A Mutual Influence: Solo and Chamber Works for Clarinet by Students of Paul Hindemith

Laura Armstrong

Paul Hindemith (1895-1963) composed many solo and chamber works for clarinet, and most are standard works in the clarinet repertoire. It may be interesting to clarinetists to know that many of his students have done the same. While most of these works are largely unknown to most clarinetists, they would greatly add to their repertoire. In this presentation I will discuss some of these works written by his students, and introduce these composers to clarinetists. While in no means does this imply that Hindemith was the only person they studied with, or that he controlled everything they ever wrote, this will serve as a new way of looking at some more recent music that has been written for the clarinet.

Hindemith taught at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik from 1927 to 1937, Yale University from 1940 to 1953, and the University of Zürich from 1949 to 1957. He also held other positions for a brief time at SUNY-Buffalo, Cornell University, Wells College, and the Berkshire Music Festival at Tanglewood. Some of the most talented composition students were drawn to study with him based on his fame as a composer, and his reputation as a teacher. He was a very demanding, strict, and critical teacher, but was very dedicated and matched his students’ efforts with his own enthusiasm about their work.

In his biography of the composer, Geoffrey Skelton writes:

He was a remarkable teacher, but also, for all but the strongest, a dangerous one. Even a cursory glance through his educational books will reveal his talent for explaining things clearly and interestingly, mainly by the use of apt and striking metaphors. His pupils, both in Europe and in America, bear witness to the invigorating effect of his classes, to his unrelenting insistence in and involvement with each one of them individually. The danger lay in the fact that his personality
was so forceful and his style of writing so very much his own that his pupils were tempted into copying him. All young American composers, Aaron Copland complained at the time Hindemith was teaching at Yale University, seemed to be writing Hindemithian music.

Stressing the importance of exercises in counterpoint and harmony was the basic principle of his teaching. For example, to be admitted into his theory and composition programs at Yale, students were required to pass his difficult written examination in harmony and counterpoint in which an excellent score was fifty percent. He treated the majority of his students as though they were beginners until they could prove their skills in these areas were superb. This approach led to his book, *Unterweisung im Tonsatz (The Craft of Musical Composition)*, which outlines the methods he used with his students.

While some critics believed that this style of teaching was too rigid, Hindemith felt that his was a less rigid method than the twelve-tone method used by his contemporary Arnold Schönberg. According to Skelton, “the twelve-tone system, as he [Hindemith] saw it…was consequently restrictive. What he was aiming at was a definition of tonal and intervallic relationships which could serve composers as a guide, enabling them to move, freely but logically, in the direction their ear indicated.” Although Hindemith freely used all twelve tones of the chromatic scale melodically and harmonically in his compositions, he insisted on maintaining a sense of tonality.

Hindemith’s musical style can be expressed as neo-classical: his mature music was modern, but not avant garde, and he used traditional forms. He was seen as the leader of the *neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) which was the German counterpart of the French neoclassical movement led by Igor Stravinsky and the composers of *les Six*. While some critics
viewed Hindemith’s music as anti-romantic, others felt he was a “true inheritor of the mantle of [Johannes] Brahms, the romantic conservative.”

Hindemith himself composed many solo and chamber works for clarinet including the Sonata; Concerto; Quartet for Clarinet, Violin, Cello, and Piano; and Quintet for Clarinet and String Quartet. He also includes the clarinet in other chamber works such as the Kleine Kammermusik for woodwind quintet; the Septet for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bass Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn, and Trumpet; and in his Octet for Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn, Violin, Two Violas, Cello, and Double Bass. In 1960, he even encouraged Josef Horák, the Czech bass clarinet virtuoso, to perform his Bassoon Sonata. It is clear that Hindemith enjoyed the clarinet and greatly enhanced its repertoire; as a consequence these works have been widely performed and studied.

While many of Hindemith’s students composed multiple works for clarinet, Harald Genzmer (1909 – 2007) was the most prolific. His output includes the Fantasy for Clarinet; a sonata for bass clarinet; a sonatina for clarinet and piano; a sonata for clarinet and piano; a concertino; a concerto; the Capriccio for Two Clarinets; a concerto for two clarinets; a trio for clarinet, cello, and piano; a trio for oboe, clarinet, and bassoon; a quartet for clarinet, violin, cello, and piano; a quintet for clarinet and string quartet; and several more chamber pieces involving clarinet. Genzmer’s music, although at times containing many difficult technical passages, is extremely accessible to most listeners and is enjoyable and rewarding to play. I have been surprised to discover that there are so few recordings of his works for clarinet. His conservative style, which strongly reflects Hindemith’s influence, may have had something to do with this, but I feel that his music deserves more attention than it has received and will be a major focus of this presentation.
Other students of Hindemith have also composed extensively for the clarinet, and many of their works have also been neglected. Violet Archer (1913 – 2000) wrote one unaccompanied piece, a sonata, a duet with alto saxophone, and several other works. Arnold Cooke (1906 – 2005) and Alvin Etler (1913 – 1973) also composed sonatas along with other works, although these two composers are more familiar to most clarinetists. Many of these pieces contain similarities to Hindemith’s music, especially with regard to harmony and melodic structure.

While some of Hindemith’s students embraced his compositional methods completely and maintained the same style throughout their careers, others developed their own methods into styles that were often entirely different. Ruth Schonthal (1924 – 2006) used an expressionistic style and her work for clarinet and prepared piano, *The Bells of Sarajevo*, is hardly reminiscent of Hindemith’s style.

My goal for this presentation is to show the degree to which Hindemith’s influence as a teacher can be found in their works for clarinet. But it is not my intention to show that all of the music presented is primarily influenced by Hindemith. All of the composers to be discussed in this project had multiple composition teachers and a variety of other influences, were talented individuals, and went on to have successful and independent careers. I am hoping that learning more about these composers and their works will encourage clarinetists to perform more of these works. All of these works are worthy additions to the clarinet repertoire and should be programmed more often.

I will provide detailed information on composers and perform brief excerpts of Howard Boatwright’s *Suite for Clarinet* and Harald Genzmer’s *Fantasie für Klarinette*.
SOURCES


Even Hindemith kept some aspects of the classical sonata form on the structure of this work, for example, it is a three movement work with contrasting tempos among the movements "fast, slow, fast" the piece conceives some particularities, which will be discussed furthermore. The second movement of a sonata (on a three movement piece) can vary on form; it is usually a slow movement. The tessitura, which represents another part of the melodic compounds, written on the trumpet voice on this first movement, goes from the low B-flat to the high A on concert pitch; and that is not too wide for the average of non beginner trumpet players.