

# An interview with John O'Reilly

by W. Richard Jones

John O'Reilly spent much of September in the UK touring the country, meeting teachers and introducing his new Band Method *Accent on Achievement*, co-written with Mark Williams. In the midst of a hectic schedule he dropped off in Richmond for an afternoon to work with the Richmond School Wind Band on early-year rehearsal techniques. He also discussed his compositional methods with the players by rehearsing one of his latest works. Before the session began he spoke with Richard Jones.

*John, how many times have you been to the UK?*

This is my fifth visit to the UK and each one holds many fond memories. I can vividly recall my first visit where I did a workshop at the WASBE Conference and walked into a rehearsal where Clark Rundell was preparing the band. I recall that this very tall guy, speaking in what I perceived to be a distinguished British accent, was telling the students how much they would enjoy working with for me as he had fond memories of his time in school when I had been a guest conductor with his junior high band. Well, my sense of perception must have deserted me, for it was a bit of a surprise to realise that he came from Minneapolis!

*So as this is your fifth visit, what changes have you noticed?*

When I left after my first visit I knew our string method was well established and continues to do well but I felt that I was just not getting through to teachers the concept of a band method—the concept of why you would want something that would work equally well for flute, bassoon or French horn at the same time. This time I am meeting more people who are receptive to the idea—and perhaps that's because of economics, not because they have a great musical desire to mix instruments. When I look back to when I started teaching on Long Island, New York I was effectively a brass, woodwind and percussion peripatetic, teaching a couple of kids in 20 minute blocks and going around the schools teaching 150 kids a week. The philosophy was for small group tuition for the first couple of years and if you wanted to get into the High School Band then you would probably have to find a private teacher. But then things changed and now tuition mostly starts in the middle school with kids meeting as an ensemble five days a week so there became the need for a method.

Other changes I notice is that more American music is being programmed over here now and people know my name through playing my music and that's great!

*We in BASBWE are trying to redress that balance and get our composers to write more for school level, but as they haven't been through a school or university system which highlights the wind ensemble, perhaps it's harder for them to write music at school level. If I were to commission you to write a Grade 3 piece what elements would you put into it?*

I'd expect a full instrumentation of 3 part clarinets, trumpets and trombones, tubas and euphoniums who were capable of being independent of the trombones. There would only be two horn parts and a full sax section of two altos, tenor and baritone. There would be parts for oboe and bassoon but the piece would not rely on them being there. They wouldn't have solos but there may well be a solo spot say for alto sax or trumpet somewhere in the piece. As regards range trumpet to A, Horns to E, Clarinets to a high D, Flutes to F but I also like low register flutes. I see a piece at Grade 3 as a piece for kids who have been playing for 3-4 years. A piece of mine like *Mountain Ridge Overture* which was commissioned by a middle school band and premiered at last year's Mid West is maybe typical, as I like to use polychords, mixed metres and modal melodies. It would not be technically difficult but it would be rhythmically and harmonically sophisticated. I'd assume that the band would be able to cope with a degree of polyphonic writing and not everything would be in blocks. I only write one commission per annum so I try to make it good for the commissioning organisation, but also good for the market place.

*Richmond School is like many in this country as the band has players aged 11-18 and so have a wide range of musical ability. Do you ever write music for such a band?*

It's possible to do it but I don't! With the range you have, I would have to be writing sophisticated upper parts and keep say, 3rd clarinets below the break. I could do it, but I don't know that I'd publish it though! The range of performance levels you describe is not common in the overall market.

*I believe there has been a reduction in standard of grade levels—do you agree?*

No, I don't agree but I do think there is a confusion because back home some people grade music on a 1-6 scale and others 1-5. I think of a 1-6 scale. There is a second confusion and that is that some publishers say a piece is Grade 3 when it's a 4! At Alfred we use terms like 'Very Easy', 'Easy', 'Medium Difficult' etc. but that doesn't always work because I still get calls from directors asking me "is the piece a 2 or a 3?"

*Do you feel artistically or commercially compromised by writing young band music?*

Personally I don't. My style is the same whether I write a grade 2 or a 4. I have the same approach to writing and one of the most satisfying things is that bands at both ends of the spectrum enjoy playing my music. I had a super reaction from the University Honours Band in Cambridge last week when they played one of my grade 3 pieces.

*Many band methods now publish correlated band pieces and I have always been intrigued by two names appearing at the head of the music. How do you collaborate on such repertoire?*

Well in the case of *Accent on Achievement* Mark Williams and I do not share credits in the same way as Sandy Feldstein and I did on *Yamaha Band Student*. Sandy and I decided where we intended to put the correlated pieces and in what style they would be. We would bounce ideas off each other and sometimes if one of us was getting behind and had another commitment like a tour such as this we might score out a sketch that the other had made. Now, with *Accent on Achievement* the planning between Mark and I is the same, but when it comes to the correlated literature we have decided to go for independence and have solely our own names at the top of each piece.

*You pride yourself that *Accent on Achievement* is the first band method to address the American National Music Contents which is a sort of National Curriculum. Are the Music Contents an attempt to raise standards?*

I don't think so. They are more designed to raise sensitivity as to what music education is all about. Teaching band should be more than just preparing three pieces for a contest, to march down Main St. on Memorial Day or play a half time show. It's important to extend ideas so when in the book we use some Beethoven we hope that directors will play a recording of say a Beethoven symphony to the kids or delve into their lives. It's a harking back to the Comprehensive Musicianship which was espoused during the 60's.

The Teacher's Resource Kit of *Accent on Achievement* is specifically designed to address these issues.

*Our system is different, but I must say that I quite often relate a technical detail to the players in my rehearsal, for often ideas that composers use have been worked on in class music.*

What you call class music is what we call 'General Music'. In my last post in a Senior High School of 3000 students I taught 1 period band, 1 period orchestra and the rest of the classes were theory or Advanced Placement courses for those who wanted to go on to be music majors at College.

*Of which features of *Accent on Achievement* are you particularly proud?*

Well, the book includes opportunities to improvise on rhythms and scales so there is extension material that can be done outside the

classroom. What is new and what I really like is the Teacher Resource Kit which ties the method together

Initial reaction from teachers is that they like the wide selection of material and the limited amount of technical exercises. This method is really aimed at the international market so there's not much text and Mark and I scoured many cultures for melodies to incorporate so you won't find an abundance of songs like *America the Beautiful* and the like.

The look of the book is also very important. In its time *Yamaha Band Student* was state of the art but this is light years ahead. I can brag about that because we have some very talented people back at Alfred who type set everything on Finale and then paid particular attention to the colour and the layout

*Just to come back to the way things are over here. If you had to work as I with a one hour rehearsal per week, how would you structure your rehearsal?*

Well it would be a lot different I can tell you! One hour really isn't adequate time to include a lot of work on warm ups and tuning exercises but I would do some chorales as they are great for a variety of reasons. I believe that if you have a performing ensemble then you'd better do more than two concerts a year. You'd need to pack the programme out with exchange concerts, get the community involved and do a programme every couple of months

*You mentioned the international appeal and design of Accent on Achievement. How does Alfred fit into the international market?*

Well we are a big company especially in piano music. We have our main office in Los Angeles and a warehouse and distribution point in New York. We have offices in Tamworth over here and in Germany and also a distribution centre in Australia.

Our German wing were keen for us to translate *Accent on Achievement*

into German but before we commit ourselves to that *Yamaha Band Student* is available in German through De Haske publishing

As regards band methods the European problem we come across is the E flat horn! It's so much an in bred part of the brass band culture that it's difficult to incorporate it into our method. All we would do is transpose the F horn up a tone

*Yes. Tenor horns are found in many school wind bands in the UK. Many kids come here as tenor horn players and we try to get them to transpose but they nearly all make a successful transition to French Horn. On the other point of instrumentation I'm very frustrated that few American publications ever produce an E flat clarinet part because I really love the tone it brings to the high winds. Our time is nearly up do you have any final observations?*

Yes. I am bewildered by your treatment of percussion players. Most of the time I see kids back there doing nothing whilst one plays the kit. Why don't directors over here assign parts? Kicking a bass drum is not the sound that is required in a piece like a march. When you get players to take on individual parts and spread them around then they are becoming percussionists not drummers!

*John I'm afraid that's all we have time for now. let's go and meet my band. Thanks very much*

Now switch the tape off and I'll tell you

But that's what you'll never know, folks!!

W Richard Jones is Director of Music at Richmond School, North Yorkshire

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by John O'Reilly and Mark Williams

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