The 4 Solo Sonatas of Paul Hindemith

Paul Hindemith is without question, one of this century's most industrious composers. One of his most famous accomplishments is that he successfully completed a sonata for every major instrument in the orchestra. Hindemith was a violist himself, and he wrote by far more literature for the viola than any other composer in history. Besides the 4 solo viola sonatas on tonight's program, he wrote 3 concertos (Kammermusik No. 5, Der Schwanendreher, and Konzertmusik Op. 48), Trauermusik for viola and strings, and 3 sonatas with piano.

Hindemith began his career as a violinist amid the turmoil of WWI. He had an early success becoming concertmaster of the Frankfort Opera Orchestra at the young age of 19. He later turned to viola in 1919, and it was to remain his favorite instrument for the rest of his life. Hindemith was the violist of the Amar Quartet, founded in 1921 for the premiere of the Second String Quartet. He later became known as a soloist in Europe, premiering his own viola works as well as the Milhaud Concerto No. 1 and the Walton Viola Concerto. From 1937 onwards, he began to become well known as a touring soloist/composer in the USA.

Sonate für Bratsche allein, Op. 11, Nr.5 (1919)

This sonata was written in the same year that Hindemith decided to make the switch from violin to viola. There are 6 works under the opus 11 number, including 2 sonatas for violin and piano, a sonata for cello and piano, and a sonata for viola and piano. Hindemith links the first and last movement by means of motivic triple-stopping (the executing of three notes at the same time). The first movement, Lebhaft, aber nicht geelit ("lively, but not hurried") is written in an ABA form in which opening material is repeated at the end. These repeated sections (A) are contrasted by a middle section (B) that also contains the 2-quarter note rhythmic motif (recurring idea), and then ends with an accelerando (speeding up).

The second movement, Maßig schnell, mit viel Wärme vorgetragen ("moderately fast, with great warmth") exploits an unusual motif of three quarter notes rising at steps of the octave, which melodically exposes the range of the instrument. The third movement "Scherzo"- which means literally a joke, is written triple meter, and often jokingly mimics a waltz with rapidly changing fast and slow sections and cheesy glissandos (slides). This movement is also in an ABA form, in which the B section contrasts the humorous waltz parody with a more serious and somber section, continuing the relentless usage of double stops only this time in a church bell fashion. The seriousness does not last for very long, as he breaks it up with jovial, light eighth notes that descend in thirds, which almost sounds like laughing.

The final movement is in the form of a passacaglia, in which a repeated bass line is used throughout the piece. This is the first passacaglia Hindemith ever wrote, and this work is often compared to the passacaglia in Bach's D minor Partita for Violin solo. It is a monstrous movement, as the one in the Bach, totaling about 11 minutes in length. This
triple stop theme, which was also heard in the first movement, is now instructed to be played in a broader tempo. The repeated bass line is not obvious, mostly because the tonal center is constantly changing throughout the work. Therefore, it is a loose passacaglia, in which he is breaking the rules of the previously written famous examples of passacaglia (including the Biber solo violin sonata, Brahms Symphony No. 4- mvt. 4, and the one in Bach's D minor Violin Partita).

Sonate für Bratsche allein, Op. 25, Nr.1 (1922)

One of the most striking features of this sonata is its tightness in formal construction. Each of the five movements is in a balanced ABA form. The pattern of tempos between the movements also creates a balance, making a slow-fast-slow-fast-slow pattern. The industrial revolution had a profound impact on Hindemith in writing this piece. There are many parts of the sonata; especially the first and fourth movements, which sound strikingly like a locomotive. Hindemith was part of a dying breed of composers who actually were known for performing his/her own works, as he often played this particular sonata on his tours of Europe and the USA. His thrifty productivity became known through this piece in which he stated "I wrote the two movements (first and fifth) in the dining car between Cologne and Frankfurt, then I went on stage immediately and played the sonata."

This sonata is by far the most often played of his four solo sonatas, but it is far from being the most tonal sounding. This is heard especially with the dissonant opening chords of the first movement, Breit ("Broad"). These chords are intermittent throughout the movement, set against some locomotive-like accelerando figures and chromatic passages. This movement runs without pause into the second movement, Sehr Frisch und straff ("Very fresh and taut"). The theme is spread over a two-octave expanse of the viola, and consists of swinging parallel fifths and descending chromatic triplet passages. The middle section begins with an ethereal sound consisting of quick triplets that also cover the range of the viola very rapidly. This section leads back into the beginning section.

The third movement, Sehr langsam ("Very slow") is purposely a classical contrast to the rest of the piece. The theme anchored in the central key of E in this movement has often been related to the theme in E flat minor of Bach's Well Tempered Klavier. The clear, quiet motion of this movement (with fifth and octaves predominating) gives it a feeling of timelessness throughout. It is perhaps the unusualness of the fourth movement that has made this so popular among violists. At first glance the music has an attractive appeal with it consisting completely of quarter notes (except the last note), rows of digits (9, 6, 7, 10, 9…) which stand for the number of quarter notes par bar, the ridiculous instructions, "Rasendes Zeitmaß. Wild. Tonshönheit ist Nebensache." (Raging tempo. Wild. Tonal beauty is of secondary importance."), and the unheard of tempo marking - quarter note equals 600-640 (normal tempos run between 35-250). The movement is clearly in C with the low C-string of the viola being exploited in much of the 1.5-minute movement. The final movement, "Langsam, mit viel Ausdruck" ("Slow, with much expression") is reminiscent of the thick German traditions of Brahms and Reger. This
extremely lugubrious movement is marked with extreme dynamic contrasts from \textit{ppp} to \textit{ff} (extremely soft to extremely loud), and finished in a downward chromatic fashion to the ultimate C which seems to symbolize the nothingness and exhaustion one has experienced in listening to the work.

Sonate für Bratsche allein, Op. 31, Nr. 4 (1924)

Written only less than two years after the Op. 25 sonata, this work was probably written to extend his repertoire as a performing artist, rather than 'replace' the far more successfully received Op. 25 Nr. 1 sonata, which is what happened to the first sonata, Op. 11 Nr. 5. Hindemith did not perform this sonata very often, it only appeared 5 times in a list of performances, and it was probably played by Hindemith for the last time on March 10, 1928 in Basle, Switzerland. In a letter written shortly after the concert, Hindemith talks about this event and then justifies the withdrawal of the work (the work remained unpublished until 1992 when the new complete works of Hindemith was released). The following is the letter Hindemith wrote:

"In Basle there was a rehearsal straight away, then I had a little sleep, then practiced. In the evening I did not exactly give a first-class performance, but it was nevertheless respectable and, by Swiss standards, the reception was very good. Afterwards the whole orchestra crowd sat around for a while together. I left quite early, I was very tired. The Viola Sonata [Op. 31 No. 4] is not as good as the other [Op. 25 No. 1] and is much too difficult. You can only play it well if you are really in the mood and that is not always easy when you are on the platform. I will not play it any more but I will write a new one sometime, in any case I will be a bit more careful in the next few days and practice the Windsperger properly; if that does not go well either I may get nervous and play increasingly badly.

It was to be nine whole years from the date of that letter before Hindemith transformed the intention expressed here into action, and composed another solo viola sonata. Also included under the Op. 31 are two solo violin sonatas (Op. 31 No. 1 and 2) as well a \textit{Sonatine} for 2 flutes (Op. 31 No. 3).

Personally, I have always preferred this sonata to the Op. 25, although I do concur with Hindemith that it is much more difficult. The first movement, \textit{Äußerst lebhaft} ("Extremely lively") is reminiscent of the locomotive-sounding 4\textsuperscript{th} movement of the Op. 25. This movement is about twice as long, just over three minutes, and takes that much more endurance on the violist's part just to get through it. The second movement, \textit{Lied} (or "Song") is one Hindemith's most poignant and beautiful creations. It almost echoes of Debussy with the "airy" texture and the somewhat nebulous septuplet (7 notes per beat) motif. The final movement is an incredible theme and variations, another monstrous movement just shy of 11 minutes in length (just as the Passacaglia movement in the Op. 11 No. 5). The theme is boldly, yet simply stated in pure octaves in the opening, and then reiterated at each variation with rhythms that seem to accelerate from variation to variation, starting 8\textsuperscript{th} notes, 8\textsuperscript{th} note triplets, 16\textsuperscript{th}s, etc. The middle section is slower, and then the faster material is introduced again.
Sonate für Bratsche allein (1937)

There were great changes that occurred in Hindemith's life in this 13-year period between 1924-1937 where there is a void of any solo viola sonatas. The Nazis expelled him from his post at the conservatory in Berlin and deprived him of his German audience. They did this mostly because of his Jewish ties, and the soprano-in-the-bathtub scene in the opera Neues vom Tage (News of the Day), which apparently shocked Hitler. So he moved to Switzerland and made concert tours to the USA before emigrating here in early 1940.

It was on one of these USA tours in 1937 in which Hindemith composed his final solo viola sonata. On the course of this trip, Hindemith gave several performances of his Op.25 No.1 sonata, as well as the newly composed viola concerto Der Schwenendreher (or the "Swan-turner") finished in 1935. The trip started in New York on March 25, 1937 and then later traveled to Washington, Boston, Chicago, and Buffalo. Hindemith was no doubt using this trip to help in establishing himself in the USA so that he could pave way for himself to eventually emigrate there. To help add to his reputation, he released a statement before his concert in Chicago that he had plans to write a solo viola sonata in 2 days, and then perform it on his arrival. The manuscript was begun in New York City on Sunday April 18, 1937 and the completion occurred on April 21 in Chicago. It is apparent that the composition was completed within three days and it is probable that the main part of the 3-movement work was written on the train journey from New York to Chicago.

It is apparent that Hindemith was becoming increasingly displeased with himself as being known as a performer/composer in a letter written on April 21, 1937 (the completion date of the final sonata) to Hans Lange, the director of the orchestra in that concert. The letter reads:

*Today I finished the sonata and wrote it out. There was little time to practice but I got down to it for a while I the evening before the concert. The usual reception, this time with dinner, was also before the concert...The concert was very noisy. First the Quartet Op. 22, played very nicely [performed by the Mischakoff String Quartet], then me playing the new sonata; which made no apparent impression, and to finish with the customary 'Schwanendreher' which, in the rather small, over-resonant room, and with brutal use of brass and other instruments, must have sounded rather like a dance of a herd of wild sea-lions.*

Hindemith went on to write only one more work for viola, the 1939 sonata for viola and piano. After that, he essentially turned his focus to just composing. Despite his harsh self-criticisms about this work, this sonata remains to be my favorite of the four solo sonatas. It was written at a point in his life in which more focus was given to accessibility, and the music puts much more emphasis on consonant sounding intervals, especially 4ths and 5ths. This turn towards greater accessibility was a trend followed by
many composers of the WWII generation, where the worldwide economy was in great flux, and everyone felt the pressure of needing to have a broader audience.

The first movement, Lebhaft Halbe ("Fast half-note beats") also has many sections that emulate the locomotive. The second movement, Langsame Viertel ("Slow quarter-note beats") contains some more of Hindemith's most beautiful slow writing. The middle section is a wonderfully creative pizzicato section (where the instrument is plucked rather than bowed), and afterwards the opening material enters, refreshingly now in the key of D. The last movement, Mäßig schnell Viertel ("Very fast quarter-note beats") makes for a wonderfully exciting closer, full of virtouotic double stops and energy.

Notes by Kenneth Martinson