Emotion in Music

Tim Reynish - reprinted from WASBE Journal

One of the standard text books around in my youth forty years ago was Steward Macpherson's Form in Music, which first emerged in 1908 In the opening chapter, Macpherson postulates that music appeals to us in three ways, through Physical Sensation, Emotion and Intellect

Physical Sensation

Of the first he is dismissive, suggesting that our physical reaction is in common with that of the rest of animal creation, and is thus the lowest agency of the three I suspect however that there is more to this than meets the eye It is a basic though not base excitement, the crowd reaction at a football or basketball match, the crowd reaction at a pop concert, the crowd reaction at The Last Night of the Proms, and the appeal of all three types of entertainment to the general public is physical All three get the adrenaline coursing through the veins, and of course it is the involvement of the crowd that helps, seven or seventy thousand people singing, shouting, screaming

However I remember hearing the Ellington Band on one of its last tours, and writing a piece for our local newspaper contrasting the total absorption of the jazz aficionados with the frigid atmosphere which had greeted a quartet concert the previous night The music of Mozart and Ravel, two hot-blooded composers surely, met with polite, almost bored applause, while the audience for the Duke, whose programme included a then way-out African Suite of considerable complexity and length, was in a frenzy of excitement

Emotion

The second category of musical appeal, Macpherson describes as more subjective, "the response of something in our own consciousness to some (often indescribable) quality in the music to which we are listening" This can also be physical; I never hear the entrance of the Commendatore in the last scene of Don Giovanni without the hairs on my spine reacting, but I am not sure how Nerve-tingling, spine-chilling, it is what the composer David Bedford called "the tingle factor" in an essay in WINDS some time ago

Intellect

The third factor, which then takes a further 260 pages to expound, is the intellectual, and here is a danger, I believe While all of us can write about form, symmetry, balance, organisation, few of us can write about what the music means, what its emotional impact is In the seventeen years since the birth of WASBE and BASBWE, countless trees have been sacrificed in the service of the intellect behind wind band music, but few are the accounts of what really matters, the emotional appeal

Architecture

I wonder whether there are other factors involved here, such as architecture; not an intellectual architecture of the work, but the actual physical forum for the performance The venue must impact on the repertoire, the balance of the forces involved, the pacing of the climaxes In 1991, my wind orchestra gave a performance of David Bedford's *Sun Paints Rainbows over the Vast Waves* in the Royal Albert Hall in a late-night BBC Prom Far from being scared of that cavernous dome, my players seemed automatically to appreciate that here at last was an acoustic which could do justice to those massive tutti chords on brass and percussion, and their sudden cut-off to ppp in the woodwind In a more constricted space, Bedford's "tingle-factor" is reduced to mere noise

In 1994, we were privileged to play the Berlioz Symphonie *Funebre et Triomphale* on Le Quatorze Juillet in a Cheltenham Town Hall absolutely packed to hear Evelyn Glennie in the world premiere of Thea Musgrave's *Journey through a Japanese Landscape* The atmosphere was electric, the Hall just big enough to take those colossal build-ups which we had ever so carefully paced over scores of bars with the full complement of wind and brass that Berlioz had requested, and the following night we played in Lichfield Cathedral, where the noble building added majesty, and of course never was the sound mere noise in either acoustic

Repertoire

Perhaps, too, we need to think of repertoire that is more "musical;" repertoire which speaks to the emotion rather than the intellect I personally find it easier to give a good performance of the early nationalist works than of middle neo-classic Stravinsky; there is a kind of filmic, heart-tugging quality in Dvorak, Brahms and Tchaikovsky which finds its apogee in a Mahler Symphony or a Strauss tone-poem, and we can suggest to our wind band composers that their works should conform to this or that ideal in terms of construction, and tonal balance without ever touching on the real meat of the matter, whether it means anything As the great quotation states, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing"

Universal Language

Frank Battisti 's dream of a universal brotherhood of wind music was of course foreshadowed by Percy Grainger who wrote,

I firmly believe that music will someday become a universal language But it will not become so as long as our musical vision is limited to the output of four European countries between 1700 and 1900 The first step in the right direction is to view the music of all peoples and periods without prejudice of any kind, and strive to put the world's known and available best music into circulation Only then shall we be justified in calling music a 'universal language'

Through the contacts we have made in WASBE, we are all greatly enriched, but whether American bands are playing more British music, British bands more Japanese music, Japanese bands more European music I doubt very much Too few of us are prepared to stick our necks out and say, with the passion that characterised our first meeting in Manchester in 1981, "such-and-such is a wonderful piece, full of sadness, longing, tenderness, joy, laughter Too often the music which we commission, programme, and review is formulaic; it often is exciting, since brash excitement is one of the simplest ingredients in wind band music

Performance Levels

I suspect that even if the venue can accommodate our sound world, and our programme has a variety of music which can sustain the emotional appetite (in Cheltenham we played Holst *Suite No 1* and Richard Rodney Bennett *Morning Music* before the Musgrave and Berlioz), we still need great performances to convince There is no doubt in my mind that the wind orchestra/wind ensemble/wind band, however big or small the wind and brass based mixed ensemble, is the trickiest of all to tune, to balance, to voice and to blend With the chamber or symphony orchestra, whatever the repertoire, we have a range of dynamics, colours and even pitches which the wind ensemble cannot begin to approach, and the ensemble and tricky voices are disguised by the cloud of strings.

All too often our performances are perfunctory glimpses of what might be possible given the right repertoire and the right sets of circumstances, and in a way it does not really matter, since we tend to play in a goldfish bowl of our own making, commissioning works which usually demonstrate our virtuosity, which we play to ourselves and pass around our cozy coterie of like-minded conductors

I believe that we could now be on the brink of consolidating the developments in the wind ensemble of the last 45 years; ever since the founding of the Eastman Wind Ensemble concept, our horizons have widened, both through the mass of great works commissioned