

SYMMETRY AND IRREVERSIBILITY IN PAUL HINDEMITH'S *LUDUS TONALIS*

(LECTURE-RECITAL)

Siglind Bruhn
 Dep't of Musicology/Institute for the Humanities
 University of Michigan
 322 N. State St. #103, Ann Arbor, MI 48104
 E-mail: siglind@umich.edu

The title *LUDUS TONALIS* could be translated as "Tonal game". However, such a rendition gives only part of the meaning implied in the Latin wording. The term *ludus* (from Latin *ludere* = to play) can refer to three different scenarios: the playing of an instrument, the playing of a drama on stage, and the playing of games. (Historically, the word *ludus* often described medieval liturgical dramas.) Hindemith probably had all three meanings in mind when he chose this particular title: the work contains what appears to be an almost complete array of keyboard techniques and performance 'colors'; the capturing characteristics of many of the fugues and interludes are suggestive of dramatic characters; and the entire cycle most certainly expresses wonderful fun—fun for the composer who wrote this significant work within only a few weeks' time, and fun for performers, especially for those who undertake to play the entire cycle.

The *LUDUS TONALIS* consists of twelve fugues which are linked by eleven interludes and wrapped by a *praeludium* and a *postludium*. This layout, with pieces on each of the twelve semitones, recalls several forerunners. However, the tonal organization of the fugues is neither chromatic (as in Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*) nor in fifths and their relative minors (as in Chopin's or Scriabine's 24 *Préludes*). Instead, Hindemith uses a tonal organization in which the succession of twelve pitches is determined by their continually lessening relationship to the central note C. Exploring this irreversible aspect of the work's layout, and discovering the patterns contained in it, will be a first step in approaching the cycle.

The framing pieces, "*Praeludium*" and "*Postludium*" respectively, act as mediators between the contrasting aspects of irreversibility and symmetry. The *Praeludium* is built on two

contrasting central notes: C (bars 1-32) and F[#] (bars 34-47). This piece thus anticipates, as it were, the entire tonal argument of the composition in contraction; it leaves us where the fugues will eventually leave us—at the tritone. Having launched the LUDUS TONALIS with a piece so fraught with allusions to the main body of the work, the question arises—and must have arisen to Hindemith—what kind of *finale* would be a match, rounding off the cycle in a meaningful way. Hindemith's solution is ingenious; he composed the Postludium as a special kind of retrograde inversion of the Praeludium: one in which the page can literally be turned upside down (see the music excerpt on the following pages) and read backwards! While this may seem as a fancy game, it constitutes in fact one of the most haunting compositional tasks—quite certainly a good reason why, since Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, no work of similar dimensions has been written in this technique.

The twelve fugues and eleven preludes framed by these remarkable examples of musico-visual symmetry are arranged in such a way as to establish various kinds of intricately mirroring patterns, all the while attentive to the other aspects of the title word "ludus." Of the many personas put on stage in this "play", only a few can be mentioned here. In the first fugue, each of the three subjects featured presents a distinct character which has considerable impact on its surroundings. Subject 1 appears as serene and composed; it envelopes itself with very harmonious chords. Subject 2 is sorrowful, expressing itself in a series of sighs followed by gradual appeasement; it is wrapped in 'unresolved' intervals and diminished chords. Subject 3 is aggressive; correspondingly it creates strong dissonances. When all three subjects finally meet, laments and aggression seem absorbed by the soothing quiet of subject 1. In another scenario, found in the fourth fugue, the outcome is quite different. A distinctly "male", somewhat rough-hewn first subject dominates the first section, while the second section exposes a very graceful, soft and fragile second subject. When these two intertwine in the third section, the gentle "female" turns into an angry bitch, causing some of the worst clashes in the entire cycle, clashes which only subside as "she" leaves the scene and "he" regains sole control. Other fugues features a seeker, a dancer, a Rococo courtier, a jester...

PRELUDE

ff free
broad

Moderate (♩ ca 72)
mf — *accel* — *ff*

cresc.

ff

dim.

cresc.

accel.

Allegro, quiet (♩ 92-100)

ff

POSTLUDE

95

First system of the musical score. It consists of two staves. The upper staff begins with a *pp* dynamic and features a melodic line with a *dim* marking. The lower staff starts with a *pp* dynamic and includes a *cresc. molto* instruction. The system concludes with a *p* dynamic marking.

Second system of the musical score. The upper staff contains a *Slow (♩ 66)* tempo marking and a *f* dynamic. The lower staff includes a *f* dynamic and a *cresc.* instruction. The system ends with a *p* dynamic. The third system continues with a *f* dynamic and a *cresc.* instruction. The fourth system features a *f* dynamic and a *cresc.* instruction. The fifth system includes a *f* dynamic and a *cresc.* instruction. The sixth system concludes with a *p* dynamic.

Solemn, broad (♩ 50-54)
sempre legato