

# Symphonies for Band - Part 1: Hindemith

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Some issues ago, Phill Ellis of the Northamptonshire Music Service made a plea for longer works for band. Due to the overwhelming weight of sound wind bands can and do produce, my personal tolerance for long wind band works is low. However I share his interest in substantial works for band, if not necessarily long ones

There is a small oeuvre of symphonies for band, which are unquestionably major works in the genre, yet are surprisingly not part of a core repertoire in the UK, as are the Graingers, Holsts and others of that ilk. This article is a brief introduction to one of these symphonies, with the idea of whetting the appetite of advanced bands for performing them. I intend to consider others in future articles.

Paul Hindemith (1895-1963) was born and raised in Germany, but moved to the United States in 1937. He wrote music for practical use - *gebrauchsmusik* - and was proficient on and knowledgeable about almost every orchestral instrument, and he had been a teacher at the Berlin Hochschule. Consequently his series of sonatas for instrument and piano are very popular with instrumentalists. He was also a theorist, having written *The Craft of Musical Composition* (1937), a comprehensive theory of harmony, amongst other books.

**“Hindemith’s *Symphony in B-flat* is an extremely valuable contribution not only to band literature, but to the entire realm of music literature. It is a major work in the mature style of one of the most important composers of the twentieth century.”**

Tarwater

His symphonic output includes six symphony or symphony-like works, written between 1940 and 1958, of which the *Symphony in B<sub>♭</sub>* (1951) was written fifth. Hindemith was familiar with the medium of the wind band, having served as a trombonist and bass drummer with a German Army post band in World War I.

In April 1952 Captain Hugh Curry offered him an engagement as conductor of the US Army Band in a ‘Freedom Sings’ concert, and he decided to write a piece for the occasion. When asked why he wrote the *Symphony in B<sub>♭</sub>*, he replied: “no literature for Band, so I wrote some.”

Of course, along with Toch, Krenek and Pepping he had been commissioned to write a piece for the Donaueschingen Festival in 1926, precisely to improve the quality of literature for bands, and on that occasion he responded with the *Konzertmusik*, Op. 41.

The *Symphony in B<sub>♭</sub>* is cast in three movements:

- i Moderately fast with vigour 6:30
- ii Andante Grazioso 5:30
- iii Rather broad 4:30

## Instrumentation

Piccolo	Solo Cornet in B <sub>♭</sub>
Flute, I-II	Cornet in B <sub>♭</sub> , I-II-III
Oboe, I-II	Trumpet in B <sub>♭</sub> , I-II
Clarinet in E <sub>♭</sub>	Horn in F, I-II-III-IV
Solo Clarinet in B <sub>♭</sub>	Trombone, I-II-III
Clarinet in B <sub>♭</sub> , I-II-III	Baritone (B. C.)
Alto Clarinet in E <sub>♭</sub>	Basses
Bass Clarinet in B <sub>♭</sub>	Timpani
Bassoon, I-II	Percussion (3 players):
Alto Saxophone in E <sub>♭</sub> , I-II	Bass Drum, Cymbal, glockenspiel,
Tenor Saxophone in B <sub>♭</sub>	Snare Drum, Tambourine, Triangle
Baritone Saxophone in E <sub>♭</sub>	

The E<sub>♭</sub> clarinet has an important, independent part, and the percussion is used sparingly, adding to its effect. All the parts are idiomatically written, and Hindemith often sets the woodwind and brass choirs against each other.

Note the absence of flugel horns, bugles and tenor horns, which were common in the orthodox pre-War German band scores.

## Content

The first movement is in sonata form. It opens without preamble with a characteristically long, breathless melody based on a tonal centre of B<sub>♭</sub>, stated forte on unison cornets and trumpets:



Themes and motives are often combined contrapuntally, using a range of formal techniques. In the very first bar, the main theme is combined with an important melodic motif in the basses:



The condensed recapitulation of the first movement is a revelation in contrapuntal compositional techniques, and repays careful study.

The second movement is in ternary form with a trio. It opens with an extended imitative duet for cornet and alto saxophone which provides the thematic material for the rest of the movement.

The last movement has a double fugue, preceded by an introduction and the symphony ends with a coda using thematic material from the first movement, giving a cyclic form to the whole symphony.

While the score is transposed, the work is written without key signatures. Even though the linear combination of themes occasionally results in transient discords, the movement is based on a tonal centre of B<sub>♭</sub>, with secondary centres of E<sub>♭</sub> and F. The conclusions of each movement have strong, if surprising harmonic progressions setting up the tonic chord.

On re-listening to my recordings, especially that conducted by the composer, I am struck by the depth and variety of expression, and its excitement and brilliance. The musical language is quite approachable by today's band aficionados. However, to perform the symphony convincingly would need a very fine, mature county group, a skilled conductor and plenty of rehearsal time!

So often when major composers write for band, they produce less than their best work. Hindemith's symphony is a notable exception to this, and it deserves to be heard more often in the UK.

## Bibliography

- Hindemith, P. *Symphony in B<sub>♭</sub>*, Schott & Co Ltd, London 1951
- Tarwater, W. H. *Analyses of Seven Major Band Compositions of the Twentieth Century*, Unpublished thesis
- Fennell, F. *The Band's Music*, Volume 1, Traverse City, MI: Village Press, 1992

## Recordings

- Paradigm*, Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music Wind Symphony/  
Eugene Corporon  
Klavier KCD 11059
- Hindemith Conducts Hindemith*  
Philharmonia Orchestra/Hindemith Seraphim 60005
- Hindemith, Schoenberg, Stravinsky*  
Eastman Wind Ensemble/Fennell  
Mercury SRI 75057

## Websites

<http://daven.deltos.com/band/ezine/articles/gallagher.html> has a scholarly analysis with musical and audio examples by Charles Gallagher, originally published in the *Journal of Band Research*.