

HINDEMITH'S MATHIS DER MALER


ROGER SESSIONS

HINDEMITH's symphony, *Mathis der Maler*, which Otto Klemperer introduced to the American public at the first Philharmonic concert this season, has already made history in one respect. It was performed in Berlin last season by Furtwängler in the face of Nazi opposition, and in fact is said to have been the only work by a composer of not strictly conservative tendency to be performed at one of the more important concerts in Germany since the present government assumed full control of German musical life. The unprecedented enthusiasm with which it was greeted forced the authorities to give it and its composer a certain measure of recognition, thus constituting in some measure a victory for the cause of contemporary music and contemporary culture on the very soil where these are being most vigorously suppressed.

The New York performance, while not a sensational event in any respect, achieved a victory which was similar in kind if not in extent. More than one hearer who had begun to be discouraged by the paucity of real achievement in the music of the last few years must have felt considerably heartened to hear, in a new work, music of real power, of clear conception, and of legitimate and full-blooded relationship with the central current of Western music. One was reminded once more that however barren an artistic epoch may seem, through the quality of its inferior productions, it is, nevertheless, by its best and not by its worst that it must, and ultimately will, be judged.

This symphony is based on excerpts from an opera dealing with the life of Matthias Gruenewald and consists of three movements each of which bears the title of one of the paintings in a

triptych by that master. The first, entitled *Concert of the Angels*, is an allegro movement preceded by a slower introduction; the second, *The Entombment*, *lento molto*, is a short and deeply expressive slow movement, elegiac in character. The third and last movement bears the title *The Temptation of St. Anthony*; it is the longest and most complex of the three, and contains striking formal features. There are five sections, clearly differentiated in tempo and character but closely related thematically in such a manner as to form an organic whole which, however, represents a real innovation in respect to recognized formal patterns. A slow recitative for the strings in unison is followed by a fast and impetuous movement in nine-eight time which presents three new themes; this in turn is followed by a slow section in which additional material is introduced on the strings alone. The third section, in fast two-four time, recapitulates in radically modified form material from the preceding two sections, while the last section, a still faster movement, brings back as a kind of ostinato the theme of the opening recitative, which here serves as a background for the hymn *Laude Sion Salvatorem*. The movement closes with a triumphant *Alleluia*.



Mathis der Maler has on several grounds been hailed as a new departure in Hindemith's work. Two points in particular have been stressed in this regard.

First of all, critics and musicians have professed to find in it a "return" to a simpler harmonic style, to "tonality" and "consonance." Secondly, much stress has been laid on the fact that it is in a sense "program music." It has thus been acclaimed as heralding another type of "return" for which certain sections of the public have long been clamoring. It would be idle to deny that there are grounds for each of these views; but like all snap judgments—and what such neatly expressed critical opinion is not, perforce, a snap judgment?—both need considerable qualification before they can be taken quite seriously.

The case is a reasonably simple one, complicated largely by the fact that Hindemith's output is so large, so varied in character, and even in its aims, and, let it be frankly stated, so uneven in


quality. In America this state of affairs is considerably complicated by the fact that performances are comparatively rare, and the difficulty of forming a true conception, not only of the music itself but even of the real development of the composer, becomes very great indeed.

In regard to the style of *Mathis der Maler* it must be said that the features noted above have been increasingly evident in Hindemith's music in the last years. It was evident, for example, to a very large extent in the oratorio *Das Unaufhörliche* or, farther back, in such works as the two concerti for viola, the concerto for piano, brass, and harps, or the concert piece written for the fiftieth anniversary of the Boston Symphony. In all of these works the composer has shown himself preoccupied with the necessity of establishing his music on the basis of a solid and unmistakable tonal center. While the music is not perhaps tonal in the strictest classic sense—what contemporary music is, after all?—and while the tonal procedure is often complex, constantly shifting, and sometimes even angular and apparently arbitrary, the ear always keeps its orientation, with the tonic triad in the background as a point of departure.

In *Mathis der Maler* the use of the hymns *Es sungen drei Engel and Laude Sion Salvatorem* in the first and last movements respectively, tend to make the tonal design even simpler than in the former works, since their extremely simple lines make such treatment inevitable. For the rest, Hindemith's melody shows the same characteristics as may be observed in his other works. The main theme, alla breve, of the first movement is an obvious example of this, in its general line as well as its details.

As far as "program music" is concerned it may be pointed out that this *Symphonie* is in reality an excerpt from an opera and not in the strictest sense of the word an independent instrumental work. This however does not dispose of the question. The quarrel of contemporary composers has not been with program music as such, but simply with music whose impelling force, instead of lying in the melodies, rhythms and harmonies themselves, is borrowed from images or ideas which are outside the music, which are not organic parts of it but which nevertheless, to an overwhelming degree condition its form. This produces

a type of music whose interest depends in overwhelming measure on such features as tone color, texture, and dynamic accent taken in and for themselves and not as an element of a complete musical impulse. Such distorted emphasis is to be found not only in "program music" but in many works which profess to be free of all extra-musical associations. In a work like *Mathis der Maler*, on the other hand, the titles of the various movements have no function except that of giving a definite direction, so to speak, in time and space, to the emotions aroused by the music; the latter however in no sense depends on the title either for its impulse or its development.



To say this is not to deny *Mathis der Maler* a special place in Hindemith's work, even though it makes it a little more difficult to define precisely what that place is. Here again we are confronted by the mixed and uneven quality of his work as a whole. Those who find this music more human, more tender, more profound than his earlier music must be reminded perforce of many pages in the *Marienleben*, of the *Third Quartet*, of the concerti for viola, and of many truly moving pages scattered throughout his other work. *Mathis der Maler*, also, contains some pages which are less satisfying than others. The main body of the first movement, in spite of some beautiful moments, is in what has come to seem a rather conventional Hindemithian manner, and though it is probably, through its freshness and simplicity, one of the best of such movements, it has less interest than the other two. Again, the last movement, in spite of the great beauty of the opening measures, the impetuosity of its rhythms, the real power of its climaxes, is too long and becomes less convincing because of the comparative flatness of its texture, which until near the close remains prevailingly homophonic. Its general formal design, though interesting to the highest degree, therefore seems looser and less convincing than would otherwise be the case. The slow movement, on the other hand, with its simple and deeply moving accents, is not only one of the most beautiful things which Hindemith has written but one of the finest pages in contemporary music.

Local comment on the work stressed as usual the "dryness" of Hindemith's music which it contrasted unfavorably with the *Second Symphony* of Sibelius on the same program. It is highly unfortunate that such comparisons be made, largely because they lead to such false conceptions not only of the personalities involved but of music itself and its true relation to life. It is fortunately not necessary to make a choice. They also force a perhaps undue emphasis of the fact that for all the fine pages and eloquent accents in his work, Sibelius remains, in the deepest sense of the word, a provincial composer. It is not merely that his music is essentially music of a special landscape and climate, and that landscape and climate which are subsidiary factors in the work of any artist, play a preponderant role in his music. It is above all that his music faces none of the issues and poses none of the problems, the experience of which has formed the sensibilities of contemporary men and women. He has remained aloof in his Finnish forests, and what he offers his hearers is, precisely, a refuge from these problems and issues.

The music of Hindemith, too, has its limitations; and since they are limitations of a totally different order it is quite idle to argue a comparison on the basis of abstract "greatness," "genius," or merit. Hindemith's limitations are to a certain extent those of his goal, that of the artist who aims first of all at perfect and expert workmanship, accepting his ideas as they come to him, and leaving the rest to Providence, Destiny, or God. At the best such an attitude produces supreme works of art; at the worst it is certain to produce good ones. And if Hindemith's work never achieves the force of ultimate revelation, it always rests firmly on the ground of musical reality, never giving less than it aims and pretends to give. And occasionally what it gives is of a very high order indeed.