

Listening Guide for Hindemith's
Symphonic Metamorphosis on Themes by Carl Maria Von Weber
From the San Antonio Symphony

The 1940s found composer Paul Hindemith living as an exile in the United States. He and his wife Gertrud had escaped their native Germany just before the outset of World War II. They arrived separately in New York City but settled in New Haven, Connecticut, where Hindemith had been offered a position as a guest professor at Yale University. It would be a productive period for Hindemith, during which some of his most successful works were composed. Among these is his *Symphonic Metamorphosis of Themes by Carl Maria von Weber*, completed in 1943 and premiered by the New York Philharmonic in 1944.

The original idea for this work sprouted from Russian ballet dancer and choreographer Léonide Massine, who approached Hindemith in 1940 about composing a ballet work based on Carl Maria von Weber's music. Weber was a widely-respected opera composer from the early 19th century, and a composer that Hindemith also admired. He began working on sketches of the music at the piano, but the ballet idea fell through when Hindemith saw one of Massine's ballets and disliked it. Rather than throwing his sketches away, Hindemith decided to turn them into a symphonic suite.

Paul and Gertrud often played Weber piano duets together. It was from four such duets by Weber (piano, four hands) that Hindemith took the themes for *Symphonic Metamorphosis*. While keeping Weber's melodies and some accompaniment parts very similar to the original, Hindemith creates masterful "metamorphoses" of them by adding colorful harmonies and orchestration, unusual instrument combinations, new countermelodies, fugal sections, extended phrases and more. In this way, Hindemith bridged the traditional techniques of composers gone before into the realm of his own unique ideas and writing style.

The themes for the first movement of *Symphonic Metamorphosis* come from a piano duet piece by Weber titled "Alla zingara," or "in Gypsy style". The duet piece is in 2/4 time with a tempo marking of "*Allegro, tutto ben marcato*," meaning "quickly, with everything well accented."

To start the movement, Hindemith keeps the 2/4 time signature and "Allegro" marking as well as Weber's syncopated accompaniment, played first by the clarinets, bassoons and horns. Already this is changed, however, with the horns' off beats forming a restless countermelody. Reminiscent of Romani folk music, the melody played by the violins also accentuates off beats, which are further reinforced by trills in the upper woodwinds. In the second half of the first theme, short segments of the melody are played by the woodwinds in parallel fourths and fifths, a technique that would have been outlawed and unheard of in Weber's time.

Hindemith builds excitement in this movement by frequently pitting orchestra families against each other as opposing forces. He does this both by setting them in contrary motion and by giving them opposing rhythms. As woodwinds play a falling motive, violas and cellos noodle

upward with restless 16th notes; then woodwinds rise chromatically while strings descend in pattern. Next, roles are reversed. Orchestra families also seem to be in conflict with frequently opposing rhythmic structure, such as the next example between the brass and strings.

Later sections become even more complex with woodwind, brass and string families all seeming to work against each other rhythmically and directionally at times. A more peaceful second theme is introduced by the oboe, this time in the key of A major key (the movement had begun in A minor). As the oboe continues, Hindemith has the clarinet, flute and piccolo jump in here and there to support and embellish the melody line. The first theme returns, but this time with hair-raising harmonies. Violas and clarinet play the melody with flute and piccolo following along but at parallel intervals, creating what one review described as the sounds of a calliope: the flute plays an octave and a perfect fifth higher while piccolo plays two octaves and a major third higher. Meanwhile, the brass play uneasy and ever-changing offbeat rhythms. After a cacophonous climatic section with each orchestra family enforcing its own theme or countermelody, the instrument sections all come together for a powerful finish, ending on a fortissimo A major chord.

In 1805, Carl Maria von Weber was inspired to write a “Chinese Overture” based on a short melody he had found in a 1768 dictionary to describe Chinese music. The original theme used a pentatonic, or five-note scale, something common to Chinese folk music and often associated to China by European composers of the time. Weber later included his Chinese Overture in incidental music for a play about a princess named Turandot. A piano, four hands version of this Turandot Overture appeared in a volume of duets that Hindemith owned and read through his wife, which gave him inspiration for the second movement of *Symphonic Metamorphosis*.

This movement is titled “Scherzo (Turandot).” A scherzo is a fast piece of music with a playful or amusing quality. It begins with an introductory section in 4/4 time marked “Moderato,” or “at a moderate pace.” A soft note of the chimes on a pianissimo bed of harmonics in the violin and viola set an ethereal mood in the first bar. A single flute and later, piccolo with accompanying woodwinds, intone the Turandot melody, the same theme re-borrowed from Weber but with some new notes and intervals added. Four such solos are punctuated by four notes in the chimes, the same four notes that open the Turandot melody. Finally, percussion instruments take over with a march-like motive that leads into the main section of the movement, marked “*Lebhaft*” (“Lively”). The Turandot melody, twice as fast now, is passed around first in the low strings while woodwinds play countermelodies and fluttering, insect-like trills on the offbeats.

Then roles reverse, similar to the first movement, and woodwinds play the melody while violins have the fluttering trills. Hindemith continues this metamorphosis of the theme with dance-like but driving countermelodies in the clarinets. Meanwhile, oboe and then flute have the melody. Next, horns and trumpet trade off under what’s become a sea of swirling trills. Trombone follow with the melody as the cellos and then violas softly begin a wandering, triplet countermelody. Roles reverse, and momentum continues to build as woodwinds, brass and strings switch frequently between playing the melody, triplet countermelody and trill accompaniment. With a great cymbal crash, the music has reached a climax. It’s as if a ship has

struck a great rock and begins to sink in swirling water as brass play a descending line. Violins continue a noodling triplet line until trombones enter with a syncopated motive that might be a reaction to Hindemith's impressions of American jazz. While the effect is very different, Hindemith has ingeniously used the same theme as that of the *Turandot* melody but with the notes simply reordered and re-spaced.

Horns, trumpet and tuba follow with this new "jazzy" Turandot in a short, fugue-like section. Pieces of the new melody are broken down into smaller and smaller bits until the timpani take over powerfully with the repeated jazzy motive. Another fugue-like section follows, this time in the woodwinds and featuring a new, staccato countersubject. Eventually, the woodwinds die away and the percussion section takes the spotlight. Here, the original four-note motive that begins the *Turandot* is played by both the timpani and chimes but at differing speeds as the sound swells and dies away. In something of a recap of the *Lebhaft* section, cellos and basses follow with a repeated *Turandot* theme, but soon clarinets and bassoons introduce a new countermelody. The new theme follows a mixed meter that includes some measures with three beats.

This continues to build steam with a certain determination as more and more instruments join in. Then musical fireworks explode as another climax marked by cymbal crash is reached. The four-note *Turandot* slowly dies away in the percussion until the end of the movement, as if the departing procession of the Chinese princess has finally moved out of sight across the horizon.

The third movement from *Symphonic Metamorphosis* was inspired by a Weber piano duet piece marked "Andantino con moto" ("slightly faster than a walking pace, with motion") and written in $\frac{6}{8}$ time. Hindemith keeps the "Andantino" but has left off "con moto," perhaps with a desire for a slightly slower pace than Weber's original. The tuneful opening of the first piano part is played by solo clarinet with accompaniment in the horn and strings.

A tremolo flute part adds a restless sense of expectation. While the melody and accompaniment follow Weber closely, Hindemith has modified the harmony to include rich 9th and 11th chords. The tune is passed around to bassoon, horn and eventually violins and viola, which grow it into something of a climax before leading into the next section, marked "*tranquillo*" ("tranquil, peaceful"). Here, a very songful melody, but still Weber's, is introduced by the clarinets and cellos. A meandering accompaniment in the violas reminiscent of Weber's second piano part develops into a power countermelody which the woodwinds play in parallel fourths and fifths. This stacks up against a newly-composed extension of the theme played by the strings. Tensions build, but soon subside as the *tranquillo* melody returns, this time played by the flute, English horn, clarinet, French horn and cello. An extended flute solo provides a florid *obligato* over a recap of the original Andantino theme to finish out the movement.

Hindemith ends *Symphonic Metamorphosis* with a powerful March ("Marsch," in German) in cut time. Inspiration comes from a Weber piano duet marked "Maestoso" ("Majestically") and clearly depicting a solemn funeral march, yet Hindemith has transformed it into one of significantly quicker pace. The movement opens with powerful brass calls in the trumpet and

trombone. In-between these calls, Hindemith has the horns create something of a resonant echo, but one with unexpected and colorful harmonies. Woodwinds lead with the melody while strings accompany with a boisterous march motive.

Later, roles reverse, and strings take over the melody, this time forte. In a more lighthearted section, the horn calls in the middle part of Weber's piano duet are taken over by real horns as woodwinds provide triplet accompaniment. An anticlimactic recap of the movement opening is softly played by woodwinds, but trombones follow with the march melody. This time, strings accompany with light pizzicato. Returning horn calls, this time accompanied by the full orchestra, bring the work to an exuberant finish.

Hindemith once vaguely described his *Symphonic Metamorphosis of Themes by Carl Maria von Weber* as "lightly colored and made a bit sharper." Howard Posner, in his program notes for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, calls the work "a splashy, colorful orchestral piece of the sort that American audiences in particular seemed to like." Indeed, the work gained swift popularity in America both during and after the Second World War, and several arrangements were made so that it could also be performed by military and concert band. Today, *Symphonic Metamorphosis* is highly regarded not just by Americans, but around the world as a beloved work of 20th century classical music.