

## The Medievalism of Paul Hindemith

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When Paul Hindemith (1895-1963) began making himself felt in German music life, he was soon acclaimed as one of the most promising composers of a new generation. Already from the early 1920s, he came to the fore as a musician of many parts, and his early reputation as a *Bürgerschreck* of the day intermingled with recognition of his extraordinary compositional talents and musical skills. In 1927, Hindemith found himself as a professor at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik. The year before he had met with the massive German amateur music movement, *Die Musikantengilde*. This organization was especially dedicated to the cultivation of old music and the German folk song tradition. In this movement, Hindemith soon envisaged great prospects for the salvation of a modern music that seemed to be heading towards esotericism and isolation. He was convinced that one prosperous remedy could be to include suitable music from contemporary composers in the amateur repertoire. A subsequent broad and active participation in new music would give possibility to diminish the expanding gap between the art and its audience. This thought would become one of the important inspirations for Hindemith's lifelong belief in musical activity as the foundation for any genuine dealing with music -- including the study of music theory.

Hindemith's Hochschule appointment of 1927 initiated his extensive career as a teacher. At the Berlin conservatory, he also had the opportunity to pursue his growing interest in old music and historical instruments, supported by the musicologist Georg Schünemann. At that time also, an interest in the musical past had started to permeate Hindemith's professional attitudes. A combination of the need for musical expansion and profound reflection was to be the mark of his maturity. The musicologist H. H. Stuckenschmidt points to the double side to his nature:

Paul Hindemith's breast was always the abode of two souls, totally without suffocated or suffocating apology: one for the playful boy, we might well say the naughty lad, and one for the strict, incomparably industrious and reflective seeker of perfection and truth.<sup>1</sup>

One important reason that the progressive young composer developed in a contemplative direction seemingly lay in a profound wish, through thoughts proving resistant to the march of time, to control and restrict what he saw as contemporary musical alienation. That this trait started becoming obvious at the time when he first made contact with the amateur organizations and undertook the responsibilities of teaching was surely no

coincidence. It also seems that Hindemith's early interest in old, not least medieval, music, its foundations and practices, also developed as a common base and epistemological anchorage for his own manifold musical activities and talents. This was in accordance with the tendencies toward objectivity at the time, the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, in which he became a leading figure. What is typical for Hindemith, however, is that his interests proved to extend far beyond the turbulent Weimar years. As time went by, an ever-increasing engagement in the music and thoughts of the Middle Ages would form a solid foundation for his life's work. It seemed to offer valid answers to fundamental questions pertaining to the art of music.

Hindemith's practical activities in the medievalist field reached their zenith after he had come to the U.S.A. as a 45-year-old exile in 1940. On his arrival, he was already engaged as a teacher at music theory courses in Buffalo, Aurora, and Ithaca. He had also been appointed by the newly founded summer academy of Boston Symphony Orchestra in Tanglewood, Massachusetts. Only a month after his arrival, Hindemith was invited to lecture at prestigious Yale University. From August the next year, he was a full professor at Yale. A common attitude among the German exile composer-teachers was that American students lacked skills, traditions, and knowledge of European musical heritage. This may be one contributing reason why he soon began furthering his persistent interest in the performance of ancient music. For the Tanglewood event of 1941, he gave a course in which the participants, through active singing and playing, were introduced to music ranging from Gregorian chant to French 17th-century compositions.

Hindemith would continue his ideas from these summer weeks in the *Collegium Musicum* at Yale.<sup>2</sup> The Yale *Collegium Musicum* was established around 1941, essentially as a reading group for the musicology students of another German in exile, musicologist Leo Schrade. In 1943, the group decided to give a concert of early 17th-century music together with the Bach Cantata Singers. Hindemith is often characterized as the arch musician of 20th century composers. On this occasion, he played the bassoon and the viola da gamba. For the concert of 1945, Hindemith had even taken charge of preparing an orchestra of old instruments borrowed from the Metropolitan Museum.

From this 1945 event, which became the first in a series of annual *Collegium Musicum* concerts with Hindemith as director, the use of authentic historical instruments was one remarkable trait. For the concert of 1946, the group consisted of fourteen different instruments, an orchestra for which the Flemish painter Hans Memling's (1430/35-1490) panel *Christ as Salvator Mundi Amongst Musical Angels*, of the late 1400s, served as a model.

The press release stated that this was the first time that such an authentic orchestra of the 15th century had ever been assembled in the U.S.A. for actual performance.

By the time of Hindemith's resignation from Yale in 1953, quite a number of his students had given their own concerts on historical instruments. Some of them had even started spreading their enthusiasm and technical knowledge to other universities. Today, the heritage from Hindemith and the Yale *Collegium Musicum* is acknowledged as an important branch of American performance practice.

Although a modernist at heart, Hindemith regarded main trends in 20th-century music as vain experiments leading away from the genuine foundations for the art. Holding Arnold Schoenberg in high esteem as a major composer, he was still heavily opposed to the twelve-tone procedures of the Schoenberg School. This basic attitude applied to every serial system and any cerebral calculation relating to it. Hindemith believed in music as a means for universal human communication. In his opinion, the advance of experimental, avant-garde music had gone too far. In response to this critical situation, Hindemith was convinced that the musical development of his time could benefit from musical views of medieval times. One reason was that these two ages, albeit situated so far apart, seemed to have such important traits in common. In different ways, they might be seen as representing two sides of the same coin. Hindemith's own writings reveal this attitude in different ways. There are also some general, basic conditions for such a view. Tonally, the development from Middle Ages to Modernism may be seen as an expansion from a pre -- functional -- or pre-major/minor -- musical material, to a post-functional musical material.

|   |              |              |             |                                       |                |            |
|---|--------------|--------------|-------------|---------------------------------------|----------------|------------|
| *Middle Ages  | *Renaissance | *Baroque     | *Classicism | *Romanticism                          | *Expressionism | *Modernism |
| Pre-functional -- <i>Musica ficta</i> -- functional |              | (major/minor |             | -----chromaticism-----post-functional |                |            |

*Musica ficta* and chromaticism both denote the additions of halftone steps: the first, historically speaking, leading *towards* functional major/minor, while the extensive use of the other is leading *away* from it. This is why some, not least in Hindemith's times, might regard music history *not* primarily as a development from a more delimited tonal scope towards tonal expansion, but rather as a mirroring motion in which functional major and minor form the axis. According to such view, the non-functionality of Middle Ages and the non-functionality of Modernism might be seen as mirror images of each other:

|               |                                   |               |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|
| *Middle Ages  | *Baroque/*Classicism/*Romanticism | *Modernism    |
| Nonfunctional | Functional                        | Nonfunctional |

Although this particular explanation does not stem from Hindemith himself, it may illustrate an important aspect of the foundation for his overall contemporaneous approach to medieval music. It also indicates why Hindemith, in so many respects, seemed to wish to build a bridge between the medieval period and modern times.

Hindemith's foreword to the work of still another German in exile, Willi Apel's collection of *French Secular Music of the Late Fourteenth Century* (1950), is evidence of this attitude. In the second paragraph, Hindemith states that

[T]he modern musician's problems, of which there are so many, will lose some of their puzzling oppression if compared with those of our early predecessors, as they appear in this volume. It is rewarding to see those masters struggle successfully with technical devices similar to those that we have to reconquer after periods in which the appreciation of quantity exaggeration, and search for originality in sound was the most important drive in the composer's mind . . . To the performers the immediate contingency with this music will open up new horizons. They will learn to understand the short-sighted attitude of our present musical culture, which adores only those idols of audible beauty that are not much older than two hundred years. They soon will find it necessary to replace our contemporary ways of performing, which oscillate between two extremes -- over-individualistic exhibitionist on the one side and the dullest metric-dynamic motorism on the other -- with the altruistic devotion which alone can revive this old music.<sup>3</sup>

These two paragraphs are laden with polemics against phenomena in their author's present. A particularly interesting point in Hindemith's foreword is the way in which he draws parallels between the Middle Ages and the musical challenges and requirements of his own time. Medieval music is put forward as an ideal model for the composer as well as the performer. In this foreword, we thus find one of the most important overall traits in Hindemith's relationship to medieval music: his view that the degenerate music of the 20th century may be regenerated through attitudes inherited from medieval times.

Thus, these few paragraphs also become an example of how Hindemith tends to interpret attitudes of the past in the light of his own reflections and musical experiences. Rejection of quantity and exaggeration in musical sound, and the requirement of a profound sobriety and objectivity on the part of the performer, are matters with which Hindemith was concerned throughout most of his career. Even his criticism of only relating to the

music of the past 200 years is typical for his wish to build a bridge from his own time over the periods of Romanticism and Classicism, back to the Baroque, Renaissance, and preferably the Medieval periods.

Hindemith sees the musical development and compositional challenges of his own century as a reflection of the pre-functional times of the medieval masters. To musicologists, Hindemith is especially known for his theories of tonality. The first volume of his theory book, *Unterweisung im Tonsatz I* (1937, later translated as *Craft of Musical Composition I*, was written while he was still in Europe. Hindemith's aim is to explore, prove, and apply the supposedly universal laws of tonality. In his opinion, these laws are valid for all music in every culture and for all times. Accordingly, the fundamental bases of medieval nonfunctional music and the nonfunctional music of his own modern times are unavoidably identical -- a fact which every contemporary composer should realize.

In the introductory chapter of *Craft of Musical Composition I*, Hindemith writes about the fundamental importance of traditional musical craftsmanship and the ancient recognition of a relationship between music, numbers, and the cosmos.<sup>4</sup> In this book, Hindemith also suggests that his own theories on a universal basis of tonality may be seen in light of the threefold *musica* concept, transmitted to the Middle Ages through Boethius (480-524).

Musica mundana  
Musica humana  
Musica instrumentalis

In this model, *musica mundana* denotes the *musica* that governs the heavens, time, and earth, *musica humana* the musical principles controlling our human body and soul, and finally the *musica instrumentalis*, the earthly music, as sounding through voices and instruments. The basic idea is that corresponding musical principles are supposed to govern each individual part of this triple *musica* concept. "For to us there is no longer, thanks to our understanding of their common physical basis, a fundamental difference between *musica humana* and *musica instrumentalis*, and even as concerns *musica humana* and *musica mundana*, we may concentrate our attention today rather on those aspects which they have in common than those in which they differ," Hindemith says, continuing: "we shall observe in the tiniest building unit of music the play of the same forces that rule the movements of the most distant nebulae."<sup>5</sup> From the allegedly natural bases of musical material and the human, physical disposition of hearing, Hindemith deducts a lawfulness supposedly embedded in principles that accord to this model. This gives strength to Hindemith's cosmological point of departure, a decisive overall factor in his musical thought. The symphony and the opera *Die Harmonie der Welt*, (*The Harmony of the World*, of 1951 and 1957 respectively, represent the creative culmination of his cosmological attitudes.

The music of Hindemith's maturity seems to be closely connected to his ideas as presented in *Craft of Musical Composition I*. His magnificent solo piano work *Ludus tonalis* is particularly illustrative in that respect. This collection of fugues and interludes was written during Hindemith's stay at Yale. The basic principles of his theories, into which we shall go no further, are present already in the tone row depicted on the front page:



Naturally, the overall ancient flavor of this graphic representation does not indicate that the piano pieces are meant to sound like medieval or other ancient music. It rather visualizes an aspect of Hindemith's contemporaneous approach to music of the past: his wish to give a signal of the profound traditions and even universal foundations of his own compositional procedures. First, the fugues and interludes of this work are based upon principles of tonality supposedly valid for every musical culture in all times. Second, he has put to use contrapuntal techniques initiated in the Middle Ages. The message is that what has been valid for, for instance, medieval music is also valid today, although in an up-to-date modernist idiom. As for the title *Ludus tonalis*, it may in itself carry associations with both ancient foundations and timelessness. Hindemith scholar David Neumeyer suggests that the title may even have been inspired by the *ludus* expression connected to the liturgical drama of the medieval age.<sup>6</sup>

In Hindemith's oeuvre, one may find musical themes from the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the German folk song repertory. The relationship with medieval thought, however, becomes most obvious in his book *A Composer's World Horizons and Limitations* (1952), written towards the end of his stay in the U.S.A. In this book, one of Hindemith's bold objectives is to advance the authentic, philosophical foundation of music as an art. The opening chapter, called "The Philosophical Approach," is a discussion inspired by the expression "a composition of everlasting value."<sup>7</sup> Once again, thinkers of the early Middle Ages are those supposed to give support to Hindemith's views. When it comes to a discussion of Boethius

and the triple *musica* concept in this *Composer's World* context, Hindemith still regards him as a noble advocate for the universal dimensions of the technical side of music. However, he goes further by stating that a highly developed compositional technique may also be misused in music without any real spiritual value. Hindemith sees many examples in his own present, overflowing with diversities of techniques and compositional systems alien to genuine, human appreciation. There is even an abundance of well-constructed but, alas, valueless entertainment music. A main feature of Hindemith's present seems to be compositional degeneration, not due to lack of technical skill, but rather to an insufficiency of spiritual content. And, according to Hindemith, this has no other than pious Boethius's thoughts as its origin. From Boethius's statement that "music is a part of human nature; it has the power either to improve or to debase our character," Hindemith deduces that music by diverse technical means has the possibility to force upon people an ethos to which they are vulnerable and against which they are defenseless.<sup>8</sup> Hindemith claims to witness many negative effects from this attitude in his musically turbulent and culturally precarious present. Typically enough, he applies ancient thinking directly to his own century: Boethius' thoughts are valid also in his turbulent age, but contemporary music has degenerated to such an extent that Boethius now needs spiritual support. And this support is to be found in Augustine's *De Musica: Libri VI*. (354-430 . In *De musica*, Augustine's divides the fulfilled musical experience into occurrences that all relate to so-called sounding numbers and their dependence on each other. He describes their manifestations in five levels, considering

- 1 the physical sound in itself,
- 2 the listener's faculty of musical hearing,
- 3 the act of performance,
- 4 the listener's ability to imagine mentally and remember music, and
- 5 the listener's ability to evaluate and judge music.

The fifth level, pertaining to the evaluation and judgement of music, is regarded as the highest division of musical experience. Still, the recognition of sounding numbers and musical order is not to be seen as an end in itself. The vital point is the recognition of *musical* order as an image of a *higher* order. A profound comprehension of this perspective leads to what Hindemith puts forward as a level six: "our enjoyment of the order of the heavens and the unification of our soul with the divine principle."<sup>9</sup> This leads Hindemith to regard Augustine above all as the noble advocate of the spiritual qualities of music. Music is supposed to have the capacity to stimulate a mental activity that can lead to the betterment of our soul. This is what Hindemith describes as the *Augustinian attitude*. He is aware that *De musica* applies especially to religious music. However, secular music of the 20th century may also benefit from Augustine's views, he claims. If our music is going to be anything more than sheer entertainment,

it cannot exist without their support. Music has to be converted into moral power, it must elevate our minds, and it must be able to turn our soul towards everything that is “noble, superhuman, and ideal.”<sup>10</sup> Undoubtedly, this attitude makes heavy demands both on us as listeners and on the actual music submitted to appreciation. Hindemith fully admits that Augustine’s noble ends may be difficult to attain. He also recognizes the problems of perceiving all music according to such a stern imperative. “Even the most cultured mind sometimes feels a desire for distracting entertainment, and, as a principle, music for all possible degrees of entertainment ought to be provided,” he says, and, accordingly, even different kinds of entertaining light music must be justified.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, at least a slight effort towards stimulating the receiving mind into moral activity must always be undertaken.

Though Boethius and Augustine share the same philosophical traditions, Hindemith sees them, interprets them, or reconstructs them in light of musical antagonisms of his own time. He regards Boethius as the representative of the technical side of music, so evidently in vogue by contemporary composer colleagues, and Augustine of the spiritual qualities so rarely encountered. The consequence of Hindemith’s viewing these two giant thinkers of the past in the light of his own age is his proposed solution that the Boethian *musica* concept ought to be united with the Augustinian attitude. This will in turn make way for “a composition of everlasting value.” Hindemith’s interpretation of Boethius and Augustine in *A Composer’s World* serves well as an introduction to the foundations of his own musical thought -- more so than to the history of Western philosophy. It is also another example of Hindemith’s wish to build a bridge between medieval times and his own.

Hindemith regarded Gregorian melodies as “the most perfect, the most convincing one-line compositions ever conceived.”<sup>12</sup> They also represented the most sophisticated example of how active participation in performance becomes the key to genuine musical recognition. We have touched upon Hindemith’s basically pessimistic attitude towards the music of his present in different ways. Apparently, he even sees the huge preponderance of instrumental music in his present as a token of decline. The Middle Ages, on the contrary, he regards as a period of vocal lavishness. In *A Composer’s World*, he says:

Our own time, with its overweening estimation of instrumental music, possibly in its most obtrusive orchestral form, will perhaps, in a later evaluation of music history, count as a period of lowest artistic culture, compared with those epochs in which the art of ensemble activity with the emphasis on vocal participation flourished most noticeably. I refer to the period of Machaut, Dufay, and Josquin; the time of Isaac, Senfl, Finck, Hofhaimer,



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and many contributors to the art of the German *Liederbücher* in the sixteenth century; the madrigalesque style of Marenzio, Monteverdi and other Italians; the English madrigalists; and finally, the cantatas of Bach.<sup>13</sup>

This quotation makes an indirect reference to the repertoire Hindemith had studied together with his *Collegium Musicum* at Yale. The more interesting point, however, is that, in regarding this music as a reflection of the society in which it was made and performed, he also sees those very societies as ideal communities. Hindemith's firm belief is that that kind of ensemble singing, which in fact does not include the choral singing of later periods, requires a mutual understanding between human beings that seems to be totally absent in his own present. He thus succumbs to the belief that medieval music not only provides fundamental guiding lines for the music of his own time, it is also a token of an ideal community of a more harmonious past.

This type of idealization was very much prevalent in the philosophies of the German music amateur movements, not least in the *Musikantengilde*, and even in the Bauhaus environment. Hindemith's views thus fit into a broader cultural context of his time, where a warm and all-inclusive *Gemeinschaft* is believed to have the possibility to arise as an alternative to the prevalent mechanical *Gesellschaft*. Before judging the possible naivetés of Hindemith's idealism, one should remember that his experiences from active participation in World War I, his departure from his native country, and his view of the horrors of World War II from a distance had made him an ardent pacifist. He strongly believed in the furthering of human understanding across any border. On referring to the German proverb *böse Menschen haben keine Lieder* ("bad men don't sing"), he maintained that "there is no nobler way of making music than ensemble singing, we may nourish the conviction that with a clear recognition of man's collective desires a new epoch of madrigalesque musical art will spring up as an encouraging model for other collective enterprises."<sup>14</sup>

By way of a conclusion, one may state that Hindemith's medievalism makes itself felt on different levels and in various musical fields. According to him, the performance of medieval music may direct the basic attitudes of contemporary composers and musicians in a more fruitful direction. Medievalism also pertains to his historically important considerations of the timeless principles of tonality. Foundations of medieval musical thought even seem to have a profound validity in questions of the eternal values of music. One should, however, never forget that Hindemith was indeed a composer of his time. This is one obvious reason why he connected his medievalism so closely to the musical situation of his present. This is also the reason why Hindemith's considerations shed such an interesting light not only upon his own music and thoughts, but upon even the music history of the 20th century.

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## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> “[...] in Paul Hindemiths Brust wohnten allezeit und ganz ohne gequältes oder gequälendes Ach zwei Seelen: die des verspielten Jungen, sagen wir ruhig, des Lausbuben, und die des Strengen beispiellos fleißigen und nachdenklichen Suchers nach Vollendung und Wahrheit.” H. H. Stuckenschmidt, “Paul Hindemiths Aufbruch und Heimkehr,” *Hindemith-Jahrbuch/Annales Hindemith 1974/751V*, (Mainz: B. Schott’s Söhne, 1975 , p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> See Howard Boatwright: “Hindemith’s Performances of Old Music,” *Hindemith-Jahrbuch/Annales Hindemith 1973/III*, (Mainz: B. Schott’s Söhne, 1974 , pp. 39-62, and Eckhart Richter: “Paul Hindemith as Director of the Yale Collegium Musicum,” *Hindemith-Jahrbuch/Annales Hindemith 1978/VII*, (Mainz/London/New York/Tokyo: Schott, 1980 , pp. 143-174.

<sup>3</sup> Apel, Willi (Ed. *French Secular Music of the Late Fourteenth Century*, Paul Hindemith, Foreword. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Mediaeval [sic] Academy of America, 1950.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Hindemith, *The Craft of Musical Composition, Book I Theoretical Part*, English Translation by Arthur Mendel, (London: Schott & Co. Ltd., 1945 , pp. 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> D. Neumeyer, “The Genesis and Structure of Hindemith’s Ludus Tonalis,” *Hindemith-Jahrbuch: Annales Hindemith 1978/V11*, (Mainz/London/New York: Schott, 1980 , p. 73.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Hindemith, *A Composer’s World: Horizons and Limitations*, (Boston, MA, Harvard University Press, 1969 , p. 1-26.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

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