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An Interview with Donald Hunsberger

Brendon Le Page

BLP *What were your personal highlights of this year's 50th Anniversary Celebration of the Eastman Wind Ensemble last February?*

DH Most certainly, the greatest thrill came with the actual anniversary concert by the EWE, performed on the same date fifty years after the première concert! Having Fred Fennell, Clyde Roller and Mark Scatterday join me on the podium for this programme was the culmination of those five decades! The next day was another nostalgic event as over four dozen Eastman graduates, who were all part of the Ensemble's programmes during their student days, joined the current ensemble members for a fun-filled playing session with Fred, Clyde and myself

You have already published a review of the Conference so the various offerings and presentations have been noted; however, one of my earliest personal highlights of the week was the première of the *Concerto for Percussion* by Steven Stucky, with Gordon Stout as soloist, accompanied by the Ithaca College Wind Symphony. This work was commissioned for my retirement from Eastman by my DMA graduates along with Steve Peterson from Ithaca, CBDNA and WASBE. Other soloists from earlier Eastman days offered similar high points: having Nexus (four out of five are ESM graduates) perform the Warren Benson *Symphony for Drums and Wind Orchestra* and Karel Husa's *Concerto for Percussion*, and Barry Snyder performing the Verne Reynolds *Concerto for Piano and Winds*, which closed the Gala EWE concert

Since composers are the life-blood of the wind band's future, we were all pleased to have in residence Bernard Rands, whose *Unending Lightning* was commissioned for the EWE's 50th by the Eastman School and the Howard Hanson Institute for American Music; Karel Husa, an old friend of many decades, represented by his *Concerto for Wind Ensemble* and the *Concerto for Percussion*; Steve Stucky, Verne Reynolds, and Dana Wilson, whose *Concerto for Horn and Wind Ensemble* received a brilliant première performance with Gail Williams as horn soloist with the Ithaca Wind Symphony. Unfortunately, Warren Benson and

Richard Rodney Bennett were unable to attend

I felt especially gratified that each of the sessions and programmes upheld a wonderful air of professionalism that can be directly attributed to the high level of seriousness and purpose of the participants. As we had done earlier with the 40th Anniversary Conference in 1992, I asked each of my DMA conducting graduates to take an active role in planning and presenting various topical events that would shape the direction of the celebration. Again, the range and depth of subjects they brought forth revealed how far wind music has progressed since February 8, 1953 (the date of the EWE's première concert) and how vital and interesting historical and research sessions featuring live performance can be! While I felt that the obvious centre of attraction was to be the EWE and all the performers who sat in those chairs over the years, an underlying theme was the celebration of the entire wind movement over the past fifty years

The research sessions on Charles Ives, Varese, Messiaen and Richard Strauss plus the Cincinnati Conservatory Chamber Winds demonstrating the vast world of wind chamber music were obvious delights to see and hear! The United States Military Academy (West Point) Band presented two programmes of premières commissioned for West Point's anniversaries in 1952 and 2002, a rare opportunity to hear all these works performed live in a great discussion-performance session.

BLP *Now that you have retired from over thirty-five years as Conductor and Music Director of the Eastman Wind Ensemble, what were your personal highlights of your tenure with the ensemble?*

DH I think there are several answers to that question as the past five decades have witnessed such a change in the development of the serious wind band from its post-WW II status in repertoire, in style of performance and indeed, in its own self-evaluation of its rightful place in the music world at large. The fact that the EWE played an important role in this growth of literature and awareness of



performance practices provides a real feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction. So, to be granted the opportunity to be part of this metamorphosis and to lead one of the potentially influential programmes in the country was truly a wondrous trip through the most recent history of the wind band

It is difficult for me to settle in on any one event or any individual concert, but probably, the numerous tours in the US and recently in Japan, the recording projects, the conferences we have presented plus the many première performances all rank high in memory. The programmes of the Ensemble over the years have involved so many different people. Each year has had its own unique high points, and when you consider that the Ensemble has always been made up of undergraduate and graduate students, most of whom were only in the group for one or two years between being rotated between orchestra, wind ensemble and contemporary ensembles - well, their training and exposure to the best in available literature was always a guiding force

Knowing full well that their primary interests lay in orchestral performance coupled with the fact that there are few professional wind bands in which one can make a living - primarily the military bands in Washington and at the service academies - my goal was always to

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prepare each person with the knowledge and ability to read and perform anything placed on the music stand. If this was accomplished, then they might be able to survive in the various demands of professional performance anywhere in the country.

BLP *Prior to your appointment in 1965 as Conductor of the Eastman Wind Ensemble, what in your background helped to prepare you for this responsibility?*

DH I grew up in a small community in Southeast Pennsylvania located half way between the centre of Philadelphia and Allentown and began studying trombone in fourth grade. My teacher, Samuel Laudenslager, was involved in public school education, community band playing, arranging and studying the history of bands. His was a unique combination of skills and interests and this led me into developing similar interests in later years.

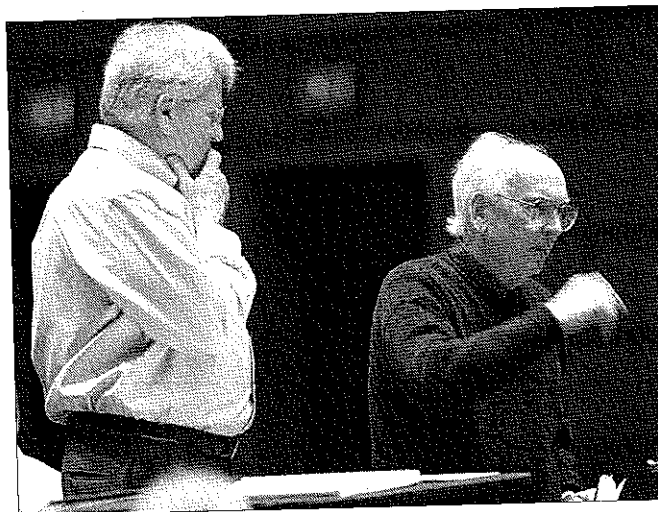
Pennsylvania has had a long history of professional and town band activity and every school had a band programme so it was not long before I was playing in a nearby town band and eventually became its trombone soloist. Sam turned me over to his former teacher, Frederick Stoll, who had been a member of the Philadelphia Orchestra and numerous professional bands and orchestras in the Philadelphia area. He was a great

teacher in every sense of the word and had a wealth of experience in the professional world. It was always exciting when my family would invite Mr. Stoll and Sam to our home for a Sunday meal and the three of us would play trombone trios for a few hours.

In the Fall of 1950 I was fortunate to be accepted by the Eastman School of Music where Emory Remington was teacher of trombone. In addition to being an excellent and concerned teacher, he became a wonderful friend and mentor. It was during the first year there that Frederick Fennell organised the now-noted concert of February, 1951 in which the entire repertoire contained only

serious wind chamber and ensemble music - this in a day when the desired concert band was between 80 and 110 players! In the Fall of 1952, we were off into the startup of the Eastman Wind Ensemble, with the initial months spent playing broadcasts of primarily educational band publications to the public schools of New York State.

It was not until February of 1953 that the première concert was presented in Kilbourn Hall and the Ensemble became established as a concert entity. After graduating from Eastman with a Bachelor of Music degree, I became a member of the United States Marine Band in Washington, DC for four years, playing trombone and writing special arrangements for them. It was here that I feel I really began to develop solid writing techniques and philosophies as I also began studying arranging with Rayburn Wright in New York City where he was Co-Director of Radio City Music



Donald Hunsberger with Composer, Verne Reynolds

Hall Ray was a marvellous teacher with very high principles and, through having the double benefit of a wonderful group to write for, this was really a productive period for me.

After the Marine Band years, I returned to Eastman for a Master's degree in trombone with an assistantship in the Ensemble Department working with Fred Fennell. One of my duties was to cover for him with the ensembles when he was out of town so the conducting practice began to assume more importance. In 1961, after two years teaching lower brass, theory and orchestration at the New York State University at Potsdam, I received a call

from Howard Hanson, Director of Eastman, asking if I would like to do a residence year on a Doctor of Musical Arts and cover Fred's position for thirteen weeks while he was to be on tour with Dr. Hanson and the Eastman Philharmonia in Europe and Russia.

That year really sped up the conducting process for me as I had the opportunity to select repertoire, rehearse and conduct both the EWE and the Eastman Symphony Band in numerous concerts. At the end of that school year, Fred Fennell resigned from Eastman in June, 1962 to join the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra and Clyde Roller was appointed Conductor of the EWE. I joined the faculty as Conductor of the Eastman Symphony Band and Coordinator of Ensembles. Clyde left Eastman in 1965 to join the Houston Symphony Orchestra and I was then appointed Conductor of the EWE.

BLP *How did your interest in writing for the wind band develop and what attracted you to make transcriptions of late Romantic works by Russian composers, some of which have become standards in their genre. What led you to Bach's organ works for transcription?*

DH Sam Laudenslager actually got me started writing while I was still in junior high school and then Ernest Strauss, a piano teacher with whom I was studying, began giving me theory and composition lessons. I wrote some small projects in high school and later at Eastman, but it was during the four years with the US Marine Band that things really developed. Much of this was directly related to studying with Ray Wright.

During the Potsdam years I began writing for Sam Fox Music Publishers and this is where I first met Lewis Roth. He was one of their senior editors and we struck up a good friendship. After a few years Lew left Sam Fox and moved to Leeds Music Publishing and I went along with him. It turned out to be a fortunate move as Leeds Music was the American partner of the Am-Rus publication programme and they were in constant touch with the Russian Composers Alliance. So, one day, Lew Roth called and said "I have just received a new Shostakovich piece that I think you will be interested in." The reason he knew I would be interested was that we had discussed the large gaps in wind repertoire created by the lack of original wind works by major composers, and

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how imaginative scorings of good works could help fill out the existing literature. A year later, the *Festive Overture* wind setting was published by MCA Music (who had just bought Leeds) and eventually became a part of the wind concert repertoire. Ever since, I have tried to plug some of those holes through settings of music by composers of various nationalistic styles

The music of Bach was a major part of the theory programme at Eastman and everyone who went through undergraduate life at Eastman was steeped in analysis techniques of the Baroque period. I wrote an edited eight-part version of the *Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor* for Emory Remington's Trombone Choir in the mid 1950's and then used the same work as part of my DMA thesis. The thesis dealt with potential possibilities of wind timbre and colour if one departed from traditional military/concert band scoring techniques. Even when applied to large bands, many of these traditional techniques - like cross-cuing, doubling between sections and alternate solo voices - were limited in scope because of the reigning philosophy that bands of all sizes and instrumentation should be able to perform the same music

After working with organ registrations with their use of overtones, octaves, etc., it became apparent that the wind band could utilise some of these same principles through adopting the philosophy that each performer possesses individual timbres and that each timbre could be coupled (at the octave or 15th) or doubled at the unison with any other timbre. In this manner you create sound structures by adding one instrument to another rather than merely doubling one section voice with another or through subtracting voices. It is a philosophy based on working with single sound sources and individual colours versus traditional doublings that were frequently present for security purposes

BLP *What was the impetus behind launching the Donald Hunsberger Wind Library? What future developments are planned?*

DH The original idea for this series developed in the late 60's when I was writing for Leeds Music. Leeds had recently been bought by MCA Music, who had also purchased Decca Records. Lewis Roth drew together Arthur Cohn,

Leeds' Director of Serious Music, Israel Horowitz, one of the primary recording producers at Decca, and myself and we formulated a plan to identify, publish and record the best of extant wind repertoire. The result was the MCA Symphonic Wind Ensemble Editions that also included a small journal, *The Wind Ensemble*. It all went smoothly for a few years with a number of serious publications and two recordings on Decca until an accountant at MCA discovered that serious wind music had 'shaky financial feet' and the whole project was discontinued.

More recently, Jack Lamb, an old friend in music education and the publishing world, approached me to undertake a similar approach series with Warner Bros. Publishing, assuming that the wind world had grown in serious musical terms since the 60s and there was a real need for a library of this level at this time. The Wind Library is now in its fifth year with over two dozen publications; I have enjoyed support and a high level of professional assistance throughout the firm so everything is running along smoothly at this moment

As to future projects, I think we will be expanding the textbook area with a few projects; hopefully some more recordings will make their way into the Library and the publishing and rental aspects will continue to grow. *WindWorks* may undergo some form of metamorphosis with the "Defining the Wind Band Timbre" articles being developed into a book dealing with the development of scoring techniques through history to today - not quite an orchestration book, but close - with a lot of historical development thrown in.

BLP *Do you feel that there are still two approaches to wind bands at US colleges and universities, i.e. wind ensemble versus symphonic wind band? Or, has the movement moved on from that dichotomy?*

DH A great question, as it brings up once again the "us versus them" standoff that lasted well into the early 70's. My feeling today is that there is a great deal of flexibility of programing, and thus instrumentation, being considered. To perform many of the best recent works, you really have to analyse the score and make some musical decisions about balances and timbres. This will produce programmes that feature numerous compositional styles and techniques, frequently with each work having its

own instrumentation and personnel requirements. This is so different from the days when every work was played by everyone in the band, including whether they did or did not actually have a part specifically for their instrument!

If you read the CBDNA newsletter - CBDNA Report - in which a large portion of the pages contain wind band programmes from all over the US and Canada, you would see that the primary impetus is now on what is being programmed. It is a situation in which one can firmly state: "the music is the message, the ensemble is the medium" versus the opposite which was frequently a standard approach in the traditional transcription era. Yes, you see some rather large "wind ensembles" performing in some places, but hopefully, their approach includes a good balance of single timbres along with some doubled qualities

Perhaps one of the most rewarding changes in approach may be found in the extensive programming of wind chamber music; I say this because I firmly believe that one of the best approaches to individual development on an instrument will be found in chamber ensembles where you really learn to listen, balance, alter tone colour and project lines

BLP *What led to your interest in creating orchestral accompaniments for silent films? What special considerations must you utilize when creating them and performing them? Are there implications for wind band conductors?*

DH Again, the early days in high school set up activities I would develop later in life, and an example lies in the fact that I was one of my school's 'techies'. I ran the school's 16mm carbon arc projector for school film showings (actually had a Pennsylvania State Projectionist's license) and operated the sound system for dances, etc. In addition to playing in the band, I was announcer for the basketball games, manager for the baseball team; in short, I enjoyed doing activities that involved personal participation and application.

In the late 1950s, the Eastman School began to bring Ray Wright to Rochester for a few weeks during the summer session to teach an Arranger's Workshop. I was his 'in-house' assistant and took part in the Workshop. As this developed, it eventually became a four week

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programme with several levels of activity including film scoring and culminating in a public concert. It fell to me to coordinate and produce these concerts that could involve lighting, staging and film in addition to straight performance by a forty piece studio orchestra.

Ray eventually came to Eastman full-time to organise and teach a Jazz Studies and Contemporary Media programme and I produced and stage directed numerous concerts that he conducted with the School and the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. It was with the RPO in 1974 that Ray conducted a concert that reproduced an Eastman Theatre programme from the mid-20s featuring the silent film *Peter Pan* starring Betty Bronson (1924). He compiled an accompaniment from publications of the period utilising suggestions from the original cue sheet that had been issued along with the film. Several years later the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House in Rochester asked him if he was interested in pursuing more silent film work and he passed the project on to me.

We organised a 'George Eastman Triangle': the Eastman House, which holds an enormous repository of film, especially silent era material, the Eastman Theatre, 3000 seats, which opened in 1922 as a film/stage show house with a 60 piece orchestra in the pit, and the Eastman School, where the Theatre Orchestra's library is still located in the current Ensemble Library. I created a small theatre orchestra of 14-18 players, the Eastman Dryden Orchestra, and we began performing scores that I compiled for silent films utilising techniques employed in the 'teens and 20's (The technique of selecting excerpts from extant published theatre orchestra music to underscore the moods and actions of a silent film is yet another article!)

We played at the Eastman House, at various festivals and theatres around New York State and made five recordings of music of Victor Herbert, Rudolph Friml and Sigmund Romberg. Eventually, requests for performances with professional orchestras from around the US and Canada began to arrive, and, since those early days at the Eastman House, I have done performances - frequently repeat engagements - with almost fifty orchestras here, and in Canada and New Zealand.

The application for wind band conductors? You have to have all your conducting skills well in hand as your

attention is divided between watching the film on the screen (you place cue marks in your score for coordination points) and conducting the orchestra, which may have had only one reading rehearsal and one dress run-through. I utilise the accompaniment technique of the 20's in which you coordinate the orchestra performance directly to the action of the film on the screen, rather than the later use of time codes and clocks. It may be much more simple to use a time code approach to make certain that the orchestra arrives at the proper measure at the right time than to 'work the screen' but, this is live performance and I feel that the music should have every option for interpretation. It becomes a matter of practically memorising the film so that you can be flexible with the music, to make ritards, accelerandi, rubati and so forth.

One difficult part lies in the fact that there are no full scores so you must learn the orchestral timbres aurally. There were some obvious doublings and solo considerations, but otherwise you have to create the score in your mind. So, having all your staging skills together, being able to create a proper mood or feeling for a visual scene from looking at a two stave score, knowing what musical requirements exist for the players, and then, how to pace the performance to enable an audience - accustomed to studio perfection on recordings - to enjoy the experience of being in the same room with both film and ensemble... these are a few of the challenges, but also the rewards, when you 'pull it off live!'

BLP *Wind band conductors love repertoire lists. Twenty-five years ago, in an article for the Instrumentalist magazine, you discussed the gems of the wind ensemble repertoire, listing core works and how you selected them. Are there pieces written in the quarter century since then which rank with these works, or even supplant them?*

DH Again, you have come up with one of the most pressing questions! Our repertoire has been - and still is - the major consideration for the wind band's future. That published article you refer to was an outgrowth of a session on repertoire I presented at the 8th Annual Wind Ensemble Conference at Northern Illinois University in 1977; it was later redrafted and presented at the 1981 International Conference for Conductors, Composers and Publishers held at Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. The purpose on each of these occasions was to

offer a personal core repertoire around which quality programming may be constructed; works of differing periods and instrumentation were included, as well as works on rental.

In the initial presentation I listed numerous compositions and challenged the assembled directors to assess each work and either: 1) agree with my selection as a work of musical substance or, 2) replace it with a work they thought of higher musical quality. The point was obviously to make them think and search their own personal repertoire to encourage not just the programming of quality works, but also the elimination of lesser material.

The paper at Manchester concluded with the then-recent work "*and the mountains rising nowhere*" by Joseph Schwantner, a composition that I feel created one of the major cornerstones of wind composition in the closing quarter of the past century. It was new in style, technique, colour and inventiveness and has become one of our major core repertoire pieces. Since that time, there has been a flood of new works, some with equally inventive musical resources, some highly imitative of previous high points, and many with little to provide lasting musical substance.

I am going to beg off your invitation to present a new list at this time and will take the option of promising to provide a more suitable answer to this question at a later date - when I can adequately list a new set of choices and substantiate my reasons for a work's inclusion on such a 'preferred' list.

BLP *What are your plans for your 'retirement'?*

DH As you can probably see from the thoughts we have discussed, I have been blessed over all these years with interest in many different subjects and matters. Leaving Eastman after forty years on the faculty has provided new time, previously dictated by schedule, plus the opportunity to set what direction each day or week will take. There are many conducting opportunities in both wind and orchestral activities and my longtime desire to attempt to put together this book on wind timbre and scoring has actually driven me to buy a new computer! So, every day has opportunities and challenges and these are something I look forward to!