

Music for Big Band

A compendium of articles collated by Keith Robinson

Mike Hall, Co-ordinator of Jazz Studies and Director of the Big Band at the RNCM muses on the problems of finding interesting music for big band.

At the RNCM we stage at least six public concerts a year for our Big Band, largely to the same audience. In addition our feeder band, the RNCM Jazz Collective presents two concerts. Although we do recycle music over the years, finding the right repertoire still creates an immense problem, because we want to keep concerts fresh, to interest our audience and keep our students challenged and stimulated.

The role of the big band has changed enormously over the 70 years that they have been in existence. In the 30's the big band was the musical unit for popular music as three guitars and drum kit was in the 60's. Band leaders were household names and there were many hundreds of working bands touring the USA. With the entry of the USA into WWII, resulting in mobilisation of troops and entertainment tax for those who stayed at home, the public's taste altered and the heyday of the big bands ended. Big Bands that have succeeded since have tended to artistic ensembles, striving for a more individual identity and usually under the leadership of a charismatic jazz instrumentalist. Nowadays, economics ensure that the principal role of the big band is in education and for recreation.

When establishing a band the most important consideration is repertoire. This is so often overlooked, not only by potential band leaders but also by composers and publishers. There is no shortage of American material aimed at education, but most of this is of a particular mould, often replicating classic big band numbers from the 60s or before. If we are to keep the big band format as a

modern living entity, it needs feeding with new music. To create a significant performance you need significant music. The frustrating thing is that the music is out there, but it is not published and is not obtainable! Further, some of that music is British and excellent it is too!

British jazz composers themselves could be more proactive. For example I purchased a couple of superb arrangements by American composer Carla Bley over the internet. These were not 'from stock'. The lady had simply photocopied the parts and score. It would not take much for others to provide this service. Is such enterprise so un-British? Incidentally, contemporary 'classical' composers seem much more on the ball in these matters.

We are fortunate at the RNCM in that we can afford to feature a guest soloist with our band for most of our concerts. I usually try to choose someone who has written for big band and invite them to bring some of their music. This has led to some wonderful concerts and prevented all of our shows from sounding the same. And many of these artists have kindly allowed us to copy their pieces so that we have rare items by Mike Gibbs, Stan Sultzman, Steve Waterman, Stan Tracey, Julian Arguelles, John Dankworth, Mark Nightingale and Dave O'Higgins.

I approached my regional arts board for funding to create a collection of big band music from regional musicians. This was not to commission new pieces but to pay a reasonable sum to composers to obtain a photocopied set of parts to make available to regional big bands. Nowadays pieces get commissioned, played once, and then put away in a drawer. Making such works available would achieve the whole reason the works were commissioned in the first place - to disseminate the new work and build an audience for it. My submission was rejected!

So now you can get a feel for why I am so pleased that Faber has decided to publish some of the music of British composer and pianist, Stan Tracey. We performed Stan's *Genesis Suite* at the recent BASBWE Festival with Stan at the

piano. The music is, in many ways, straight forward, yet highly distinctive and powerful. Lets hope that this is the beginning of being given access to a great realm British big band music.

Mike Hall

This is just a taste of what might be available if composers and Big Bands networked their resources.

1. The BBC Big Band Competition had a composers' prize until 1997. That year it was won by Philip Pesket (unfortunately I have not tracked down the title of this winning work) but I do know that it was 10 mins. long. The controllers of the BBC did not think that such a substantial work was what their listeners wanted and as a result the competition was dropped. Previous winners were:

1996 Florian Ross with *By Any Means Necessary* www.jazzpages.com

1995 Tim Garland with *Dance for the Human Folk* www.zahzah.com

1994 Dave Blackmore with *Accelerator Man* Walsall Jazz Orchestra

1993 Martin Williams, piece not known.

1992 Scott Stroman, piece not known www.scottstroman.com

1991 Martin Hathaway, piece not known

Keith Robinson contacted a few Big Bands about their commissions and these are some of the replies:

Aylesbury Music Centre Dance Band

Director Nick Care wrote to say:

The following three pieces were all written for the AMC Big Band and were winners of the composition or arrangers'

prize in the BBC Big Band Competition. Incidentally the Aylesbury Music Centre Big Band won the junior section each year these pieces won awards.

Echoes Runes & Ciphers (part of *Life's Suite*) by Mark Armstrong, trumpeter with Stan and Clarke Tracy and Pete Long's Gillespie bands. Mark was a previous member of the AMC Big Band. The band played this at the North Sea Jazz Festival and recorded on 'Beyond the Limit' album. This was written as a gift to the band and is published by Stanza Music.

Dance for Human Folk by Tim Garland (part of *An Aylesbury Suite*). The AMC Big Band paid for this commission. Recorded on Doin' Time album, this has also been performed by the London Jazz Orchestra.

Night's High Noon by Simon Ashford. Ex-pianist with the band. Recorded on Doin' Time album. This was written as a gift for the band.

We also had a work written for the band and dancers which was performed at the Millennium Dome. This was written by John Eacott formerly of the Loose Tubes band. We received money for the commission of this work from the Millennium Commission.

Ulster Youth Jazz Orchestra

Director Ken Jordan wrote to say they have commissioned three pieces from Steve Barnett, who plays trombone with the Ulster Orchestra and another three pieces from Brian Irvine who is making a name for himself in Northern Ireland and abroad.

Wigan Youth Jazz Orchestra

Director Ian Darrington sent me this:

1. *Lion and The Dragon* - 'Impressions of Hong Kong' by Paul Mitchell Davidson is a forty minute suite, available on vinyl and cassette.

2. *The Golden Ass* - music by Paul Mitchell Davidson, book by David Ponting, based on a play by Lucius Apalaeus (?) - a musical theatre piece of approx 90 minutes. Performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1986 - recorded on video.

3. *Fanfare for Her Majesty the Queen* by Paul Mitchell Davidson - written for the Royal opening of Wigan Pier in 1985 - duration approx three minutes.

4. *Monkification* - written by Paul Walker (Jazz Animator No 2) - this won for Paul and for WYJO the BBC Big Band competition composition award in the early 1990's.

5. *Western Promise* - by Paul Walker featured soprano sax of Matthew Leaver and won for him and WYJO the BBC Big Band competition best soloist award in the early 1990's.

6. *The Snake* composed by Paul Mitchell Davidson for WYJO.

7. *Rock the Boat* composed by Steve Berry (Jazz Animator No 3) - performed at the BBC Big Band Competition All Winners Programme in early 1990's.

8. *Forty Minute Suite* written by Andy Scott for multi media project performed at the 2000 North of England Education Conference - received a standing ovation from 900 strong audience of head teachers, politicians, and directors of education.

9. *Our Town* - a suite written by Andy Scott for multi-media project - performed at the Millennium Dome in September 2000 (duration 20 mins).

10. *South African Suite* written by Richard Iles. Thirty minute suite written to celebrate the twinning between South African Youth Jazz and the Youth Jazz from Wigan. Premiered at the Wigan International Jazz Festival on Sat 20th July 2002 - by WYJO, the Gauteng Music Academy Youth Jazz Ensemble (Johannesburg) and the Stirling High School Jazz Band (East London SA) and also in Cape Town between WYJO and Univ of CT Jazz Ensemble on Friday 9th August and at the Nelson Mandela Theatre Johannesburg by WYJO and Gauteng Ensemble on 25th August 2002. The South Africa/WYJO project and the commissioning of this work was made possible by a grant from the Arts Council.

There are probably others but these are the major ones!

Midlands Youth Jazz Orchestra

Director John Ruddick wrote to say that he regretted the BBC's decision to drop the composition prize. Occasionally they do perform new works, however they prefer to concentrate on arrangements for the Band, some of which they have commissioned from well-known composers.

(Keith Robinson thanks all those who contributed to this article)

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