

A GUIDE TO REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE

Eric Whitacre's SLEEP

Russell Cowieson

Sleep, originally an a cappella choral piece composed in 2000, was commissioned by the 'Big East Conference Band Directors Association' whose many members are to be found printed in the score. Published by Carpe Ranam and distributed by Hal Leonard, it was premièred by Rutgers Wind Ensemble on April 26th, 2002.

Written for wind band with optional SATB chorus, it has been given an appropriate grade three level, achievable by good school bands.

Performance time is approximately five and a half minutes.

Sleep had been intended as a setting of Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. After extensive legal battles, Whitacre was forced to discontinue use of Frost's text, and turned to American poet and friend Charles Anthony Silvestri to craft a new text to fit the already existing music. Silvestri's text was inspired by watching his son fall asleep and fits the music so beautifully one would never know it came after the composition.

Eric Whitacre

Eric Whitacre studied at the Juilliard School, earning his Master of Music degree and studying with Pulitzer Prize and Oscar-winning composer John Corigliano.

Many of Whitacre's works have entered the standard choral and symphonic repertoires. His works *Water Night*, *Cloudburst*, *Sleep*, *Lux Aurumque* and *A Boy and a Girl* are among the most popular choral works of the last decade, and his *Ghost Train*, *Godzilla Eats Las Vegas*, and *October* have achieved equal success in the symphonic wind community. To date, Whitacre's published works have received thousands of performances and sold well over 350,000 copies worldwide.

His music has been featured on dozens of commercial and independent recordings, and a full collection of his a cappella music - released

under the Hyperion label in spring 2006 - reached number one in the classical charts.

More information about the composer and his works can be found at www.ericwhitacre.com

Instrumentation

Scored for flute 1&2, oboe 1&2, clarinet 1-3 and bass clarinet 1&2, AATB saxophones, 1 bassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, 2 baritones and 2 tubas. Three percussionists and timpani are required.

Rehearsal Suggestions

Sleep is on the current *ncbf* repertoire list (grade three), therefore I offer this guide to rehearsal and performance from the perspective of a conductor working with a young band.

Because the piece can be performed with optional SATB chorus, we have the added bonus of the score of the original choral version being placed in the middle of the full score. This helps us to understand how the text of Silvestri's poem fits the music, helps us with the pacing of the music and also with the emotional context.

In the first rehearsal I read the poem to the band, so they understand the context. It makes a nice change from the usual rehearsal routine, to 'escape' the band room, and consider other art forms. I return to the text regularly throughout the rehearsals, especially when working with a young band, as it helps them to connect emotionally with the music.

Whitacre gives no metronome mark but gives the directions '*Lento lontano*, *e molto legato*' and '*Chorale-like*'.

In general I find that most young musicians' understanding of Italian terms doesn't extend beyond tempo. They have failed to grasp that they can also give extremely important and useful direction as to the character of the music. It is always worthwhile taking the time to explain to them.

Lento - If you are working with a young band the tempo of the *lento* is probably going to be determined by how slowly they can play the phrases in one breath.

Lontano - discuss with them what *lontano* means - 'as from a distance' - and how they can achieve this effect. Talk about trying not to produce a sound which is too 'present' in the room.

Molto legato requires a constant concentration on their breathing and also knowledge of the length of the phrase they are playing.

Chorale like - again, discuss what a chorale is (regularly refer to this throughout the rehearsal process to enhance the singing qualities of the line) and how this also implies a freedom of movement within the phrase.

OPENING

First phrase (bar 1-4)

There is no introduction; the music begins immediately with the first phrase. Scored for clarinets, horns, baritones and tuba.

Bar 1 Aim for a true *pianissimo*, but don't let it do damage to the line. Make sure the air supply is supported enough to allow the musicians to play through the line, especially when the line (see first horn) doesn't move by step. Balance the ensemble to the best *pianissimo* horn sound.

2 Beat 1 - possible errata, the concert Ab in the tenor (original choral parts) is missing in the score. This could perhaps be solved by one of the baritones or third clarinet.

3 As there is obviously no text to sing, the concert Eb is not rearticulated - see the alto in choral version - which helps the legato quality of the harmonic accompaniment. There are many other places in the score where this happens.

4 Allow time to finish phrase and breathe as an ensemble.

Second phrase (bar 4-7)

Same instrumentation as first phrase.

5 The clarinet does not repeat the concert Eb in the melody but the first horn does. Although the clarinet minim helps ensure the line, it is important that we hear the repeated crotchets in the horn line in order for the syllable of the text to be heard. Maintain the *pianissimo* dynamic and *lontano* effect.

7 Again allow time to finish phrase and breathe as an ensemble. The first two phrases have now been musically, yet deliberately, rounded off which sets up a contrast with the next two phrases.

Third and fourth phrase (bar 7-10 and 10-13)

Same instrumentation as first phrase.

The next two phrases (bars 7-10 and 10-13) are joined to make one long phrase. Make sure ensemble breaths deeply enough to play the two phrases in one long unbroken line.

The *diminuendo* before letter A (end of phrase) acknowledges that there will have been some shaping (growth) of dynamic in the phrase. A small amount of *rubato* through the phrase is appropriate but not too much or it will ruin the effect of the *poco più mosso* at figure A.

13 Inexperienced players will need to hold their nerve to control intonation on this chord (clash between concert E and concert F). I usually have to spend some time on this to reassure them that the 'clash' of notes is correct. Due to the nature of the harmony there are many other moments in the piece which may require the same attention (e.g. bars 17, 24, 32 etc).

Rehearsal letter A First phrase (bar 14-18)

The crotchet rest in bar 14 makes it easy to give a clear preparatory beat for the *poco più mosso*.

Strongest dynamic of the piece yet (*mf*); by the end of the phrase all instruments (apart from percussion) are playing.

Guard against the new *mf* being too strong. Provided that you don't allow the flutes to be shrill, the very nature of the orchestration will automatically change the sound and depth of tone to produce the warm sound needed here. As the phrase progresses and the orchestration grows, try to encourage the players to make subtle entries which enrich the quality of the sound. They shouldn't 'announce' their arrival!

Although you would want the ensemble to round off the phrase, don't allow a

diminuendo, or the contrasting *mp* needed in bar 18 will be lost. A generous acoustic makes this much easier for a young band.

Second phrase (bar 18-21)

Whitacre 'moment' in terms of scoring. I like very much that he isn't afraid to use flutes in the lowest range. He manages to score these moments so well that it is possible to hear the flutes produce the wonderful full tone in the lower register that they are capable of.

Depending on the acoustic you might have to allow the sound to clear (before you play the second phrase) in order to hear the second flutes' low C (encourage a full dynamic from them and remind the others to listen; they must be aware they need to balance to the flute).

21 Instruments are all sitting on a comfortable note for their instrument, so *diminuendo* from *mp* is easily achievable. Be mindful of the *poco più mosso*, don't slow down through the *diminuendo* and work on getting the ensemble to take a quick breath which signals their intention to move on.

Third and fourth phrases (bar 21-23 and 23-27)

As in the opening section of the piece to letter A, the third and fourth phrases are linked to create a longer phrase. Don't forget the *poco più mosso* and flow through these two phrases. Work on a smooth transition of instrumentation from phrase three to four (some fade out, others fade in).

21-23 Bassoon, tuba, clarinet 3, trumpet 1 need to be encouraged to play through the interval leaps to create line.

Phrase four – all the repeated notes in the original chorus version are now held as single sustained notes. Inner parts are crucial to the momentum of the phrase.

26 Slight *rall* into this bar with a clear cue to the timp (they haven't played yet) which encourages a *pp* dynamic. Work with the horn and clarinet to round off their note as subtly as possible.

27 Differs from the choral version in that the repeated concert C is not reproduced. Conductor must conduct through bars 26 and 27 with a slightly slower beat (as indicated) to produce a moment of stillness before the *p più mosso*.

26-43 Third clarinets need to work out stagger breathing. Of course you want them to manage this as subtly as possible, but the timp pedal note can help cover a multitude of sins. Also note that they

must resist the temptation to change dynamics.

Rehearsal letter B

Note the direction *transparente* in the choral version which is not on the band version. I like to add this direction. Whitacre has tried to create the sound with his scoring (upper woodwind and percussion) but it is possible to go further and present a challenge to the musicians. One of the difficulties wind bands have is that the sound very often lacks the transparency that an orchestra can achieve (to describe at its most basic strings are able to play on a different part of the strings with a much lighter contact which creates this transparency of sound). The percussion section of the band is excellent at achieving this but wind instruments find this more difficult. Doesn't mean we shouldn't try.

Ask the woodwind to imagine singers performing this section with a breathier tone and then ask them to attempt to create this on their instruments. A sound less focused, with less centre or 'contact'. This can of course adversely effect the intonation so beware of potential problems.

The ensemble must balance to oboe which leads this section.

Avoid the tendency to *diminuendo* too soon after beat two rather than from beat three and don't labour the *crescendo/diminuendos*; be always aware of *p più mosso*.

27 Flute must be heard on the upbeat to 28. I dwell very slightly on the note then give an upbeat into 28 which signals the *p più mosso*. Timpani and clarinet need to be aware of their balancing duties.

28 Tubular bells / vibes would appreciate your attention (their first entrance).

33 Again – work to make sure that flute low C is heard.

Rehearsal Letter C

35 Horns signal a change in the tone quality from *transparente* to *dolce*. Note their *crescendo* is from *p* to *mp*. All other *crescendo-diminuendos* in this section are slightly stronger, working from an initial dynamic of *mp*.

38-42 Trumpet 1 and clarinet 1 have lines with large intervals. Guard against them playing note for note and encourage them to play through the notes to create line.

38 Second alto sax has the only moving inner part from beats 2-3 and must be heard.

39-43 Two groups of instruments (i. trumpets, clarinets, flutes, horns and ii. saxes, trombones) have contrasting/opposing dynamics, one group phasing out while the other group phases in. Worthwhile with young musicians to rehearse each group separately, let them find the single group balance before both groups find their collective balance.

39 Upbeats into these bars must be heard, they give motion. As lower notes they tend not to be heard, ask them to be marked *tenuto*.

41 Same as 39.

43 Make sure chord is balanced (some instruments start their *diminuendo* a half bar earlier than others) then round off.

Rehearsal Letter D First phrase (bar 43-46)

Note that scoring at D is exactly the same as opening (with added bass drum). No *più mosso*, play with a more restrained tempo to help create an air of expectancy.

Marked *espressivo* so ask for full contact with the tone but still at a *p* dynamic. From the beginning of this phrase to bar 59 is **an exercise in restraint**.

43 Ask upper horns to define the repeated concert C from 43-44. Amount of definition depends on acoustic.

44 Cue bass drum, it's his/her first entry. The sound of the bass drum should only be 'felt' by the ensemble rather than heard. Combined with the restrained tempo helps create an air of expectancy. Note the *crescendo* in lower brass and clarinets which, though it should never overpower the ensemble, gives some shape and direction to the short phrase.

46 Clarinets and lower brass must sustain full value of semibreve in order that sound doesn't drop out as trumpets enter with second phrase.

Second phrase (bar 46-50)

Beware of the nature of the ascending line. Trumpets and clarinets will probably *crescendo* too early and too much; rein them in.

49 As in the first phrase of rehearsal figure A, the trombones and alto sax should add to the sound without announcing their arrival. Suspended cymbal would probably appreciate a cue. The *crescendo* should not be too strong, nor should it end in an accent. Ask the player to round off the note and 'send it out' without a jolt. Bass drum only makes

a small *crescendo*.

50 Slightly holding the upbeat to E is both expressive and practical (in allowing the lower brass, bass clarinet to breathe).

Rehearsal Letter E First phrase (bar 50-53)

Upbeat to 51 must be heard.

Continue to hold back the dynamic. With young players, find the best controlled warm *forte* that the trumpets can play on a top A and balance the rest of the ensemble to that.

Trombones need to switch from accompanying *forte* dynamic (51 and 52) to fuller *forte* dynamic (crotchet before 53) and back to accompanying dynamic in 54, whilst also being aware that on the fuller dynamic they must balance with saxes and 3rd and 4th horns.

Second phrase (bar 53-56)

Still hold back the dynamic but ask the trumpets and horns to stress the repeated concert G (from 54-55). I usually ask them to mark it *tenuto*. Not *tenuto* that gives length to notes but *tenuto* that gives 'full value'. In other words we value these notes as the most important in the phrase and 'knead' them.

As in the preceding phrase, trombones need to switch from accompanying *forte* dynamic to fuller *forte* dynamic and balance with saxes and 3rd/4th horns.

Third phrase (56-62) – the climax of the piece

58 Again hold the dynamic until 58 then make sure the *crescendo* is correctly paced with most of the work happening on beat three and four. I ask the first trumpets to play the repeated A and the Bb with added *tenuto* and stress (no accent though). Hold back beat four slightly and 'place' beat one off bar 59. Percussion have a crucial role in achieving an effective *crescendo*, they are only marked to *f* to ensure they don't overpower the ensemble (especially percussion three who has been waiting a long time to play these crash cymbals!).

59 I like to encourage the band to think of the sensation of flying, of weightlessness as you drift off to sleep. The music should 'take off' which is achieved by letting the music move forward slightly then *rall* into 62. The tuba has an important role here in driving the momentum you want to create and as a moving part which needs to be heard.

62 Note the cut off at end of bar. It

should only be long enough to let the sound clear (need to know your acoustic) and for ensemble to take a relaxed breath.

Rehearsal letter F

Watch with young players, that those who aren't playing don't 'tune out' and slump, thus ruining the atmosphere the band have worked hard to create. Everybody must remain focused.

63 *Crescendo* goes to beat three (young players tend to bulge the sound towards beat two) and must be rounded at peak, not accented. Same for bar 64.

65 The *crescendo* is paced over a whole bar.

66 As mentioned previously, the cymbal should send its sound out, and avoid being accented.

67 Virtually the whole band is scored here, but dynamic and balance must be managed to create a warm *mf* only.

68 Note the 'solo' oboe on beat two and first clarinet on beat three. Ensemble must cut off at end of beat three in order to hear the flutes upbeat into G. Again you will have to consider your acoustic to make this work.

Rehearsal Letter G

69 The solo flute and clarinet who will play in bars 71 and 72 should not be playing here in order to prepare for a smooth transition when they take over from the section.

I like the clarinets to be strongest and as they *diminuendo* the vibes become more audible; it changes colour as the clarinets fade out.

With young players you could use two players to handle the vibes part which also keeps percussion two and three more involved.

The choral version allows a repeat to end. I tend to have the winds play as written but ask the vibes and marimba to play another couple of bars *ad lib*. They are capable of *diminuendo* to an absolute whisper and as you don't need to count the bars you can stay focused on them till the end.