

# Contemporary Music with a School Wind Band

compiled by Carol Condliffe

School Band Directors are always on a lookout for new and interesting repertoire for the year's programme. We are also interested in finding music which is pleasing and accessible to our audiences and to the players. Perhaps this leads us to err on the side of safety and not try the more avant-garde pieces. But from experience I have found that often the piece which has the most impact in a concert is the most modern and unusual. The conductor needs to feel at ease and confident about a new work, so must prepare well by finding a recording, talking with another conductor about likely problems, and even more important, likely solutions. Think carefully about presentation; interesting lighting, combining with another art form, even playing the piece twice - once in each half. But above all think about the music and its message. Believe in it, and if it is a good piece it will not let you down.

Here are some suggestions for you to try; each work is recommended by a conductor who has used it with a school band recently.

**Crystals** by Thomas Duffy Ludwig Grade 3

Crystals is a one movement tone poem which is divided into four sections, each of which represents a type of crystal. The first, **Dark Ice**, combines water sounds with quartal harmonies and a modal melody to suggest the mystery and terrible majesty of glaciers, icebergs, and things under and in them. Next comes **Underwater Rubies** again uses water sounds to suggest beams of light ricocheting off gems spilling from sunken treasure. **Cyanide** is a violent and percussive section mimicking the terrible potency of its namesake. Finally comes **Monolith** which aspires to images of huge piles of stone and granite, natural or manmade.

The piece is written for standard Wind Band but with six important and busy percussionists, whose battery includes various drums, tuned instruments, cymbals, bell tree, wind chimes, gong as well as the exciting addition of Water Gong (potentially messy but great fun!) and Lion's Roar. Detailed explanations for the last two are given, but be sure to reinforce the hole in the drum head to prevent it ripping. As one might expect from the title, a number of players are required to play tuned wine glasses; players are also required to whistle, sing and in the case of brass play half valve murmurs. Much of the score is divided by time rather than by metre and the players do need to watch and listen most carefully.

The piece lends itself to dramatic presentation, perhaps by using coloured stage lights for each section. We used green, then red, then blue for Cyanide and finally yellow. It is a most interesting exercise in contemporary techniques, with effective combinations of sounds producing delicious effects. It also produced very favourable audience and performer reactions.

- Carol Condliffe

**Hall of Mirrors** by Howard Jones Grade 3

This piece is a musical description of walking through a Hall of Mirrors where the visitor's image is distorted in bizarre and grotesque ways. The work is very rhythmical, like a march, and although the harmony is occasionally strange it is easy to listen to.

It is scored for conventional Wind Band and although it can work with fewer instruments, it does need Piccolo and Tuba or Baritone Saxophone, because they have important solo parts to play. It does not require any special percussion instruments, but does require six players.

I think the score is technically a compositional tour-de-force because it uses all kinds of mirror devices. There are rhythmic mirrors which sound the same backwards or forwards; melodic mirrors in which tunes are reflected about a central point in time; melodic mirrors which are

played in inverted form, giving two lines which move high and low in contrary motion, reflecting each other in counterpoint; it uses mirror harmony where intervals below a central pitch mirror those above it, and finally whole musical sections are reflections of other sections.

Crucially none of the above details really matter to the listener because the work flows in a natural and convincing way.

- Keith Robinson

The score and parts can be obtained from the composer at 44 Dolphin Road Slough SL1 1TA

**Penumbra** by Daryl Runswick Grade 3

Although written for conventional Wind Band forces, this piece can be played with fewer instruments. The tape starts immediately and the conductor indicates individuals to play one by one, gradually building a gentle floating texture. Each group of instruments, Flutes and Piccolo, Oboes, Clarinets, Bassoons, Trumpets, Horns and Trombones pick phrases in a random order from boxes at the beginning of their parts. The percussionists play a selection of gently tinkling instruments like Bell Trees, Wind Chimes and Finger Cymbals, but are cued in like everyone else.

On cue from the conductor some of the players stop improvising and begin to play a wide-leaping, strange but haunting melody. This melody starts in the low register instruments and gradually rises up through the band like a wave which crests with the piccolo and then falls back through the band to the bass instruments.

On cue from the conductor the instruments begin to leave the tune and return to the random texture at the beginning of the piece. One by one they stop playing, giving the piece a kind of 'Farewell Symphony' ending.

Rhythmically the piece is quite complex and each group of instruments has a fragment of the tune; however some of this difficulty is lessened for the more inexperienced because each instrumental type is written in unison. This may seem very simplistic compared to conventional harmony and scoring, but you have to remember that it is heard in conjunction with a tape. Because the tape is quite complex and moving at a completely different speed than the tempo set by the conductor, anything else would muddy up the texture and make it sound leaden and heavy. Players with a limited range could just play the parts of the melody that are in their range.

You do need a DAT player (or MiniDisk), PA system and we found it best to have somebody adjust the volume of the tape as the piece progresses. In this way the tape never drowns out the live sounds at the beginning but as more players join in it is equally important that the band does not obliterate the tape. A few play-throughs are all that is needed to sort out this problem.

- Keith Robinson

The Score, Parts and Tape are available from Dazzle Music, 126 Jerningham Road, London SE14 5NL

**Statement** by Brent Heisinger Shawnee Press Gr. 3.5

This particular example of contemporary wind band music featured in an article by Clark Rundell in the Summer 1997 edition of *Winds*. It was just the piece that we needed for a music-drama production on the theme of War and Peace. The composer states in his foreword that the piece represents the turmoil of man's existence throughout time - uneasy - calm - unrest - chaos - struggle for resolution - peace.

continued on page 24