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## Feeling his way

By Andrew Clark

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The first sign of life is Dario, an ageing English whippet. Next, and noticeably more energetic, is Belmonte, followed by Aristeo – two Italian greyhounds who clearly believe they own the place. Then a window above the courtyard opens to reveal the housekeeper, pointing me towards the *terrazza*, where a latter-day Garden of Eden presents itself.

I have hardly taken in the cypresses, pines and olive orchard, basking in the wintry Mediterranean sun, before I am invited into the house.

Welcome to La Leprara, Hans Werner Henze's secluded villa in the hills south of Rome – an earthly paradise that has been his refuge for nearly 50 years. Henze, 83, came to Italy in the 1950s to escape the ghosts of his native Germany and avoid the sneers and strictures of the postwar musical avant-garde, who derided his compositions for betraying emotion. In this land of fertility and light he found peace of mind, fuelling a body of work that has notched up more performances than any other classical composer of the postwar era.



Four years ago Henze stopped composing. He stopped talking. He even stopped eating. The music world began to write his obituary. Then, one winter's morning, he asked for breakfast. The fire of life was rekindled. He regained strength. Best of all, he went back to writing music.

Of all living composers, Henze has one of the most complete work-lists – operas, symphonies, concertos, choral and chamber works – and old age has not stemmed the flow. This month sees the premiere in Rome of *Immolazione*, his setting of a 1913 dramatic poem by Austrian writer Franz Werfel. After that comes a youth opera for the Ruhr Triennale in northern Germany.

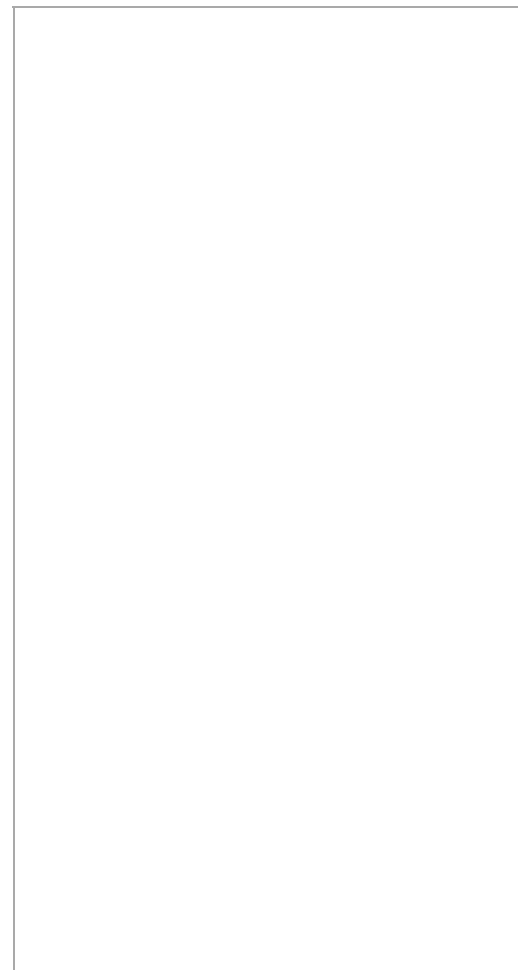
It looks like a bumper year. As European Capital of Culture the Ruhr is mounting a Henze festival, with performances through the region of his birth. London, too, is experiencing a revival of interest in a composer who has long treated the UK as a home from home. The BBC Symphony Orchestra gives an extensive Henze tribute on January 16, with the UK concert premiere of his operatic monodrama *Phaedra* a day later. In April English National Opera will stage *Elegy for Young Lovers*.

Henze has long been a man of contradictions: the composer of daunting complexity who championed popular, socialist and revolutionary causes; the intellectual who fell prey to his feelings; the classicist who preached romanticism and dallied with modernism.

None of these categories fits the frail octogenarian who fixes warm eyes on me while being helped to his fireside seat. A decade ago, when I last saw him, Henze was still a formidable force. Today he exudes gentle serenity. Conversation is punctuated by pauses, sometimes so long that you don't know whether he is daydreaming, contemplating an answer or merely waiting for you to say something more stimulating.

He works every morning, he explains, "starting at seven or eight, when I am still sleepy enough not to see the stupidity of what I write". That line comes with a whimsical smile: in his old age Henze has not lost his sense of humour, or his yen for a midday tittle. He calls for two glasses of his beloved Tio Pepe.

Watching Henze's dogs padding around the house and terrace goes some way to explaining what he found so inspiring about Werfel's *Das Opfer* (The Sacrifice), which forms the basis of *Immolazione*. Yet the story of a dog that attaches himself to a fugitive and ends up sacrificing his life for his master does not, at first sight, lend itself to easy vocalisation. Henze says he has



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his life for his master does not, at first sight, lend itself to easy vocalisation. Henze says he has known the poem “for as long as I can remember. It reads like a libretto. It goes to extremes, with slow, thoughtful conversations. There’s comedy and tragedy, tenderness and brutality – lots of juxtapositions which I have tried to give a musical face. Would you like me to read it to you?”

Taking a sip of his aperitif, he gestures towards a stack of books from which I extract the relevant volume. Above the first page lies an enigmatic Italian motto *La somma sapienza è il primo amore* (The supreme wisdom is the first love, that is, non-judgmental love). “When the dog [to be sung by Ian Bostridge] meets the stranger [John Tomlinson] he says: ‘My Lord, my Lord, I now know why I ran away from the woman who owned me, from the cutlet I was fed and the good life I had, because you were always in my dreams. I weep with all my soul because love is starting ...’ The dog wants to be accepted as a companion. But he also learns that you cannot love without experiencing pain.”

Might this have some autobiographical significance? Long silence. In his various writings Henze makes no secret of the fact that his life has been a yo-yo of hedonism and heartache. Three years ago his longtime partner Fausto Moroni, 10 years his junior, died after a lengthy battle with depression. “Yes,” he says, “I have had the all-consuming love. He was taken from me. Now I have life but not love. Whenever I mention Fausto’s name, it’s like he is still here – but he is not. It’s very painful.”

Some of that pain has been assuaged by composing a piece for chorus and orchestra in Fausto’s memory – *Elogium musicum*, which features in the BBC’s day of Henze performances. As he moves gingerly to the lunch table – “Do you eat garlic? Yes? Then we’re in business” – Henze begins to summarise the work’s content, laid out in four movements with a text of his own.

*Elogium musicum*, like *Immolazione*, is a fusion of the animal world and the human, a very classical theme. The first movement is about two hawks flying in harmony until one is shot. The second, subtitled *La Notte* (the night), is addressed to “you who are the most beautiful in the world of myths. Where are you now?”

The third movement is “a celebration of sensuality: it includes the song of the cicadas whose noise gets louder and louder until it becomes unbearable. Fausto only needed to say one word and they fell silent. I can show you the olive tree to which he went and said ‘Basta!’. The whole garden went quiet.”

Conversation goes quiet, too, as Henze sinks into thought and our soup plates are cleared. The arrival of the main course, a tasty mix of beans and home-grown vegetables, perks him up. “We eat healthy food here.” Steering the conversation back to *Elogium musicum*, I ask if the finale is another of his serene Mahlerian inspirations. “It’s between Mozart, Mahler and me: a vision of children, sacred representations, the splendour of the day, the extraordinary clarity of the sun, a song of thanksgiving.”

And a declaration of love. Henze admits that some of his most successful works have been the fruit of romantic frustration. He cites *The Bassarids*, his 1966 opera about the conflict of passion and order. “Thank God I had that to write: I was in the middle of a devastating love affair. Love and lust, sadness and loneliness; nothing boring there. They represent stimulation.”

Hearing those words, you could mistake Henze for a composer of the Romantic era – and yes, he did suffer the opprobrium of the postwar avant-garde for unfashionably translating feelings into music. “When we were preparing *König Hirsch* (King Stag), [the conductor Hermann] Scherchen told me: ‘We don’t write arias any more.’ I said ‘Who are we?’ He later apologised. People like him believed that, because arias were a medium for emotional expression, they were redundant. Composers in the 1950s didn’t trust the emotional power of opera. No one wants to hear their music now, because there are no emotions.”

It will soon be time for Henze’s afternoon nap. I broach one piece of unfinished business: the enduring impact of his wartime experience. Has he finally made his peace with Germany’s past?

Henze cites three recently discovered letters written by his father, a Nazi supporter, before he died on the eastern front. “He told my mother she shouldn’t be sad if their children became victims of war; she should see it as a gift for the Führer. When you read these letters, you can only shake your head.” Henze himself had to break off his musical studies when he was called up in 1944, at the age of 18. “The war affected me more than anything before or since. As a soldier, I saw so many atrocities. The scar is healing, and life at La Leprara has been part of the convalescence. The goal was always this house, and the stability and security it gave me.”

*‘Immolazione’*, Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Rome, January 10. [www.santacecilia.it](http://www.santacecilia.it)  
*‘Elogium musicum’*, Barbican, London, January 16. [www.barbican.org.uk](http://www.barbican.org.uk)  
 Ruhr Henze festival, January 13-15 [www.essen-fuer-das-ruhrgebiet.ruhr2010.de](http://www.essen-fuer-das-ruhrgebiet.ruhr2010.de)

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