

Paul Hindemith's *Hérodiade*

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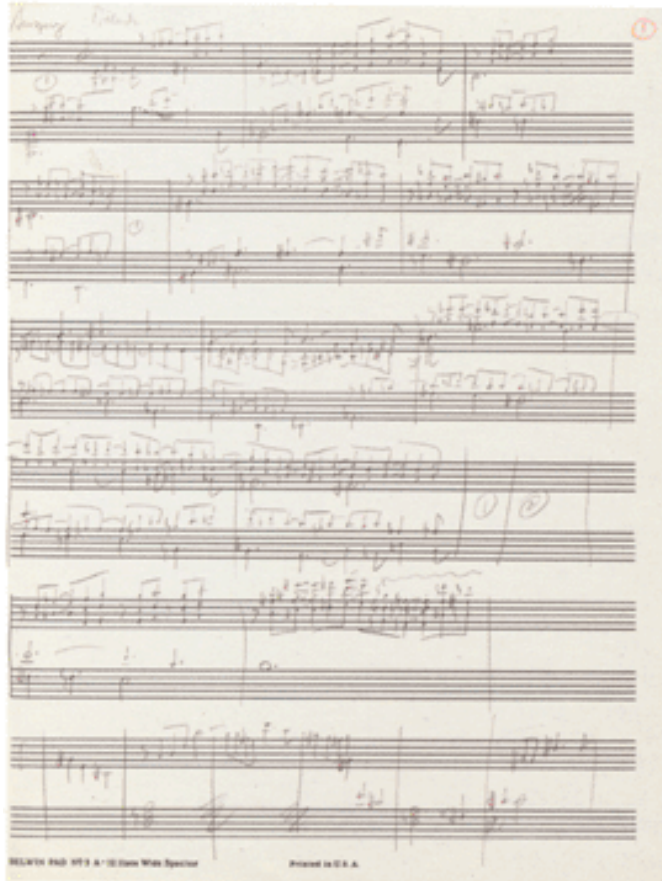
Paul Hindemith (1895-1963) had leapt onto the musical scene in the 1920s as an enfant terrible and musical revolutionary. Even though at the end of the decade his compositional style was increasingly informed by a striving for comprehensibility and by ethical considerations, the unrestrained modernity and shock character of some of his early works haunted him when the Nazis came to power in his homeland. Despite the support of many friends, the official view of Hindemith's music as "degenerate" prevailed, making it impossible for him to continue his career in Germany. Three journeys to North America in the late 1930s opened up contacts for Hindemith as violist, conductor, composer, and teacher, and shortly after the outbreak of World War II he emigrated to the United States, accepting within a year a professorship for music theory and composition at the Yale School of Music where he taught from 1940 to 1953.

The work under discussion is one of the few ballet scores composed by Hindemith. It is based on Stéphane Mallarmé's dialogue poem *Hérodiade* and consists of eleven movements, which are to be performed without major breaks. Hindemith, however, specified short pauses after movements 3, 7, and 9, thereby grouping the entire work into four larger sections. The ballet is scored for a chamber ensemble of flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and horn--woodwind quintet--plus piano and strings. The music for the textual portions of the nurse in the poem is given to the strings, while the emotionally high-strung lines of *Hérodiade* are represented through the colorful instruments of the winds as well as the piano.

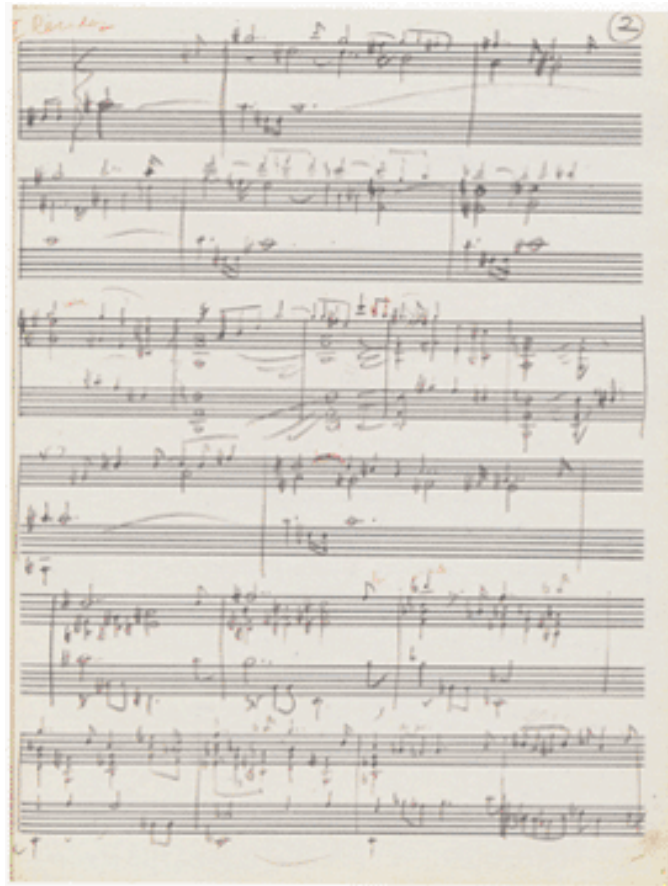
Several factors contributed to the genesis of *Hérodiade*. Since the late 1920s Hindemith had known Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge (1864-1953), the famous patron of the arts, who had commissioned from him the *Concert Music for Piano, Brass, and Two Harps*, op. 49 (premiered in Chicago in 1930) and who had been interested in drawing the composer to the United States. During the first of Hindemith's exploratory tours of North America in 1937 contacts between them were reestablished,¹ and when he settled in the United States, Coolidge supported the composer by commissioning him to write a work for Martha Graham (1893-1991), one of the leading figures of contemporary dance.² The inspiration to use a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) as a pretext for a composition--one readily associates Debussy or Boulez with the French symbolist poet, but not necessarily Hindemith--seems to have come from the composer's wife,

Gertrud Hindemith (1900-1967)³. During the mid-1940s she had enrolled in the graduate program in French philology at Yale University, completing her MA degree in 1945, and it is likely that she familiarized her husband with Mallarmé's famous paean of 1869.⁴

Since teaching obligations at Yale required a considerable time commitment during semesters, Hindemith had to relegate creative work mainly to the summer months. *Hérodiade* was completed in two weeks in June 1944 in New Haven.⁵ Some correspondence concerning the publication of the score and piano reduction with American Music Publishers was conducted from the Hindemiths' summer quarters in Maine.⁶ The premiere took place at the Library of Congress on November 30, 1944, with Martha Graham dancing the role of Hérodiade.



Facsimile of Frame 107 (Sketch for "Reculez" at rehearsal letter A) Moldenhauer Archives, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel

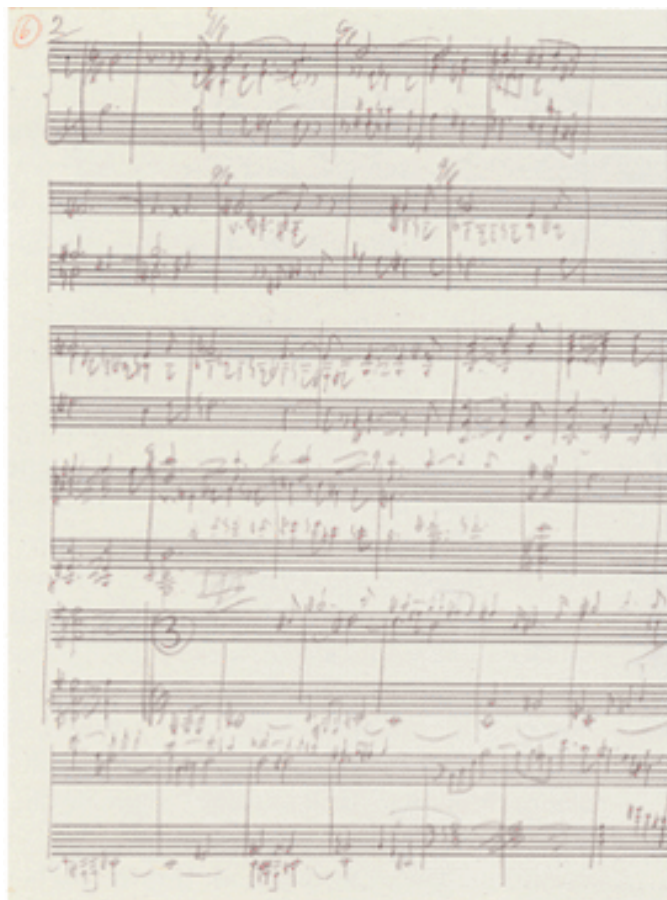


Facsimile of Frame 124 (Fair copy of beginning of "Reculez") Moldenhauer Archives, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel

Hindemith always composed fast--some critics would say "dangerously fast"⁷--and *Hérodiade* seems to have been no exception. What surprises, however, is the extensive number of sketches and drafts that were part of the compositional process. Hindemith experimented in *Hérodiade* with a compositional technique of reciting the poem in the instruments, using the poem's phrases, rhythms, and cadences as *cantus firmus* for his music, thereby also following its poetic ideas and expressive gestures. (Hence the subtitle of the work: *Récitation orchestrale*.) In a way, by following the rhythm of the French language, Hindemith was able to avoid relying on his usual motoric rhythms and perpetual motions for musical continuity. It was perhaps the absence of the text as a vocal line, or rather the poem's peculiar presence in the melodic line of various instruments (encompassing the entire range from the lowest to the highest registers) that led Hindemith to shape the composition through more than fifty pages of sketches and drafts.

While it cannot be the function of this commentary to provide a detailed source study of the autograph, a few general remarks may be permitted. The gathering of twenty-seven

leaves (fifty-four pages), bound in cardboard with spine reinforced, falls clearly into



Facsimile of Frame 113 (Piano reduction of "Reculez," beginning) Moldenhauer Archives, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel

three layers (as indicated through Hindemith's pagination) which, by and large, are also representative of different stages in the compositional process.

Layer A. Preliminary sketches, some of them so vague that it is difficult to attribute them with certainty to any one section; some can be identified because of fragments of the Mallarmé poem appearing in the score; and some of them already show the contours of the final version. (The preliminary sketches are contained on pages numbered 17 through 31 in the second half of the autograph as well as a few unnumbered pages at the beginning of the gathering.)

Layer B. Fair copy of the work in the form of a particell (mostly on two staves, but occasionally expanded to three and four staves). This compositional stage is notated on the verso of the pages numbered 1 through 17 of layer A; because of its content, an unnumbered page belongs to this group as well. These pages contain all the movements of *Hérodiade* except for the prelude and movement 8 (fair copies of these sections are intermingled with the layer of sketches described above). The movements (excluding the prelude) are numbered consecutively in Roman numerals I through X. Mallarmé's text appears not only as incipit in the titles of the various movements but also throughout the score, especially in the lengthier movements, in the form of textual fragments written (and later printed) as rubrics above a given passage. These function as "bookmarks" for the reader, much in the way they provided Hindemith with orientation during the compositional process. The fair copy is further characterized by frequent corrections and sections crossed out, indicative of the still fluid stage in the compositional process, and also by occasional listings of instruments. Hindemith wrote out a tonality chart for the entire work (again excluding the prelude) at the end of movement 7 (which he counted here as VI). We can assume that he used this section of the autograph for writing the final copy of the score.

Layer C. The fair copy of the piano reduction is notated on pages located in the first half of the gathering; they are numbered 1 through 16 and thereby designated as a unit. Moreover, Hindemith also writes "Auszug" (reduction) on the first of these pages. This layer contains the piano reduction of all the movements, except for the slow sections which are the framing sections for the prelude. (Movement 8 appears out of order before movement 2.) No references to Mallarmé's text appear in this layer of the autograph, neither as titles nor as bookmarks, suggesting that the compositional process had been completed by this time; moreover, some movements (27) already appear with the final numbering (counting the prelude as no. 1), indicating a late or final stage in the conception of the work. We can assume that Hindemith used these pages to write out the final copy of the piano reduction for publication.

Three facsimiles from the third movement ("Reculez") may illustrate the different stages of the compositional process:

- 1) Facsimile of Frame 107 (Sketch for "Reculez" at rehearsal letter A)
- 2) Facsimile of Frame 124 (Fair copy of beginning of "Reculez")
- 3) Facsimile of Frame 113 (Piano reduction of "Reculez," beginning)

In the last years of his life Hindemith returned to *Hérodiade*, not to revise it along the standards of *Unterweisung im Tonsatz* (*The Craft of Musical Composition*) as he had done with some of his earlier works, but to supply the score with a detailed scenario, written up as a trope commenting on the various movements, for performance as a ballet. He always had a special fondness for the work: "Es kommt aus der besten Kiste" ("It is something out of the top drawer"), he wrote to his publisher Ludwig Strecker in 1948.⁸ The composition had been performed frequently after World War II in Europe, but never with dancers. The publication of Mallarmé's poems in a German translation by Carl Fischer in 1957 as well as the prospect of having the piece performed, for the first time since its premiere, as a ballet in Mannheim and Rome during the 1961-1962 season may have inspired the composer to provide a helping hand for what he considered one of his better pieces.⁹ Hindemith did not attend the 1944 Washington premiere, but, according to the recollections of Martha Graham after Hindemith's death, his wife, who attended, may have been critical of Graham's rather abstract dance forms set in counterpoint to the orchestral declamation.¹⁰ Hindemith's handwritten instructions for the "Aufführung als Tanzstück";¹¹ clearly are directed against an "abstract" performance and point toward very concrete, albeit stylized, scenarios as backdrop for the dancers and similarly concrete, though restrained, expressive gestures and movements. The subtle psychological nuances of Mallarmé's enigmatic poem are translated here into a *ballet d'action*.

Not only is Hindemith's *Hérodiade* a work based on an enigmatic poem that resists immediate intelligibility, it is also a composition that reinforces the enigmatic character of the poem by rendering it in two wordless media: instrumental music and dance. By doing so, Hindemith hoped to find an equivalent for "Mallarmé's wonderfully exalted but likewise polished, brittle, and artificial creation" (preface to the piano reduction). But he undoubtedly was aware that performances of the work would face communication problems for musicians, dancers, and audience. "The whole thing is admittedly a very esoteric affair," he wrote to Strecker in 1948. "To read the text and listen to the music at one and the same time is an impossibility even for experienced connoisseurs, and one cannot demand from ordinary listeners a study of each single factor and the way they interact."¹² In order to facilitate communication, some conductors (Robert Craft and, most recently, Werner Andreas Albert) have recorded the work with a speaker reciting the text. But there is something tautological about such renditions; moreover, Hindemith expressly opposed performances with spoke recitation, and only reluctantly permitted Craft to record it with Vera Zorika's recitation.¹³ "AMP [Schott's American representative] should rent the material only if the text is not to be spoken."¹⁴ And he concludes his note to Karl Bauer: "Getanzt werden darf natürlich" ("Dancing, of course is permitted"). Perhaps it is imperative for the performers to take the "Anweisungen zur Aufführung als Tanzstück" (Hindemith-Institut, Frankfurt/Main) seriously; they seem to Hindemith's last word on one of his most idiosyncratic yet musically appealing works.

¹ Paul Hindemith, "*Das private Logbuch*": *Briefe an seine Frau Gertrud*, ed. Friederike Becker and Giselher Schubert (Mainz: Schott, 1995), pp. 164-67, 171; also *Selected Letters of Paul Hindemith*, ed. and tr. Geoffrey Skelton (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 100-102.

² Wayne D. Shirley, "Ballets for Martha," *Performing Arts Annual 1988*, Washington: Library of Congress, 1989, pp. 26-59.

³ Conversation with Giselher Schubert, May 22, 1996.

⁴ Luther Noss, *Paul Hindemith in the United States* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 162.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁶ Skelton, p. 185.

⁷ Ludwig Finscher, "Der Späte Hindemith," *Hindemith-Jahrbuch XIII* (1984) (Mainz: Schott, 1985), p. 11.

⁸ Skelton, p. 204.

⁹ Andres Briner, *Paul Hindemith* (Zurich: Atlantis, 1971), p. 162.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Andres Briner, Dieter Rexroth, and Giselher Schubert, *Paul Hindemith: Leben und Werk in Bild und Text* (Zurich: Atlantis, 1988), pp. 180-81.

¹² Skelton, p. 204.

¹³ Geoffrey Skelton, *Paul Hindemith: The Man Behind the Music* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1975), p. 212. "These people are my friends. What can I say to them? Let them do it."

¹⁴ Noss, p. 122.