An Integrated Approach to Preparing Paul Hindemith’s Sonata for Trombone and Piano: A guide to help achieve a better performance

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The aim of this article is to enhance understanding of the Hindemith Sonata and assist performers toward performances of the highest musical quality and emotional impact. The goal is to produce a musical and historically informed performance, based on a good theoretical foundation and thorough technical preparation.

We will briefly discuss the history and theory behind Hindemith’s Sonata, examine unique performance issues, and introduce ways to prepare for a successful performance with several specific exercises designed to help the trombonist decode Hindemith’s complex compositional language, which involves a unique approach to tonality and rhythm.

**HISTORY**

Paul Hindemith’s Sonata for Trombone and Piano of 1941 has become the landmark sonata of the trombone repertoire of the twentieth century. This work stands within the ambitious series of sonatas that he undertook to write for all orchestral instruments, a project that occupied Hindemith off and on from 1936 to 1935. This project was an outgrowth of Hindemith’s desire to create *Gebrauchmusik*, which translates literally as “music for use” or “utilitarian music,” in response to what he felt was an ever widening gap between the general public and the modern composer. Hindemith meant to strengthen the connection between composer, performer, and society by producing accessible works that could be performed by the professional or amateur in any setting. Hindemith said, “How can we say that just one specific musical style is usable? . . . Let us rather strive to write a music so good that, with representation suitable to its style, purpose, and instrumentation it must appear completely satisfying and hence, usable” (Neumeyer).

Paul Hindemith is largely remembered as a neoclassical composer; however, Hindemith’s style varied greatly over the course of his career. Early in his career, in the 1920s, he was branded as an atonal composer. After the successful premiere of his Second String Quartet, Richard Strauss asked Hindemith, “Why do you compose atonal music? You have plenty of talent.” To which Hindemith replied, “Professor, you make your music, and I’ll make mine” (Neumeyer). Considered a radical, his anti–post-romantic leanings in the 1930s caused his music to be banned by the Nazi Party as “degenerate art” in his native Germany. Hindemith then turned his thoughts toward the historical and codified his ideas on music theory and composition in The Craft of Musical Composition. He moved to Switzerland, and then to the United States, where he taught at Yale University and composed prolifically during the 1940s. In the years after 1955, when serialism was in fashion, Hindemith’s style was deemed too accessible and moderate for the musical climate of the time. Thus, over the course of his career Hindemith went from being branded as a rogue atonal composer, to being labeled as an out-of-touch conservative. Perhaps a fairer assessment of Hindemith is offered by the noted Hindemith scholar David Neumeyer, who stated:

For Hindemith, the object all along was synthesis: of diatonic and chromatic materials, tonal and atonal methods, French and German styles, twenties’ cleverness with the gravity of a sense of Western music’s traditions . . . throughout his career Hindemith searched for a way out of the Romantic-Modernist dialectic. Stravinsky once referred to three neoclassic trends in twentieth century music: his own, Arnold Schoenberg’s and Paul Hindemith’s.
Hindemith is considered to be the more conservative of this trio of composers and the Sonata for Trombone and Piano is an excellent example of Hindemith’s style at that time. The Sonata was composed in early September 1941 at Hindemith’s home in New Haven, Connecticut, during a break between teaching at Tanglewood and Yale and displays a highly ordered sense of logic that guides a listener through Hindemith’s music. The harmonic language is complex and ordered, yet the character of the music at times reflects the chaotic state of the contemporaneous world, as many nations were then engaged in World War II.

THEORY
Let us begin our theoretical discussion with two quotes from the preface to The Craft of Musical Composition that give us excellent insight into the musical mind of Paul Hindemith, his orientation toward tonality, and the importance of understanding a composer’s works:

Theoretical knowledge certainly will not directly improve a violinist’s finger-technique; but is it not likely to broaden his musical horizon and influence his ability to interpret a composition? If our performers—players, singers, and conductors alike—had a better insight into the essentials of musical scores, we would not be faced with what seems to have become almost a rule in the superficially overpolished performance of today: either the rattling through a piece without any reasonable articulation, without any deeper penetration into its character, tempo, expression, meaning, and effect—or the hyper individualistic distortion of the ideas expressed in the composer’s score.

In the world of tones, the triad corresponds to the force of gravity . . . Music, as long as it exists, will always take its departure from the triad and return to it.

The Sonata for Trombone and Piano uses a modified version of conventional sonata-allegro movement form. In this Sonata, Hindemith is strongly aware of the traditions of sonata form and its dependence on tonality. He generates interest throughout the Sonata by following these traditions on some levels, yet departing from them in unexpected ways. The departures Hindemith chooses become all the more innovative against the backdrop of the traditional elements that give them context. It is clear from the tonal processes Hindemith employs that they are not completed within the first section and thus it is appropriate to view this entire work as one large modified sonata-allegro form movement. The first section, the Allegro Moderato Maestoso, serves as the exposition and the beginning of the development. This process is interrupted when we abruptly come to a halt at the end of the first section. The second and third sections of the work, the Allegretto Grazioso and the Lied des Raufbolds (“Song of the Ruffian” or “Swashbuckler’s Song,” marked Allegro Pesante), contain further material that on the surface appears unrelated to the thematic material from the opening sonata-allegro material of the first section. The finale of the work features a return to the development begun in the first section. This final Allegro Moderato Maestoso brings us to the arrival of the recapitulation and a short triumphant coda that brings the work to a close. What is particularly innovative here is that the melodic seed for the entire sonata can be derived from the B theme of the Lied des Raufbolds, and that B theme appears to be derived from, or at least inspired by, original German folk song material. What this means is that Hindemith took the kernel of a melodic idea from a piece of German folk music, draped it in a highly chromatic musical language, and constructed an elaborate sonata-allegro formal structure around it. Music Examples 1 and 2 illustrate the relationship between the B theme of the Lied des Raufbolds and the Primary Theme Motive.

Hindemith is known for constructing multi-movement works deriving from the themes of composers from the grand tradition of German music, an example being Symphonic Metamorphoses on themes of Carl Maria Von Weber. The Hindemith Sonata is an example of his borrowing of material from the German Volkslied tradition. Hindemith frequently referred to German folk music in Franz M. Böhme’s Old German Song Book: An in depth discussion of possible source material for the Lied is outside the scope of this article. For more information refer to Landmarks of Twentieth Century Trombone Repertoire (Robertson).

PERFORMANCE PREPARATION GUIDE
For any successful performance, we must have a specific conception of how we wish to express the music and the technique with which to express these musical ideas. To guide you toward your own interpretation, let’s look at a few facets of the Sonata. First, a majority of the Sonata is notated at a forte or fortissimo dynamic (Willis). The predominance of these loud dynamic markings brings up issues of effective pacing and balance. The trombonist, observing these dynamics, tends to play bombastically and with inappropriate force. We must realize that there are no instances of notated fortississimo (FFF) within the Sonata. Though it is essential to balance with the piano, it is more vital to value phrase direction, rhythm, and style above loudness so as not to obscure the nature of Hindemith’s musical expression by unnecessarily shouting in a stentorian style. Take musical advantage of the softer dynamics in the portion of the Sonata that is marked in the mezzo forte and piano dynamic ranges. It is too easy and common to escalate dynamics beyond what is musically appropriate due to the excitement generated...
An informed interpretation of this work begins with an understanding of the large-scale form and tonal centers of each movement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Allegro Moderato Maestoso</th>
<th>II. Allegretto Grazioso</th>
<th>III. Lied des Raubhölden (&quot;Swashbuckler’s Song&quot;)/Allegro Pesante</th>
<th>IV. Allegro Moderato Maestoso</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exposition and development (sonata-allegro form interrupted)</td>
<td>Modified ritornello (ABCBDBEB)</td>
<td>Binary song form (ABAB)</td>
<td>Development/recapitulation/closing/coda (sonata-allegro form conclusion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonal Centers: F/C</td>
<td>a/d</td>
<td>C/e(F)</td>
<td>Bb/F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure Numbers: 1-83</td>
<td>1-100</td>
<td>1-102</td>
<td>1-75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interrupted sonata form that Hindemith employs becomes readily apparent when we discard the inner movements as in the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Allegro Moderato Maestoso</th>
<th>IV. Allegro Moderato Maestoso</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exposition, development, interruption</td>
<td>Development, recapitulation, closing, coda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

in the piano part. Trombonists frequently mistake greater decibel level with greater expressive intensity. Take care to avoid this frequent trap.

Note that in the entire Sonata there are no instances of staccato, a majority is marked in a detached style, legato is used sparingly, and marcato is used very rarely (Willis). These observations tell us we must cultivate an excellent detached style of articulation. Then because legato is used such a small percentage of the time, it is musically important to bring out those moments of lyricism as contrast.

Hindemith was a pianist of prodigious dexterity, and the difficulty and prominence of the piano part means it is essential to find an excellent and sensitive collaborator. The pianist should take care not to obscure the melodic line and the trombonist should play with resonance and avoid trying to compete. Both performers must work together to play with rhythmic vitality and a clear sense of pulse. Let us remember Hindemith’s directive: “Sense and order must prevail even in the wildest tumult of sounds.”

Finding an interpretation that represents our own musical conception is an issue that every conscientious performer strives for. For a compelling musical interpretation, and to be confident in it’s validity and individuality, we must take time to acquaint ourselves with the composer. As performers we must ask ourselves probing questions about the music and avoid just “rattling through” the literature. Tubist Gene Pokorny offers a fascinating perspective on this process:

. . . When I was preparing the Hindemith recording I debated for a long time about the possible interpretations and which should go on the disc. Hindemith himself said that what he wrote on the paper varied greatly from what he would actually love to hear. There is a story that he once rushed backstage after hearing a performance of his Viola Sonata. The soloist, who had played a very Romantic interpretation of the work, became alarmed and was afraid of the composer’s reaction to the liberties he had taken. However, Hindemith came up to the violist with tears in his eyes and said, “I’ve never heard anybody actually make a piece of music out of something of mine.” When I recorded Hindemith’s Sonata for Tuba and Piano, I asked myself which of the many ways of looking at the music made the most sense. It was not the only way, but just an intelligent way, and today I might play some passages differently. As my musical tastes develop, my interpretation might change again (Bough).
The following warm-up exercises have been developed to help the musician prepare specifically for practicing or performing the Sonata.

Warm-up 1: Transposed cadences of the first statement of the primary theme

Warm-up 2: Developing musical line and rhythmic stability in the primary theme

Warm-up 3: Transpositions of primary theme to facilitate ease of sound and range
To accompany the above, I offer the following performance suggestions for the Sonata:

1. Play the primary theme (bars 1–5) in a full, resonant, singing style. Watch out for a tendency to slam the low notes. Maintain beauty of tone across the expanding intervals. Play the secondary theme (19–23) with crisp articulation in a slightly understated way so that there is a clear contrast in character. Play the closing theme with rhythmic flair and accuracy. At rehearsal E, play sostenuto, yet get out of the way in 49. Pace yourself and build gradually to H. The only fp in the Sonata is at rehearsal G—make it effective. This is a false climax, as everything continues to build to H. Play fully and heroically at H. Face yourself and build gradually to H. The only fp in the Sonata is at rehearsal G—make it effective. This is a false climax, as everything continues to build to H. Play fully and heroically at H. Face yourself so that breathing is not interruptive and so that the high B natural in 77 is sustained, full, pure, and exciting. Play the dotted eighth-sixteenth passage in 78–79 in a facile and rhythmically accurate manner. Play the musical arch of this phrase heroically, yet avoid bombast. From letter I, phrase through to the resolution to A natural. Back off in dynamic a bit in 82 so that the repeated Abs have direction oriented toward the abrupt end of the phrase. Maintain the musical moment through the silence of the fermata—“play the silence”—and don’t break the moment with a premature physical gesture.

2. Regain composure as the piano introduces the beginning of the Allegretto Grazioso. Play a beautiful and effortless slur up the minor seventh from A to G at the beginning of your repeated phrase. Keep the tempo moving and clearly articulate in this softer dynamic. Exploit the softer dynamics here and create musical contrast. A loose rhythmic interpretation here obscures the syncopations and thus dilutes some of the rhythmic energy so play with vitality. Learn to sing the intervals in this repeated melody for effortless execution. Strive for ease and consistency. Play a compelling phrase. As an exercise, practice this phrase without articulation to develop accurate slurring.
3. Pause briefly then dive into the Lied des Raufbolds. Keep the tempo moving without rushing. Pick a tempo at which you can execute the agile passagework and avoid sounding frantic or breathless. Pace yourself, as a good deal of the remainder of the Sonata is marked fortissimo. Take care to execute the notated rhythm and articulation in the ascending passage of 11–15. Phrase to the F in 15. This can be achieved by a well-paced crescendo and great time. Listen carefully to pitch and slide coordination in bar 20—this is frequently a trouble spot. Maintain a full, rich sound through the descent to the low E in bar 30. Along the way, try to avoid the trap of breathing in the middle of bar 27. Play a dynamic that allows enough air to lead to the resolution to F in bar 31. In 33, when we arrive at the B section, recall this theme’s relationship to the primary theme of the Sonata. Try not to play too heavy here; Hindemith wrote the proper tone into the music with his choices of meter, rhythm, and chord voicing, so don’t apply any undue heft. Play simply, confidently, and heroically. Feel free to “Swashbuckle” a bit, but keep in mind the clear direction of the phrase. On the return to the A section, play with lots of energy in the sound yet pace your energy expenditure internally so that you have it to spare in the coming recapitulation and coda. There is some challenging phrasing here in the Lied, so keep in mind issues of breathing and endurance when molding your interpretation.

4. When we return to the development in the final Allegro, keep in mind that from V to Y there should be a long, gradual building of
tension in anticipation of the recapitulation. As the secondary theme is developed, maintain a resonant and pure tone while executing with agility the motivic fragments and sequences that abound. Play dramatic and broad eighth notes leading into Y. This is the only moment of unison passagework in the Sonata, so bring it out. Don’t take too much liberty with tempo—just play boldly and sustained. From the recapitulation at Y to the end, the Sonata is pretty windy and generally in the middle register. When Hindemith notates a dynamic below forte, observe it so that the shape of the music has a chance to be articulated. From the coda at measure 64 to the end, play with lots of sustain and clear articulation. Map out a good breathing plan that works for you so that the final phrases don’t get too chopped up with extra breaths. At the end of bar 70, after arriving at the sustained F, get out of the way and let the virtuosic piano part drive us to the final resolution. Try to breathe in 73 rather than in the middle of 74. Play with a robust sound on the two-octave descent to the final low F and sustain your most beautiful and open tone.

On the proceeding and following pages are several warm-up and technical exercises derived from specific moments in the Sonata. I also suggest that the performer invent self-tailored exercises. I have identified many of the challenging melodic patterns and motivic fragments that recur throughout the Sonata and created exercises to help the performer develop the necessary technique for an effective performance. After reviewing these issues relating to performance, preparation, history, and theory, get out there and share this exciting music with an audience. Enjoy and let me know if this article helps you or your students.

WORKS CITED
Willis, James D. “A Study of Paul Hindemith’s Use of the Trombone as seen in Selected Chamber Compositions” University of Missouri–Kansas City, 1973.

Jemmie Robertson is assistant professor of trombone and euphonium at Eastern Illinois University. Jemmie completed a DM at Northwestern University where he studied with Michael Mulcahy, whom he would like to thank for his guidance in developing his DM Project, part of which was adapted for this article. Jemmie also holds degrees from Yale University and the University of Northern Colorado. Jemmie would also like to dedicate this article to the memory of his father, James D. Robertson (1944-2012) who was a lifetime member of the ITA and an influential music educator. For further information on the topic of Hindemith please attend the clinic that will take place at 2PM on Friday, June 28th, 2013, in Trade Center Room 103 at the International Trombone Festival. Jemmie’s solo CD, A New Day Dawning, is available on the MSR Classics label. He can be contacted at jrobertson@eiu.edu.
Warm-up 9: This gesture ends the first section of the Sonata. Utilize this exercise to develop range and to foster a sense of ease in this moment of musical intensity.

Warm-up 10: These intervallic sequences appear throughout the Sonata. Take care with each pattern and use these exercises to develop accuracy and to match articulation throughout.

Warm-up 11: This fanfare-like figure appears prominently in the Lied. Use this exercise to develop range. Play in a variety of tempi from slow to fast.