

The Politics of *Mathis*

Paul Geraci

Bowling Green State University

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Immediately after the premiere of the *Mathis der Maler Symphony*, on March 12, 1934, public performances of Hindemith's works were banned throughout Germany. Soon after, the composer fled to Switzerland. This paper will examine the political issues that were relevant to the *Mathis der Maler* premiere. It will also explore the music of both the opera and the symphony, and support the argument that *Mathis* was not the sole reason that forced Hindemith into exile, but was used as a pretext to dub the composer unacceptable in the new Germany. Further underlying reasons such as his previous works and their programs and his association with Jews, were equal cause for his flight.

Biographical Sketch

Hindemith was born in 1895. He was a child prodigy on the violin and the viola, and played many concerts as a youth with his brother and sister. His musical studies continued in the Hoch conservatory in Frankfurt where he began to compose. He later occupied the post of principal violinist in the Frankfurt Opera Orchestra. In 1917 he was called for military service and played violin in a regimental army band. Throughout these years Hindemith became proficient on many orchestral instruments, for it was his belief that one must truly know the instruments if one is to compose for them.

Hindemith's early period (1918-1923) is best categorized as experimental. It includes such works as *Three Pieces for Cello and Piano*, *String Quartet Op. 10*, *Sancta Susanna*, *Kleina Kammermusiken*, and *Morder, Hoffnung der Frauen* (Murder, Hope of Women). Although some pieces were written in a late Romantic style, others began to break away from traditional harmony. The use of popular music, both dance and jazz based, also influenced works of this period. Additionally his two one-act operas, *Sancta*

Susanna and *Morder, Hoffnung der Frauen*, deal with sexuality and *Neues vom Tage* (News of the Day) involved nudity on stage (the lead vocalist sings an aria while bathing in a tub). This was enough to provoke scandals and identify Hindemith as a radical. In 1927 he was appointed professor of composition at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik.

After leaving Germany visited Turkey to help the Turkish government improve the musical culture. He also completed the first volume of The Craft of Musical Composition, which was based on the principles of Fux's Gradus ad Parnassum and the overtone series. After three musical tours in the United States, Hindemith eventually settled in New Haven where he joined the music faculty at Yale in 1940. In 1946 he became a US citizen. In 1948 he was given a position at Zurich University but did not resettle in Europe until 1953. He died in 1963, in Frankfurt.¹

Musical Politics Between Hindemith and the Third Reich

When Wilhelm Furtwängler and the Berlin Philharmonic premiered the *Mathis der Maler Symphony*, it was received with enthusiastic applause from many, but viewed with skepticism by high-ranking Nazi officials. On one side was the Nazi party, who had pre-existing reasons to reject Hindemith. On the other were those who rejected the principles of the Third Reich and used Hindemith's music as a rallying point. The Nazis had already become disenchanted with Hindemith because of the radical nature of his

¹ Biographical information taken from the following sources:

Ian Kemp, "Hindemith, Paul" In The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians Edited by Stanley Sadie. Vol. 8 (London: Macmillan, 1980), 573-585; Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 1991), 220-250; K. Marie Stolba, The Development of Western Music, a History (Dubuque, IA: WCB Brown, 1990), 834-837; Stephen Walsh, The Dictionary of Composers Edited by Charles Osbourne. (New York: Barnes and Noble Books Inc, 1995), 173-175.

previous music. Because of his growing popularity and association with Jewish musicians, they began to view him as a threat to German culture. Throughout the next eight months his political situation deteriorated and his music was under constant scrutiny.

On November 25, 1934 Furtwangler, in an attempt to sway public opinion about Hindemith and gain support for the upcoming opera *Mathis der Maler*, published the article “The Hindemith Case,” in the Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, a Berlin newspaper. This publication proved to be a pivotal event that was responsible for aligning people who did not support the Nazi government, with Hindemith. In the article, Furtwangler boldly states that Hindemith has come under attack due to purely political circumstances. He points out that since before the Nazi regime Hindemith was a part of the half Jewish Amar Quartet. Then Furtwangler addresses Hindemith’s early operas, stating that the programs were indeed questionable, but that this was because they were written at a time when Hindemith was unsure if he wanted to be a composer. He then compares Hindemith to Richard Strauss and the program of *Salome*, stating that master composers of German stock often chose controversial programs to base their works on. “The Hindemith Case” also refers to Hindemith the teacher and that young musicians look up to him and that an entire generation of music students had been educated by him. The mention of *Mathis der Maler* being an opera of noble quality and German content, coupled with Furtwangler’s descriptions of the symphony and its reception not only favor *Mathis*, but also deems both works as undeniably German.²

² Wilhelm Furtwangler, “Der Fall Hindemith” (The Hindemith Case), Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung: Berlin, 1934. Cited in James Paulding, “Mathis der Maler. The Politics of Music,” Hindemith-Jahrbuch/Annales Hindemith 5 (Germany: B. Schott’s Sohne, 1977), 104-108

The day the article was published, history was made. The newspapers went into additional printings, and when Furtwangler entered the concert hall that morning for a rehearsal, he was greeted by twenty full minutes of applause and accolades. But even this was dwarfed by the reception he received that evening before taking the podium to conduct Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. The audience gave a gigantic ovation that disturbed Nazi officials Goering and Goebbels so much that a report was made to Hitler that same night. The report stated the significance of "The Hindemith Case" and that Furtwangler was encouraging people to openly demonstrate against the Third Reich.³

A quick public retaliation was struck by the government. Hindemith was attacked in the press and the Nazis initiated a boycott which forbade performances of his music. Furtwangler, disgusted by the boycott, promptly resigned his position. A speech by Reichminister Paul Goebbels to large assembly of German artists gives an idea of Nazi rhetoric. Hindemith is fingered as being a radical with perverse ideas and as a substandard composer.

When the occasion is ripe, not just thieves but also atonal musicians arrive on the scene who, in order to attain a particular sensation or remain close to the spirit of the time, allow naked women to appear on the stage in obscene and kitsch-ordinary scenes in the bath tub, making a mockery of the female sex, the members of which are too weak to stand against them and, in general, surrounding themselves with the biting dissonances of musical bankruptcy.⁴

Despite the fact that some people saw Hindemith as a cultural bastion of opposition against the Third Reich, the composer often stayed aloof and indifferent to

³ James Paulding, "Paul Hindemith." PhD. diss. (University of Iowa, 1974), 164-165

⁴ Paul Joseph Goebbels, Untitled speech. Cited in James Paulding, "Mathis der Maler. The Politics of Music," Hindemith-Jahrbuch/Annales Hindemith 5 (Germany: B. Schott's Sohne, 1977), 108-109

government affairs. He was in contact with high level government officials and optimistic that any political difficulties would soon be over. The following excerpt is a letter to his publisher Willy Strecker relating his plans to work out differences with the government.

...I was taken to see State Secretary Funk, who is the big shot dealing with our affairs in the Propaganda Ministry... Furtwangler had already been with him, and he promised to talk to the Fuhrer tomorrow. It was true, he told us, that the latter had once walked in horror out of a concert in Munich where something of mine was played, but he [Furtwangler] hadn't the slightest doubt that everything would be all right... As well as speaking to him, Furtwangler had also spoken to Goering. It all seems to be going splendidly. He will now definitely be going to the Fuhrer in the next few days and is convinced everything will click. I shall be seeing him on Friday. Then we shall see.⁵

Hindemith's optimism did not pay off and it was not until the government relieved all of the Jewish music teachers of their positions at the Berlin Hochschule, that he realized he had to take steps to leave Germany. Moreover, his wife Gertrude was Jewish. Hindemith left for Switzerland. Furtwangler premiered the opera *Mathis der Maler* in Zurich. It was never performed in Nazi Germany and was therefore, a work the Nazis never knew. It is therefore probable that the government officials had made up their minds about Hindemith before he wrote *Mathis der Maler* and that, in fact, he was ostracized because of certain earlier works.⁶

⁵ Paul Hindemith, Letter to Willy Strecker, November 15th 1934. Published in Hindemith, Paul. Selected Letters of Paul Hindemith Edited by Geoffrey Skelton. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 84

⁶ James Paulding, "Paul Hindemith." PhD. diss. (University of Iowa, 1974), 175

Mathis der Maler the Opera

In 1932 Hindemith was looking for material for a serious German opera. He began collecting information on Mathias Grunewald and later journeyed to Colmar and viewed Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece. He was in awe of the work and began the libretto of *Mathis der Maler* (Mathias the Painter).

The opera involves an artist's struggle to find worth and meaning. In the opening scene *Mathis* proclaims his confidence with himself and his life's works. However, doubt arises quickly as he wonders if his work pleases God and are his paintings enough or is there more for him to do? His soliloquy is interrupted by Schwalb, leader of a peasant revolution, and his daughter Regina. Mathis offers to shelter the two even though it constitutes an act against authority. Schwalb scolds Mathis for painting during a time of revolution and tells him he should cease his art and get involved with the revolt. Mathis further aids them by giving them his horse and later defies the officer looking for them by saying he helped them escape.

The second section opens with Catholics and Lutherans fighting; only when until Cardinal Albrecht arrives do they stop. Mathis is seen with Ursula, the daughter of a rich man with whom he has fallen in love. Sylvester, the young officer, enters and fingers Mathis before the cardinal as the one who aided Schwalb. Mathias cries out that he will renounce his art because everything he paints turns the color of blood.

Scene three features the famous book-burning scene. Several Lutherans are ambushed and their religious books are taken away and burned in the town square. Ursula's father tells her she must marry soon. Although she loves Mathis she knows she

will be used as a political pawn and be forced to marry Albrecht. Scene four features the beating and execution of a nobleman by the peasant revolutionaries. Mathis speaks out against their actions. When the government forces arrive, Schwalb is killed and the revolt is crushed. Mathis escapes with Regina into the forest.

Scene five shows the cardinal trying to decide whether or not to marry Ursula. He is against a political marriage and although Ursula believes that he is partial to the Lutheran cause, he later proclaims his faith in Catholicism. Scene six represents a dream like state in which Mathis appears in the guise of St. Anthony. Ursula appears dressed in many different forms to tempt and torture him. Others, including a violent warrior and demons, enter to cause further injury to Mathis but at last the Cardinal disguised as St. Paul comes forth to protect him. The final scene shows Mathis has returned to his art and completed the great altarpiece. Regina has fallen ill and soon dies. The cardinal offers his comfort but Mathis is now physically exhausted and drained of all creative energy and resigns himself to die.⁷

It is easy to see why Hindemith chose Grunewald as the subject of his opera. In many ways the composer's life runs parallel to that of the painter. Each is an artist who realizes he must be faithful to his art. Although the program involves book burning and revolt against authority, the emphasis in the opera is the struggle within the artist. There was therefore, no reason to ban the work on the basis of a controversial program. Furthermore since Mathis was not premiered until 1938, it is doubtful that its program contributed greatly to Hindemith's exile.

⁷ James Paulding, "Paul Hindemith." PhD. diss. (University of Iowa, 1974), 183-198

Mathis der Maler the Symphony

When the Nazis criticized Hindemith and *Mathis der Maler* as being un-German, atonal, and hasty, they attempted to use the radicalism of Hindemith's youth to brand the composer as unacceptable in the new Germany. The *Mathis Symphony* is anything but atonal, it was surely not completed in haste, and in no way at all does appear un-German; it is in fact, neo-classical. The major characteristics that define the work as neo-classical and German are its form, use of German folk music, compositional development, orchestration, and phrasing.

The first two movements were taken directly from the opera. The third needed some alterations for the symphonic version. Each movement of the symphony represents a panel in Grunewald's Isenheim altarpiece. The first movement entitled "Engelkonzert" (The Angelic Concert) is tonal (G Major) and in classic sonata form. The only exception Hindemith makes is his choice of modulations. Instead of modulating to the dominant he opts for the mediant. He later travels to the sub-mediante and only at the end does he return to the tonic. The form, while not belonging exclusively to Germany, has many notable German roots stemming from the first Viennese school of Haydn and Mozart.⁸

The first movement also contains the medieval German folk melody "Es sungen drei Engel," which, is sung by the character Mathis during the opera. His reasoning for this is twofold. First, he wants to incorporate German elements and second, the medieval tune dates back to the time of Grunewald; therefore Hindemith achieves a certain

⁸ David Neumeier, *The Music of Paul Hindemith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 84.

authenticity. The fact that Hindemith uses German folk music in the symphony further emphasizes its German character.

The development and orchestration contribute to the composition's neo-classicism. Hindemith's developmental procedures involve counterpoint, imitation, and fugal techniques. He frequently takes thematic motives and transposes them, overlaps them, and plays them against each other. He also takes other thematic material (Theme B) and sets it against the previous melody. His developmental resources also include "Es sungen drei Engel," which, is heard over the other themes during the recapitulation. This provides for a metric and learned polyphonic texture, a style of motivic development dates back to Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven.

The scoring is for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings. His orchestration is actually quite bland, which, could be considered another neo-classical trait. Seldom does he blend instruments or utilize percussion to highlight color. The result is an orchestra that sounds more like light and dry Haydn than the deep, rich-sounding Berlioz.

Finally, Hindemith's melodic structure of even four- and eight-bar phrases also distinguishes it as neo-classical. The music reflects the angular German style of Beethoven and Brahms rather than the impressionistic and ambiguous compositions of Debussy and Ravel. Therefore, because of its form, use of German folk music, compositional development, orchestration, and phrasing, *Mathis der Maler* is decisively German. The music itself provides evidence that Goebbels used *Mathis* as a pretext to defame Hindemith. Furthermore it not only shows Goebbels' lack of knowledge of *Mathis*, but the Nazi's vulnerability to any perceived threat, however far-fetched

Conclusion

Paul Hindemith was a victim of political circumstance. If he had lived in another place or time his *Mathis der Maler* would not have caused such a scandal. Because of his previous works that were musically adventuresome, or touched on sexuality, and his association with Jews, the Third Reich viewed him as anti-Nazi and ultimately anti-German. Since *Mathis* remains very true to German traditions, it is obvious to understand that, at that point, the government wanted to be rid of Paul Hindemith, no matter how German his writing, and used *Mathis* as a pretext to do so.

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