

The music of...

**Rankl
Sprongl
& Hindemith**

Leon
Bosch
Double
Bass

Sung-Suk
Kang
Piano

Meridian



Norbert Sprongl (1892-1983), Karl Rankl (1898-1968) and Paul Hindemith (1895-1963): all three were born in broadly the same part of the world (Austria and Germany) in the same decade and all lived well into the second half of the 20th century. Two of them took the decision to leave the Nazi regime, taking citizenship in their host nation before moving on elsewhere. One is barely known at all; one is known in certain circles, but as an opera conductor rather than as a composer; one is very well known, but largely on the basis of a handful of pieces that scarcely reflects the range of his skill and creativity.

He, of course, is Paul Hindemith. Although eclipsed by the reputation, popularity and influence of other major 20th century composers – Mahler, Stravinsky, Bartok, Schoenberg and so on – he was a significant figure and his achievements are numerous and diverse. He advised Ataturk's government on the establishment of a music education system in modern Turkey. He was for a time artistic director of the contemporary music festival in Donaueschingen. He collaborated with Bertolt Brecht, although the two quickly fell out, and amused himself drawing silly caricatures and cartoons, sometimes even on his manuscripts. He was a successful viola player who wrote himself a difficult sonata on a train from New York, performing it in a concert on his arrival in Chicago. (Perhaps, as a model railway enthusiast who enjoyed playing long into the night with fellow enthusiast, the pianist Artur Schnabel, he was simply inspired by the surroundings.) His music was singled out in the 1938 exhibition of so-called 'Degenerate Music' in Düsseldorf, and he took himself and his wife into exile in Switzerland to escape the dangerous political climate in Berlin.

But undoubtedly, his prolific composing is the major legacy. He gave up issuing opus numbers for his music in 1930 when he got to 50, which actually apply to well over 50 individual works – there are six sonatas in the opus 11 set, for example. Exceptionally, he wrote at

least one sonata with piano for every orchestral instrument barring percussion – the double bass sonata is one of the last in the series – not to mention three for organ and one for viola d'amore, and concertante works featuring all of these instruments in some solo capacity or other. What is more, these were all instruments he learned to play, apart from the harp. With operas, songs, ballets, solo piano and chamber music and even an early foray into writing for electronic instruments (the trauteonium), there are well over 400 items of music by Hindemith in the catalogue of his publisher, Schott.

Not only did he write copiously, he wrote quickly and without a great deal of preliminary planning, relying on his creative ingenuity, technical skill in counterpoint and orchestration and highly developed ideas on harmonic theory. The *Sonata for Double Bass and Piano* (1949) is a case in point since Hindemith wrote it over two days in August while on holiday in New Mexico. It was premiered in Vienna the following April by Otto Rühm, principal double bass with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.

It is a neat, concise piece in which the taut sonority of the double bass finds an agreeable contrast with the delicately percussive piano. The first movement, based on a couple of simple themes, starts as a perky march that is soon thrown out of step by a constantly changing meter, piano and double bass falling in and out of step with each other. The second is a gossamer scherzo, gone with one last offbeat peck from the piano. The last movement is the most substantial, a series of six variations on the noble lament introduced by the double bass, the piano making her presence increasingly felt as the tension grows with each section. A Recitativo, however, clears the air and all is well at the end: the opening theme turns into a jolly folksong, its rhythm slightly altered to recall the very start of the piece.

It would be fanciful to suggest that sonata's energy and jazzier moments reveal the influence of America on

Hindemith, given that these qualities are in abundance in his work from the earliest times. But he had been living in the USA with his wife Gertrude since 1940, teaching composition at Yale University. Despite an initial wariness about the country on his first visits, they lived there happily, gaining US citizenship in 1946. But it would not be long after he had written the sonata, and with most of his major works behind him, that the University of Zurich approached him with an offer that would eventually lead to the Hindemiths' definitive return to Europe in 1953. Their residence at Blonay, by Lake Geneva, is today home to the Hindemith Foundation. There is a separate research faculty, the Hindemith Institute, at the music college in Frankfurt, the city where he died in 1963 and where his career began.

There are, however, no such establishments given over to Norbert Sprongl, not even one of those dedicated societies that are the salvation of many an otherwise forgotten composer. Born 1892 in Obermarkersdorf, a village in Lower Austria near what is now the Czech border, he died in 1983 in the town of Mödling, a short distance south of Vienna. He wrote a substantial amount: the 166 works with opus numbers include five piano concertos, two violin concertos, four symphonies (there are some 40 orchestral works), songs and chamber music, not to mention a trio for three double basses to go alongside the two double bass sonatas.

Yet he is little known even in Austria, despite earning a certain amount of recognition during his lifetime in the form of honours and prizes such as the Austrian Cross of Honour for Science and Art in 1968 and the City of Vienna Medal of Honour in 1970. It was in that city in 1915 that he began studying composition with Joseph Marx, as well as piano and music history, at the Vienna Music Academy. By then, he had already embarked on a career as a school teacher, but would retire in 1945 after 34 years in the profession, taking up residence in Mödling in 1947 to devote himself full time to

composing.

The two sonatas for double bass, though similar in length and sharing a fast-slow-fast three-movement structure, are otherwise contrasting pieces. The second *Sonata (op 132)* for double bass and piano was written in 1961 for Lajos Montag, principal double bass in the Budapest Opera orchestra and a professor at the city's conservatory, where he taught Leon Bosch's own teacher Zoltan Kovats. It is the darker of the pair, at least in its first two movements: a rather lugubrious exploration of a simple thematic idea (its rhythm closely resembles the opening of Ravel's string quartet), followed by a more free-ranging song that emerges from a double bass drone and builds to an impassioned climax. The finale is a rondo with the flavour of a danse macabre in its somewhat livelier character.

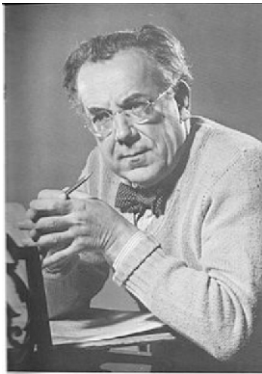
In that respect, it more closely matches the first *Sonata (op 74)* for double bass and piano, its outer movements so reminiscent of Prokofiev and of Ravel in his bluesier frame of mind, notably in the piano writing. Published in 1953, it is dedicated to Johann Krump, principal double bass with the Vienna Philharmonic. The second movement is a particularly expressive piece of *Nachtmusik*, profound and ruminating, that extends over the entire range of the double bass. It is hard to imagine it sounding anything like as compelling on any other instrument.

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In some ways the composition of the *Sonata Concertante for Double Bass and Piano* could be seen as a mere diversion in the prolific composing career of Karl Rankl. He was primarily a symphonist and the writer of vocal works. Yet this piece holds a unique place in the composer's catalogue. It is Rankl's only composition for a solo



instrument and it was written as a gift for the double bass player whose sound and personality inspired the work, Stuart Knussen. Born near Vienna in 1898 Karl Rankl was to become a pupil of Schoenberg and Webern and thoroughly educated in their pioneering approach to modern music though he was not a follower of the twelve-tone method of composition which he believed too mathematical. "Atonal is complicated enough for me" he said. As he took his first steps as a composer he also began his conducting career. An appointment in 1922 as



chorus master at the Volksoper in Vienna led to an Assistant Conductor post with that company under Felix Weingartner. Further appointments followed. From 1928 -31 he was assistant to Otto Klemperer at Kroll Oper in Berlin but when Hitler became

Chancellor of Germany Rankl returned to Austria and eventually to Prague before taking refuge in England in 1939.

During the war years Karl Rankl was unable to work officially so he devoted himself to his composition and also playing the viola in a string quartet. As his presence and reputation became known he was offered conducting work with the London

Philharmonic and the Liverpool Philharmonic orchestras for expenses only until taking British Citizenship. In 1946, he was asked to take up the position of Music Director of the newly formed Covent Garden Opera Company at the Royal Opera House by General Administrator, David Webster, formerly Chairman of the Liverpool orchestra. Rankl's vast experience and tireless energy over a period of 5 years were crucial in establishing this new venture as the word class institution now known as the Royal Opera.

In 1952 Karl Rankl became Principal Conductor of the Scottish National Orchestra in Glasgow where he was to remain until 1957. For the first two years of this period the Principal double bass of the SNO was the young Mancunian, Stuart Knussen. Born in 1923, Knussen was a third generation orchestral musician, largely self-taught, who at the age of 20 had joined the Hallé Orchestra at a time, during WW2, when many musicians had been enlisted to the armed forces. John Barbirolli had been hired by the Halle to keep the depleted orchestra functioning. Auditions were held and positions were filled by promising youngsters, school teachers and brass band players.

Within months of joining the Hallé Knussen had been promoted to the co-principal position of the bass section and remained there until 1948 learning the symphonic repertoire from a great musician and conductor.

Following a two year spell in the United States as Principal Bass of the Kansas City Symphony, Knussen returned to Britain to join the Scottish National at the point it became a full time professional body of players. Karl Rankl obviously

liked Stuart Knussen as a player and a person. Knussen was never afraid of conductors and befriended them throughout his career, and Rankl would often consult with key players of the orchestra on the finer points of their respective instruments with regard to his compositions. On the 26th of June 1953 Stuart Knussen performed the Handel G Minor Double Bass Concerto (a transcription of the Oboe Concerto No. 3) with the orchestra at St. Andrew's Hall, Glasgow under Karl Rankl's direction, and it is assumed that Rankl, who was impressed by Knussen's performance, had this sound in his head when he began writing the Sonata Concertante for Knussen. A hand-written letter from Rankl dated 29th July 1957 begins:

Dear Stuart,

Here is the 2nd movement. I hope I did justice to your singing quality.

By this time Stuart Knussen was Principal Bass of the BBC Symphony Orchestra and soon to join the London Symphony for the major part of his career. It is not known whether he ever performed the Sonata in public but he cherished the handwritten autograph score which he kept until

Dear Stuart,

Here is the 2nd movement. I hope I did justice to your singing quality!

There are a few things I should like to mention:

on page 3

of the piano copy (6th bar)

your Flageol. is meant to sound ! Should I have

written  ??? Please correct it yourself.

page 5 (10th bar)

again your Flageol. is meant to sound 

again should I have written ? Please correct it yourself

~~the~~ Everything else is written an octave higher than the actual sound.

page 5 last line. Please take it as slowly as need be to produce crystal-clear notes. You know the first two bars are like a question to which you as the

angel of heaven answers and so on. To us your best.

If the key is to your instruments liking, you need not say any more — if not — well then if you have to sit down and write to me in detail?.

Yours Karl Rankl

his death in 1990.

Rankl left Scotland to work in Australia and subsequently retired to St. Gilgen, Austria to concentrate on composition. Tragically he never had a publisher, and very few of his compositions have ever been performed. He died in 1968 and his entire catalogue including 8 symphonies, an opera ('Deirdre of the Sorrows'), an oratorio ('Der Mensch') and numerous other choral works, 60 songs and a string quartet, were donated to the library of the Kunst University of Graz, Austria. At the ceremony to mark this event the Double Bass Sonata was performed.

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'What I do know is that I'd like to live to be at least 100 years old, because there's so much more still to do and I'm impatient to get on with all those wonderful things.'

Leon Bosch

Now a British citizen, **Leon Bosch** grew up in 1960s and 70s South Africa, enrolling at the University of Cape Town to study the cello only because he was prevented by apartheid authorities from studying law. He soon switched to the double bass, dedicating himself to it with the kind of commitment that remains characteristic of him today.

His first teacher was Zoltan Kovats. 'In addition to teaching me to play the instrument he taught me the true value of hard work. He was demanding, to the point of exhaustion, but the harder I worked, the more talented I became!'

After graduating, and thanks to the generosity of private benefactors, Bosch moved to the UK to continue his studies at the Royal Northern College of Music. He has remained in the country since, combining orchestral work with chamber music and solo performing, both internationally and at home.

Principal Double Bass with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields until recently, Leon also held the post of principal with the Manchester Camerata. He has performed as concerto soloist many times with distinguished conductors including Sir Charles Groves and Pinchas Zukerman.

His recordings, mostly for Meridian, include several recital and virtuoso discs with pianist Sung-Suk Kang, as well as concertos by Allan Stephenson with the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra and Carl Dittersdorf with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. He has also been instrumental in reviving the work of the neglected Catalan double bass virtuoso, Josep Cervera, helping bring to light over 60 original works for the instrument in first editions as well as a recording.

In 2013, he founded the ensemble I Musicanti, a hand-picked ensemble dedicated to presenting distinctive programmes in a spirit of artistic freedom. Alongside projects with this group, Bosch's future plans include several recordings, among them more Cervera; a volume of specially commissioned British music; music by Dittersdorf's contemporary, Vanhal; and a disc of sonatas by Hindemith, Karl Rankl and Norbert Spongl.

Leon is also professor of double bass at Trinity Laban College, and is in demand as a teacher at masterclasses, festivals and summer schools around the world.

'While it is almost certainly true that experience can not be hurried, if my own personal journey has taught me anything, it is that I have an obligation not only to share the knowledge I have been privileged to acquire, but also to provide some challenges, guidance and perspective to the next generations.'

Bosch also holds a masters degree in international relations. 'I've always had a very wide range of interests. For example, the thing I'm highest qualified for in my life is international relations, not music. But this a part of who I am: I'm not just a musician, I'm a human being.'

www.leonbosch.com

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Pianist **Sung-Suk Kang** was born in Seoul, Korea. After winning prizes in the competitions in Korea she was given a scholarship to continue her studies at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester with Derrick Wyndham and later at the Vienna Musikhochschule with renowned pianist and scholar Paul Badura-Skoda to whom she acted as assistant. This rewarding experience was swiftly followed by another when she was hand-picked to attend the Performers' Course at Banff Center for the Arts in Canada. These invaluable experiences paid professional and artistic dividends when she returned to Europe and took first prize in the Schumann international competition in Italy resulting in a string of engagements.

Her activities in recitals, concertos and chamber music have taken her across eastern and western Europe, to North and South America, and the Far East. Her many broadcasts on radio and television world-wide have showcased her varied repertoire which ranges from Bach to Berg.

In more recent years, Sung-Suk was invited to record for Meridian, and her discs of Chopin, Schumann and now Mozart are a valuable contribution to the company's catalogue. She still resides in Vienna where she successfully balances a life of Professor at the Conservatoire, performing and recording artist, and mother.



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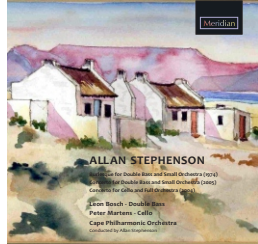
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