

Why not, with the several excellent orchestras and conductors at its disposal, give a series of retrospective programs of music by composers since 1900, both European and American? Or an historical series of American works from J. K. Paine on, chosen by a good jury? This could happen if enough people wrote letters to the Federal Music Project. There are many who would be only too glad to take steps in that direction.

Elliott Carter

FORBIDDEN OPUS — PROTESTANT

NOT in many years has the opening of an opera been so eagerly awaited as Paul Hindemith's new music-drama, *Mathis der Maler*. Although it was written in 1932-1934 and published in 1935 (piano excerpts and the libretto; B. Schott's Söhne, Mainz), the composer remained a storm center in Germany and the premiere was continually postponed for political reasons. When finally the piece was freed from the Reich's proscription it was not mounted in the Berlin State Theatre, as Furtwängler had so fervently desired, but in the Municipal Opera House of Zurich, which has been devoting ever increasing attention to contemporary opera. The performance, a magnificent pinnacle in the June festival of this pioneering Swiss theatre was a red-letter day in the world of art, an occasion for the gathering of musicians and music critics from all over the globe. Their great expectations were not let-down; Hindemith's work is one of the most powerful and individual achievements of recent years, remarkable in its poetic and musical structure. It is the artistic credo of a great musician.

The composition, which is national opera in the very best sense, and gives powerful expression to a part of German history, German art and German mores, was lifted out of the baptismal font in the very hour when Hindemith's scores were being pilloried in the Düsseldorf exhibition of "Degenerate Music" as un-German!

The pictorial panels of the Isenheimer altar inspired Hindemith to compose the three orchestral pieces, *Engelskonzert*,

Grablegung and *Versuchung des heiligen Antonius*, which, combined in the symphony, *Mathis der Maler*, have been performed everywhere with great success. But the urge to express his visual and musical impressions in a poetic and scenic form, to materialize the legendary figure of Matthias Grünewald and his art, led the composer to create the opera.

He wrote the book himself and it is a remarkably good libretto, simple in speech, profound in thought. The protagonist is the creator of the Isenheimer altar, one of the most gifted and unusual painters of all time, but Hindemith did not undertake a biography of Mathis (we know practically nothing of the life of this master, the complete measure of whose greatness has been recognized only in our own age). Instead he made him the symbol of the German artist. Epitomized in an historical allegory and employed to motivate the action, is the conflict between art and the call of the world, the problem which life presents to the artist at a time when war and distress rule. Mathis asks himself: "Does it suffice merely to create, to paint?" Tortured by doubts, by "humanity's lament," he deserts his protector, the Cardinal of Mainz, exchanges his brush for a sword and goes to war. Bitter is his disillusionment that the peasants fight not for a better way of life, but to revenge injustice. Vainly attempting to halt murder and rapine, his belief in himself and the world shattered, he hears the voice of his outraged soul, is tormented by visions of his paintings. The answer to doubt comes at last in a dream (*Der heilige Antonius in der Einsiedelei des heiligen Paulus*)—the artist must follow his own divine mission, neither questioning the goal nor asking for reasons. Obedient to the mandate, he begins to labor as in a trance, and absorbed in a sacred passion, produces work after work until he collapses, the task complete.

This saga develops out of the period of the Reformation and the Peasant Wars. Powerful conflicts are portrayed, opposing views, faiths, classes. Practically all the characters are historical: Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg, Archbishop of Mainz, his wise and crafty counselor, Capito; Schwalk, the peasant leader, and even Ursula Riedinger, daughter of the wealthy burgher. Alone imaginary is the charming figure of Regina, the peasant leader's young daughter. All are richly developed and well-

sketched, princes and people, lords and knights, Papists and Lutherans and especially the women, Ursula in particular, who becomes a figure of feminine charm and goodness.

The music for this work far transcends ordinary creation. It releases new powers, reveals an outbreak of real emotion in one of the most gifted of modern composers. As never before, Hindemith has been successful in his portrayal of the women, of maidenhood, of feminine nature, of the sensation of love. The songs and speech of his characters recall the sounds he heard in his native land, the south of Germany. Old folk music, battle hymns of the Reformation and Gregorian chorales are also present. The style owes something to the instrumental music of Bach's time and to the oratorio, but does not bely its fundamental orientation in our own time.

This new work synthesizes all of Hindemith's previous composition and unites various aspects of his art; a counterpoint which advances phrase by phrase, as the old school taught; a motoristic rhythm born out of a musical *Spieltrieb* and the philosophic-religious leanings, already evident in the music for Rilke's *Marienlieder* and in the oratorio, *Das Unaufhörliche*. Each scene contributes to the musical unity, the closed forms are the building stones of the score, but the strict bonds of form are slackened by a great freedom of bar measures. An essential factor, often dominant, is the chorus, for the most part polyphonically developed. Hindemith does not "illustrate" his composition but develops it completely from the musical material. All the purely instrumental parts are very strong and individually stamped, especially the prelude, *Engelskonzert*, a simple, natural expression of the emotions of tender moments in which, as in Regina's song, national elements are woven.

But no matter how gratefully we recognize the significance and the strength of the work, it has its weakness. There is a duality in the nature of this stage piece which in its latter portion becomes not an opera but an oratorio, a concert in costume. The main development takes place in the orchestra, which sometimes swamps the stage. The music often brings the drama to a standstill; a skilfully constructed ensemble, or a great choral passage will interrupt the development of the action. (It is typical that

one of the finales demands a special chorus placed in the orchestra.) Dynamic climaxes and contrapuntal leading of the voices interfere with the intelligibility of the text. There is another objection in the architectonics of the work. It is composed of seven great "pictures," some of them encompassing an act. Until the third picture there is a mounting interest and effectiveness, but the later scenes in the camp of the revolting peasants and in the workroom of the cardinal, are too drawn-out and produce a certain let-down. The vision of the Isenheimer altar, the allegory in which Grünewald, who takes on the features of the holy Anthony converses with the figures of his paintings, strains the whole structure of the opera by its tremendous dimensions (sixty-eight pages in the piano score). After that the charming, restrained finale comes as a feeble epilog.

Hindemith, pioneer of the short opera, has gone astray in writing a work of Wagnerian proportions. Extreme lengthiness dulls the total effect. The dream scenes, intended to be the high-spot of the opera fatigue the most loyal spectators and listeners. One may "quote" parts of the Isenheimer altar, but the realistic presentation of a famous painting with singing and acting figures belongs to the debatable realm of "living pictures."

And yet while these and other failings should be mentioned, they do not vitiate the artistic worth of this opera. It remains in my opinion one of the outstanding works in German music.

The Zurich premiere, on which the Municipal Theatre expended all its powers, was a great achievement of orchestral, vocal and scenic effort. Its memory will long remain fresh in the annals of the city, it is indeed a memorable occasion in the history of the music of our time.

Arno Huth

FORBIDDEN OPUS — CATHOLIC

IT was a tragic sign of fate that Ernst Krenek should have been unable to attend the premiere of his most important and serious work. This was emphasized by the fact that, dealing with an episode from the history of the Hapsburg monarchy, it was produced just at the time that Austria lost its national and cultur-