

## Some Thoughts on Instrumentation

*from a composer's point of view - Michael Short*

I've often said that scoring for the wind band is rather like writing a string quartet when you are not quite sure whether a second violin will be available.

Of course, I am talking here about the band as distinct from the wind ensemble of specific instrumentation, which is quite a different animal. A properly-constituted band should obviously include all the necessary instruments, played by competent players, but by its very nature the wind band is an inclusive and social activity - a group of people making music together for their own and the listeners' enjoyment, so why should any musician be excluded on grounds of artistic purity? There are some bands who don't even hold auditions and accept anyone who happens to possess an instrument (actually, some of these bands sound quite good!), but most require some basic competence from players wishing to join the band. But should you accept all comers with, say, Grade 5 or above, regardless of the musical needs of the band?

As a composer, my main objective in scoring is to achieve a proper balance between the parts, which is especially important in modern music where every line in the texture is important and each note in the harmony counts just as much as the others. It is of course possible simply to double all the lines all the way through and hope for the best, but this is hardly allows for contrast or subtlety of scoring. In order to achieve the best balance, I think that the traditional analogy with the symphony orchestra is the best method - i.e. that the clarinets take the role of the strings, while the remaining woodwind, brass and percussion fulfil a similar function to their counterparts in an orchestra.

This implies a similar kind of balance within the band to that which might be found in an orchestra. I imagine say three or four players on each of the B-flat clarinet parts, to balance single players on each of the brass parts, and other woodwind numbers accordingly. But sometimes I get a shock. I was invited to a performance of one of my own compositions and was horrified to see single players on each of the clarinet parts, but three players on each of the trumpet and trombone parts, plus two euphoniums and two tubas - i.e. three clarinets versus twenty-two brass plus horns - and 'versus' was certainly the right word -

the clarinets didn't stand a chance. The same sort of problems appear in other sections - sometimes a commissioning band will tell me that they only have one flute, whereas others have as many as eighteen - how can a composer score so that a reasonable balance is produced in such varying circumstances?

To conductors, I say: be inclusive by all means, but please have regard for musical integrity. It may be necessary to adopt a waiting-list system for eager applicants if a particular instrument is already sufficiently represented in the band. Sometimes it is good to allow new blood to sit in beside old hands to get the feel of the music, but this should not be done at the expense of the musical result. In certain demanding pieces it may be necessary to include 'bumper' players to take some of the load from the shoulders of the principals, but otherwise a system of alternative personnel for various pieces on the programme might go some way to solving the problem.

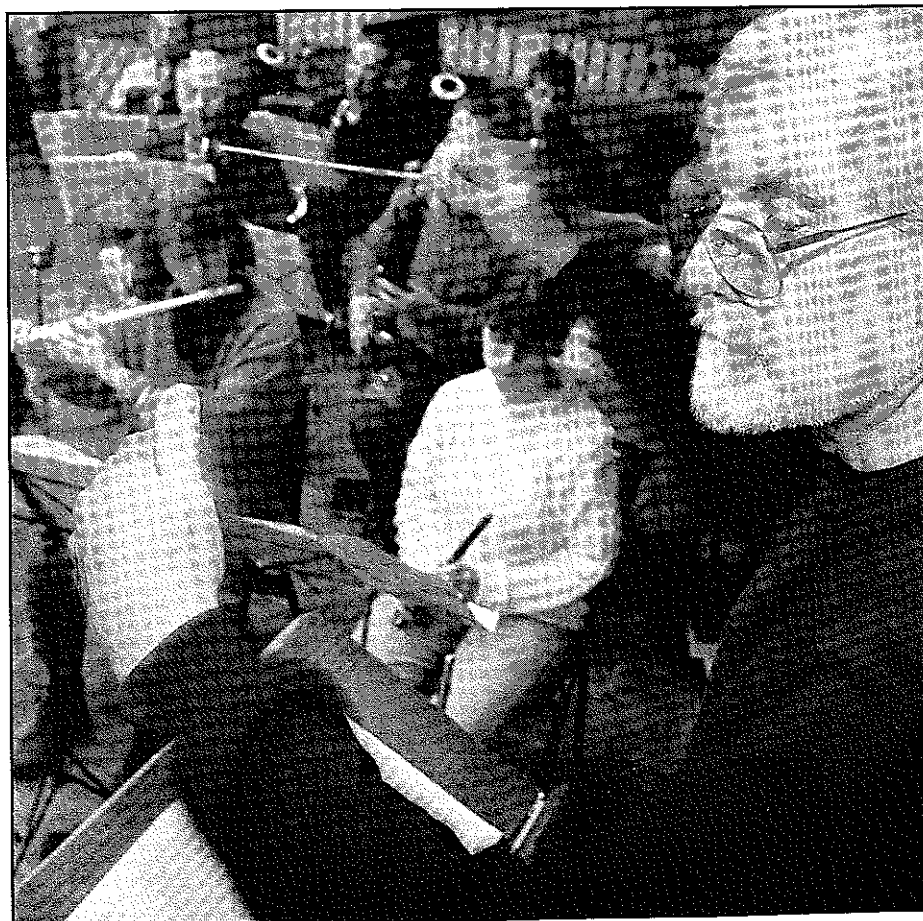
Moreover, acoustics are a vital factor in achieving a good overall sound, and in the varying circumstances of performance spaces conductors should not hesitate to remove

instruments or add them to obtain the best balance - i.e. making 'a2' into 'solo' and vice-versa. Incidentally, scores are often unclear as to what is meant by terms such as 'solo' and 'a2' - although these indicate whether only one or both parts allocated to a staff should be playing, they do not show the actual number of players envisaged. To avoid confusion, I try to use terms such as 'one player', 'two players', or 'tutti', where appropriate. In the case of absent instruments, cross-cueing is the obvious answer, but the composer can never be sure whether the alternative instrument will be available, which leads to complicated triple-cueing and consequent over-burdening of parts with confusing detail.

I would like to make a few comments about particular instruments which have concerned me over the years:

### Trumpets and Cornets

I've often seen these mixed together haphazardly in brass sections, but it seems to me that they are quite different instruments. I always write for the bright sound of the trumpets, as used in the symphony orchestra, whereas the more mellow cornet sound



seems more appropriate to the brass band, where it blends well with the other instruments. When cornets are mixed with trumpets the resulting sound is often muddy, being neither one tone-colour nor the other, unless the composer has written separate parts for these instruments, which used to be the case in many older military band scores

## Horns

The same kind of comments also apply to the practice of mixing F horns and E-flat horns. The full, rounded sound of the F horn is quite different from the tauter, narrower sound of the E-flat. Also, because the fundamental of the E-flat horn is a whole tone lower than that of the F horn, the players of the E-flat horn have to play in a slightly higher register if they are given F horn parts, thus resulting in stress and insecurity of intonation. In the symphony orchestra, single players on each of the four horn parts are sufficient to balance the rest of the instruments, but in the band rather more horn sound is needed. The horn section is therefore a good candidate for the inclusion of 'bumper' players, particularly as these instruments tend to play more than they would in a symphony orchestra - but let them all be F horn players!

## Euphonium and Baritone

The baritone seems to be disappearing from British wind bands, to be replaced by the more mellow sound of the euphonium, but I am not sure that this is a satisfactory trend. Apart from certain famous solo passages, the euphonium part is often confined to the middle register, filling in the texture with countermelodies and harmony, and the instrument should therefore be appropriate to this role. The baritone, with its 'narrower' sound is more suited to modern harmony, thus avoiding a muddy sound, whereas the beautifully rounded sound of the euphonium blends better in a brass band context. Two euphoniums are often to be seen in wind bands, sometimes even when there is only one tuba, but care should be taken to ensure that the middle register lines are not given undue emphasis.

## Tubas

The octave doublings often seen in bass parts are usually intended to provide alternative notes where the part goes out of the range of the E-flat or the B-flat instruments, rather than to produce a strong octave sound. When players are playing both parts, care should be taken to avoid undue emphasis of the bass, and one of the players may have to drop out in certain phrases to ensure a reasonable balance against the upper parts.

## E-flat Clarinet

This instrument is frequently used to emphasise upper lines in louder passages, but is often difficult to control, and needs a really good player to achieve a result which is effective yet musical. If its role is merely to double other instruments, the E-flat clarinet can often be dispensed with altogether, particularly in loud passages where the incisive sound of oboes and flutes doubled in octaves is sufficient to produce the required effect.

## Alto Clarinet

Although very useful in the clarinet choir, where it fills in the gap between B-flat clarinets and bass clarinet, this instrument is rather superfluous in the wind band. The band's middle register is already quite crowded enough, particularly if there is a full complement of saxophones, so there is no real point in scoring for the alto clarinet.

## Contrabass clarinet

I wish that more bands had this wonderful instrument, but I recognise that cost usually precludes it. Although the bassoon is very versatile in capable hands, it cannot match the mercurial character of the contrabass clarinet (which seems to resemble a piece of central-heating plumbing), and if the latter were more widely available, composers would be able to take a completely fresh approach to their woodwind bass lines.

## Valve trombone

Having dismissed both the cornet and the E-flat horn, I am nevertheless willing to accept this relative of theirs into the wind band. Although suffering from intonation problems compared to the 'normal' trombone, this is offset by the instrument's versatility and rapid articulation, as evidenced by the playing of Bob Brookmeyer and certain Russian symphony orchestras. We composers would like more of these more unusual instruments to play with!

These are a few of my own random thoughts on instrumentation - does anyone beg to differ?

Michael Short

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