

Paul Hindemith's *Six chansons:* Genesis and Analysis

by Chester L. Alwes



The choir "Chanson Valaisanne" in Sion, Switzerland.

For Hindemith, art was essentially commemorative, and it was this commemorative quality that defined not only the technical and spiritual, but also the social function of art as he conceived it. In the technical area, for example, it is easy to think of pieces by Hindemith which, by quotation, allusion, or implication, embody musical ideas and procedures in which he found meaning for the present. It is, in fact, virtually impossible to think of any works in which he deliberately cut himself off from the technical lessons he had learned from others.¹

Given the extent to which Hindemith consistently commemorated music of the past through his compositions, teaching, performing,² and theoretical writings, it is appropriate to commemorate his work during the centennial of his birth. Of Hindemith's large and diverse output of choral music, the most accessible and popular pieces are the *Six chansons* (1939) with texts by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. This article discusses the genesis of these pieces and how they reflect the larger historical context of Hindemith's art.

Genesis of the Chansons

Both Rilke and Hindemith were exiles by choice, both driven from Germany by their opposition to war. Rilke initially fled to Italy but was forced in 1919 to undertake a lecture tour in Switzerland to bolster his income. There he gradually found support and encouragement. Ultimately, Rilke settled in the

thirteenth-century Chateau de Muzot in the canton of Valais,³ where he resided until his death in 1927. While living there, Rilke produced his entire output of French-language poems (approximately four hundred). He also made the acquaintance of a local Swiss musician named Georges Haenni.⁴ In 1939, Hindemith, who made his home in Valais after he retired from teaching at Yale University, also became acquainted with the Swiss musician. Haenni, who conducted a chorus called the *Chanson Valaisanne*, made Hindemith aware of Rilke's collection of French poems.⁵ He wanted Hindemith to compose some settings of these French poems for his chorus. Four days after showing Hindemith the collection, Haenni received the manuscript of the *Six chansons* with the dedication "To my good friend G. Haenni and his *Chanson Valaisanne*, from the newer resident of Valais to the older with best wishes."⁶ Thus, Hindemith's settings of the French poems of his German countryman are a symbol of the affection that both he and Rilke felt for the Valais countryside that became their refuge.

Texts

The texts that Hindemith chose are taken from a collection of French quatrains written by Rilke in 1924. The poet's pride in the quatrains is demonstrated in a letter dated August 18, 1924, to Nanny Wunderly-Volkart: "The Valais quatrains—dedicated to the [canton of] Valais—which I would use to support my future claim for Swiss nationality; I cannot better prove that I have this country in my blood."⁷ Rilke's collection, titled *Vergers*, contains fifty-nine quatrains. The six poems that Hindemith chose are not contiguous but are drawn from various parts of the collection. Taken as they appear in the order of their publication in Hindemith's set, the poems are:

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6) The appearance that the second quatrain has five lines is misleading; it results from the enjambment, albeit with rhyme, of lines four and five. As with accent, the rhyme pattern changes from poem to poem and even from one quatrain to the next. The high degree of assonance, however, and Hindemith's astute recognition of rhyme and accent in the rhythms of his settings are consistent.

Another textual issue is the choice of language for performance. While Hindemith sets the poems in French and his understanding of French prosody is clearly impeccable, one is struck by the quality of the English translations made by Elaine de Sincay. So natural and apt are her translations, both in their sense and sound, that the chansons seem to suffer very little when sung in English. Indeed, when preparing a performance at the Eastman School of Music in 1982, I was told by Samuel Adler, who studied with Hindemith at Yale, that the composer preferred them in English. Furthermore, in the new *Sämtliche Werke*, the chansons are titled both in French and English, and the English text is underlaid directly beneath the music with the French text placed beneath the English in italic type. While these facts should not dissuade anyone from performing the chansons in French, they certainly seem to give permission, if not endorsement, for performance in English.

Music

The *Six chansons* are very approachable by choirs of even modest abilities. When examined alongside Hindemith's other unaccompanied choral music—the *Lieder nach alten Texten*, op. 33 (1923), *Zwölf Madrigale* (1958), and especially the *Messe für gemischten Chor* (1963)—the chansons seem simpler and more direct in their musical language. They are remarkably consonant, and, though they cannot be described as tonal, they clearly show a sense of tonal center and a preference for triadic harmonies.

The pitch centers of the cycle are A, E, G, A^b/G[♯], E^b, and G. The intervallic relationships between these tonal centers not only are symmetrical (Figure 1) but also reinforce the poetic structure of the cycle: the two animal poems and the two seasonal poems are cast in keys a fifth apart,

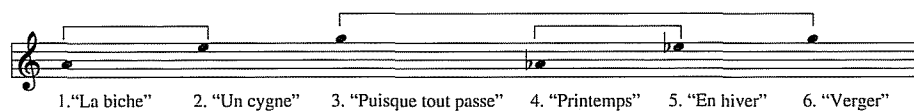


Figure 1. Tonal centers in *Six chansons*

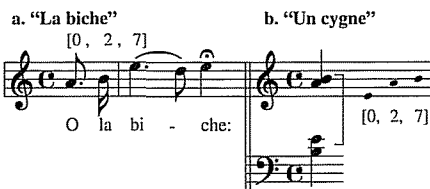


Figure 2. Pitch class 0,2,7 in "La biche" and "Un cygne"

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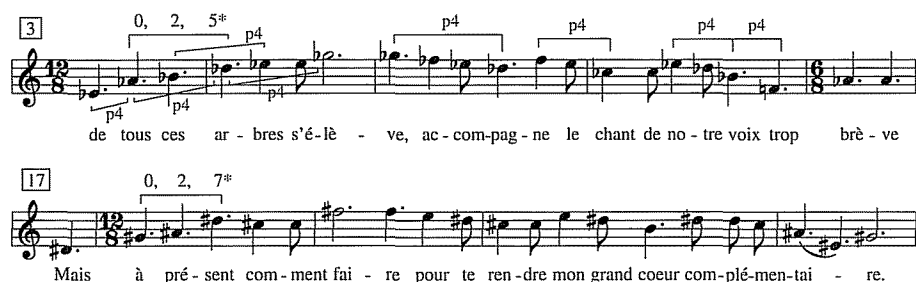


Figure 3. "Printemps"

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Figure 4. "Verger"

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and the third and sixth chansons appear in the same key.

The tonal centers of the textually paired pieces also generate the important harmonies of the settings. For example, "La biche" opens with the pitch collection A-B-E (in theorist Allen Forte's terms, the pitch class 0,2,7).¹⁰ The same pitch class forms the first sonority of "Un cygne" (Figure 2), where it may serve to

symbolize the swan's reflection by "reflecting" the final tonality of the movement (E) with pitches a fifth above (B) and below (A).¹¹ In the same chanson, the last two phrases cadence on E^b (m. 20) and E (m. 22), the same half-step relationship that exists between the tonal centers of the textually paired pieces. The pitch class 0,2,7 also appears prominently in "Printemps" (Figure 3) and "Verger" (Figure 4).

Figure 5 presents a reduction of the soprano melody of "La biche," showing again the pervasiveness of the 0,2,7 pitch class. It constitutes the first melodic phrase and appears three more times in the sixteen-measure composition—once at the

end of the first phrase (m. 4), again transposed to C# at the beginning of the third phrase (mm. 9–10), and finally on A in the penultimate measure of the composition. It is also heard, reordered (B, E, F#), at the end of mm. 3 and 14.

Another prominent feature of this melody is its emphasis on the interval of the perfect fifth, made prominent in the dactylic rhythmic pattern (♩ ♩♩) of the poetry. With the exception of the major third that begins the first and last phrases, all the structural intervals are perfect fifths. The location of the exceptional major third also highlights the fact that the first and last phrases are essentially the same. The third phrase, which begins with the 0,2,7 pitch class on C#, is clearly related motivically and intervallically to the first and last phrases. The second phrase is the only one to omit the 0,2,7 motive, but it is clearly based on perfect fifths (C#, F#, B), presented in their inverted form as perfect fourths. Hindemith highlights the significance of the second phrase's digression from the others by doubling it in the bass voice.

The repetition of melodic ideas is a hallmark of all six chansons and a clear expression of Hindemith's neoclassic sense of formal structure. In "Puisque tout passe" and "Verger," repetition of melodic phrases (and their harmonic accompaniments) articulates the structure of each composition (ABCB in the former, ABA in the latter). Melodic repetition in "En hiver" receives a varied harmonic treatment and a reduction in dynamics to fit the text's meaning. The second strophe of "Printemps" features a repetition of the melodic and harmonic material of the first strophe. Following a contrasting section in the enharmonic minor, the final phrase of the first melody returns (written enharmonically) to round off the form.

In "La biche" Hindemith explores the broader ramifications of his melodic structure. Formal cohesion is created as the pitch centers of the four phrases—A, B, C#, and A—are the first four notes of the soprano melody following the opening fermata.

A final fascinating aspect of Hindemith's compositional craftsmanship in the *Six chansons* can be seen in his part-writing and harmonizations. In "La biche" the first and last melodic phrases are harmonized by a bass line that steps down an A-major scale from the tonic to the supertonic (Figure 6). The soprano melody of the second phrase is doubled by the bass and accompanied by pedals in

Figure 5 shows a reduction of the soprano melody for "La biche." It consists of five systems of music. Each system includes a vocal line with lyrics and a piano accompaniment line. The lyrics are: "O thou doe, what vis-tas of sec-u-lar for-ests ap-pear in thine / O la bi-che: quel bel in-té-rieur d'an-ci-en-nes fo-rêts dans tes / eyes re-lect-ed! What con-fi-dence se-rene af-fect-ed by / yeux a-lon-de; com-bien de con-fi-an-ce ron-de mē- / tian-si-ent shades, by shades of fear. And it all is / lée à com-bien, com-bien de peur. Tout ce-la, por- / borne on thy bound-ing course, for so gra-cile art thou! Nor comes / té par la vi-ve gra-ci-li-té de tes bonds. Mais ja- / ought to as-tound, ought to as-tound the im-pas-sive pro-found un-a-ware-ness of thy brow. / mais rien n'ar-ri-ve, rien n'ar-ri-ve à cette im-pos-ses-si-ve i-gno-ran-ce de ton front." Dynamic markings include *p*, *pp*, *f*, *mf*, and *pp*. Pitch class indicators [0, 2, 7] are placed below the notes.

Figure 5. "La biche"

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Figure 6 shows the bass line for "La biche." It consists of two systems of music. The first system shows the bass line with lyrics: "ought to as-tound, ought to as-tound the im-pas-sive pro-found un-a-ware-ness of thy brow. / mais rien n'ar-ri-ve, rien n'ar-ri-ve à cette im-pos-ses-si-ve i-gno-ran-ce de ton front." The second system shows the bass line with lyrics: "eyes re-lect-ed! What con-fi-dence se-rene af-fect-ed by / yeux a-lon-de; com-bien de con-fi-an-ce ron-de mē- / tian-si-ent shades, by shades of fear. And it all is / lée à com-bien, com-bien de peur. Tout ce-la, por- / borne on thy bound-ing course, for so gra-cile art thou! Nor comes / té par la vi-ve gra-ci-li-té de tes bonds. Mais ja- / ought to as-tound, ought to as-tound the im-pas-sive pro-found un-a-ware-ness of thy brow. / mais rien n'ar-ri-ve, rien n'ar-ri-ve à cette im-pos-ses-si-ve i-gno-ran-ce de ton front." The bass line is a descending scale from A to C#.

Figure 6. "La biche"

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the internal parts and parallel writing at the cadences. The third phrase, like the first and last, is harmonized by a descending bass line moving in contrary motion to the soprano. In this *chanson*, as in the others, the part-writing is simple, effortless, and interesting.

Borrowing from the Past

The cyclic arrangement of Hindemith's *chansons* (especially *six pieces*) can be seen as a historically informed decision. One thinks immediately of the part-songs of Mendelssohn and Schumann, which tend to be grouped into sets of six pieces. The use of French texts also leads Hindemith to imitate the spirit and declamation of sixteenth-century French *chansons*. Finally, his use of simple, Classical formal structures, as well as canon (in "Verger") and other forms of imitation, pays homage to his Germanic forbears. Regarding this stylistically Catholic approach in these *chansons*, editor Alfred Rubelli notes:

The songs are connected to one another through the binding together of opposing styles, stamped by individualized rhythmic, harmonic, and tonal idioms.¹²

The accessibility of the pieces may reflect the ability level of Haenni's choir, but it is also a mark of Hindemith's desire to create music that would be of use to amateur musicians. Rubelli notes the "natural, unaffected" manner of the *chansons* and attributes their popularity to their "apparently unpretentious, but very natural, spontaneous" expression. Conductors interested in sampling Hindemith's choral output during the centennial year of his birth should consider these "most beloved of Hindemith's *a cappella* choral creations"¹³ an excellent starting point.

NOTES

¹ Richard F. French, "Hindemith's Mass 1963—An Introduction," in *Words and Music: A Scholar's View: Essays in Honor of A. Tillman Merritt*, ed. Laurence Berman (Cambridge: Department of Music, Harvard University, 1973), 86.

² He founded the first collegium musicum in the United States at Yale University in 1945.

³ The canton of Valais is located in southern Switzerland and extends from the upper Rhone Valley into Lake Geneva.

⁴ *Paul Hindemith Sämtliche Werke, Band VII, 5—Chorwerke a cappella*, ed. Alfred Rubelli (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1989), xii.

⁵ Hindemith already knew the German poetry of Rilke, as he had his countryman's poems in his song cycle *Das Marien-Leben* (1928, rev. 1943).

⁶ *Paul Hindemith Sämtliche Werke*, xii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸ The numbers are those given the poems in Rilke's *Sämtliche Werke, Zweiter Band*, ed. the Rilke Archive (Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1957), 517–33.

⁹ A separate title is given to this particular poem by the poet.

¹⁰ Allen Forte, *The Structure of Atonal Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973). The figures refer to the number of semitones between the pitches.

¹¹ I am indebted to my student James Wells for this insight.

¹² *Paul Hindemith Sämtliche Werke*, xii.

¹³ *Ibid.*

—CJ—



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