



## Henze, Hans Werner (1926-2012)

by Paul Attinello

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German composer and conductor Hans Werner Henze was remarkable for his ability to employ a wide range of styles, from those of the avant-garde to opulent neo-Romanticism, especially in his many stage and concert works.

His operas include the lush *König Hirsch* (1955); *Elegy for Young Lovers* (1961) and *The Bassarids* (1965-1966), both to libretti by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman; the anti-bourgeois comedies *Der junge Lord* (1964) and *The English Cat* (1980-1982); a political allegory for multiple stages and orchestras, *We Come to the River* (1976); and *Das verratene Meer* (1990), based on a dark tale by Yukio Mishima.

Henze held strong Marxist convictions, as shown in explicitly political works such as the vituperative *Versuch über Schweine* (1968), the dramatic cantata *Das Floß der Medusa* (1968), the Cuban slave's story *El Cimarrón* (1970), the bizarre "show for 17" *Der langwierige Weg in die Wohnung der Natascha Ungeheuer* (1971), the "anthology" cantata *Voices* (1973), and the ballet *Orpheus* (1978). Most of these works juxtapose downtrodden proletariats and rich oppressors.

Other important works include eight symphonies (1947-1993), five string quartets (1947-1976), the remarkable *Second Piano Concerto* (1967), and numerous concerti, keyboard works, and chamber works.

Henze was born on July 1, 1926, in the small town of Gütersloh in Westphalia. He studied music in nearby Brunswick, against his parents' wishes, and composed from the age of twelve without formal training; as a teenager he was interested in the modernist music banned by the Nazis.

In 1944 Henze was drafted into the German army. He served in Poland before being transferred to a propaganda film unit. In 1946 he returned to his musical education, studying in Heidelberg with Wolfgang Fortner and writing his first acknowledged compositions.

That year, Fortner brought Henze to the first of the summer music courses in new music in Darmstadt, where the young composer was presented as a star pupil. Over the next fifteen years, as Darmstadt became a center of the avant-garde, Henze's reputation devolved to that of neo-Romantic reactionary.

This ambiguous political and aesthetic position--regarded as avant-garde by the bourgeoisie, but as an Establishment tool or "limousine liberal" by the avant-garde--haunted Henze's career. It contributed, along with his increasing distaste for Germany, to his decision to establish residence in Italy in 1953.

Henze's career survived detachment from the world of the avant-garde because his theatrical abilities allowed him to become one of the few modernists able to survive as an opera composer.

Despite maintaining a residence in Italy, Henze served as professor of music in Salzburg from 1962 to 1967 and Cologne from 1980 to 1991. In 1990, he became the first composer in residence for the Berlin



Hans Werner Henze in 1960.

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Philharmonic. In 1988 he founded the Munich Biennale. The Biennale commissioned many new stage works by young composers.

Henze was open about being gay for most of his life, as seen in his honest, non-sensational autobiography, *Bohemian Fifths* (1999). Despite his strong leftist convictions, he evidently does not associate sexuality with politics, although much of his work outlines conflicts between sensuality and repression.

Images of and allusions to homosexuality appear in *Heliogabalus Imperator* (1972) and *Le Miracle de la Rose* for clarinet and ensemble (1981), the former a symphonic poem suggesting Roman decadence, the latter an instrumental work that refers to Genet's novel.

Henze died on October 27, 2012 in Dresden, where he was expected to attend the premier of a ballet based on one of his scores.

In his *New York Times* obituary for Henze, Paul Griffiths described as "the crowning work" of his late period, "Elogium Musicum" for choir and orchestra (2008), which he wrote in memory of Fausto Moroni, his companion of four decades, who died in 2007.

## **Bibliography**

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## **About the Author**

**Paul Attinello** teaches in the Department of Music at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne; he formerly taught at the University of Hong Kong. He has published in a number of journals, anthologies, and encyclopedias, including *Queering the Pitch*, the first collection of gay and lesbian musicology. He established and edited the Newsletter of the Gay & Lesbian Study Group of the American Musicological Society, and was also co-founder of the Society of Gay & Lesbian Composers in San Francisco.