

From Arnold to Zappa or Creating a Repertoire

by Tim Reynish

Tim Reynish discusses the development of Wind Ensemble repertoire from the perspective of two decades at the Royal Northern College of Music.

In the past twenty years, I have become increasingly convinced that the wind ensemble is the finest training medium for wind, brass and percussion players that exists, in the right repertoire

If your band can play, for instance, *Irish Tune from County Derry* with balanced brass, with the high wind in tune and making a fine sound, with the range of dynamics from *ffff* to *ppp* that he demands in the closing bars, with unanimous phrasing, breathing, then it's a very good band

Similarly, a band that can achieve a flexibility of dynamics and subtlety of phrasing needed in the Grainger *Colonial Song* or the the tuning and balance in the second movement of the Holst *Second Suite*, that can cope with the stamina and rhythmic problems of Elizabeth Maconchy's *Music for Wind and Brass*, or the problems of articulation, balance and subtle varieties of pace in Magnus Lindberg's new *Gran Duo*; that band has got qualities with professional potential

In the Wind Ensemble, the woodwind have to cover a vast range of dynamics and a wide tessitura, with good intonation and tone; there is no hiding place behind a blanket of strings. They have to balance up to the brass, as well as playing 'kaum hörbar', (scarcely audible) as Mahler demands. The brass have to be able to thrill and excite, as most brass sections do, but also they must have the control and sensitivity to play as a chamber group with the woodwind. All of the players must be able to accompany and to emerge as soloists; with a perfect internal balance in each section. Meanwhile, the percussion, piano and harp need to learn quickly that the placing of the note varies with the placing of the chord or melodic motif. And everyone, including the percussion, needs to re-think their attitude to phrasing, dynamics and balance, conditioned by the melody, the harmony and the architecture of the work

At the Royal Northern College of Music in the past two decades, we used the Wind Orchestra as the basis for this type of ensemble training and also as a vehicle for the development of a significant new repertoire. Twenty years ago it consisted of Holst, Vaughan Williams and Grainger, with orchestral pieces by Stravinsky and Messiaen, and a couple of hired works by Bedford and Gregson. Now, thanks to my students at the College, and colleagues in BASBWE, we have about 500 works of different levels and calibre published, and the best works are being played and recorded worldwide.

Statistics can be used in a variety of ways, and are often meaningless, but the bald figures on

performances at the Royal Northern College of Music over the past two decades do give indications of an attempt to establish a repertoire for the wind band and wind ensemble in this country. Out of 1032 performances of works, the following composers emerged as 'Top of the Pops'. Percy Grainger scored highly because he has written so many shorter pieces, and because we have recorded all of his original wind works for Chandos. However, a work such as *Lincolnshire Posy* is both standard repertoire and terribly hard; each generation needs to know this masterpiece, and we hope we have added *Marching Song of Democracy* and *The Power of Rome and the Christian Heart* to the growing list of substantial repertoire pieces.

The works of Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams were quoted by Frederick Fennell as the basis for the whole development of 20th century wind literature, and again *Hammersmith* is a

Number of Performances by RNCM Ensembles during the past two decades

64	Percy Grainger	7	Leonard Bernstein
42	Gustav Holst	7	Hector Berlioz
30	Richard Rodney Bennett	7	Paul Hindemith
26	Edward Gregson	7	Darius Milhaud
24	David Bedford	7	Wolfgang Mozart
21	Anthony Gilbert	6	John Adams
20	Igor Stravinsky	6	Michael Colgrass
20	Guy Woolfenden	6	Felix Mendelssohn
19	Philip Wilby	6	Nikos Skalkottas
17	Vaughan Williams	6	Michael Tippett
15	Martin Ellerby	6	Geoff Poole
14	Adam Gorb	5	Irwin Bazelon
11	Elizabeth Maconchy	5	Frank Bridge
11	James MacMillan	5	Aaron Copland
10	John Casken	5	John Corigliano
10	Camille Saint-Saëns	5	Ingolf Dahl
9	Tristan Keuris	5	George Gershwin
9	John McCabe	5	Edward Harper
9	Olivier Messiaen	5	Arnold Schoenberg
9	Thea Musgrave	5	Günther Schuller
9	Marcel Wengler	4	Nigel Clarke
8	Michael Ball	4	Bill Connor
8	Buxton Orr	4	Jean Françaix
8	Nicholas Maw	4	Aulis Sallinen
8	David Maslanka	4	Ole Schmidt
8	Richard Strauss	4	Florent Schmitt

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Looking through the list, a pattern emerges of established composers whose works are the backbone of the 'core' repertoire, alongside pieces which either we have commissioned, or which have been 'discovered' and brought back to the repertoire. This development of repertoire has been a primary concern, so that while we have played the major works of Stravinsky, Messiaen, Berlioz, Hindemith, Schoenberg regularly, new works have figured significantly. Sir Richard Rodney Bennett has contributed three major works to the wind ensemble repertoire, and this is reflected in his status at number three, including performances at Cheltenham, Aldeburgh and Warsaw International Contemporary Festivals. It is encouraging to think of the generations of wind,

brass and percussion students who have played the post-serial works of Bennett regularly, alongside other major 20th century composers. Gregson, Bedford, Woolfenden, Wilby, Ellerby, Gorb and the late Buxton Orr all have a growing international profile, thanks to the RNCM and BASBWE. Tougher pieces by MacMillan, Keuris, Musgrave, Maw, Casken, Clarke and Sallinen are being increasingly played by the top ensembles in America and Japan.

Perhaps we have chauvinistically concentrated on our own composers, and somewhat neglected American stalwarts such as Colgrass, Copland, Corigliano, Dahl, Maslanka, Schwantner and Schuller, though in the earlier years, we presented these regularly, together with composers like Warren Benson, Irwin Bazelon, William Schuman, Chance, Husa, and Varese. One proud boast is that all of our commissions are published, most are on sale and readily available. Other works are awaiting publication including three works which we have brought back to the repertoire, the heart-rending *Sinfonia In Memoriam Benjamin Britten* by Peter Racine Fricker, Ole Schmidt's delightful *Homage to Stravinsky* and the complete *Versuche über einen Marsch* by Marcel Wengler. It has taken nearly two decades to persuade Ernest Tomlinson to re-orchestrate his splendid *English Folk Dances*, and this will be published in the wind band version this Spring, played at BASBWE/RNCM International Wind Festival.

Works to explore in the coming decade include the European and Japanese repertoire, especially the recent works of Messiaen, and composers such as de Vries. I can no longer look to the School of Wind and Percussion to fund commissions, so at present I have commissioned wholly or partly new works by Steve McNeff for the RNCM, Edwin Roxburgh for Sefton, a wind arrangement of *Little Red Riding Hood* by Paul Patterson and Roald Dahl and a new work by the Latvian composer, Peteris Plakidis, both of which will need a premiere later this year somewhere. There are commissions in

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the pipe-line too, a joint commission with the Irish Youth Wind Orchestra from Michael Ball, another based on the Basket Islands of the West of Ireland from Matthew Taylor, works from Akira Miyoshi, David Del Tredici and Aulis Sallinen for the WASBE Conference in 2003, and another from Luciano Berio for 2004, possibly one from John Adams. I am still as passionate about the medium as I was back in 1981 when I first discovered it, and thanks to email and the internet I am constantly finding colleagues from outside the UK equally enthusiastic. It really is the musical medium of the 21st century, so keep commissioning! And I wish that Arnold and Zappa had written more for the medium and qualified for the Top Fifty.