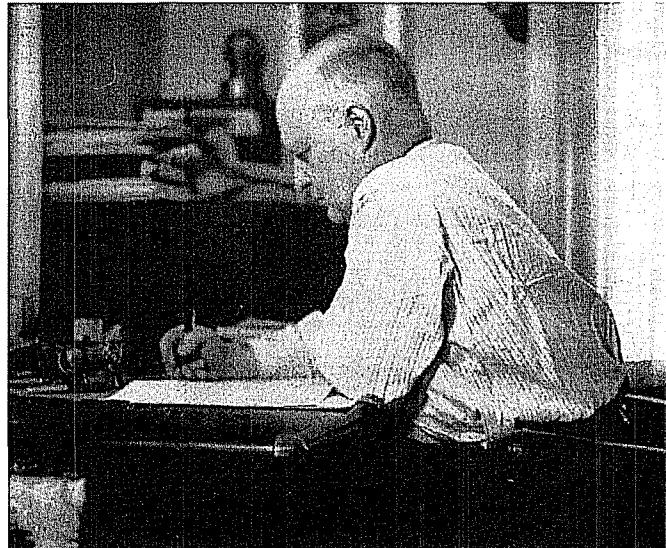


Music to Sing and Play: The Choral Works of Paul Hindemith

by William Braun



Paul Hindemith (ca. 1942)

Paul Hindemith (1895–1963) not only enjoyed an active compositional and performing career, he also made important contributions as a teacher and author, writing texts on both musical instruction and the philosophy of music. He composed in every musical genre and produced a substantial body of choral music. It is appropriate this year as we celebrate the centennial of his birth to survey the great breadth of his choral output.

Early Successes

In 1923, Hindemith wrote his first collection of six choral pieces for unaccompanied mixed chorus, *Lieder nach alten Texten*. This collection was a product of his participation in the *Singbewegung* musical movement.

The youth of the time suddenly got all excited about Bach, about Schütz, about Praetorius, about Josquin, and many others from European history. All at once they grabbed the *Denkmäler* and complete editions of Eitner's publications off the shelves of the library and suddenly "discovered" these things anew for themselves.¹

Each of the songs of the *Lieder nach alten Texten* is varied in mood, tempo, and temperament, ranging from a lady's solemn lament in "Frauenklage" to the rollicking energy of a drinking song in "Landsknechtstrinklied." The musical idiom in each piece is not formulated by well-rounded themes but rather by motives that stretch over the whole composition. The individual lines, rarely either tonal or traditionally modal,

use original modal patterns. Despite the predominance of scalar lines, they are not easily sight-read because the chromatic voice-leading often takes surprising turns. The *Lieder nach alten Texten* premiered at the 1925 Donaueschingen Festival and were an instant success.

Because these songs were too difficult for the average singing group, Hindemith turned his creative efforts toward music that could be used by a larger number of choirs. *Lieder für Singkreise* (Songs for Group Singing) was written in 1927, after Hindemith spent a week in a *Jugendbewegung* camp associated with Fritz Jöde, one of the leaders of the Youth Movement. Based on texts by August von Platen, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Matthias Claudius, these songs are scored for SAB chorus and reflect Hindemith's growing interest in providing simple yet high quality music for amateur singers. B. Schott's Söhne, the publisher of Hindemith's works, later issued a collection called *Das neue Werk—Gemeinschaftsmusik für Jugend und Haus*, which represented the joint efforts of Jöde and Hindemith in the creation of additional songs for group singing.

In 1927, Hindemith accepted the post of composition teacher at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Berlin and undertook a leading role in advancing music education. During a discussion with German choral conductors, he addressed a problem he saw in contemporary music: a growing gap between composers and audiences.

A composer should write today only if he knows for what purpose he is writing. The days of composing for the sake of composing are perhaps gone forever. On the other hand, the demand for music is so great that the composer and the consumer ought most emphatically to come at least to an understanding.²

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describes the text theme as "the evanescence of human endeavor in contrast to the permanent values of the universal order."⁶ Composed in 1931, it is scored for SATB soli, chorus, boys' choir, and orchestra. One analyst, James E. Paulding, finds a new contrapuntal freedom in this work:

While he relied primarily on traditional four-part textures, he also attained a new freedom in regard to polyphony. . . . With its sweeping vocal lines and gently flowing accompaniment, [it] bears considerable resemblance to the vocal style inherent in the oratorios of George Frederic Handel.⁷

Igor Stravinsky recorded his impressions of the premiere of *Das Unaufhörliche* in his autobiography:

This composition, large alike in size and substance and the varied

character of its parts, offers an excellent opportunity for getting into touch with the author's individuality, and for admiring his rich talent and brilliant mastery. The appearance of Hindemith in the musical life of our day is very fortunate, for he stands out as a wholesome and illuminating principal amid so much obscurity.⁸

Hindemith's last important *Gebrauchs-musik* work was the *Plöner Musiktag* (*A Day of Music in Plön*). This piece, similar to *Wir bauen eine Stadt*, is a series of instrumental and choral pieces for schoolchildren. He describes the work's genesis in a speech given at the Greenwich Settlement Music School in New York.

I came over [to Plön] with some of my students from Berlin, and after a very enthusiastic and impressive reception, we all went to work. Music sounded from every nook

and cranny of the schoolyard, the orchestra practiced in the garden, the choir sang in the fields and woods. I was busy composing new pieces and making certain changes on ones I thought were finished. The youngest students could not read music and were very unhappy that they couldn't take part. The only instrument that they had a chance to play was the little school recorder in C. There was nothing left to do except let them play them—and so I wrote them a trio for the opening march of the cantata.⁹

"Advice to Youth" was the centerpiece (approximately sixteen minutes) of the festival day. It is scored for chorus, soli, and orchestra and is based on a sixteenth-century text by Martin Agricola urging young people to become involved with music. The characteristics and essence of this piece reflect a change in both the style and function of Hindemith's music. Paulding notes:

For the first time [Hindemith] began to accept the responsibility of his nineteenth-century heritage, and he discovered that his musical horizon was broad enough to include homophony as well as polyphonic elements. His attitude toward dissonance also changed considerably and, maturing beyond his youthful need to shock and unnerve his listeners, he began thinking more and more in terms of tonal centers, and much of his music became endowed with a certain folk-like quality.¹⁰

Political Crisis

By 1933, Hindemith had achieved a great deal of international recognition as a performer and composer, but this status did not save him from the growing political crisis in Germany. He was labeled a "cultural bolshevist" by the Nazis' *Kampfbund* because of his early works. He continued to work and associate with his Jewish friends, even though many of the leading German-Jewish musicians such as Arnold Schoenberg, Franz Schreker, Otto Klemperer, and Fritz Busch had lost their

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positions due to their Jewish associations and ancestry. In 1934, Hindemith's works were boycotted by the Nazi party's *Kulturgemeinde* and *Reichsmusikkammer*.¹¹ Wilhelm Furtwängler, a long-time friend and ardent supporter of

His Silver Burdett songs along with his other works for children prove that serving the musical needs of the young is not beneath the dignity of a great composer.

Eckhart Richter

Hindemith's works, published the famous article "Der Fall Hindemith" ("The Case of Hindemith") in an unsuccessful effort to reverse the forces rising up against his colleague. At the end of 1934, Hindemith took a leave of absence from the Hochschule and settled in Lenzkirche in the Black Forest to wait out the coming storm.¹²

During the next few years, Hindemith continued to compose, but he also devoted a considerable amount of time to music education. He was engaged by the Turkish government to organize a national music school in Ankara. Simultaneously, at the urging of Marshall Bartholomew, the Silver Burdett Company of Chicago commissioned Hindemith to write *Nine Songs for an American School Song Book*. Beginning in 1945 the first seven of these songs were published over the course of seventeen years in various Silver Burdett song books:

A Rain Song (one-part with piano)
Romance (two-part with piano)
Rain (one-part with piano)
The Spider's Web (one-part with piano)
Thrush Song (two-part with piano)
The Sea Gypsy (two-part with piano)
Young and Old (mixed chorus)
Prayer for a Pilot (mixed chorus)
April Rain (SSA)

Each song is structured around one principal melody and employs a homophonic texture throughout. The accompaniments are musically and technically simple. The songs are discussed and analyzed at length by Eckhart Richter in the 1968 *Hindemith Jahrbuch* where he concludes:

His Silver Burdett songs along with his other works for children prove that serving the musical needs of the young is not beneath the dignity of a great composer but is well worth his time and best efforts.¹³

During his years of exile, Hindemith also wrote a textbook on composition, *Unterweisung im Tonsatz* (*The Craft of Musical Composition*). The early decades of the twentieth century saw radical changes in the foundations of music theory, composition, and aesthetics. Hindemith felt the need as a teacher and composer who struggled with these basic changes to pass on to the next generation what he had learned.

I have lived through the transition from conservative training to a new freedom perhaps more intensely than anyone else. The new land had to be explored if it was to be conquered, and everyone who took part in this process knows that it

was not without danger. The path to knowledge was neither straight nor smooth. Yet today I feel that the new domain lies clearly spread out before our eyes, that we have penetrated the secrets of its organization. . . . A wider circle of readers will understand, at this first stopping-place on the road to complete clarification of both contemplation and action, that an attempt to explain the music of the present day had to be undertaken.¹⁴

In 1936, Hindemith received an invitation from Oliver Strunk, Jr., on behalf of Elizabeth Coolidge, who was an ardent early champion of Hindemith's music, to be the featured guest at the Eighth Washington Festival of Contemporary Music. In preparation for his first concert tour of America, Hindemith revised his *Lieder nach alten Texten*. Four of the pieces performed at the festival were so well received that Associated Music Press officials urged Schott to publish them with an English translation. The resultant publication, *Five Songs on Old Texts* for unaccompanied mixed chorus, included the revised versions of nos. 1, 2, 3, and 6 from *Lieder nach alten Texten* plus the 1938 piece *Wahre Liebe* with English texts by Arthur Mendel and Strunk.¹⁵



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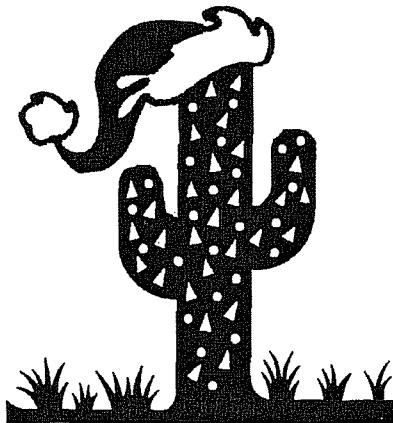
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- XI. Finale, "Passing the Visions"

Throughout the forties Hindemith was building larger musical structures based on his early works. According to biographer David Neumeyer, the entire *Lilacs Requiem* was generated "from a song written in 1943 ("Sing On There, in the Swamp") . . . which was itself a reworking of a German-language setting from 1919."¹⁹ The falling minor third, an ancient musical symbol for a birdcall (i.e., thrush), is motivically significant in the original song and is exploited throughout the requiem. It is often found in a short rhythmic pattern in a line interrupted by rests. In the "Death Carol" the chorus uses this combination—the falling minor third interval now expanded to a perfect fourth—in the soprano line, underpinned by half-step motion in the lower three voices (Figure 5). Neumeyer's in-depth analysis of the *Requiem* includes the formal design, the principal tonalities and their structural significance on various levels, the iso-interval chains, and the symbolic use of various motives. Neumeyer concludes:

The uncharacteristically tight motivic-thematic integration of the *Requiem* is a compound of the generative method Hindemith used in its composition and the consistent mood and recurrent imagery of Whitman's text.²⁰

The oratorio was first performed in New York City on May 5, 1946, by Robert Shaw's Collegiate Chorale—"far and away the best choir in the world," wrote Hindemith to his friend and publisher Willy Strecker.²¹ The composer must have felt a great emotional attachment to the work since he programmed it numerous times in the concerts he conducted.

Harvard University, sponsoring a symposium on music criticism in 1947, invited Hindemith to compose another work to be performed by the Collegiate Chorale. Hindemith selected the text

Apparebit repentina dies, a medieval Latin poem describing the last judgment. This text is one of the earliest examples of a poem in which each stanza begins with the next letter of the alphabet, a structure that Hindemith retained in the cantata. Hindemith did this by changing some musical element at the beginning of each stanza. Thus, for "Apparebit repentina dies" (the first stanza), he employs an unaccompanied choral texture with a pedal point and rather lyrical, slow moving lines; for "Brevis totus tum parebit" (the second stanza), a short rhythmic figure in a staccato style is used in the voice parts with a sparse instrumental accompaniment; "Clangor tubae perquaternas" (verse three) is set in a homophonic texture. This form is followed throughout the piece as each stanza has its own tempo, texture, or other distinct musical identity.

Set for mixed chorus and ten brass instruments, *Apparebit* is divided into four sections preceded by an instrumental fugue. Section two juxtaposes choral writing, spoken narration, and interjections by the basses singing the words of Christ. Section three begins with a fast, rhythmic subject that leads into a passacaglia section. The instrumental accompaniment stops during a quiet, beautiful passage for unaccompanied chorus. The final section consists of a dialogue between instruments and voices on a text that implores man to be concerned for those in need.

Hindemith wrote a number of vocal canons to celebrate or mark specific occasions. To thank those who wished him well on his fiftieth birthday, he wrote *Oh, Threats of Hell*, a four-voice canon for mixed voices based on a quatrain from Omar Khayyam's *Rubáiyát*. Two other occasional canons include *Sine musica nulla disciplina* and *Musica divina laudes*. The latter "Coolidge Canon" Hindemith wrote as a birthday greeting for Elizabeth Coolidge while he was teaching at Harvard.²²

Hindemith was appointed the Charles Eliot Norton Lecturer at Harvard for the 1949–50 academic year. One of the results of this lectureship was his book *A Composer's World: Horizons and Limitations*, which dealt with the philosophical, compositional, practical, and pedagogical aspects of music. Intended as a book that would "be a guide through the little

universe which is the working place of the man who writes music,"²³ it was addressed chiefly to the layman. The volume closes with words that are as close as Hindemith ever came to making a direct statement of his religious beliefs:

The ultimate reason for his [the musician's] 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. If his prayers are granted and he, armed with wisdom and gifted with reverence for the unknowable, is the man whom heaven has blessed with the genius of creation, we may see in him the donor of the precious present we all long for: the great music of our time.²⁴

In 1952 the United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) asked Hindemith to write a choral/orchestral work to be performed at a world conference in Brussels. The theme of the meeting was to be "The Role of Music in the Development of Youths and Adults." Hindemith requested that a leading European poet provide a text permitting audience participation. The renowned French author Paul Claudel sent Hindemith a poetic paraphrase of the eighteenth chapter of Isaiah called *Cantique de l'espérance* (*Canticle to Hope*). Hindemith set the text for mezzo-soprano solo, mixed chorus, orchestra, band, and audience. The cantata is set in seven sections:

- I. Chorus: "Away, Wings Moving Swiftly, Away Angels" ("Allez, aliez, ailes rapides, allez anges")
- II. Chorus: "I Was Presented Some Bitter Bread" ("On m'a donné à manger un pain amer")
- III. Solo: "What Stupidity!" ("La bêtise de ça!")

IV. Song: "There Is an Angel Deep in My Bosom"

("Il y a un ange dans ma poitrine")

V. Chorus and solo: "You Men Below"

("Epoux de l'injustice lâbas")

VI. Chorus and crowd: "Daughter of Eternal Truth"

("Fille de la Vérité")

VII. Chorus and crowd: "Hope, Oh Conqueror of Death"

("Destructrice de la mort")

Cantique was premiered at the Brussels Palace of Fine Arts in July 1953, with Hindemith conducting the huge ensemble comprised of instrumentalists from the Orchestre International des Jeunesse Musicales and an international chorus.

Claudel and Hindemith added two more parts to *Cantique* in 1955, creating a

three-movement cantata titled *Ite, angeli veloces*. Part one, *Triumphgesang Davids*, was a joyous song of triumph based on Psalm 18: "I Love Thee, O Lord, My Strength." Part two, *Custos quid de nocte*, is more subdued and opens with the tenor questioning man's fate: "Trumpet, why do you call me?" The complete work was premiered on June 9, 1955, in Wupperthal, Germany, under Hindemith's direction. *Canticle to Hope* was the last composition Hindemith wrote as a resident of the U.S.

A Conducting Career

With the premiere of *Canticle to Hope*, Hindemith began a conducting career that occupied the majority of his time for the last ten years of his life. He took up residence in Switzerland and embarked on a series of European concert tours. In

162 *f* *poco a poco calando* *mf* *p* *pp*

I float this car - ol with joy, with joy to thee. O Death!
Er-schall mein Hymn-nus voll Lust, voll Lust dir zu, o Tod!

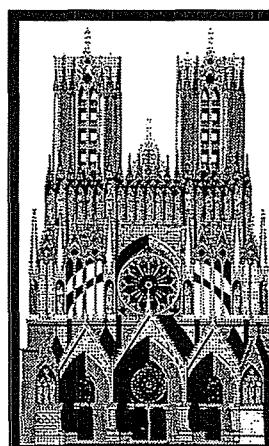
I float this car - ol with joy, with joy to thee. O Death!
Er-schall mein Hymn-nus voll Lust, voll Lust dir zu, o Tod!

...this car - ol with joy, with joy to thee. O Death!
...mein Hymn-nus voll Lust, voll Lust dir zu, o Tod!

I sing with joy, with joy to thee. O Death!
voll Lust voll Lust dir zu, o Tod!

Figure 5. *When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd*

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² Quoted in James E. Paulding, "Paul Hindemith (1895-1963): A Study of His Life and Works" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1974), 64.

³ Quoted in Geoffrey Skelton, *Paul Hindemith: The Man behind the Music* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975), 86.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵ Luther Noss, *Paul Hindemith in the United*

States (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 132. (The Bartholomew diaries are in the archives of the Yale School of Music.)

⁶ Skelton, 100.

⁷ Paulding, 123.

⁸ Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), 266.

⁹ Heinrich Strobel, *Paul Hindemith* (Mainz:

B. Schott's Söhne, 1948), 55.

¹⁰ Paulding, 130.

¹¹ Ian Kemp, *The New Grove Modern Masters* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 235-36.

¹² Skelton, 107-24.

¹³ Eckhart Richter, "'Spider, Spider What Art Thou Spinning?' Paul Hindemith's Songs for American School," *Hindemith-Jahrbuch Annales Hindemith* (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1968), 157.

¹⁴ Skelton, 144.

¹⁵ Noss, 13-20, 200.

¹⁶ Paulding, 255-58.

¹⁷ Letter from Paul Hindemith to Gertrude Hindemith, July 15, 1940, quoted in Noss, 74.

¹⁸ Skelton, 219-20.

¹⁹ David Neumeyer, *The Music of Paul Hindemith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 216.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 223.

²¹ Letter from Hindemith to Willy Strecker, quoted in Skelton, 220.

²² Noss, 149.

²³ Paul Hindemith, *A Composer's World: Horizons and Limitations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), vi.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 220-21.

²⁵ Noss, 184.

²⁶ Paul Hindemith, *Zwölf Madrigale* (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1958), foreword.

²⁷ Neumeyer, 282.

²⁸ Neumeyer, 251.

²⁹ Noss, 179.

³⁰ Ian Kemp, *Hindemith* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 55-56.

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