

# Angelic Harps, Mortal Tears: Music of Robert Schumann and Paul Hindemith

## Program Notes

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### **Hindemith, Piano Sonata No. 3**

Paul Hindemith wrote his three sonatas for solo piano in 1936. They, like the 1948 revision of *Das Marienleben*, exemplify the height of his life's journey into neoclassicism, which was in one form or another to dominate his prodigious output for the remainder of his life. It's universally acknowledged that the pillars of early twentieth century composition were Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, and Bela Bartok, but increasingly, Hindemith is recognized as the fourth pillar. Worth recounting is that every new era of music has struggled with how to organize new ideas formally, so as to give holistic shape and elemental integrity to composition. This was especially problematic for the early century, which saw the de facto dissolution of the system of key-based organization that had persisted for hundreds of years. Of all the composers bridging the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Schoenberg's influence proved the most durable (some might say "invasive") of the group, having developed a system of musical organization (Serialism, or "Twelve Tone") radically different from anything that had ever been devised or even considered; one which freed composers entirely from the chains of traditional tonality. And while Stravinsky dabbled with twelve-tone music (as he did, definitively, with every style of writing of his or another's invention), he, Bartok and Hindemith tried to carry forward something of the tonal systems of organization that had dominated all composition from its earliest recorded days. Hindemith, alone, codified the new possibilities for tonality in a deeply rigorous and thorough, three volume treatise on music, *The Craft of Musical Composition (Die Unterweisung im Tonsatz)*. In this singularly brilliant work, he laid forth a new way to express traditional ideas of counterpoint and harmony considering all intervals, not just primarily the third and fifth, and all twelve pitches to be of equal weight and potential in the unfolding of a tonal composition, dependent not on keys but on the inherent physical characteristics of sound. The three piano sonatas were produced just as the first, purely theoretical volume, was being published.

Of the three, the third is more often performed than the other two (although, at that, very seldom), and is distinctly Prokofievian in its affect. More overtly virtuosic than its siblings, it's cast in the very classical four movement form, with a modified sonata-allegro first movement followed by a scherzo, a slow movement, and a daredevil finale. The first movement is a deeply lyrical Siciliana, a pastorale in which one surmises that the shepherds suffer sleep disturbances. The second movement is the most like the typical virtuoso piano writing coming from the Russian piano school of the day, contrasting sharply with the neo-Romantic third movement, whose range of dynamics, expertly managed coloristic contrasts, and emphasis on melody form the emotional heart of the entire piece. Finally, a knuckle-busting double fugue (drawing material verbatim from the third movement) brings the work to a bright, brilliant conclusion. (MM)

### **Schumann, *Sechs Gedichte von Lenau und Requiem*, op. 90**

Robert Schumann composed the seven songs of op. 90 in 1849. The songs from this period are less well known than those of his prolific output in 1840, but are equally superb in their masterful integration of poetry and music. The first six songs are settings of poems by Nikolaus Lenau (1802-1850); the final song, 'Requiem,' is credited as an 'old Catholic poem' and traditionally regarded as a lament for Abelard written by Heloïse.

There is a consistent melancholy hanging over all the songs in this set. Lenau resembles Schumann's greatest poetic partner, Heinrich Heine, in his ability to evoke subtle, profound emotion through plain

diction. The first song, 'Lied eines Schmiedes,' seems to be a simple song to accompany the swing of the blacksmith's hammer, but the poem invokes a journey to heaven; the little horse becomes the medium between life and eternity. In 'Meine Rose' the poet wishes to revive his sorrowing beloved by pouring out his soul like water for a withering blossom – the tenderness and yearning for union and renewal unfulfilled, yet beautifully etched in the long-breathed melody, capped by a classic Schumann piano postlude.

Next follows a miniature, 'Kommen und Scheiden,' one of two songs that strongly recall material from Schumann's masterwork *Dichterliebe*. Here both poet and composer work through impressionistic fragments to trace the evanescent emotions of a lost love. 'Die Sennin,' the fourth song, begins with the spirited cowgirl's yodel echoing off the mountain peaks; by the end of the song, her imagined departure has left those peaks silent and abandoned.

'Einsamkeit' is the centerpiece of the set. Harmonically restless, Schumann changes the key signature from E flat minor to g# minor and eventually to E flat major, while the piano spools out continuous chromatic figuration reminiscent of a Bach prelude. Over this the vocal melody seeks resolution, but is continually diverted by the modulating harmonies beneath. The bitter grief of loneliness finds solace in lament, then in a hint of supernatural comfort, but sinks down in the end in hopelessness. The final E flat minor cadence congeals into the following song, 'Der schwere Abend,' which might be the darkest, most nihilistic song in all of Schumann. Its opening motto is a distinct echo from the lowest ebb of *Dichterliebe* ('Ich hab' im Traum geweinet') even to the choice of key. The ominous, oppressive atmosphere is intensified by an ambiguous meter and by violent interchanges between the piano and voice. In the poem an unhappy couple tortures each other, secretly wishing for death.

Schumann appended the final song as an elegy to Lenau. The troubled relationships that inhabit Lenau's poems are transfigured by the ecstatic vision of the 'Requiem'; perhaps as Heloise's tribute to her beloved Abelard, the humanity and passionate nature of the deceased soul is the foundation of its paradisiacal joy. While the poetic voice has changed, the musical content of the final piece not only ties the preceding songs together, but also provides resolution. Here we see everything – all yearning, loving, and suffering – from an eternal perspective, where loving deeply ensures future bliss. (PD)

### **Hindemith, 'Abendkonzert' from *Plöner Musiktag***

Paul Hindemith's trio for recorders was written while he was at a boarding school in Plön, Schleswig-Holstein, for a short residency in June 1932. While there, he composed music for the students to play in concerts throughout the day, hence the title *Plöner Musiktag*. That Hindemith is a facile composer is evident from this short three-movement piece. Without the harmonic scaffolding of the Classical Era, he creates structures which are seamlessly organic and harmonically satisfying. The first movement is in sonata form, with a tempo and affect change about a third of the way in. The slower section is rather short, ending with a bump change back into the first tempo, which launches a short development. A jazzy recapitulation brings this attractive movement to a close. The second movement is a rondo. The rondo theme opens with an accompaniment that suggests the chugging along of large machinery. This material comes back in much larger note values (perhaps suggesting even larger machinery) and becomes as important a structural element as the rondo theme itself. The final movement, the least tonal of the three, is a slow fugato. The broodingly intense writing here reveals Hindemith's early roots in Expressionism. Pieces of music often "feel like" the eras of their creation. For me, this trio feels like the hopefulness and grinding anxiety in pre-war Germany. (RS)

### **Schumann, *Nachtstücke*, Op. 23**

The four "Night Pieces" date from 1839, towards the end of the period almost exclusively devoted to piano music, and the first great period of Schumann's maturation as a composer. One can think of them as minor pieces in the style that began with his first completely mature masterpiece, *Kreisleriana*, op.

16. What distinguishes such works from their predecessors is their decidedly episodic characters, accomplished formally by Schumann's adoption of the simple rondo as the organizing structure. In the case of the *Nachtstücke*, this really is as simple as a strict ABACA scheme, where the first theme is contrasted in turn with two sharply different segments. Whereas the early works, *Papillons*, *Davidsbündlertänze*, and even the beloved masterpiece of Romantic imagination *cum* musical biography, *Carnaval*, are largely collections of delightful little waltzes and *landler*, these later pieces are more complex, more musically sophisticated and far more rhetorically ambitious (*Waldszenen*, Op. 82, written much later than the works already discussed here, include a piece, *Vogel als Prophet*, that absolutely presages Impressionism).

These pieces were written during a stressful time in Schumann's life, and can be seen partly to result from the death of his beloved brother, Eduard. While en route to his home, Zwickau, to attend to him, Schumann had a premonition, or rather, an episode of clairvoyance, which he described in a letter to his wife Clara:

“Half past three on Saturday morning, while traveling, I heard a chorale of trombones – it was the moment Eduard died.”

Schumann, ever the weaver of musical narrative, first imagined titles for each of the four pieces: “Funeral Procession”, “Curious Assembly”, “Nocturnal Revel”, and “Roundelay with Solo Voices”, but was convinced by Clara to drop the cryptic titles in favor of something less prone to public misapprehension – hence, the more general *Nachtstücke*.

The third “night piece”, in D-flat Major, alternates an exuberant theme first with a more brooding, agitated tune in the relative minor, then with a kind of dark elfin dance in a different tempo from the preceding sections, and itself sub-organized as an extremely compact ABACA rondo. The hymnodic character of the fourth piece was not lost on the Protestants of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, who adapted the principal tune into the hymn “Lord, speak to me that I may speak.” (MM)

### **Hindemith, *Das Marienleben* (1948 version)**

In 1923, Paul Hindemith, then a rising star of German Expressionism, published *Das Marienleben*, a song cycle based on a cycle of 15 poems by Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926). In 1948, as a leading exponent of the *Gebrauchsmusik* movement, he released a revision of these songs. While a few of the songs remain essentially unchanged, Hindemith explains in an extensive introduction how he rethought and reorganized the song cycle, rejecting a large bulk of his earlier ideas in the process. The earlier songs, he claims, were difficult to sing; the vocal line did not relate to the piano part or sometimes, the poetry, and the songs were not thematically linked to each other to create a unified cycle. In the revised version, his earlier, expressionistic style has largely been replaced with a more conventional melodic line, a consciously restricted harmonic language, and a highly ordered compositional style that includes a variety of formal devices (passacaglia, fugue, theme and variations) along with key relationships and motives that carry symbolic meaning and reappear throughout the cycle. The harmonic language is simpler, but at the same time it embraces a broad spectrum: from Renaissance modality to an almost Schönbergian atonality; the studied formalism is not only brilliantly executed, but filled with expressive detail. The two versions of the cycle can be seen in the same light as Schubert's habit of multiple settings of the same poem.

The poem cycle *Das Marienleben* was a minor work in Rilke's oeuvre. While his portrayal of the Virgin Mary is drawn from Biblical events and evokes many medieval images, it is filled with deep psychological insight. Rilke's poetry is revered for his ability to mingle vivid imagery, profound philosophical musing, and the simplest prosaic language, often directed squarely at the reader. A unique aspect of Rilke's art is his focus on objects to highlight the significance of events, known as *Dinggedichte* (thing-poems).

Even in abridged form, Hindemith's cyclic intent is evident. In the opening song, 'Geburt Mariä,' a gently swaying pastoral theme connects the angels in the heavenly sphere, suppressing their joy over Mary's birth with difficulty, and the simplicity of the humans on earth, stirred by the miraculous beyond their comprehension. This same texture reappears in #3, 'Mariä Verkündigung' and in #7, 'Geburt Christi.' The Annunciation centers on the electrifying instant of visual contact between Mary and the angel Gabriel immediately before he speaks his greeting. By contrast, Rilke presents Christ's birth in the highly unusual 2<sup>nd</sup> person, speaking directly to Mary as she contemplates the events already occurred, including the visit of the Magi. The mood of tenderness and joy is momentarily shattered by a painfully dissonant chord: a foreshadowing of the Passion.

Hindemith builds the cycle towards its climactic center, which is placed by Rilke at the scene of the Wedding at Cana. At the opening of this song (#9, 'Von der Hochzeit zu Kana') we see Mary at the height of her earthly joy; proud, in awe, and deeply in love with her gifted son. A spectacular fugue for piano solo, which occupies the first half of the song, suggests both the bustling ceremony and Mary's inner stirrings. But here Mary's gentle prompt to Jesus during the wedding, "They have no wine," becomes a defining moment in both their lives – the point at which his destiny becomes fixed, and hers becomes tragic.

#11, 'Pietà,' shows us Mary cradling the body of her crucified son, reminiscent of Michelangelo's iconic statue. Here for the first time in Rilke's poems Mary speaks directly. As if turned to stone, she cannot fathom the depths of her grief. This song is permeated with the harsh passion chord. Instead of a triumphant Resurrection, Rilke imagines a private, deeply intimate moment of reunion between Mary and Jesus (#12, 'Stillung Mariä mit dem Auferstandenen'). Hindemith sets this poem in stasis with suspended, modal harmonies and a peaceful, chant-like melody.

In the final poem and final song of the cycle, (#15, 'Vom Tode Mariä III') Rilke depicts Mary's assumption into heaven as another Easter morning, with a tombstone rolled away and burial clothes tossed aside, radiant with light. Hindemith combines triumphant music reminiscent of the Wedding at Cana with the gentle pastoralism of the first song, as the messenger angel appears again to explain to mortals how she sweetened the earth "like a lavender pillow." (PD)

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