

Suggestions on how to practice *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* by Paul Hindemith

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As a composer, performer, conductor, pedagogue, and leading theorist, **Paul Hindemith** (1895-1963) played a prominent role as one of the dominant musical forces of the twentieth century. Without question, he was among the most industrious composers of that century creating a catalogue of nearly two hundred works spanning many genres: orchestral, solo concertos, a wide variety of chamber music, choral works, lieder, operas, and ballets.

One of his most famous accomplishments is his completion of at least one sonata for every orchestral instrument, either solo or with piano, in the spirit of *Gebrauchmusik* (“music for use”). The sonatas are all idiomatic and most have become standard repertoire. Each is like a musical portrait of the instrument for which it was written.

Gebrauchmusik, a music term coined by Hindemith in the 1920s, roughly entails music for use in common life and serving specific purposes, particularly social or educational. As a reaction to the difficult works of the late Romantics, proponents of *Gebrauchmusik* composed with simplicity, clarity, and avoided technical obstacles. Hindemith wrote many such pieces in every conceivable field: children’s games, music for youth groups, brass bands, radio plays, and other practical purposes. The inspiration behind such works, both vocal and instrumental, was to introduce wide audiences of young and amateur performers alike to modern idioms through school and home performance. However, Hindemith later disowned the term *Gebrauchmusik*, saying it was misleading, and preferred to call this music *Sing und Spielmusik* (“Music for Sing and Play”). His efforts helped revive the spirit of Classical chamber music through unpretentious works that could be played by amateurs at home as well as by professionals on stage.

Hindemith’s desire to explore the sonata genre for all the orchestral instruments was originally formulated when he started teaching composition at the Berlin Academy of Music in 1927. While there, he became aware of the lack of literature for social and educational purposes. He was in no doubt aided by his exceptional abilities and knowledge of most instruments. Apart from the harp, Hindemith could play all the standard Western musical instruments, at least passably, and understood them all on an exceptional level. Thorough training on viola, violin, clarinet, and piano was obtained during his study at the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt. The *Sonata in E Major for Violin and Piano*, composed in the summer of 1935, opened a series of sonatas for winds, strings, piano, organ and harp, and was followed by a series of sonatas for horn and trumpet in 1939. The projects would carry him well into 1955.

Hindemith’s extensive production of sonatas during the 1930s also reflects the situation surrounding his personal life. Early in 1934, the Nazi party began a campaign to discredit Hindemith labeling him a “cultural Bolshevik” or “degenerate.” The terms were somewhat ironic in light of the fact that while much of the music culture around him was breaking from tonality, Hindemith sought to revitalize it. Rather than lose tonality altogether, he chose to combine new ideas with traditional structures. However, conductors and performers became fearful of performing his pieces and gradually Hindemith’s music disappeared from concert programs. As a result, he resorted to making music almost entirely at home with his wife. In the face of Nazi oppression, public criticism, and

because of the partial Jewish ancestry of Hindemith's wife, the couple left Germany for Switzerland in August of 1938. The *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* was begun in 1939, during their 15 months as refugees and before their subsequent relocation to the USA in 1940.

The *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* is highly typical of Hindemith's work in this genre. Composed within the temperament of *Gebrauchsmusik*, the sonata is a reflective work in which the player can demonstrate rhythmic stability, beautiful tone, finesse, style, and strength. The range and registration of the clarinet part is very conservative; dynamics are generally in the range of *piano* to *forte*, with very few *pianissimos* and *fortissimos*; no great difficulties are presented in either the clarinet or piano parts; and very few ensemble problems between clarinet and piano are apparent. The three-voiced writing in which all the sonatas are composed are the expression of a conviction that a listener can perceive no more than three simultaneously sounding voices with any degree of differentiation. Moreover, the unequivocal triadic arrangement of harmonies is only possible with three voices. In addition, the sonata displays a balance between the clarity of homophonic structures and contrapuntal textures which chiefly characterize Hindemith's *neoclassical* works. Conservative approaches can be found in the form and the tonal motion—a motion involving tonal areas a fourth or a third apart. Most cadences consist of major or minor triads, occasional mild dissonances are created through non-harmonic tones, and harmonic tension is created by contrapuntal voice leading. There are frequent alterations of thematic statements between the clarinet and the piano, and linear motion is dominated by fourths and whole-steps throughout the entire sonata.

The sonata also reflects principles found in *Unterweisung im Tonsatz* (The Craft of Musical Composition); Hindemith's text created in the 1930's and first published in 1937 constituting a theoretical statement of the guidelines for composition that Hindemith would utilize for the remainder of his life. An opponent of the twelve-tone technique, Hindemith formulated his principles on a harmonic system that was based on an enlargement of traditional tonality. Instead of abandoning all tonality, he chose to use new harmonies combined with traditional structures. Musical intervals were ranked from the most consonant to the most dissonant, harmonies built from fourths rather than entirely from thirds were investigated, and a preference for stepwise movement in melodies was also integrated into the system. Rhythmic topics include his adoption of early music phrasing with unequal phrase lengths and shifts in meter. However, apart from musical topics, his interests were both deep and wide-ranging and included medieval philosophy and the writings of the early church.

Rhythmically, the *Sonata for Bb Clarinet and Piano* features interesting hemiolas at several junctures. Ostinatos in the piano part underpin a flowing melody and often shift to different beats leaving the melody unchanged. The time signatures change rapidly and at several points the piano and clarinet share contrasting time signatures while syncopations take place between the pianist's hands. The pianist and the clarinetist frequently share melodic duties in imitation while the final movement utilizes syncopated passages and subtle shifting of metrical accents.

The *Sonata for Bb Clarinet and Piano* consists of four movements in a diverse form structure: Mvt. I - Sonata-Allegro form; Mvt. II – Scherzo; Mvt. III – Ternary form; Mvt. IV – Little Rondo. Hindemith uses a tonal center without a key signature for all the movements. The first, second, and the final movements are all in B-flat, while the third movement is in the tonal center of F. Tempo indications are: *Mässig bewegt* (Moderately Fast); *Lebhaft* (Lively); *Sehr langsam* (Very Slow), and *Kleines Rondo, gemächlich* (Little Rondo, Leisurely).

The first movement is marked *Mässig bewegt*, a moderately fast tempo, with a time signature of $\frac{3}{4}$, but in the Coda, starting measure 140, the tempo slows. At the beginning of this movement, there are many perfect fourths and imitations between the clarinet and piano (Example 1), a common characteristic of Hindemith's music.

While playing the opening passage, the air stream should be as fast as blowing out a candle. Lifting the root of the tongue by saying "EE" will make the air flow faster and easier and will allow the player to get to the high notes with more success. This technique should be used in many places of this movement, such as the first theme in measure 5 of example 1.

Example 1: Hindemith, *Sonata for Bb Clarinet and Piano, first movement, first theme* (mm.1-7).

The image shows a musical score for the first movement of Hindemith's Sonata for Bb Clarinet and Piano. The top system is labeled '1' and 'Klarinette in B' (clarinet) and 'Klavier' (piano). The clarinet part is marked *mf* and features several large leaps, with two circled in red. The piano part is also marked *mf*. A red dashed box highlights a section of the clarinet part, and a red dotted arrow points from this section to a corresponding section in the piano part, which is also enclosed in a red dashed box. A box labeled 'imitation' points to the piano part's section. The bottom system is labeled '6' and shows further musical notation.

In the clarinet part, there are large leaps shifting the ranges from clarion to altissimo. This may cause a squeaking sound in some cases. The clarinet range is illustrated in illustration 1.

Illustration 1: Clarinet range

The diagram shows a musical staff with notes representing different clarinet ranges. The ranges are labeled: Chalumeau, Throat Tones, Clarinon, and High Range. The High Range is further divided into High range or altissimo. A box labeled 'High range or altissimo' points to the highest notes on the staff.

In the development, starting at measure 54 (Example 2), both instruments play with different time signatures. The clarinet part has a time signature $\frac{3}{4}$ while the piano part has that of $\frac{9}{8}$. The pianist plays triplet figures with the left hand and has a different rhythmic ostinato figure with the right hand. The clarinet player should subdivide in three in order to play the passage steadily. While playing with the piano, the melody in the left hand should be heard clearly because the downbeats and bass notes will contribute to better ensemble playing.

Example 2: Hindemith, *Sonata for Bb Clarinet and Piano*, first movement, development section (mm.54-61).

51

3/4

56

9/8

In the development section, measures 93-97(Example 3), the clarinet's melodies dovetail the piano in imitation with crescendoing lines of tongued sixteenth notes. The dynamics slowly increase from *p* and reach a climax of *ff*. This is followed by the recapitulation section at measure 99, which starts with the piano playing thirty-second notes. At the sixteenth notes of the clarinet part, the tongue and the fingers frequently do not coordinate nicely because the fingers do not move evenly when tonguing. To solve the problem, let the tip of the tongue touch the reed softly. The player should use more airflow with good support while tonguing.

Example 3: Hindemith, *Sonata for Bb Clarinet and Piano*, first movement, development section (mm.93-97).

93

p

cresc.

p

pp

The second movement is marked *Lebhaft*, lively, with a time signature of 2/2. It starts with a melody from the clarinet in major thirds. The performer should play the eighth notes and the sixteenth notes of the melody with a short articulation because long articulations may slow the tempo. Moreover, every marking such as slurs, tonguing, staccato, and marcato should be strictly played because articulations help to strengthen the music. In the transitional section, measures 12-15 (Example 6), the piano part plays a hemiola created against a rhythm in the clarinet part.

Example 6: Hindemith, *Sonata for Bb Clarinet and Piano*, second movement, transition section (mm.12-15).

2/2

In section B, measures 16-21 (Example 7), the note G to G occurs over two octaves in the melody. In this case, the performer should use a fast airflow as explained earlier. The piano plays syncopations contrasting against the melody in the clarinet. In this part, the performer should contrast the mood of the next section by creating intensity through attention to clear accents.

Example 7: Hindemith, *Sonata for Bb Clarinet and Piano*, second movement, B section (mm. 16- 21).

2/2

The third movement is marked *Sehr langsam*, very slow, with a time signature of 4/8. “The composer wrote the melody by using triplets, with perfect fourths and chromatics, in both parts with imitation style of writing.” In the beginning of the movement, the clarinet has a slow melody, most of which is in the chalumeau range with loud dynamics as shown in measures 1-7 (Example 8). The clarinetist should play the melody with a long legato, but this may cause an intonation problem. The notes may have a lower intonation due to the loud dynamic (*f, ff*). Some performers may not relax their embouchure enough. Maintaining the grip of the embouchure, especially on the lower lip while playing loud dynamics in low notes, will help prevent the lower intonation.

Example 8: Hindemith, *Sonata for Bb Clarinet and Piano*, third movement, A section (mm.1-7).

There are difficult rhythms in this section consisting of sixteenth, thirty-second and sixty-fourth notes in a triplet feel. Instead of thinking in 4/8 (Example 9), the players should think in 4/4 to expand the note value in order to easily understand the complicated note values in a simple form (Example 10).

Example 9: Hindemith, *Sonata for Bb Clarinet and Piano*, third movement, theme b repeated of B section (mm.53-55).

Example 10: Hindemith, *Sonata for Bb Clarinet and Piano*, third movement, theme b repeated of B section (mm.53-55) in 4/4.

The fourth movement is marked *Kleines Rondo, gemächlich* in the little rondo (leisurely), with a time signature of 2/2. In the beginning of the movement, the clarinet part has staccato notes and the piano part consists of staccato chords. The pianists should play the downbeat strongly to maintain a lively feel in the melody. “In this main theme, agogic accent can be observed, and should be treated as a down beat. This will create the necessary tension against the evenness of the piano part.”

“An agogic accent relates or denotes accentuation within musical phrases by slight lengthening of notes.” In measures 1- 4 (Example 11), the performer should play the staccato notes quickly by using a light tonguing and support the air stream to make the notes sound even, smooth, and clear.

Example 11: Hindemith, *Sonata for Bb Clarinet and Piano, fourth movement, A section* (mm.1-4).

In measure 70-77 (Example 12), the clarinet has an ostinato figure before the appearance of theme C. The time signature changes from 2/2 to 5/4 then 2/2, causing a syncopation effect.

Example 12: Hindemith, *Sonata for Bb Clarinet and Piano, fourth movement, repeated of A section* (mm.70-77).

The melody in the clarinet starts from *ff*, and then gets softer to *pp* to allow the occurrence of a melody in the piano at measure 73. As the rhythmic grouping might cause the performers to get confused, re-grouping the mentioned rhythm will help them understand the rhythms more clearly and eventually have a better sense of the musical direction. An illustration of the rearranging method is in example 12.

The foregoing suggestions for practicing *the Sonata for Bb Clarinet and Piano* by Paul Hindemith were illustrated by isolating performance details in order to understand the music easier and to adapt it to educational situations. Topics presented included music comprehension, interpretation, history, style and form, fingering, intonation and ensemble solutions. By investigating all of these, it is hoped that those interested in playing the clarinet will acquire skills that will lead to improved practice sessions and greater technical abilities.