

SYMPHONIC METAMORPHOSES ON THEMES OF CARL MARIA VON WEBER PAUL HINDEMITH

Hindemith's *Symphonic Metamorphoses* is a brilliant, imaginative, colorful, and dramatic composition; based on some obscure piano duets by Carl Maria von Weber and an ancient Chinese melody, it is astounding to hear how Hindemith weaves a fascinating pallet of sounds and moods.

The Weber duets can be found on the IMSLP/Petrucci web site – they are opus 60, #4 (first movement) opus 10, #2 (3rd movement) and opus 60, #7 – and it is amazing to witness the transformation of these simple pieces. In addition, a pentatonic Chinese melody is turned into a veritable concerto for orchestra in the second movement.

When I conduct the piece, I have our pianists demonstrate short excerpts from the original Weber piano pieces followed by the corresponding passages in the Hindemith played by the orchestra, which allows the audience to hear some samples of what Hindemith created from the Weber.

My recent experience conducting this piece led me to write this article, as there are numerous details of performance that might prove to be of interest. These include metronome markings, balances, articulation choices, note lengths, and various other points of interest.

I also add rehearsal numbers and change some of the letters that are supplied by the publishers, as several are not placed at the beginnings of phrases. These additions and changes allow for much more efficient rehearsing.

I've noticed that Hindemith often uses a dynamic marking of *mf* for softer dynamics when in actuality *p* is what seems to work better. I will mention a few of these places in the article. Also, I perform the piece with very little pause in between movements.

I

The opening of the first movement, which sounds fairly straight forward in the piano duet version, is turned into a macabre and dramatic setting through deft orchestration and harmonic ingenuity. The tempo that I do is about quarter note = 100. Hindemith's tempo in his recording with the Berlin Philharmonic, is quarter note = 112.

Measure 1 I have the violins play the opening pizzicato as a snapped or "Bartok" pizzicato; violas and cellos – all down bow until the second beat of measure 3; horns – play with bravura, accented, and clipped downbeat, measure 2; clarinets – accented syncopations; timpani – hard stick

Measure 3 - violin 1: spirited, articulate playing

Measure 7 - violin 1: tenuto eighth note

4 before Letter A – violin 1: dolce

3 before Letter A – violin 1: slur to Letter A, to the tip, and play Letter A at the tip

8 after Letter A – violin 1: off the string

6 before Letter B – horns, bassoons, cellos; tenuto to hear the chords clearly

4 before Letter B – violins and violas: tenuto, on the string, to hear the chords clearly

Letter B – woodwinds: well articulated

7 after Letter B – woodwinds, horn 2: long quarters, short eighth notes

6 before Letter C – violins and violas: I do a downbow on the 16th note and two upbows on the eighth notes in the next measure, then retake to a downbow 4 measures before letter C with the same pattern; then downbow 2 measures before Letter C, with 2 upbows in that measure for the eighth notes

Letter C – strings: start softly, 2 upbows, then hook the eighth notes

5 after Letter C – tutti: it might be helpful to rehearse slowly for ensemble between 16th note players and brass melody

8 before Letter D – violin 1: off the string, softly to hear woodwinds clearly

6 before Letter D – strings: on the string as before to hear harmonies clearly

Second ending after Letter D – 1st violins, violas: forte and very gradual diminuendo

2 before Letter E, also 3 after Letter E – violas: espressivo

Letter G – note that the trombones are playing their accompaniment in 5/8 time, 2 eighth notes plus 3 eighth notes, until one measure before Letter H

Letter G – flute and piccolo: while these instruments add an eerie polytonality, I found that pp is a little too soft, and that they can play somewhat louder

1 before Letter H – brass and percussion adjust dynamics to something closer to p so that the woodwinds can be clearly heard

8 after Letter H – strings: I have the strings play expressively and with charm

12 after H – diminuendo for all strings, 1st violins slur for 3 ½ measures

12 before letter I – winds: forte on each melodic entrance, 1st violins off the string

8 before Letter I – violins and violas: off the string - brass and percussion; p, crescendo last 2 measures before Letter I

Letter I – tutti: ff

II

The second movement features an amazing Bolero like crescendo, as the same two part melody is played over and over with more and more intensity. Finally a transition leads to a jazzy section for the brass, followed by extended woodwind passages based on the brass theme. A

percussion interlude leads to an ostinato of the first part of the first theme with a chorale melody as a second ostinato. A coda featuring the percussion concludes the movement.

Hindemith's tempo at the opening of quarter note = 132 works well.
I'm a little slower at the Lebhaft, half note = 88

Hindemith's tempo in his recording is also quarter note = 132, and the lebhaft is half note = 84.

The theme can be played very simply, without being overly expressive

Letter B – percussion: 2 ½ measure ostinato leads to the Lebhaft tempo marking

Lebhaft – cello/bass: I suggest the theme to be played with clear articulation, clipped eighth note slurs, and not too heavy

3 after Letter C – I suggest a tenuto quarter note each time that the second part of the theme is played

Letter D – woodwinds: consistent articulations and note lengths

Letter F – woodwinds: connect half notes

3 before Letter H – trumpet and horn: 1st horn needs to play strong, as the 1st trumpet doesn't play the melody the whole way

Letter H – starting at this point, the brass need to adjust their dynamics according to their relative importance.

6 after Letter K – violin 1: intonation is paramount, be sure that players have a fingering that works for them

5 after Letter N and 4 before letter O – tutti: softer so that the horns may be heard more easily

3 after Letter P – I have the second violins play the first violin part until the downbeat of 5 after Letter P so that the first violins are resting from the downbeat of 3 after Letter P, until 5 after Letter P

5 after Letter P – violin 1: This passage is essentially grouped as a six-beat pattern which is heard three times, with a final two quarter beats before the legato begins. I then have the violins play the repeated passages slurred 3 beats at a time until Letter Q, where I have a measure per bow for two measures, and then the last two measures in 1 bow.

Letter Q – brass: for a somewhat jazzy effect, I suggest a short quarter note, and a slightly “ghosted” eighth note (the “and” of the second beat) for each of the thematic brass passages

4 after Letter R – brass: crescendo to mf

6 after Letter R – brass: bring out melody, less accompaniment

5 after Letter S – brass: forte only, then crescendo to 8 after Letter S

10 after Letter S – brass: crescendo to Letter T

3 after Letter T – woodwinds: mf and p contrast must be consistently observed to 4 after Letter V

5 before Letter W – percussion: crescendo to forte only

5 after Letter W – I have the chorale melody played with tenuto quarter notes to contrast with the cello/bass theme

Pickup to 4 after Letter Y – brass: tenuto quarter notes

2 before Letter Z – percussion: players should listen, but not watch the conductor!

2 before Letter Z – tutti: all quarter notes loud enough to counterbalance the percussion

III

The third movement is a simple ABA form, with an original flute obbligato ornamenting the second A section.

Hindemith's tempo marking seems awfully fast – I suggest eighth note = 92-96. Hindemith's recording is eighth note = 96-100

When the flute obbligato starts at 4 before Letter C, perhaps a little faster, eighth note = 100, might be possible.

When starting the movement, I'm careful to remember the horn as well as the clarinet, making sure that my preparation is very clear. The accompaniment must be very quiet, with minimal crescendos in the strings.

4 and 2 before Letter A – violin 1: d string

Letter A – violin 1 and viola: sustain the dotted quarter notes and connect the phrase, leading to the 4th measure

4 after Letter A – flute and bass clarinet: perhaps take a little time into the tranquillo

5 after Letter A – cello: d string

At 5 after Letter A, Hindemith slows down to 80-84, going back to tempo primo at 4 before Letter C

4 before Letter B – violin 1 and viola: start up bow for entire measure, then printed bowing until the 4th bar which is all in one bow

3 after Letter B – tutti: I take a little time at the end of the measure

4 before Letter C – tutti: I suggest staying in strict tempo, and let the flute play with a little rubato as needed, accompaniment even quieter, especially 5 measures before the end. Build to mf at most rather than f 3 measures from the end

IV

The fourth movement is a brilliant march that concludes the piece in thrilling fashion.

Hindemith's marking of half note = 80 seems to work well. Hindemith's recording is the same.

Be sure to give the horns a moment to grab their mutes before starting the last movement. I often take a moment in rehearsal to check the intonation of the muted horns, and to be sure that they are using the same kind of mute.

Measure 6 – strings: keep accompaniment soft enough for the winds to be heard clearly, violin 1, consider staying on the D string rather than the G string where applicable

2 after Letter A – tutti; keep crescendo going until the third bar

4 after Letter A – triangle: score should have a trill four after A just as it does 3 after A. The part is correct.

3rd measure of first ending – brass: crescendo

4th measure of first ending – strings: no accent

1st and 2nd measure of second ending – woodwinds: full half note

3 before Letter C – strings: slur and retake, downbow next measure

2 before Letter D – strings: I do no accent, 2 downbows with small retake

Letter D – horns: mf only, not overly accented

6 after Letter D – trombone 3: sound like 5th horn

7 before Letter F – strings: violin 1 G string, all strings diminuendo to p

5 after Letter F – tutti: crescendo all the way to the 4th bar of the phrase

Second ending after Letter F – woodwinds: no vibrato, cello/bass: with expression

2 after Letter G – clarinets: I like swells a little exaggerated

Pickup to 3 before Letter I and pickup to letter I – strings: exaggerated f pizzicato

5 after Letter I – tutti: grand pause on beat 3

Letter K for 4 measures only – horns: I'm not a big fan of bells up, but I think that it works here, other brass and percussion, softer

Pickup to 5 after Letter K – tutti: f only, crescendo to cadence 8 measures after Letter K

Letter L – increase intensity to the 5th measure after Letter L

4 measures from the end – brass: strong downbeat and decay a little, crescendo on the whole note
3 measures from the end

Next to last bar - second violin: second beat should read Bb for the top note. The part is also wrong