Symphonic Band Conducting Practicum

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Date 6-1-98

A video and audio tape of this project are available in the Honors Program office.
Most music education majors take a year-long sequence of conducting classes in their junior year, about two years before we student teach. Unfortunately, of necessity, these conducting classes are rather contrived. Over the period of each quarter, we conducted our ensemble of cooperative, musically mature peers through about five eight-measure exercises focusing on a specific skill. Of course, since actual technique is only one (small) aspect of work on a podium, we were also introduced to the process of score study with its multitude of layers such as consideration of harmonic structure, stylistic elements, orchestration, context (historical influences, information about the composer, significance of composition), etc. At the end of that year, then, we fulfill the conducting requirement with merely seeds of knowledge and a handful of isolated skills in our bag of tricks. Oh yeah, we have a baton to show for it, too.

So, last spring (1997), a year after I had successfully completed the conducting sequence, with my baton and bag in hand, I marched into the band room at Bellingham High School for my last practicum through the Woodring College of Education. There I was, in the face of reality. With the few opportunities I had to wave my magic wand and throw my seeds of knowledge around, I soon realized that I needed a bit more practice before I begin student teaching in the fall of 1998. With a year left on campus, I had time to find more practice opportunities. I talked to the Director of Wind Programs, Dr. Wallace, about that obscure class my eyes always skip past in the timetable, Music 451: Conducting Practicum. Familiar with my experience at Bellingham High School and future career plans, and aware of the inevitable shortcomings of the conducting classes, he graciously agreed to let me do a conducting practicum with the Symphonic Band (non-audition wind group) in which I would rehearse a piece with the group once a week (about eight hours total of rehearsal time) in preparation for performance at the concert.

I already had a piece in mind when I asked about the practicum: Nancy Galbraith’s with brightness round about it. I first heard the piece, and of Galbraith herself, at the regional music educators’ conference last February when the All-Northwest High School Honor Band rehearsed and performed it. I was moved by the combination of brilliant shimmering effects and nostalgic, almost painful, melodic ideas, and I wanted to know more about the piece. I was also attracted to the fact that it was a new composition by a woman. I was hoping that the Symphonic Band would like it and be able to play it.
The piece is basically in an arch form (ABCBA). In this symmetrical form, the themes are presented and then revisited in the opposite order so that similar music is heard in the beginning and end. Galbraith makes use of minimalist techniques such as the repetitive melodic and rhythmic cells heard throughout. The piece is tonal, though not in the conventional way; the harmony doesn’t really go anywhere (progress), but instead just changes tonal centers. Just as the piece ends where it begins, the harmony doesn’t take us anywhere either. She masterfully creates the illusion of forward movement through her driving themes and rhythms.

The more time I spent with this piece, the more I liked it. I always found something new each time I sat down with the score.

Rehearsal Planning

I began looking at the score and parts over Christmas break to get a basic idea about the principal thematic material and structure of the piece. By the first week of the quarter I had a rough formulation for how I wanted to approach the piece in rehearsal. In other words, I had broken the piece into its five principal sections and had decided on how much time I wanted to allocate to each. My general overview of the rehearsal time was the following:

- first three hours - the principal theme which follows the piano solo introduction and its return at the end (roughly 2/5 of the music)
- next three hours - the middle development section (about 1/5 of the piece)
- next hour - the ending section (about 1/5 of the piece)
- next half-hour - the introduction (about 1/5 of the piece)
- remaining time - run-throughs

Before each rehearsal I would spend about three hours with the score, conducting through large sections and transitions, practicing specific techniques, examining and re-examining relationships. In developing each rehearsal plan, I would review my notes from the previous week’s rehearsal and brainstorm some problem-solving strategies.

I thought quite a bit about the first rehearsal. The initial presentation of a new piece of music is important with respect to the ensemble’s first impression and the attitude and level of motivation that will carry through the whole quarter. I was undecided about whether to try and sight-read the whole piece or to just spend some time with the principal melodic material. I chose the latter. I wanted the ensemble to “buy into” the music and was afraid that if they saw how repetitive the motives were they would lose interest from the start. The main theme is very energetic and “catchy.” I think I chose the right strategy. We sight-read the piece the following week after the members had had a chance to explore it on their own.
The Videos

First Clip
The first clip is a sample of a typical conducting class assignment. It is demonstrative of my skill level prior to beginning work with the Symphonic Band.

Second Clip
Due to discomfort with my presence in front of the ensemble, I was camera-shy for a good part of the quarter. Though I would reflect and make notes of my impressions after every rehearsal, I really didn’t get the kind of objective feedback a video recording will give until about the sixth week of rehearsal, from which this segment comes. The footage is from the second half of a Thursday rehearsal. We are in the final phases of putting the piece together. As you will see, this was the first time we had rehearsed with the synthesizer. My plan was to spend some time with the introduction (the last large segment to be rehearsed), play through some transitions, and run the whole piece for the first time since the second week of the quarter when the ensemble was still basically sight-reading.

I was a bit frustrated that the ensemble wasn’t shaping phrases in the introduction (I had just rehearsed the brass in a sectional the day before and had spent a lot of time on dynamic contrasts and shapes of lines). The ensemble seemed tentative with this section and I was hoping that they would make more of it when they felt more comfortable. I was very relieved that we made it all the way through the run-through.

Third Clip
The third example comes from the day before the performance. As I had the first half of rehearsal, you will see the warm-up and tuning procedure. I was principally concerned with spot-checking at this point. There were still some ideas that I wanted the ensemble to understand and successfully convey. Because of this, I tended to talk much more than was actually beneficial. I think this rehearsal would have been much more efficient if I could have shown the ensemble with my hands the kind of dynamic contrasts I wanted.

Fourth Clip
The final example is from the actual performance. As is evidenced, I never did get completely proficient at 5/4, for in the heat of the moment I screwed up and lost my place. However, the ensemble was incredibly aware and confidently played right through it. As is natural with adrenaline, I took the faster tempo way too fast!! I couldn’t believe it as I watched the tape!! I am very impressed with how the ensemble just held on and played with energy. I think it was obvious that they liked the piece and I feel that it was a convincing performance.
**Student Evaluations**

The feedback I got from the students was honest and very valid. The areas for improvement which they indicated were precisely those I had been working on all quarter: tempo consistency, pattern accuracy, and eye contact (keeping my head out of the score). However, I was pleased to see that the fact that I cared about the music and about my work with them was obvious to the students.

**Self-Evaluation**

This practicum experience was perhaps one of the most difficult things I have done since beginning my college career. This was the first time I was forced to combine and apply the wealth of isolated skills (theory, ear-training, conducting, etc.) I have been accumulating over the last five years. It was a challenge every week to put it all together while I was on the podium. I was frustrated with how little I could hear while in front of the ensemble. I had great difficulty sorting the mass of sound coming at me into intelligible chunks. I was also frustrated by my lack of baton technique. Though I knew the music and could talk about it, my technique prevented me from really getting everything I could from the ensemble. I didn’t feel that I improved as much as I had hoped I would; my technique was still in the way by the time of the concert.

It is amazing how complex something that appears so simple can be. Every time I stepped on the podium there were at least four things going on at the same time: interpersonal relationships, teaching, rehearsing (hearing problems and fixing them), and baton technique. Some days my head would be spinning after a rehearsal.

I am very thankful for the experience and am just beginning to see the growth that occurred as a result of such a test of my musicianship.
Student Evaluations
Please respond to as many of questions 9-20 on the standard form as you feel are appropriate, then proceed to the questions on this sheet.

21. Is well prepared for rehearsals.
22. Finds effective ways to improve the quality of the performance.
23. Conducts the rehearsals in an effective and organized manner.
24. Encourages student understanding of the interpretive process.
25. Attempts to incorporate the teaching of major musical concepts into the rehearsals.
26. Is fair and reasonable to students in the evaluation procedures.
27. Evaluation procedures accurately reflect the quality of performance.
28. Is readily available for consultation with performers.
29. Functions as a role model for the students.
30. Creates a good professional working relationship with the performers.
I enjoyed working with you on the piece. It is an interesting piece of music. I enjoy working on newer music. It takes more effort and work to play the new styles of music and you prepared us very well. You were a good instructor and it was clear how you wanted us to present the music the way you wanted us to.
Your conducting is a little difficult to follow. You should work on using broader movements especially in tempo changes.

I thought she did fairly well. It seemed though that sometimes she just wasn't quite aware of everything that was going on in the ensemble. I'm sure that will come with more practice.
Allison,

Great job! The piece you picked to hand and you did a great job with it! Thanks for being straight forward with us and treating us very professionally.

Good work.

I was surprised at how upbeat you seemed. I know that you know this more — you will have to look at us more often to reassure us that we are following you, not the other way around. I know you are a good musician, translate that into being a good conductor and make us feel comfortable with your conducting. There are too many basic conducting principles that you seem to forget — eye contact with the entire group, prep breathing, consistent patterns, consistent tempo. Don't be afraid to smile — you are in charge but it can be fun too.
I think that you did a very good job. You seemed prepared and to know what you were doing. My only criticism is that you could have been a little more sure on your tempos. I think that you worked well with the group and that you were always ready and willing to help us if we had any comments, questions, or concerns. Good Job!

Allison,

It has been wonderful having you in symphonic band as a director. I appreciate your choosing such a difficult piece to conduct. This is the most challenging conducting project that anyone has ever undertaken. Though at times the conducting wasn't always going your way you stuck to your guns and didn't get too frustrated with yourself. The only criticism I have is that it would have been nice if your head was out of the score a little more.

Overall I admire you and all the hard work you put in...
Alison seemed very prepared for all rehearsals. She not only found effective ways to improve the music, but seemed easier to do so. Understandably, there were mishaps on some days, but these were quickly smoothed over as efficiently as possible. She was very encouraging and worked well with the group as a whole, singling out individuals when necessary, urging the entire ensemble on the rest of the time. Overall, she seemed very excited about the piece and the results of performance.

Tina Choi, Dol

She has a good start, but needs to work on being able to keep a steady tempo. She is difficult to follow. With more experience, she'll do great.
Rehearsal Plans
melodic ideas are based on 4/4ths

12 → 287

The descending 7th scale lead into 8 - 9
1st time - into recap of piano music

107 → 205

94 → 138

125 → 217

p. 55 controls

quiet

to quiet coda again

declines

Ag. sub. tempo

discole oboe

discole serp.

p. 29 - looks like it's gonna

cheer up! go back

though

A line trying to finish - up 7/48

2 3 18

p. 39 or

3/18

p. 35

for place note

other form
Does this piece end up to a certain point? I would say not.

- Adagio ascent
- 334/33
- 17th bar
- Flute
- Tempo
- 132

- Eb picking away
- 6/4
- Reappearance of motif

- Eb melodic
- Two ideas
- Bass
- Return of motif
- Idea
- B finish
- Two ideas

- New melody
- 102
- Eb solo
- 102
- Mood
- New idea
- BC1
- Scale
- B
- C

- Rhythm
- BC1
- 183
- Same as
- BC1
- Back

- Key change
- 107
- Reappearance
- BC1
- New
- 228

- Time change
- 287
- Same key

- 201
- Build again
- Same as
- 217
- Old
- 223
- New
- 252

- Rhythm
- 338/33
- 340
- Scale
- 201
- New
- 66
- Ends
- New
- Same key

- Beginning
My 30 minutes of hell
by Allison Schmidtke, Music 451

Plan to release 5 minutes of music, he says

letter A (m. 38) to letter B (m. 92)
then m. 232 to m. 287

almost the same music
pitch relationship D♭ → D
How did we get there? We'll find out
next time

principal motive is in tpt. (program notes)

scalar music. V is emphasized

sudden change back
to original

muted piano

Emphasize a natural 10

What kind of scale is this? Ask someone
1) trumpet motive m. 40
   (1'-4')
2) piccolo motive m. 56
   oboe, 1-3. cl., a.sax, piano, glock.
   (50-114) 3+4 > conso.
3) baritone m. 45
   begins in picc., tpt. 1-2, contrast w/ BCl, a.sax, hn 1, 2, 4
4) take some time w/ the scalar passage.  
   slow down. how each part blends

5) m. 78. combination of all parts
   melodic + rhythmic fragments
   tpts, horns vs. flutes + oboe, saxes

A = 54. \rightarrow long phrase
      \hspace{1cm} all
      \hspace{1cm} step explain. lecture. ideas
      \hspace{1cm} go back. do again.
      \hspace{1cm} something got better. leave it
      \hspace{1cm} instruct how to practice. \rightarrow
      \hspace{1cm} then ask tpts. about parts.

\hspace{1cm} whole piece
\hspace{1cm} Thursday
\hspace{1cm} look Q
1-15

1) clarify parts - notation
   log drums?
   crotale?
   m12 - understand notation
   @26 play notes
   faster until hit tremolo @ 21
   those 4 notes.
   cymbal same as crotale
   in that order.
   3) cymbal sounds - xwall @ 21

   gluckenspiel - similar idea. only you start @ 14
   become faster, but you also start to ascend
   measured co @ 21.

   

2) establish bongo rhythm @ 107.
   actually give me the whole rhythm section to establish
   this ostinato pulse.
   again, establish pulse @ 168

3) read it

7) $^5$, as promised slow.
1) #48 flutes, clarinets, oboes
   48-56

   Slower

   C1 2-3 almost unison whole way

   Fl. picc. unison rhythm 51-53

   * tips 1-4 (48-54), then drop down.

   + bassoon, bass clar., bassoon, tuba, euphonium

   * come out of texture

2) #50 clarinet, alto sax, piccolo, oboe, gluck, piano

   Motive - forte

   64

   Flute 1+2 just float over top

   * hear flutes + melodic line

   * add brass ostinato under melody

   Run together

3) #64 bone 2, bass clar., bassoon, picc., fl.,

   64-72, come out of texture
then flute, clarinet, oboe + picc mass above

clarinet 1 + 2. paced + unison
clarinet 3 will oboe
flute 1 + picc
flute 2 by self

4) duple against triple in 70-71
delaying arrival
Bruce was sectional.

Ties, wind sectional.

Tinble is doa.

Sound in space.

She is going anywhere.

Creating direction.

Harmonic web.

Eb vs. B - wind wise.

Ab C

Tension.

Balance.

Small motion can affect great change.

Build it slowly.

Less tension, change in pop.

Rate of change.
1-27. Do again didn't feel like we left with a sense of what I was trying to get.

5 at 48 - hear in families wind vs. brass together.

Brass at 56 - alto sax + glock. picc. oboe, clarinet at 56.

Listen to brass chords - F7 cluster.

64 music in low brass, low wood, bassoon, bass.

Born, saxes.

Duple against triple against before 72.

Eb in #77 run section from 77 to 3 new chorus.

Look at 72 - chord, states run 11, middle brass 11, low brass d.

A chromatic run slurs...
2-4

B

shading of texture

**107**

B: 107 (transition to next main section)

- Melody in clarinets is old tpt.
  - from beginning
  - work on the seamless passing of the
  - muted tpt and oboe
  - similar timbre
  - spatially divided
  - stopped harp + glock @ 96
  - emph. solo @ 103

**107'**

New thematic material presented first.

- In bb clarinet + tenor sax (basically 5 bars long)

- Clarinets + oboe play 2-bar interlude
  - enter leg drum
  - percussion (muted) + marimba begin their ostinato that
  - groove lasts until piano solo
  - bongos + tom

**113**

- Clarinets + oboe play 2-bar interlude again

- Flute 1 takes over solo

- Clarinets + oboe continue ostinato
- bongos + marimba pattern set up under solo

**123**

- Piano solo!

New thematic material (previous)

- [Emerges out!]
  - Interplay between brass & oboe/saxophone
#128 Flute motive - new - don't shy from Bb.

Shifting us into G minor? Clarinets enter and add to m.

131 big section tutti section upper woodwinds slide first, then brass. Answer wind.

138 = B - 107 with added inst. of type bass, brass, emph.

Above still alone. Not music play quietly.

Transition 1 old melody fragment - making use of old motive. Same back in 146.


160 - c1. 1st motive returns. Trade with c1.


172 - c1. 1 has part that comes back. Bring bit @ 25.6? 1st 4 notes.
2 big ideas - 107 + 168

Overall comments about this middle section:

* constant S's throughout -> if you have S anywhere, listen to see how you fit in - it should be seamless - just getting passed around ensemble to hear color changes

* here's an analogy: it's like a relay race - the S's are the baton you need to anticipate when it's be passed to you - you would just stand there cold & let someone hit you...over the head...if you're pumping your arms, shake your legs - do the same thing...warm-up subdivide

* lower dynamic level all around when you state a new ostinate...this means for the 1st time, let it emerge from the texture & then sink back in gently

* if you notice you're repeating something, listen and see when has the more important new mel. stay underneath

This goes for the whole...
2-11  #155

- dramatic style - pointed, dry, staccato - piano
- @ 169 - establish bassoon motive
  - tbn 1+2, horn 3+4 marking beat
  - add bassoon interplay
  - then add bass bone
  - then throw in percussion ostinato

- @ 169 bass clarinet is important and alone

- baritone sax, tubalele, synth (1st)

- clarinet 1 - that comes back @ end:
  - collection
  - tutti brass

- interplay between tbn, bar. swells + woodwinds
- work on ritard into 205
- go back + work on subito piano (cresc. until downbeat)

Run it!! / 84 @ end

(??) build suspense
dynamic con

* running eighth
running eighth notes have sections listen to each other and point to each other describe what hear detached can you match style? strive for seamlessness tuba/euph emph. 1 - 18

htps. till 107 → horn 1-2 till 113 → hn 3-4 till 131 → tpts. → tbn → add tbn 113 till 123

horn tbn → tpt → 136 horn 1-4 till 138 → hn 1-4 till 153 → tpts. till 155 → tbn 

tbn → 12 euph

hn 3:4 till 183 → euph till 198 then add tuba play in 1-5

beginning start in 13 spend line in 15-18 slow exaggerate shape overall, start loud gets softer

slow dynamics

hn, tpt, horn don't line up

inverse dynamics between bars 1-2

tuba crescendo to down and change of note

maintain same dynamic throughout whole section

17 hn, tpt, horns do line up then don't line up for rest of time

echo, values closer together
goal: understanding of how you fit together

work to interlock between sections - musical

so a sequence - classical