

COMPOSERS

Kenneth Hesketh

Interview (part 2)

Samuel Becker

The first part of this interview was published in the Autumn 2002 issue of *Winds*. Here Kenneth Hesketh gives Samuel Becker some revealing insights into the contexts of his compositions for winds.

SB *The wind band repertoire is not widely known outside wind band circles. Do you feel that there should be more awareness of some of this repertoire in more mainstream musical circles? Can you envisage a time when an audience might go to a wind band concert in the same way that they now attend an orchestral concert?*

KH There is certainly a lot of wind band repertoire that should be more widely disseminated and, just as importantly, wind ensemble repertoire. Two pieces that comes to mind are Colgrass's *Winds of Nagual* and Bedford's *The Sun Paints Rainbows*, and for ensemble works the music of Colin Matthews (*Quatrain* for example), Oliver Knussen (*Choral*), John Casken and Edwin Roxburgh. These names suggest themselves because they work in mainstream contemporary music as well as having written pieces that are well crafted and challenging to play in the wind medium. This music deals with more interesting notions of abstract form and how it is constructed. They are, I think, also pleasurable to listen to! This leads to the issue of the type of work often presented in wind band concerts, of which I believe there is a preponderance of later day 'tone poems' - descriptive and illustrative. This I think might have something to do with

the often-held opinion of the wind band medium as being less serious, less forward looking. The question of a more main stream audience is certainly an interesting question and my answer to this leads on from my previous point; that until wind bands are seen to be organised on a more orchestral footing, not just inside education and the military, and until there is a much more regular and balanced diet of more challenging music as well as the immediate, I fear audiences for the medium will remain insular and self-interested.

This point of view is certainly not new, and many organisations have done much to propagate more forward programming and commissioning, WASBE for one. This would encourage more stylistically diverse composers in to the genre, a genre whose players and conductors are amongst the best trained and capable anywhere.

SB *There have been some comments about the scoring in your 'early' works for band being, although brilliant, perhaps a little thick. Do you feel that, now you have written a number of pieces, you are writing more comfortably for the medium? In other words, do you think you have developed a distinctive and more personal instrumental 'voice' in your writing for winds and, if so, how does it fit in with the rest of your output?*

KH I actually don't feel that my 'early' works are too thickly scored! The instrumental make-up of the full symphonic band does dictate certain approaches to scoring; compensating for upper-wind predominance for example. Also the full massed timbre of the wind band is a very unique sound. In *Danceries* and *Masque* I wanted to write very richly scored works that would not suffer from weaker sections, as well as having interesting accompaniment figures to keep the interest of all sections of the band. In the later *Festive Overture* and recently in my new work, *Diaghilev Dances*, I wished to achieve a greater balance of chamber texture to full

massed tutti. I have also made a point of writing some harmonically complex sections, which do not appear in my earlier works. I feel that as I'm now a little more known in the wind band world, I can write music that is closer to the rest of my output in language and scoring. As for what influences what in my work, I would say that the non-wind band side of my work is progressively influencing my band composition. Of course I enjoy writing music that is immediate and satisfying on a more initial level - I will continue to compose music encompassing all sorts of expression.

SB *Has writing more for wind bands influenced your other composing work? (I am thinking of - for example - Stravinsky's very austere neo-classical style, which went hand in hand with a more wind-dominated scoring.)*

KH As a young composer I began to write with more understanding, empathy, perhaps love, for wind instruments than for strings. (I was a tuba player in a brass band as a young musician!) Much of my early orchestral music is wind dominated. As my compositional technique has developed I have been able to respect and enjoy the possibilities of different timbres interacting.

The Stravinsky period of composition you mention is part of that composer's rejection of the subjective for the more objective, non-emotional, less vibrato dominated if you like, view of musical expression. Stravinsky, it must be remembered, then became more even-handed in his instrumental treatment in the later part of his compositional life, the so-called serial period. He expected all instruments to be more percussive and stringent; shorter, starker accents, solo strings etc. A leaner sound, perhaps a further nullification of the emotional!

SB *Dancing as a theme comes up many times in the titles and background to your pieces. You obviously find the thought of dancing and physical movement an*

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inspiration in starting a piece. Can you elaborate? Following this, have you had any thoughts of collaborating on writing a ballet, which is scored for winds? (I have always thought this could be very exciting!)

KH The use of the dance form in music for me is the presentation of an activity with certain rules, moves, mannerisms and rituals, if you will. It is these aspects which draw me to this form; variation of harmonic treatment and accompaniment figures also feature in much dance music. This constant remoulding of material very much interests me. Closed structural forms have always worked well in composition (the number of dance suites in the musical repertoire pays tribute to this!) and are easy to balance in suites.

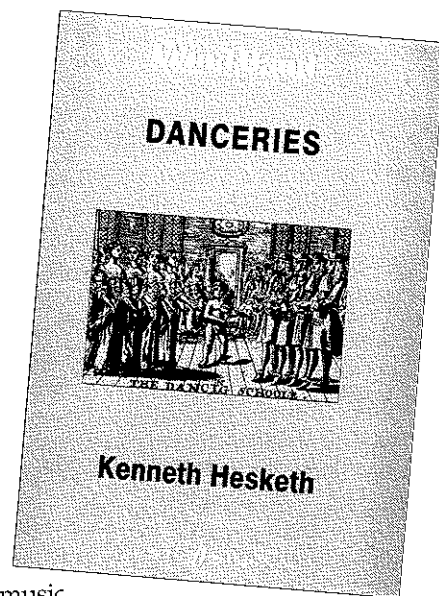
Ballet has always attracted me and perhaps an outdoor 'extravaganza', very much like the Medieval mystery play, would be something I would very much enjoy writing. Winds of course would be much more suitable for this as they can be heard to less detriment than strings!

SB You have mentioned discovering the wind repertoire. Are there any composers or pieces that have been a particular inspiration or influence?

KH As to influence or inspiration, I don't think so. My compositional tastes were pretty much formed when I began listening to music that I enjoy in this medium. It was the sonority that struck me as unique and interesting and I wanted to find a way to harness this for my own musical ends. This is something I continue to enjoy.

SB Do you have any advice for a young composer trying to write music for winds? Any pitfalls to watch out for?

KH I would suggest that the awareness of the numeric difference of upper to lower-end forces in the wind band is imperative, and subsequently not to underscore. Music written for the medium can easily sound 'brash' and 'harsh' due to upper wind predominance. More importantly, I would encourage young composers to take risks particularly in harmonic and rhythmic procedures, and not to reduce them to a set of predictable and inflexible formulas. It is my belief that part of the composer's job is to help bands rise even further in an understanding of musical expression by writing well heard and well crafted



music

Harmonic and rhythmic complexity shouldn't be a stumbling block if they are approached sensitively for the medium.

SB Do you have any general advice for conductors and bands on performing your works?

KH I would say that clarity of texture - whether or not you feel the scoring is too thick! - is important. The dynamic curve of a section within a piece often changes rapidly, and if this is not brought out enough the formal contour will not be apparent enough. I am usually happy with a performance when the 'sweep' of the music is pronounced, though getting the notes right certainly has a lot to do with it!

SB You mentioned that you have further pieces planned out and ideas that you would like to explore. Do you have a clear overall direction that you want to take your wind band music in, or are you responding to particular ideas with each piece that you tackle?

KH As I work on commissions I tend to treat them individually depending on musical need or requirement dictated by the material at hand. However I would like to narrow the gap a little more between my wind band music and the other parts of my output; this tends to be more adventurous, being much more rhythmically and harmonically diverse and challenging.

I think that I will remain a little schizophrenic in my output stylistically (!), as I enjoy creating music that has differing values at its core.

SB Have you noticed any particular compositional trends - which you either like or dislike - in wind band pieces? Do you feel that composers writing in this genre are missing anything vital that is going on in the wider musical world?

KH There is one particular compositional technique that, even on a subliminal level, is I think being used to death and that is the octatonic scale. Used on a harmonic basis the chords generated provide triads or tetrachords related by minor thirds spaced symmetrically or equidistantly from each other (the nodal points form a diminished seventh - see Messiaen's first mode of limited transposition). I have long noticed the use of this scale especially in American wind band music, but there are many composers who use it here a little too much as well. The next time you hear the same tonally inflected material in a piece transposed up a minor third, you'll know what I mean!

I certainly have my list of bugbears when it comes to compositional clichés. Clichés are only clichés when the context in which they occur is not new enough to liberate such musical ideas from the mundane. I guess some clichés would include: over use of one pitch mode, the "splat-wee" effect (big tutti chord followed by single note at a quiet dynamic) and the "three strikes and you're in" effect (the repetition of a fragment, gradually elongated until the final, third, time when the piece actually begins). All of these can be excellent rhetorical devices but can also too easily become moribund formulas to be wary of.

I certainly enjoy the rich variety of music making which distinguishes the medium and would encourage all those in positions of power, from conductor to commissioner and performer, to seek out interesting music of whatever style. Good music is the only goal!

SB Thank you for your interesting thoughts, Ken. We are confident that there will be much good music from your pen in the coming years.