

Hindemith : Sonate for Trombone and Piano (1941)

Paul Hindemith can be regarded as a founding father in the field of music education, his musical and social activities summed up in the maxim, “ it is better to make music than to listen to it”. He asserted that music is a socially useful tool whether designed for education or stimulation, a belief reflected in his large volume of material entitled *Gebrauchsmusik* (functional music) and *Gemeinschaftsmusik* (music for amateurs). In his ‘*Sing und Spielmusik*’ (music to sing and play), school children were actively encouraged to participate which was a distinct departure from the attitude of music being ‘high art’ that had previously prevailed.

The world of music experienced a huge upheaval in the years before and directly after the First World War giving rise to fresh ideologies, theories and techniques, notably the ‘twelve-tone system’ pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg and composers of the Second Viennese School. Born in Germany in 1895, Hindemith’s early compositional style was reminiscent of Brahms and Bruckner but his explosive and eclectic approach soon gave rise to atonal experimentation resulting in *Police* being called to an early operatic premiere.

He quickly established a career as a conductor, composer and also viola player in the celebrated Amar String Quartet. A true workaholic, he subsequently added a Professorship at the Musikhochschule in Berlin to his portfolio in 1927 and began to refine a compositional style which exemplified the artist’s responsibility to society. His fascination with the expressive and structural possibilities of the form of the Sonata gave rise to a legendary series of chamber works for orchestral instruments and piano. In line with his beliefs, these Sonatas provided musical challenges to the performer, avoiding clichés and unnecessary difficulty in favour of idiomatic suitability to the individual instrument’s character and timbre. The Flute Sonata of 1936 was followed by

similar pieces for Clarinet, Horn, Trumpet and Harp in 1939 until his unorthodox and original language fell foul of the Third Reich, resulting in American exile along with a teaching position at Yale University.

The echoes of war are very present in the four movement Sonata for Trombone and Piano composed in 1941, providing the trombonist with a great opportunity to extol the instrument's noble strength and unique tonal qualities. This stentorian work has long occupied a central place in the solo repertory and has also been a favourite choice for examination boards and juries in assessing qualities of tone, sustaining power and endurance. The development of a strong and reliable tone throughout the range is, therefore, crucial to the successful execution of this piece and should form the basis of any prospective performer's preparation.

The components of a note on any brass instrument depend on a deep inhalation, utilizing the whole of the abdominal area, in order to maximise 'body resonance'. It is common, however, for players to over emphasize the tongue's role in production so that notes have a hard, explosive beginning followed by rather weak decay. Try starting the notes of the opening phrase of the first movement of the Sonata without the tongue thus focussing on the push of the abdominal and diaphragm muscles throughout the intended duration of the note. This is commonly referred to as 'support'. Allow the column of air to pass freely (without constriction) through the throat and mouth aperture so that the lips vibrate naturally and then one can experience the unique resistance within the trombone. Unlike the other brass instruments, the trombone only has two bends (slide & tuning slide crooks), which in turn reduces the perception of any kind of assistance from internal resistance when sustaining a long note or phrase. In short, the response on the trombone is so immediate, with the air flowing through so quickly, that an efficient and well-developed breathing technique is essential. Given that every pitch on a brass instrument has an optimum air-speed to air-volume ratio, one

can use this exercise, commonly referred to as ‘diaphragm only’, to ensure that the air speed is constant right from the inception of the note. If the air is constricted and thus artificially speeded up, the tone will harden and the pitch, go sharp. Any over use of the tongue will also increase the air speed, sharpening pitch at the beginning of the note. Ideally one should not be able to detect tongue or rush of air but rather a clean, coordinated and integrated beginning to each and every note.

The use of a practice mute, in moderation, is recommended to help open the throat and mouth aperture thus enhancing the free passage of air and avoiding the possibility of tightness or a stretched embouchure. Aim for the aperture on the left of figure 1, the one on the right will encourage a hard and possibly forced tone prone to going sharp.

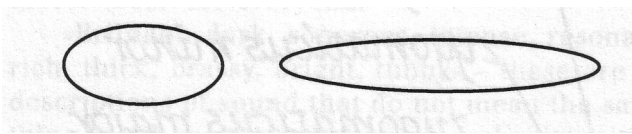


Fig.1 Embouchure apertures

One must also take into account the potential length of the trombone slide and supply more air to the longer positions. For example, in the opening phrase of this Sonata, I recommend that the repeated low Cs are taken in 6th position (even if 1st pos. with the F valve depressed requires less effort) where the tone will be more open. Try to sustain these Cs for as long as possible within your chosen tempo so that they act a kind of ‘spring-board’ for the widening intervals that follow. The energy and direction of this first phrase dictates passage towards the harmonic modulation on the first note of the third bar, so take enough breath (remember it is only marked ‘*f*’) to sustain the phrase and then take a breath after this note. Use the repeated low Bbs in the following phrase to build energy and intensity in the same way and take the breath after the tied first

note in bar 9, while ensuring maximum clarity and definition on the four quavers at letter A with precise tongue and slide co-ordination. The third phrase, starting on the fourth bar of letter A, utilizes the same thematic material as the opening but this time with a proper sustained '*ff*'. One common error, two bars before letter B, is to allow a less than precise quaver. Make certain of an exact subdivision of the beat, not crushed in any way, while the long C that follows will benefit from efficient breath preparation to ensure a strong and precise resolution onto the third beat of the bar before letter B.

The fourth phrase provides a rare opportunity to play lyrically in this strong and thrusting work, however, be careful to sustain the second note of the slurred couplet throughout this passage. A short or clipped slur will lessen dignity and create a more comical flavour, not to mention encouraging the possibility of 'rushing'. Try also, with careful conservation, to accomplish the whole phrase in one breath to promote uninterrupted flow and musical shape.

By now any player making their first acquaintance with Hindemith will have perceived the rather angular style, the frequent use of the interval of a 4th and short repeated motifs, which create sequences. A typical example can be found at letter D where tension is created by the sequence of the first three bars followed by further sequential intensity over the next two and half bars and culminating in the top A at the height of the phrase. Be very careful here to support throughout the top A in order to secure the quaver G and not an E, which in my experience is common error.

Hindemith creates his tapestry with 'musical building blocks' so the performer must be sure to sustain notes for their correct length and bring out the detail of quavers and semi quavers to ensure precision. Like so many pieces of music the *modus operandi* for accurate execution of the rest of the work is now set and one can use these basic rules to negotiate most of the remaining corners.

This monumental work is a perfect example of this composer's neo-classical approach but unlike the other great 20th century neo-classicist, Igor Stravinsky, Hindemith still affords the performer the opportunity for personal interpretation and not simply observing phrasing and dynamics. For this reason, recordings of this work show quite different characteristics, from the more romantic approach of Christian Lindberg to the clinical precision of Mark Lawrence. The latter's splendid performance is part of a double CD containing a collection of Hindemith's chamber music for brass, from the stunningly effective *Konzertmusik* for Piano, Brass and Harps (1930) to the charming *Morgenmusik* (Morning Music) of 1932 and with the added bonus of the rarely heard *Sonata for Alto Horn in Eb*.

Hindemith's attention to structure and musical architecture results in the role of the piano in all Sonatas forming an integral dialogue with the solo instrument and not just an accompaniment. For this reason, any prospective performer must (particularly due to the virtuosic difficulty of the piano part in the Trombone Sonata) secure the services of a capable pianist and allow sufficient rehearsal time to achieve natural interaction.