

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Paul Hindemith

Born November 16, 1895, Hanau, Germany.

Died December 28, 1963, Frankfurt, Germany.

Suite from *Nobilissima visione*

Hindemith began *Nobilissima visione*, A Dance Legend in Six Scenes, in 1937, completed the score in February 1938, and extracted a suite from the complete work later that year. The ballet was premiered in London on July 21, 1938, with the composer conducting. Hindemith also conducted the first performance of the suite on September 13, 1938, in Venice. The score for the suite calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, long drum, snare drum, bass drum, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-three minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra first performed the Passacaglia from Hindemith's *Nobilissima visione* on subscription concerts at Orchestra Hall on December 3 and 4, 1942, with Hans Lange conducting. The complete suite was first performed on December 22 and 23, 1955, with Fritz Reiner conducting. Hindemith himself conducted this suite on a subscription concert on April 6, 1963. Our most recent subscription concert performances of this suite were given on January 20, 21, 22, 23, and 25, 1994, with Daniele Gatti conducting. The Orchestra first performed the Passacaglia at the Ravinia Festival on July 14, 1942, with George Szell conducting, and the complete suite was performed there on July 2, 1959, with Pierre Monteux conducting.

For the record

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Hindemith's Suite from *Nobilissima visione* under Jean Martinon in 1967 for RCA.

"The church and cloisters of Santa Croce give onto one of the town's oldest squares, which is lined by several palaces which are typically Florentine in style," says the Michelin guide to Italy. Paul Hindemith had just come out of the church one day in early 1937 when he ran into the celebrated choreographer Léonide Massine, and he was still under the spell of the great Giotto frescoes inside that depict the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. "He had been deeply impressed by them," Massine remembered,

and taking me by the arm he hurried me back to the church to see them. I too was struck by their spiritual beauty and could well understand why they had so profoundly moved Hindemith. But when he later suggested to me that we should do a ballet together on the life of Saint Francis, I hesitated.

"The first of the great personalities in Florentine painting was Giotto," begin Bernard Berenson's classic portrait of the fourteenth-century artist in his *Italian Painters of the Renaissance*. The Santa Croce frescoes are still among his most admired works (despite continuing uncertainty, as with most of the works ascribed to him, that they were actually painted by him)—one of the achievements that, as Berenson suggested, "will make him a source of highest aesthetic delight for a period at least as long as decipherable traces of his handiwork remain on mouldering panel or crumbling wall."

The idea of transplanting the essence of Giotto's Saint Francis frescoes from the walls of Santa Croce to a London stage came to Hindemith at a crossroads in his artistic life. Long highly regarded throughout

Europe as a first-rate violist, an important teacher, and above all, a supremely gifted composer, Hindemith felt that he had no choice but to leave Germany in 1937. His music had been branded "degenerate" (along with the work of Stravinsky, Kurt Weill, and Irving Berlin, among others), and his continuing friendship with Jewish musicians, including his string trio partners Emanuel Feuermann and Szymon Goldberg, was deemed unacceptable. From 1937 to 1939, Hindemith lived with his wife in Italy and Switzerland, looking for a new place to call home and searching for artistic direction. (In 1940, he settled in New Haven, Connecticut, where he taught at Yale.)

Hindemith had already begun sketching a ballet score when he visited Santa Croce and chanced upon Massine, the Russian-born, former Diaghilev star dancer and famous choreographer. Despite Massine's initial skepticism, Hindemith persuaded him to collaborate on the new ballet, ditching the music he had started (it later become the *Symphonic Dances*). The two met at Positano, near the Bay of Naples, in September 1937, agreeing not only on their new subject but on a title as well: *Nobilissima visione*—most noble vision. At first Hindemith intended to rely heavily on borrowed material from medieval composers such as Guillaume de Machaut. (Hindemith, who would later direct Yale's Collegium Musicum, was an authority on early music.) But he and Massine eventually decided to create their own "dramatic and choreographic interpretation of the life of Saint Francis," as the choreographer put it. Taking eleven vignettes from a scenario constructed for them by the writer François Mauriac, they tried to "create and sustain, throughout, a mood of mystic exaltation."

In July Hindemith conducted the London premiere of *Nobilissima visione*, which was sympathetically received, perhaps in part because of the large contingent of priests in the audience. Later that summer, after closing up his Berlin apartment for good, Hindemith traveled to New York to lead the first American performance of the ballet, at the Metropolitan Opera house (where, for the only time, it was billed as *Saint Francis*). Shortly after that, Hindemith made a three-movement suite from the ballet, using five of the original eleven sections.

The suite begins with Saint Francis lost in deep meditation. The Rondo, which follows without pause, depicts the mystic union of the Saint with Mistress Poverty, a scene in the ballet that was inspired by an old Tuscan legend. "The music reflects the blessed peace and unworldly cheer with which the guests at the wedding participate in the wedding feast—dry bread and water only," Hindemith writes.

The second movement begins with the march of a troop of Medieval soldiers, approaching from the distance. "The middle portion of this movement," Hindemith writes, "suggests the brutality with which these mercenaries set upon a traveling burgher and rob him." In the Pastorale, the sleeping Saint Francis dreams of three symbolic figures: Obedience, Chastity, and Poverty.

The final movement is the passacaglia that closes the ballet, where it represents the Hymn to the Sun. "Here," writes Hindemith, "all symbolic personifications of heavenly and earthly existence mingle in the course of the different variations through which the six-measure theme of the passacaglia is transformed."

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