiere of his opera *Mathis der Maler*, Hindemith wrote:

No one expects works from musicians and playwrights that satisfy the scholarly requirements of an art historian; but they are surely permitted what painters of historical figures and events have always been allowed: to show what history has taught them and the significance they have found in its events. If I have tried to present on the stage what I have read of the few remaining pieces of information regarding the life of Mathis Gothart Neithardt [a.k.a. Grünewald] and the connection to his works which this information suggested to me, it is because I cannot think of a more lively, more problematic, human, artistically touching and, in the best sense, more dramatic figure Mathis placed himself at the disposal of the powerful machinery of the state and the church and was apparently able to withstand the pressures of these institutions The abysses of doubt and despair through which he passed must have been deep [He was] a man who went to his grave having finally found a balance in his soul between bliss and abomination.



Detail from the Engelkonzert (Angelic Concert) scene of Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece, which inspired the first movement of Hindemith’s symphony

the opera in Frankfurt, as had been planned. It would first be seen in Switzerland, at the Zurich Stadttheater, in 1948.

In 1933, the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler asked Hindemith to write a piece he could premiere with the Berlin Philharmonic. The composer responded with the idea of creating a four-movement *Mathis der Maler* orchestral suite, employing symphonic passages that he had already sketched, or intended to write for his opera. In the end, he decided to limit the movements to three, each depicting a different section of the Isenheim Altarpiece. The Symphony, *Mathis der Maler* was one of the composer's last successes before the tide turned against him, but it was a resounding one, and he himself led the Berlin Philharmonic in a recording for the German Telefunken label shortly after the 1934 premiere.

The first movement, *Engelkonzert (Angelic Concert)*, is inspired by a scene of the altarpiece in which the Virgin and Child are being serenaded by a host of angels playing fanciful instruments. It begins with a solemn introduction during which much use is made of an ancient German folk song, *Es sungen drei Engel ein' süssen Gesang*. Mahler had drawn on the same folk song in the choral fifth movement of his Third Symphony, taking its text from the famous 19th-century German poetic collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Here one encounters Hindemith's love of brass timbres, as in the chorale-like intonations that follow the fugal development in this opening movement.

The second movement, based on Grünwald's *Grablegung (Entombment)* altarpiece

scene, serves as an interlude in the opera's final tableau. The music builds from the flute's tender melody at the opening through a procession of increasing power to a solemn but grand climax (again with a firm brass presence); and then it recedes to quiet contemplation.

The *Versuchung des heiligen Antonius (Temptation of St. Anthony)* music occurs as a sequence of hallucinations in Scene Six of the opera, during which the painter imagines himself to be the hermit St. Anthony, confronted by a series of characters from Mathis's past. "Ubi eras bone Jhesu / ubi eras, quare non affuisti / ut sanares vulnera meas?" Hindemith has inscribed at the head of this finale, words transcribed from the altarpiece itself: "Where were you, good Jesus, where were you? Why have you not come to heal my wounds?" St. Anthony's triumphant fate is mirrored in a concluding chorale prelude on the chant "Lauda Sion Salvatorem" ("Praise the Savior, O Zion").

Instrumentation: *Ragtime (Well-Tempered)* calls for two piccolos and flute, two oboes, two clarinets and E-flat clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, xylophone, and strings. Symphony, *Mathis der Maler* employs two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, small cymbals, triangle, orchestra bells, and strings.