

A 20th Century Alternative for the Alto Trombonist:

Paul Hindemith's *Sonata For Alto Horn*

by David Mathie

As more trombonists use the alto trombone on recitals, finding music from various historical periods becomes a problem. The works of the baroque and classical periods for alto trombone, such as the Albrechtsberger and Wagenseil concerti, are now performed enough to be considered "warhorses"! Although many contemporary composers, such as Frigyes Hidas and Thom Ritter George, have written excellent new works for the instrument, 20th-century recital music for the alto trombone is still scarce. An alternative is to transcribe works from the brass literature; one of the finest is the *Sonata for Alto Horn* by Paul Hindemith.

The six sonatas for brass instruments typify two of Hindemith's musical philosophies: They provide valuable additions to the brass literature¹ and offer contemporary works accessible to the audience in both form and tonality. The *Sonatas* include piano-accompanied works for trumpet (1939), horn (1939), trombone (1941), alto horn (1943), tuba (1955), and the

unaccompanied *Sonata* for four horns (1952). None seem to have been written for specific players or occasions, which may be in keeping with Hindemith's idea of the works as abstract additions to an instrument's repertory.

The alto horn sonata is a lost gem in the brass literature, certainly due to the unusual solo instrument. It is more lyrical and tonally conservative than the trombone *Sonata*, and includes a short spoken dialogue given by both soloist and pianist before the final movement. Ever practical, Hindemith specified on the title page the alternate solo instruments as waldhorn or alto saxophone. This has become a source of confusion for many musicologists and compilers of Hindemith's music, who often incorrectly refer to the work as a saxophone sonata. Hindemith's reasons for composing a work for an alto horn are unclear and contradict his own views: In *A Composer's World* he wrote, "Our hybrid instruments have remained a shadowy crowd, and probably nobody will ever inflate with a breath of persistent musical life all those varied bugles, cornets, mellophones, sarrusa-phones, Wagner tubas, baritone oboes, and valved trombones."² The *Sonata* was not even published until 1956 (leading to more errors concerning this work), long after the composition date of 1943.³ Mary Rasmussen accurately predicted the future of the *Sonata* in her review after its publication when she wrote, "I don't know how many alto horn players are around who are interested or capable of playing a Hindemith sonata."⁴ The piece, when heard at all, is usually performed on the horn or alto saxophone. Given Hindemith's option for the use of alternate solo

instruments, a performance on the alto trombone is certainly justified while being closer in timbre to an alto horn than either horn or saxophone.

The *Sonata* was written with a tonal center around e-flat, and thus works well for the alto trombone. The range spans from c-sharp³ to e-flat⁵, with modest technical demands primarily involving certain passages containing sharps. The major obstacle involves the necessary transposition of the e-flat solo part: The alto trombonist would read this in bass clef, then up one octave. Rewriting the part in alto clef is an easier solution and of course will still work with the published piano part.

It is hoped that this fine work will enter the small repertory of the alto trombone. Certain works for other brasses (such as the two Richard Strauss concerti and the Larsson *Concertino*, all for horn) are also logical candidates for transcription. It is up to trombonists to seek out and commission new works for this "newly discovered" instrument: the alto trombone.

End Notes

¹Geoffrey Skelton, *Paul Hindemith, the Man Behind the Music* (London: Victor Gaollancz Ltd., 1975), 15.

²Paul Hindemith, *A Composer's World – Horizons and Limitations* [no translator given] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 160.

³David Neumeyer, *The Music of Paul Hindemith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 275.

⁴Mary Rasmussen, review of *Sonata for Alto Horn and Piano*, by Paul Hindemith, in *Brass Quarterly* I (1), (September, 1957): 110.

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