

Eastman Wind Ensemble Celebrates 50 Years

Brendon Le Page

Fifty years ago, on 8th February 1952, the Eastman Wind Ensemble gave its first performance directed by Frederick Fennell in the Eastman Theatre. This event sparked a new way of looking at wind music, which has resonated down the decades to the present day.

During a four-day celebration, together with a regional College Band Directors National Association conference, many of the major figures in the movement gathered to give their perspective on events, then and since.

Ithaconnections

A particular nexus of events and people occurred in up-state New York in the early 1950's, as people such as Fennell, Battisti, Husa, Hunsberger, Benson at Ithaca College and Eastman School of Music influenced one another.

The first day of the conference explored the rich history of the education of band musicians at Ithaca College, and there relations with Eastman

Patrick Conway

Conway anticipated the decline of the professional wind band in the '20s and saw the future lay in school and college bands, and in 1922 the Conway Military Band School opened its doors. Closely allied to the Ithaca Conservatory of Music which had existed since 1892, the Military Band School's legacy was the corps of well-educated musicians who left the band school and went to the schools and colleges throughout the USA - including Walter Beeler

Walter Beeler

Beeler, a champion of bands and music

education conducted the Ithaca College Concert band for 40 years. An inspirational teacher, he inculcated a love of music, and championed the transcription of works by Persichetti, Bernstein, Kabalevsky and others. He espoused in particular blend, balance, and intonation. Fanatical about sonority and resonance, he would demonstrate on his own instrument. Occasionally demanding and even frightening, Beeler approached the band from the band tradition, whereas Fennell approached it from an orchestral tradition.

Frank Battisti

In his book *One Band that Took a Chance*, Brian Norcross describes how Frank Battisti became the band director at Ithaca High School, greeting his new students with the words: "You will be the best band around". He held daily rehearsals, sectionals before and after school, and on Saturdays. Battisti studied with Warren Benson at Ithaca College in evenings - and Fred Fennell was a frequent guest at the High School. Both these people influenced Battisti's concept of programming and commissioning new works.

The Ithaca High School's commissioning project is unique for the its long tradition, the quality of composers and the close involvement of the students.

For example, Hovanness' *Symphony No 19*, was written for the New York Philharmonic, and his *Symphony No 20* for Ithaca High School. To sustain the commissioning project the pupils sold magazines to pay for them. Integration of arts formed part of the band's curriculum - pupils read and wrote poems, which were then set as songs by a composer in residence.

Then followed a performance of Benson's *Remembrance*, after a very affecting story of how it came to be composed by Benson at the request of the pupils as a birthday present for their conductor. Comprising a chorale and inversions, the countersubject allowed each student to pay his or her own respects. Mexican rhythms give

rhythmic life and an exciting conclusion.

The Ithaca Wind Symphony performed Beeler's transcription of the Overture to *Candide* and Benson's *Remembrance*. Characterised by honey-like warmth, smoothness, transparency and colour, Steve Peterson is achieving a synthesis of Beeler/Winter influences with this group.

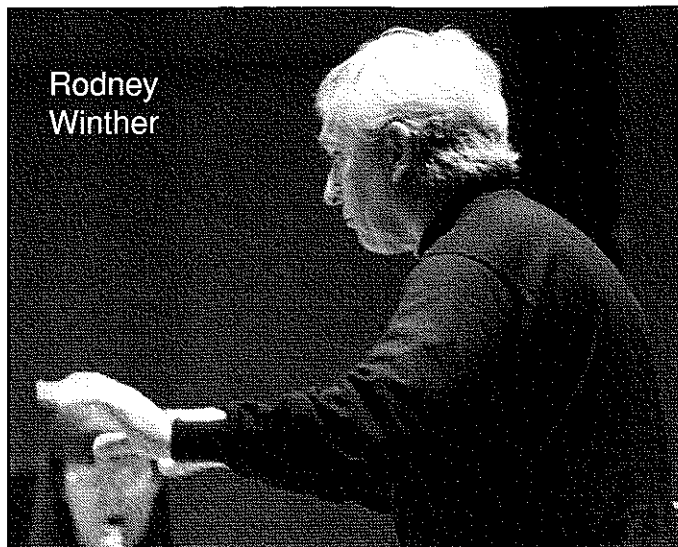
That evening the Ithaca Wind Symphony gave the première of Steven Stucky's *Concerto for Solo Percussionist and Wind Orchestra*, and Dana Wilson's wind transcription of his own concerto for horn, effortlessly played by Gail Williams, followed by Husa's *Concerto for Wind Ensemble*.

The Eastman Wind Ensemble

The following morning saw performances in the Kilbourn Hall of some items from the first EWE concert 50 years previously, including works by Willaert, Scheidt, DiLasso, Gabrieli, Beethoven and Ruggels. According to Fennell, some of the repertoire ideas stemmed from a weekly broadcast series over 26 weeks on history of music on Rural Radio sponsored by the local association of Milk Producers. Howard Hanson resurrected the early pieces and scored them for winds - the original scores are in Sibley library.

The Mercury recordings began with a project to record all the Eastman ensembles, and Fennell was offered one I.P. to represent what he wanted to band conductors to hear and know about. He decided on works by Piston, Persichetti, and Gould. At that stage, he envisioned only one, and no one predicted that it would evolve in to the famous Series.

In the live performance, especially telling was the Beethoven *Equali*, played by a double quartet, a testament to the vocal style of trombone playing espoused by Emory Remington. Many of the world's fine trombonists hail from this School, and the tradition appears to be holding up. Ruggels' *Angels* for 6 muted trumpets, is a simple and short but beguiling work. I came away with the



Rodney Winther

feeling that the modern brass instruments didn't reveal the texture of the music from the renaissance period

The afternoon discussion panel revealed some of the contributions of other major figures in the US band movement, and included the inevitable shadow of the old debate about wind band versus wind ensemble, I was more struck by the similarities of the purpose - the difference is really in the selection of repertoire.

The Goldman Band, one of the few professional bands in the world, which started in 1911 has been revived. During its time the band has been responsible for many premières and new repertoire, with especially close relationships with Leidzen, Grainger, Robert Russell Bennett, Grundman, and others

The orchestration of band music.

As a preamble to considering the suitability of works for transcription, Mark Rogers looked briefly at how composers conceive the instrumentation for their works:

For example, was it conceived for piano originally and later orchestrated? (Ravel and *Tambour de Couperon*). Gershwin composed at the piano and scored from piano, as did Brahms and Holst. Other composers conceive their works with the instrumental colours already in place, forming a fundamental part of the creative spark. Other considerations are the composers' knowledge of instrumentation, and whether instruments are used as separate pure colours. Some composers are especially skilled at mixing colours -

Wagner, for example, and how doublings are used: whether to add weight, change colour, octave for tonal spectrum, or other reasons

He identified four categories of music originally for band later transcribed for orchestra:

1. Composers who scored a work for both ensembles (Husa's *Music For Prague*)
2. Works scored by a close personal friend eg RVW's *Folk Song Suite* scored by Gordon Jacob
3. Transcriptions during composers lifetime but not by friends
4. Transcriptions of works by composers long dead

He noted that Stravinsky asked Bennett to score *Circus Polka* for Ringling band - its not always clear that its not a composer original

We had the rare treat of having both the Eastman Philharmonia and the Eastman Wind Ensemble on stage at the same time to demonstrate the differences between the band and orchestral versions of Schoenberg's *Theme and Variations* and Milhaud's *Suite Française*

While working at UCLA, Schoenberg was short of money, so Schirmer commissioned him to write a work for the 20 000 high school bands in the USA. However, it turned out to be too hard technically and musically for the bands of the time, and was rarely performed

In comparing the band and orchestral versions, Rogers asked us to consider:

- % how are sonorities transferred
- % how are missing instruments replaced (alto clarinet, saxes etc)
- % differences percussion writing
- % whether specialised string techniques were used?

In general, the orchestral versions of both works were re-orchestrations, and it was fascinating to see how each composer made different decisions on the instrumentation for their orchestral versions. Rogers had gone to the trouble of producing a full score of the *Suite Française*, with the orchestral and band

versions on opposite pages allowing for easy comparison. Both works gained clarity and colour in their orchestral form, at the expense of warmth, sonority and solidity. Comparison of the versions prompted Hunsberger to begin work on third version of the *Theme and Variations*, jocularly titled OP. 43 (c), removing some doublings and attempting greater clarity I began to feel that the Milhaud would benefit at least from the lightest and most articulate style of playing, if not from actually thinning out the doublings, which Milhaud himself avoided in the orchestral version

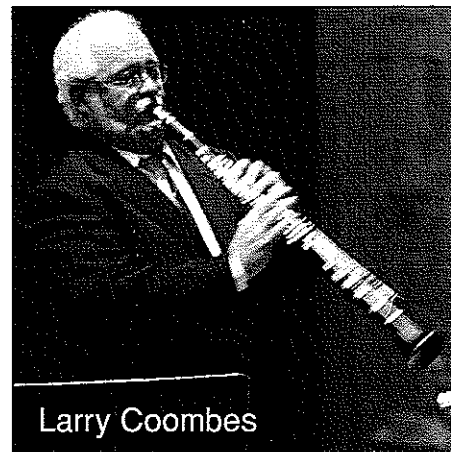
Chamber Wind Music

One of the sub-themes for the Conference was an exploration of chamber wind music, including Robert Rumbelow's transcriptions of Classical orchestral works for Wind Harmonie, exemplified by a superbly liquid performance by Larry Combs of the Mozart *Clarinet Concerto*, on an unusual basset clarinet. Generally Rumbelow's transcriptions work well, but the use of contra-bass clarinet, contra bassoon and double bass lead to a bass-heavy balance which obscured some of the other parts, even in Kilbourn Hall's marvellous acoustic

On Friday morning, the Cincinnati Chamber Winds and Rodney Winther performed Richard Strauss' wind serenade *From a Happy Workshop*, written towards the end of his life, shortly after recovering from an illness.

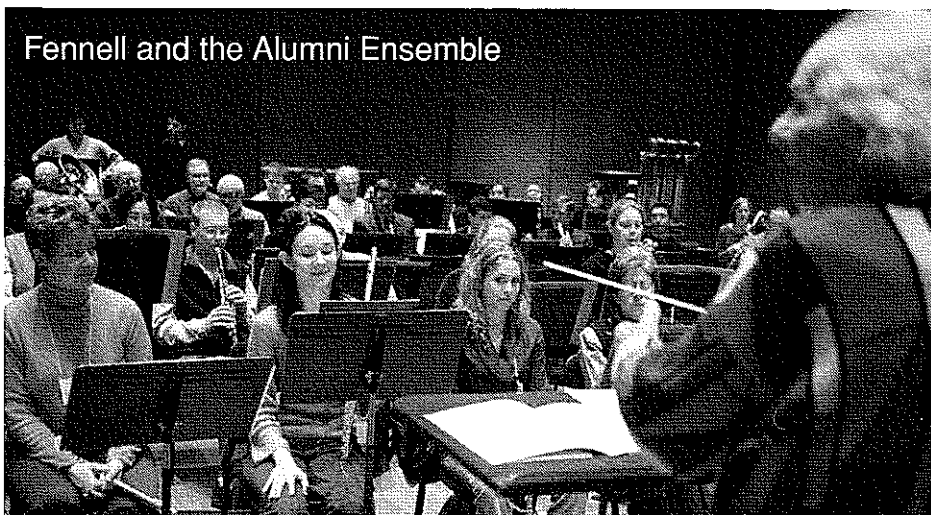
Someone did ask the question whether 5 horns are possible against 8 upper winds and 4 tenor/bass winds? With CCM the answer was yes, as the balance and clarity allowed all voices to be heard within Strauss's sometimes dense textures

The assured, expressive and committed playing allowed me to suspend any critical faculties and let my thoughts drift:



Larry Coombes

Fennell and the Alumni Ensemble



During the first movement the sun shone, fluffy white clouds drifted, birds sang, fruit ripened: but at times tinged with wistfulness and melancholy. If summer comes, can Autumn be far behind? Knowing Strauss' Nazi collaboration, can this be just the benign reflections of an old man, and not just a cover-up?

The second movement opened with stream of lovely melody, and the third with bright horn calls in a syncopated figure which characterised the movement.

The fourth was more deeply sombre with intimations of mortality, yet calm and accepting, quite unlike the protestant 'come sweet death' approach. Soon the mood lightens with busy semiquavers in the woodwinds. The Bass clarinet was especially good, and the Contrabassoon very controlled and subtle. All parts in excellent working order. A lovely way to start the day - enjoy the music without having it analysed. When the ensemble is conveying the mood and character of the music, technical or critical considerations become irrelevant.

Brian Gilliam described the wind serenades by Strauss as "Craftsmanlike material, wrist exercises," written after last work - Capriccio.

He considered there were two Strausses, the inward and outward. Music by the public Strauss includes *From a Happy Workshop*, a continuation of a German tradition of woodwind pastoral music. Also heard was the ghost of Wagner's *Rhinegold* in opening phrase of 1st and 4th movements and in moments of melancholy.

During a further chamber repertoire session, Battisti described the Longy Club from Boston who performed standard wind ensemble works during the period 1900-1917.

During the session on chamber music, we were urged by Winther, DeRoche and Battisti to incorporate more chamber music into school and college music programmes, and to entice us players from the Cincinnati Chamber Winds presented excerpts of deliciously witty, effervescent, and diverting music through three ages, from Mozart, Raff, Krommer, Myslivicek, via Hahn, Arrieu, Françaix and Martinu to American compositions by Piston, Wilson and Schwantner. In all, delightful music played and presented with evident enjoyment by players and conductors. Exploring this repertoire gives players extra dimension of experience.

Timothy Reynish mentioned chamber ensemble works by Schoenberg *Kammersymphonie*, William Alwyn's *Flute Concerto*, and Andriessen's *Bassoon Concerto*.

West Point Commissions 1952 - 2002

There were three major events in 1952 which affected the West Point Military Academy Band: Fennell's establishment of EWE, a performance of Hindemith's *Symphony in B flat* at Carnegie Hall, and the West Point Academy Band's commissioning project.

The 1952 commissions were solicited from major American composers by the West Point Band. The composers were offered no payment, only a visit and a baton and the attendant publicity. None-the-less, many prominent composers responded. Gould considered his *Symphony for Band* to be one of his better pieces.

Many of these works remain unpublished. Arison, a member of the band wrote *Israfil*, a piece with some charming moments, unusual instrumental colours; gentle, not too long and vaguely impressionist. Interesting, evocative and

worth publishing - a composer's personal statement.

Milhaud's *West Point Suite* is very militaristic, even grandiose. The second movement is in the form of a lyrical aria with piquant harmonies. Not my style of music - rather harsh and sounding like a band piece.

Roy Harris *West Point Symphony* was another band piece. Henry Cowell's *Fantasie* comprises variation of the Academy's song, *Alma Mater*. The variations are sensitively scored, with a full statement of the *Alma Mater* appearing only half way through. The Band played a chorale setting to establish melodic intervals for the audience in advance of the performance to allow us a framework to listen with - a helpful gesture which added to the enjoyment of the piece.

Angel Camp by Charles Cushing, preceded by an audience rendition of a psalter from a book bought over by pilgrims on the Mayflower, is a peaceful and lyrical work in a wistful, even sombre minor mode. The work reflects the composer's view that army are 'guardians of the peace as well as prosecutors of war'. After a dramatic outburst, tranquillity returns.

The instrumentation of the 90-strong Academy Band included harp and most instruments conceivable in a wind band. Most composers felt obliged to avail themselves of the full tonal palette, leading to some pretty dense, even turgid instrumentation. Others chose more discriminately from the possibilities of the full array.

Later the same day, the US Military Academy Band performed a selection of the 2002 West Point Bicentennial commissions by Broege, Ketchley, Grantham, Adler, Fletcher and Hearshen.

Broege's *Three Pieces for American Band*: contained an attractive chorale for brass lead in by trombones, and the third movement evoked a western film score in pastiche style, with echoes of Copland, marches and rolling cassions!

An American Song, by Alan Fletcher, has a light touch. A collage of US tunes bound loosely into a thinnish texture to form one cohesive whole, a musical embodiment of the United States motto 'E Pluribus Unum'.

No matter how polished the performances, I came away feeling that six blockbuster wind band works in one concert was too much for the most dedicated wind music aficionado - admittedly the first hint of ear fatigue after four days of band music, a tribute to the variety and quality of the music on offer.