

PAUL HINDEMITH

Born November 16, 1895 in Hanau, near Frankfurt; died December 28, 1963 in Frankfurt.

Mathis der Maler, Symphony (1933-1935)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Berlin, March 12, 1934

Berlin Philharmonic

Wilhelm Furtwängler, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 25 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings

Hindemith's opera *Mathis der Maler* ("Matthias the Painter"), based on the life and work of the artist Matthias Grünewald, is set in Germany during the time of the Peasants' Revolt in 1524-1525. The Revolt, partly fueled by the strong sectarian allegiances of the early years of the Reformation, has brought bloodshed and turmoil to Germany. Against this background of political and social strife, Mathis reflects on the ease and pleasure of his painting, questioning the value of his art during a time of upheaval. Feeling he might find an answer as a man of action, he joins the peasants in their struggle against oppression by the nobility. His idealism, however, is shattered by the peasants' acts of atrocity. Having failed to better the world as a militant, the artist flees to the Odenwald Forest, where he experiences visions that inspire him to return to painting and undertake the work that became his masterpiece — the altarpiece for the monastery church of St. Anthony in Isenheim, Alsace. Mathis, convinced that the obligation imposed by his God-given talent can best be fulfilled in the studio rather than in the political arena, resumes work with a frantic zeal to fix his visions on canvas. Exhausted by his labor but satisfied that he has completed his mission, he bids a quiet farewell to his friends, and, as the curtain falls, packs away his painter's tools for the last time.

The *Mathis der Maler* Symphony comprises three excerpts from the opera that, in the words of the German critic Heinrich Strobel, "endeavor to approximate by musical means that emotional state which is aroused in the onlooker by Grünewald's famous altarpiece" rather than to depict specific events. Each of the movements was inspired by a single panel of the Isenheim polyptych. The opening movement, *Engelkonzert* ("Angelic Concert"), is the prelude to the opera. It is based on the richly detailed Nativity scene in which a gathering of seraphic beings serenade the Madonna and Child with music of heavenly sweetness. The movement, in traditional sonata form, opens with an introduction utilizing a 16th-century folksong, *Es sungen drei Engel* ("Three Angels Sang"), chanted by the trombones. The flutes and violins present the main theme of the movement, a gently dancing strain with several piquant harmonic inflections. A solitary note on the horn serves as the bridge to the second theme, a legato melody given by violins with a simple accompaniment in the lower strings. The closing theme is a sparkling refrain tossed off by the solo flute. Hindemith's awesome mastery of thematic manipulation and contrapuntal ingenuity are displayed less in the brief development section than in the recapitulation of the themes that follows. As the trombones intone *Es sungen drei Engel*, the high woodwinds simultaneously recall the second theme and the clarinets the main theme. Further enriching the texture of this virtuoso display of musical craftsmanship is an obbligato in the upper strings and a steady, descending line in the basses. Quiet reminiscences of the main theme in the woodwinds, another traversal of the closing theme by the flute, and various thematic fragments followed by stentorian chords from the full orchestra bring this superb "Angelic Concert" to a stirring close.

The second movement, *Grablegung* ("Entombment"), is the music from near the end of the opera with which Mathis takes leave of his friends. The music is associated with Grünewald's moving portrayal of Christ's piteous burial. The sobbing main theme of this haunting elegy, given immediately by the string choir, is complemented by a stark melody presented by the solo oboe. The mood of intense, introverted grief is broken only by a long crescendo rising to a single, sunlit chord spread across the full orchestra. With all emotion spent, the coda paints a resigned, bitter acceptance of the awesome tragedy in music of ethereal simplicity.

The finale is based on Grünewald's painting inspired by the most fearsome of his visions in the forest — *Versuchung des Heiligen Antonius* ("Temptation of St. Anthony"). The artist showed the saint being cruelly tortured by horrific creatures of the most hideous visages. An introductory theme initiated by the unison strings summons the weird beasts. They assemble, slithering about with grotesque movements to music of no fixed meter. The snapping chords in the brass imitate their chilling barks. The temptation scene unfolds with a fury and terror driven as if by the very hounds of Hell. In the Symphony's closing pages the woodwinds sing the melody of

an ancient chant, *Lauda Sion Salvatorem*. The holy song dispels the terrors of the night, and a closing brass chorale on the “Alleluia” heralds the glorious rising sun.