

A Discussion with Warren Benson

The Leaves Are Falling

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Warren Benson is one of the most thought-provoking contributors to the serious repertoire of the wind band. Over the past twenty-five years, he has remained consistent in his quest for pure tone colors versus traditional doublings, the use of open spaces and silences as timbral factors, an uncompromising desire for the highest standards of individual and section performance, and above all, a sincere interest in developing the finest wind repertoire with the most musical conductors and ensembles to perform that repertoire.

Born in 1924 in Detroit, Benson attended Cass Technical High School and studied both percussion and French horn (with Francis Hellstein, principal horn of the Detroit Symphony). He earned Bachelor and Master degrees in Theory at the University of Michigan and while a junior at Ann Arbor was selected to play timpani with the Detroit Symphony and the Ford Sunday Evening Hour Broadcast Orchestra. In 1950 he was awarded the first of two successive Fulbright Fellowships to Salonica, Greece where he taught at Anatolia College and founded the Anatolia College Chorale, the first co-educational school choir in Greece; he also developed a five year music curriculum at the school and served as music advisor for the United States Information Agency.

Upon return to the United States he assumed the position of director of band and orchestra activities at Mars Hill College in North Carolina, and in 1957 began a fourteen year tenure at Ithaca College, Ithaca, NY, where he taught composition and percussion. At Ithaca he organized the first percussion ensemble on the East Coast and toured and recorded with the ensemble. He became deeply involved with the Ford Foundation Contemporary Music Project,



Warren Benson

developing the first pilot project in comprehensive musicianship at Ithaca College with a subsequent project at the Interlochen Arts Academy. While at Ithaca, Benson composed several of the works most familiar to wind conductors: *Concertino for Alto Saxophone* (1954) commissioned by Sigurd Rascher, *Symphony for Drums and Wind Orchestra* (1962) for the American Wind Symphony, *The Leaves Are Falling* (1963), *Helix* (1966) commissioned by tubaist Harvey Phillips, and *The Solitary Dancer* (1967), one of the first publications of the MCA Symphonic Wind Ensemble Editions.

Benson joined the faculty of the Eastman School of Music in September, 1967 as Professor of Composition. In 1970 he lectured in Argentina and was awarded the Diploma of Honor from the Ministry of Culture; the following year he was given the Lillian Fairchild Prize for Composition. The National Band Association awarded him a Citation of Excellence in 1976 and in 1980–81 he was named Kilbourn Professor at the Eastman School.

It is interesting to note that out of his total compositional output of ninety compositions, seventeen are for various instrumentations of the wind band. This ratio is highly significant as it indicates an interest in many forms and styles of performance other than the wind band, thus bringing to the band the experiences derived from working in vocal and instrumental settings both professional and amateur. Benson described his approach to composition in material submitted to David Ewen's *American Composers: A Biographical Dictionary*¹:

"My creative process is essentially a layering process. I tend to write a work all the way through in a very sketchy form and then apply a series of overlays to this until the work is completely finished. I usually then put it away for a couple of months to ferment, bringing it back into the harsh light of the new day for appraisal, correction, and final completion. I do not write for competitions or abstract hereafters. I write music for people: family, friends, professionals, and amateurs alike. It is to give us pleasure that we collaborate; not without serious commitment, exposure, and risk, not without striving for genuine expression, new challenge, and fresh solutions worthy of the art."

¹Ewen, Davis. *American Composers: A Biographical Dictionary*. G. P. Putnam and Sons, New York, 1982.

The Leaves Are Falling is undoubtedly one of the most difficult works in the wind repertoire to perform due to the demands, both musical and emotional, imposed upon the conductor and the ensemble. Cast in an 11½ minute single movement form, it moves at a ♩ = 32–34 mm pace; the first half is original material which is repeated almost exactly in the second section, this time with various statements of *Eine Feste Burg* superimposed on the material previously heard. The infinite control required of each performer produces situations seldom seen in traditional large scale band writing and focuses attention on basic performance techniques such as tone control, extremely quiet entrances and exits, graduated crescendi, intensity and projection of individual and section lines and, at all times, rhythmic control. All these combine to create one of the wind band's most contemplative, yet elegant, statements.

The Leaves Are Falling was recorded recently by the Eastman Wind Ensemble for release in 1984. The interview with Warren Benson was recorded between September 1 and October 15, 1983.

Donald Hunsberger

DH: How would you describe the genesis of *The Leaves Are Falling*?

WB: The work began originally as a commission from Kappa Gamma Psi, a small national fraternity that had a chapter at Ithaca. I was teaching at Ithaca College then and held a night course which Frank Battisti, who was teaching at Ithaca High School, attended. We would talk about band music and the dismal state of the current band repertoire and 'What could we do about it?'. The thing that interested me most was that I played much of that repertoire for years and remembered that most of the pieces were short—three, four minutes pieces, five or six minutes would be a healthy wad. These were either short works or longer multi-movement works that still came in short sections.

There wasn't any long line, continuous, unbroken eleven, twelve minute tone poem such as you find in the orchestral repertoire, and I felt that this was a hole in the band literature that created a curious experience at a band concert because so many of the six minute pieces all had the same aspiration . . . to go for broke. With a succession of enormous climatic efforts, which just wore you out by the time it was over, you were continually being assaulted by the total hardware of the ensemble with maximum stress levels to achieve these climaxes, and that could happen six, seven or eight times or more in the typical band concert.

So I thought, what about the type of composition that doesn't do that, that lasts longer and actually takes more time to get some place. A piece that has anti-climactic peaks but really goes somewhere, and after it gets there, really takes its time to come away . . . in a sense offering to the concert a longer span of continuity. The first opportunity I had to experiment with something like this was a little work called *Remembrance*, a set of variations which lasts about eleven and one-half minutes; *The Leaves Are Falling* is about the same length.

Another idea I was interested in was the idea of montage and the presentation of two thoughts at the same time, as when you look at a piece of glass and you

see what is reflected on the surface of the glass and you see what is behind the glass. You see them independently or you see them both at the same time depending upon your point of view, and that can be changed instantly by the introduction of some new element. How to do this in music really interested me because it seemed to me that since ours is a time art and not a space art I would have to present one of these views as a known factor. It's easy enough to do Theme I, Theme II and then combine those themes, but I wanted to do it a little differently by using one piece of well-known material, almost like a quotation, and then write some other material which would offer a second element, so that's essentially the way in which I started.

I wrote the opening flute solo (Ex. 1) because I had heard a flute player from Ithaca, Nancy Howe, over a long period of time who had this enormous breath capacity and air suspension. That really intrigued me . . . to start a line, that because of the length of the line and because the instrument is obviously in an extreme low register, conveys some of the stress of not being able to take a breath, because that's one of the things about wind instruments that I think is interesting. I think that factor is a presence that people relate to, especially in live performances when it is very obvious that players have to breathe, and then people wonder what will happen if someone doesn't breathe after a four-bar phrase. So I wanted to build these long-breathing phrases as part of psychologically increasing the intensity of the composition.

Ex. 1. *The Leaves Are Falling*. mm. 6–18. Flute solo.

In November, 1963 we had house guests; Karen Rascher, Sigurd's daughter was visiting us. One morning we were talking and turned on the radio to get the news . . . and the news was that Kennedy had been assassinated and that really devastated us. It turned me toward this piece I had begun where I was still trying to figure out what to use for the second musical material, the known factor or quote. I had written the first half straight through in a sketch earlier. I thought then that I should choose something as some kind of memorial to Kennedy because I was so emotionally involved with this news, although I didn't feel that I wanted to say anything about it in the title or notes.

I guess it was on the next Monday that one of my percussion students, Ruth Komanoff, who shared an interest in poetry with me, brought in some poems for me to see, one of which was *Autumn* by Rainer Maria Rilke, which just suited the moment perfectly. The first line just captivated me as a title because it seemed

The Leaves Are Falling

WARREN BENSON

Full Score
Duration: 11 min., 30 sec.

Expressively, with steady rhythm (♩=32-34)

Expressively, with steady rhythm (♩=32-34)

Flute 1, Solo

C Piccolo
Flutes 1, 2

Oboes 1, 2

English Horn*

B♭

E♭ Alto

B♭ Bass

B♭ Contrabass

B♭ Soprano*
[E♭ Alto as subst.]

E♭ Alto

♭ Tenor

E♭ Baritone
[optional B♭ Bass]†

Bassoons 1, 2

Contra Bassoon

Harp
(or Piano)

Piano
for study

B♭ Cornets

B♭ Trumpets

Horns in F
1, 2
3, 4

Baritone

Trombones

Basses

String Bass

Timpani

Bells

Chimes

Triangles (Small)

Triangles (Large)

Claves, Suet. Cym.

Tam-tam, Bass. Dr.

Soli (let vibrate)

simile (l.v.)

pp

REIN' FESTE BURRO

With vigor, may be sung in unison

Melody, MARTIN LUTHER, 1529

1 A might-ty for-tress is our God, A bul-wark nev-er fall-ing;
2 Did we in our own strength confide, Our stri-ving would be lo-osing;
*3 And tho' this world, with devils filled, Should threaten to un-do us;

Our help-er he a-mid the flood Of mor-tal ills pre-vail-ing;
Were not the right man on our side, The man of God's own choos-ing;
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to tri-umph through us:

For still our an-cient foe to work us woe; His craft and
Dost ask who thus may be? Christ Je-sus it is he; Lord Sa-ba-
The Prince of dark-ness grim, We trem-ble not for him; His rage we

power are great, And, armed with cruel hate, On earth is not his e-qual.
oth his Name, From age to age the same, And he must win the bat-tle.
can en-dure, For lo! his doom is sure, One lit-tle word shall fell him.

*) See Note to the Conductor.

14853-FS-24
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to be society was feeling that way . . . like everything was going to pot and the upbeat spirit of the Kennedy administration, at least as the people of my generation were concerned, had just been blown away.

AUTUMN

The leaves are falling, falling as from way off,
as though far gardens withered in the skies;
they are falling with denying gestures.

And in the nights the heavy earth is falling
from all the stars down into loneliness.

We all are falling. This hand falls.
And look at others: it is in them all.

And yet there is one who holds this falling
endlessly gently in his hands.

"Autumn" from TRANSLATIONS FROM THE POETRY OF RAINER MARIA RILKE, by M. D. Herter Norton, Copyright, 1938, by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, N.Y.; Copyright renewed, 1966 by M. D. Herter Norton. Reprinted with permission from the publisher.

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So that all came together and in thinking about what to use, like some big universally-identifiable religious symbol, I thought I would use a Protestant hymn, even though Kennedy was a Roman Catholic. It was curious that his being a Catholic produced such a political issue at first, asking whether a Catholic could be elected President of the United States. So I thought rather than use the *Dies irae* or *Kol Nidre*, I would use a Protestant faith hymn, the predominant faith of the country and so I chose *Eine Feste Burg*. I wrote it out from memory, never went to a source and still haven't gone to a hymn book to play one of the traditional harmonizations even though I've heard them over the years. I wrote out a few harmonizations then but didn't really use any of them in the piece.

As this idea of the montage grew, and by this time I was involved with an emotional set with this piece because of the Kennedy phenomenon, the character of *Eine Feste Burg* began to bring a relationship emotionally to the first part of the piece, and it was on the basis of this that I really discovered the affinity of the two ideas. I then tried to work them closer and closer together by the way in which I introduced the hymn, the order in which the hymn is introduced, the fact that there are errors in the tune setting and some very different and strange harmonies. I wanted the particular climactic progression to be some giant harmonization so I went all out with chromaticism and so forth, but these are ideas that actually come out of the first-part original material that are then realized in that harmonization to make it effective.

Ex. 2. *The Leaves Are Falling*. Chorale statements and harmonizations of *Eine Feste Burg*. (Each entrance or overlap is numbered 1–8).

Chorale Statements

1 Trombone a 3
91 92 93 94 95 96 97
mf molto allegro, ma articolato

2 Piccolo (Bva)
Trumpet 1
103 104 105 106
mf Broad and steady

3 Trumpet 2-3
Trombone 1-2-3
mf

4 Trbn. 1
Picc.
107 108 109 110 111
f *empire*

5 Picc.
Trbn. 1-2-3
112 113 114 115 116
f

6a Trbn. 1-2-3
Tromba 1-2-3
117 118 119 120
Bar.

6b Trpta. 1-2-3
Tromba 1-2-3
121 122 123
f

6c Picc. (Bva), Clar. 1
125 126 127 128 129
f

6d Trpta. 1-2-3
Tromba 1-2-3
130 131 132 133 134
f

7 135 136 137 138 139 140 141
mp *corona* f mp

8 144 145 146 147 148
f

9 149 150 151 152 153 154
f

Ex. 2. Continued.

The actual technical aspects of the work hinge on the character of D-flat and C-sharp with one wanting to go to F and the other to D. The D \flat is the upper leading tone to the dominant (C) of F, and the C \sharp is the leading tone to D. So there's that contrast between the pull toward F and the pull toward D minor that is used throughout the piece, and I used that as a way of sustaining the intensity after we get to the big climax and resolve the hymn by having the D \flat hang over so long before it deteriorates . . . just as the unison statement of the hymn is presented in its final form. (See example 4 on pages 12 and 13, mm. 160–164).

DH: One question that puzzled conductors for years is the use of chimes playing both those pitches. An example is the C \sharp chime in the climax to Part One, measures 78–79, which continues as C \sharp until the first introduction of the hymn tune in measure 92 where it becomes D \flat .

WB: The first time we are cadencing in D minor, thus the C \sharp leading tone. The D \flat takes over as the hymn is presented in the key of F and points the way forward.

DH: Referring back to the second part climax (Ex. 4), why did you not use the entire tutti resources of the ensemble? Why no clarinet section for example?

WB: I really wanted a timbre there in a harder quality of brilliance. If the clarinets were high, they would be shrill and I didn't want that, and if I didn't use them high, it would mellow out too much. They just thicken in the middle register. I wanted it to be strong and vibrant without mellowness.

DH: A successful score study process includes the study of the growth of melodic material, but the growth of melodic material in *The Leaves Are Falling* is so controlled that each entrance frequently appears more as new material than as a re-statement and one can accept a new line as possessing a certain shape or identity without questioning its organic roots. Do you consciously write melodic material in small groups or sets, or do you write long lines and then break them up into smaller groups or components?

WB: I guess what I am looking for is the longest projection of the line with the least manipulation of the material, so in that sense I suppose you might say that it is set-oriented, not exclusively in the current practice thinking of sets but more in the old fashioned idea of motivically organized material. I want to work with as little material as possible and I don't want to change something just to introduce a fresh thought. I tend to work with small elements, like a string of beads or chain

with one link hooked to the next link making long lines.

DH: I have extracted the basic sets or melodic cells as seen in Example 3. What manipulations of these sets occur to create melodic material?

Ex. 3. *The Leaves Are Falling*. Melodic sets, along with corresponding melodic excerpts from the score.

WB: The primary one is the use of the octave transposition in the first whole step interval of Set 1, G–F–E which becomes a minor seventh leap upward as shown in No. 4. This line reaches its most important statement in measures 150–153 in the pitches C–B \flat –A just as the final climax is building.

Another important item is the repeated opening chime notes which relate to the first three notes of *Eine Feste Burg* (m. 92) and all the climax build of successive F's in the trumpets at measures 162–165. (See Ex. 4, mm. 157–164 and Ex. 2, No. 8.).

DH: Would you discuss your theories on harmonic rhythm?

WB: I think there's a kind of harmonic rhythm that is the compulsive element that concerns me the most because I like to keep the harmonic rhythm suspended as

Ex. 4. *The Leaves Are Falling*. mm. 152-164.

This is a comprehensive orchestral score for measures 152 to 164 of the piece "The Leaves Are Falling". The score is organized into several sections:

- CLARINETS:** Includes parts for C Piccolo (Flutes 1 & 2), Oboes 1 & 2, English Horn (E.H.), B-flat Bass Clarinet, E-flat Alto Clarinet, B-flat Bass Clarinet, and B-flat Contrabass Clarinet.
- SAXOPHONES:** Includes parts for B-flat Soprano Saxophone, E-flat Alto Saxophone, B-flat Tenor Saxophone, and E-flat Baritone Saxophone.
- BRASS:** Includes parts for B-flat Trumpets 1 & 2, B-flat Trombones 1 & 2, B-flat Trombones 3 & 4, and Trombones 5 & 6.
- PERCUSSION:** Includes parts for Bells, Chimes, Triangle (Trgls.), Small Gong (Sm. Lge.), Claves, Suspended Cymbal (Susp. Cym.), and Bass Drum (B. Dr.).
- Other Instruments:** Includes Harp, Piano for study, Bassoon 1 & 2 (Bsns. 1, 2), Contrabassoon (C. Bsn.), and Percussion (Perc.).

Key markings include a 2/3 time signature, dynamic markings such as *ff*, *fff*, *ffz*, and *f*, and performance directions like "Broadly" and "Solo". The score features complex rhythmic patterns with many tied notes and slurs, indicating a dense and expressive musical texture.

Ex. 4 Continued.

158 Picc., Fls. a 2 b (160) *dim. poco a poco* *to silence* 164

C Picc. Fls. 1, 2 *ff* *dim.* *to silence* *to silence*

Obs. 1, 2 *ff* *p*

E. H. *ff* *dim. poco a poco* *f* *mf*

CLARINETS

Bb $\frac{1}{2}$ $\frac{2}{3}$ *ff* *dim. poco a poco* *f* *mf*

E♭ Alto *ff* *dim. poco a poco* *f* *mf*

Bb Bass C. Bass Cl. *ff* *dim. poco a poco* *f* *mf*

Bb C. Bass *ff* *dim. poco a poco* *f* *mf*

SAXOPHONES

Bb Sop. *ff* *dim.* *to silence*

E♭ Alto *ff* *dim.* *to silence*

Bb Ten. *ff* *dim.* *to silence*

E♭ Bar. *ff* *dim.* *to silence*

Bans. 1, 2 C. Bsn. *ff* *dim.* *to silence*

C. Bsn. *ff* *dim.* *to silence*

Harp *ff* *dim.* *f* *mf* *mp* *p* *pp* *l.v.*

Piano for study *loco ff* *l.v.* *pp cresc.* *ff sempre*

Bb Cnts. $\frac{1}{2}$ $\frac{2}{3}$ *ff* *mf* *dim. to silence* *ff sempre*

Bb Trpts. $\frac{1}{2}$ $\frac{2}{3}$ *ff* *mf* *dim. to silence* *ff sempre*

Hns. in F $\frac{1, 2}{3, 4}$ *muted* *mf* *div. open* *ff* *ppp* *mp dim.* *p*

Bar. *ff* *dim. poco a poco* *f* *mf*

Trbs. $\frac{1}{2}$ $\frac{2}{3}$ *ff* *f* *dim. poco a poco* *mf*

Basses *ff* *dim. poco a poco* *f* *mf*

Str. Bass *ff* *dim. poco a poco* *f* *mf*

Timp. *f* *ff* *mp* *mf* *f*

Bells Chimes *ff* *dim.* *f* *mf* *mp* *p* *pp* *ppp* *l.v.*

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long as possible before there's any resolution complete enough to really be satisfying. A lot of my pieces don't even have that final resolution until the very end, so keeping the harmonic pressure on . . . not in the Wagnerian sense of deceptive cadences, but more related to the fact that there is no strong terminal element of cadence. It's as in the *Leaves* when you get to the big D minor cadence (mm. 78–79, Part 1), just as soon as the tam-tam fades away, you are aware of the chime playing C#, growing out of the background as if it was always there, not letting it sit there long enough to become too comfortable or to interfere with the forward pressure of the piece.

I don't even like the use of the word "flow" here because that assumes a lazy forward progress; I would rather think of forward motion as being like someone putting their hand in the middle of your back and seeing that you move along.

DH: How do you define "tension and release" or "pressure and intensity" or the "maintenance of intensity" since you create such suspenseful moments in your works with the control of harmonic rhythm, etc.?

WB: Well, I think we have to build all this in kind of layers. We talk about "tension and release" as if there's either one or the other, and of course, there's all levels and degrees in both. So, I like to think about it in the terms that I'm working with in a new piece. What are the most involved, the most complex, the most severely stressful moments, and how will I achieve them? What sonorities are to be used for that? How do you do it? It might be that I might want a really complicated sound, or conversely, I might want a simple, simple sound: the stress factor comes because the piece is in danger of falling apart, which is what happens in the case of the *Second Symphony* (1982). In the last part, the last sixteen minutes, the tension is built upon the fragility of an idea, while in the beginning the intensity is built upon the sheer bulk and dramatic confrontation of the situation. I think the stress is greater at the end than at the beginning because you can fight an enemy you can see. In the ending it's a question of whether it's going to make it or not in the sense of forward progression . . . it just keeps going, keeps going, but doesn't develop or get bigger, it doesn't move toward a final goal, it just keeps going.

So I try to think that psychological strategies are to play more than musical strategies and then I try to figure out how one could create analogous musical situations that seem to implicate people in the psychological situations. I suppose that's what it's about.

DH: How do you define that fine line between suspension and being static?

WB: Yes, stagnant . . . how does one deal with that? When does that kind of passive thing begin to turn into an active annoyance? A functional disturbance? If you leave a disturbance there long enough, you begin to wish it would go away and when it becomes sufficiently apparent on our consciousness that it hasn't gone away, then it becomes useful. It goes through the phase of boredom and now becomes alive in some other guise just because of its presence. How long is that? Is it a useful or dependable item?

DH: What is your concept of performer, conductor, or au-

dience acceptance of your music which is doing and saying something that frequently is the antithesis of the band norm, the band director's mainstream?

WB: While we've talked about these things as though they were "repertoire strategies," I have a strong enough involvement and commitment to the music so I really feel emotionally the spirit of the piece is being expressed. I've been fortunate in that I've always known performers who have enjoyed playing some of my music and I usually write specifically for individual people so I can do what I want to do. I've always felt free to use whatever language I wanted . . . if I want to write a serial chunk in a piece, I do so. If I want to write C major to F major, I do that too because I'm not dependent upon the approbation of my fellows. Passing styles and fancies don't interest me in the sense that I *have* to keep up, but they do interest me in the sense that they offer *new* ways to look at my writing, plus more vocabulary. I do use freely *anything* that is out there, including whatever is current, or was current whenever it was current. It's not being eclectic, it's being inclusive rather than exclusive.

Speaking of another type of acceptance, did you know that *The Leaves Are Falling* was rejected by nine publishers before it was taken by someone who was not even in the educational band publishing business? Felix Greissle, who was the manager of the Serious Music catalog at E. B. Marks, took the work in for publication. I told him that he was not going to sell a million copies and he replied "That's not what I took it for." So you see that any composer who is really serious about his work must write what he believes and not become part of that old relationship between the composer and the conductor in which the composer writes to satisfy the conductor's needs or tastes first and his own second.

DH: How do you feel about the preparation of wind conductors today?

WB: Recently, I was a guest lecturer at a band directors workshop, and the group of young people I was working with asked if I could help them get into the more difficult contemporary repertoire. I suggested first of all that they were in the wrong place and didn't belong in the program I was teaching but rather in some advanced theory course or a course in the analysis of contemporary music. Where I think their problem lies is not in their ability to beat time or teach instrumental techniques, it's rather that they just don't know enough about modern music and the way in which it's put together. To do a decent analytical job so they have some hierarchical understanding of the composition, not just that this particular material is important within itself, but more what is it related to and how you make those relationships function on behalf of your understanding and presentation of the music. That's one of the problems.

I also don't think that fundamental musical experiences are present, because I don't think they listen to enough music of a broad enough communicative range to refine the most basic skills and to develop more esoteric ones. If I may take the example of a Mahler symphony where you have to go from overwhelming, awesome giantism to the most extraordi-

Ex. 5. The Leaves Are Falling. mm. 74-81.

74 81

Fls. 1, 2 *mp* *♯*

Obs. 1, 2 *ff* *pp*

E. H. *ff* *pp*

CLARINETS

B♭ 1 2 3 *p* *ff* *ppp*

E♭ Alto *p* *ff* *ppp*

B♭ Bass
B♭ C. Bass *p* *ff* *ppp*

SAXOPHONES

B♭ Sop. *f* *ff* *ppp*

E♭ Alto *f* *ff* *ppp*

B♭ Ten. *f* *ff* *ppp*

E♭ Bar. *f* *ff* *ppp*

Bsns. 1, 2
C. Bsn. *f* *ff* *ppp*

Harp *f* *ff* *l.v.* *l.v.*

Piano for study *mf* *f* *ff dim.* *ppp*

(20)

2. (one only) (Alto Sax. cue) in felt hat or muffle with hand *f* *ff* *ppp*

B♭ Cnts. 1 2 3 *f* *ppp*

Hns. in F 1, 2 2. *mp* *mf* *ppp*

3, 4 3. *mp* *mf* *ppp*

4. *mf* *ppp*

Bar.

Trbs. 1 2 3

Basses

Str. Bass *ppp* (80)

Timp. (Timpanist on Susp. Cym.) *ppp*

PERC.

Bells
Chimes *dim.* *al pppp possibile*

Susp. Cym. *p* *sempre*

Claves *f* *l.v.*

Tam-tam *p* *mf* *molto* *mf* *l.v.*

(Tam-tam)

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narily sweet, pure and serene intimacy in an instant, and then change into a nostalgic waltzy, folksy presentation, all while being able to understand what the music is, what the social setting is, what the psychology is and how, physically, you are going to do something about each of these musical thoughts.

I think the range of their musical understanding is far too limited partly because they don't get outside of their job and make a serious commitment to their development as musicians and conductors. Or, they just don't work hard enough at their job to make their performers play well enough so they can have an adult, mature musical experience with each other.

DH: In looking back over your own career as a professional timpanist, teacher, composer, orchestrator, where do you think you actually began to compose seriously rather than just writing music for immediate needs?

WB: I suppose that was in the late 1950's. When I was in college I wrote jazz arrangements and had a nodding acquaintance with a couple of composition lessons that were just a bad experience for me so I never went back. I wrote for nieces and nephews and friends, but when I really got involved was the year (1961–62) we spent in Mexico. I wrote the *Symphony for Drums and Wind Orchestra* there and a set of snare drum solos, *Three Dances for Solo Snare Drum*. That was the period when I really got hooked because up to that time I was teaching percussion and composition at Ithaca College and I had decided I didn't want to do percussion any longer . . . my interest just wasn't there. So I became really involved with the first movement of the *Symphony for Drums and Wind Orchestra* as I wanted to see if I could make a whole movement work based on two pitches. Of course I used a couple other ones but they are really incidental to the fact that *A* and *B \flat* are the only fundamental pitches in the whole movement. It was a crucial step for me and I really wanted it to come off. That engaged me as hard as anything I have ever done in my life.

DH: Was this also the beginning of your use of "audible silence," the lack of something audible?

WB: Yes, waiting . . . the other side of the coin. There are times when players sense the importance of the silence, like in a big jazz band when you wait out those 8th note rests before the whole ensemble hits together. Those are awesome, profound chasms in the sound when you come together after that silence, it's just a phenomenal experience. You know it became the 'thing to do' in the sixties, the use of 10 seconds of silence in much of the aleatoric music. But it seemed to me that a lot of that didn't work and the reason it didn't work was because it wasn't predicated on any form of psychological strategy that led to silence as a suspended situation. The silence was not suspended, it was imposed; however, in the pieces where it *was* suspended, it was terribly effective.

DH: Through your compositions runs a thread of exactness and control of the material which requires a similar control on the part of the performer. How do you find the average performer equipped to provide this control?

WB: I think the exemplars are out there for any performer

to emulate. Being able to sustain a sound for a long time and make it vital and alive, or to play with great delicacy, to make a really wonderful entrance—piano—on a low brass instrument . . . that's something you have to work at . . . that's real artistry. These are the things that interest me and I write as I do in spite of the fact that this type of virtuosity, versus note-wise technique, doesn't happen very often and incidences of my music being really well played are very, very few. But I just know that this is the future of the wind field, it's got to go that way. If the wind ensemble or band is ever going to get anywhere, it's got to develop to the point where you can depend on the trombones or horns or whomever to play really beautiful sounds in any register at any dynamic and really execute those requirements. When it says 'dolce' in the part you must really do something with it, make a real difference and not just play in a general twenty-word musical vocabulary the way it happens today. I think the level of technical achievement is great but the expressive gamut is terribly narrow. When you hear the people play who are the exemplars, their expressive gamut is extraordinary and their ability to execute under trying circumstances is of unusual breadth and capacity. That's where I think we have to go now and if I just wrote the kind of things that band people can play now . . . music where you write in 2's and 3's and cover everybody up so you get nice entrances all the time, and where you can get a good tone because everyone is playing at the same time and it's 'dangerous' to allow somebody to do anything alone . . . if that's the kind of music I would have to write, I wouldn't write at all.

DH: It has been twenty years since the *Leaves* was published. There has obviously been some progress in repertoire development and yet we still do not have a substantial quantity of wind compositions that take the type of chances you just described. What advice do you have for composers to continue enriching the wind literature?

WB: I have a rule of thumb as an answer to that question, that I offer to my students. I tell them to take a look at the repertoire and see what's not there that is *present in life*. That thought is one of the reasons why I wrote *The Solitary Dancer*. There just wasn't any work that was fast and exciting and quiet, you know like when a group of people get together and whisper, there's a lot of intensity and excitement but it never gets loud. It never goes anywhere in that sense. It may bubble and cook but it never really blows the lid off, just never does, and there are a lot of situations in life like that, just quiet moments.

Next, you have to know something about the repertoire, the general musical repertoire at large. What do you know about vocal repertoire for example? Organ repertoire? Opera? As I mentioned before, it's like the band directors who don't get outside of their job enough to become acquainted with the rest of the musical world. If you are going to develop a repertoire to be called 'great,' then it has to represent the *entire range of human experience*—that's the sign of a 'great' repertoire. Otherwise you can't *evaluate* the repertoire. If the repertoire is all funny music or all happy

music or all incidental, that's fine in itself, but it's not 'great,' it merely relates to part of life in the round.

Someday I want to write a really beautiful serene piece, a big beautiful serene piece. After Kennedy died there were a few works that came out that tried to do this and really got part way there. The *Elegy For A Young American* by Ron LoPresti was one and came very close to the idea I'm thinking about. The repertoire needs big infusions of real human experience. Eric Stokes in his *Continental Harp and Band Report* had a lot of nifty things that I think should be in so much more of the repertoire. Ideas just as fresh as can be.

If I were going to do a big lyrical piece I don't know exactly how I would get things that way because I think the second movement of the *Symphony for Drums and Wind Orchestra* is actually a big lyrical piece in a sense. It's very simple material and ostinati and canons with improvisational development, a more casual, subtle, inflective development rather than substantive development.

DH: So with all the works you have done, the key words are "introspective," "personal," "control," "humanistic?"

WB: Yes, I think that's it. That's as close as I can get.

DH: The music actually means more to you as a creative value than what you ascertain it is going to mean to someone else, and the idea of the control elements is what has characterized your music.

WB: Yes, and this I think is both good and bad, because occasionally you get a performance where somebody finds things in there that are presented in a little different light than you see them and that makes something really wonderful out of it, just wonderful. The only objection I have to conductors is that they don't perform the tempos close enough to those that are marked or they haven't developed any conceptual grasp of the piece. Also, there is so much emphasis on pitch and ensemble that there's no thought given to the timbre. This creates a mish-mash of sound, very ordinary, and although the music may be interesting, their casting of it timbrally, frequently is just as dull as can be.

Getting back to *The Leaves Are Falling*, I've got any number of tapes where people play it as though they were playing some Stephen Foster melody, no concept of the gravity of the piece, no suggestion of deliberation, of stretch and adhesion. I can't imagine how they can associate what they read in the poem that is printed in the score and what they are hearing. On the other hand I have heard performances when the conductor follows the directions, adds his own personal insight and in that way brings more to the performance than somebody knew about . . . *I think this is wonderful!* There are a variety of interpretations that can be really exciting, and then I can feel that the work is actually durable.

We've been talking . . . I've been talking a lot here and much of what I've said may sound cocksure, even glib, I suppose. Of course we're really talking about

the way I think and work, not about scientific truth or lab experiments. My way works for me to the extent that it enables me to do what I want to do and to stretch and grow, I hope. All this is not set or without risk, and if it was I wouldn't do it anymore. I'm naturally curious, what's unknown or new or the latest hot stuff might be just what I need—or offers a sufficient enough opportunity to fail that I really want to get involved and see if I can make something worthwhile happen, really make it come off, stretch a little.

I guess I'm just trying to do my best. In discussing the *Leaves* we're talking about something that happened twenty years ago. If I'm doing my best, I'm not doing that anymore.

Wind Compositions

Transylvania Fanfare concert march for band (1953) Shawnee

Concertino for Alto Saxophone and wind ensemble (1954) MCA Music*

Night Song for band (1958) Chapell**

Polyphonies for Percussion and Band (1960) MCA Music

Remembrance for band (1963) Shawnee**

Symphony for Drums and Wind Orchestra (1962) C. F. Peters

The Leaves Are Falling for wind ensemble (1963) Marks/Leonard, now Presser (rental)

Star Edge for alto saxophone and wind ensemble (1965) C. Fischer*

Requero for oboe/English horn and wind ensemble (1965) MCA Music*

Helix for tuba and wind ensemble (1966) C. Fischer*

The Solitary Dancer for wind ensemble (1966) MCA Music

The Mask of Night for wind ensemble (1967) C. Fischer

Shadow Wood for soprano and wind ensemble (1971) MCA Music*

The Beaded Leaf for bass voice and wind ensemble (1974) W. Benson**

The Passing Bell for band (1974) E. C. Schirmer

Ginger Marmalade for elementary band (1978) C. Fischer

Symphony II: Lost Songs for symphonic band (1982) C. Fischer (rental)

* available in solo with accompaniment reduction

** available from: Warren Benson
Eastman School of Music
26 Gibbs Street
Rochester, NY 14604

The Leaves Are Falling, recorded by Donald Hunsburger and the Eastman Wind Ensemble, is available on a newly-issued compact disc, Centaur Records #CRC 2014.