

THE VERNACULAR MADE ARTFUL: AN ANALYSIS OF DANA WILSON'S WORKS FOR WIND ENSEMBLE

CBDNA NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2007
ROBERT TAYLOR, UNIVERSITY OF PUGET SOUND

ABSTRACT

Intended as a resource for conductors interested in performing the wind music of Dana Wilson, this presentation explores the composer's life and influences, shares his personal reflections about the creative process, provides an overview of his compositional style, and presents detailed analyses of several of his works for wind ensemble. Analytical discussion includes: stylistic similarities of formal architecture, melody, harmony, tonality, rhythm, texture, and orchestration; the role of binary opposition and extramusical associations in the communication of dramatic intent; and Wilson's highly organic approach to composition, as seen in the principal motives and themes explored in his works. The presentation offers direct insight into the composer's philosophy and practice, illustrating how Wilson's musical training, performance experience as a jazz and rock pianist, and life interests combine to form his unique compositional voice—the juxtaposition of American vernacular styles, non-Western cultural practices, and contemporary concert music.

CONNECTION AND MEANING

“Great Music is the vernacular made artful.”

LIFE AND INFLUENCES

- 1946 Born in Lakewood, Ohio
- 1953 Received first formal musical training on piano
- 1957 Played piano/guitar in middle school jazz band and high school rock band
- 1964 Attended Bowdoin, BA in Psychology
- 1968 Worked as minority admissions recruiter
- 1970 Drafted into military during Vietnam War
- 1972 Attended University of Connecticut, MA in composition
- 1975 Attended Eastman, DMA in composition with Samuel Adler
- 1978 Began present position as Professor of Composition at Ithaca College, NY

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

- Extramusical associations
- Limited parameters
- Music of the world's cultures
- Binary opposition

COMPOSITIONAL STYLE

Formal Architecture

- Traditional forms as points of departure
- Organic unity
- Narrative structure
- Familiarity and ambiguity

Melody

- Interrelated motivic cells
- Scale-oriented construction (blues and octatonic sets, with frequent chromatic alterations)
- Emphasis on scale degree 5 and b5
- Allusions to jazz, rock, and folk styles

Harmony

- Mode mixture
- The #9 chord
- Conflict between major and minor
- Extended tertial harmonies

Tonality

- Stable tonicizations
- Temporary bitonality or polytonality
- Root motion by third
- Jazz progressions (blues, ii-V-I, tritone substitution)

Rhythm

- Abundant syncopation derived from jazz, rock, and funk
- Idiomatic articulations
- Groove and riff
- Polyrhythm

Texture

- Additive layering technique
- Slow passages in quasi-improvisational style
- Faster passages scored in unison or set in canon
- Ostinato accompaniment

Orchestration

- Emphasis on percussion and saxophone
- Special color devices, such as bends, glissandi, flutter tonguing, and various mutes
- Occasional use of spoken word

SUMMARY

Wilson's musical background and life interests combine to form his unique compositional voice—a voice that has come to define his artistry as the juxtaposition of American vernacular styles, non-Western cultural practices, and contemporary concert music—synthesizing disparate elements that have been deeply internalized and integrated into his native musical language.

MUSICAL BACKGROUND

Jazz and rock pianist

- Priority of groove and riff
- Syncopated figures and articulations
- Nonfunctional dominant-seventh chords and tertial extensions
- Jazz-oriented harmonic progressions
- Blues scale and resulting major/minor ambiguity
- Call-and-response phrasing
- Quasi-improvisational solo writing
- Orchestration emphasizing percussion and saxophone
- Special color devices created by the use of mutes, bends, glissandi, falls, and trills.

Conservatory training

- Prototypical forms
- Idiomatic and colorful orchestrations

LIFE INTERESTS

Psychology and politics

- Extramusical associations
- Limited parameters
- Music of the world's cultures
- Binary opposition

Music of the world's cultures

- Africa
- Japan
- India
- Indonesia

DANA WILSON • COMPOSITIONS FOR WIND ENSEMBLE

Dana Wilson is an important composer for the wind ensemble medium. His first composition for winds, *Piece of Mind* (1987), was awarded the prestigious Sudler International Composition Prize and American Bandmasters Association Ostwald Award and has been recorded and performed by numerous university and professional ensembles. Since 1987 he has contributed over twenty new works to the wind ensemble repertory designed for ensembles at all levels of experience.

Chronological List

1987	<i>Piece of Mind</i>
1989	<i>Shakata: Singing the World into Existence</i>
1990	<i>Calling, Ever Calling...</i>
1991	<i>Time Cries, Hoping Otherwise</i>
1991	<i>Winds on the Steppes</i>
1992	<i>Dance of the New World</i>
1993	<i>Io Rising</i>
1994	<i>Sang!</i>
1995	<i>Uprising</i>
1997	<i>The Shifting Bands of Time</i>
1997	<i>Concerto for Horn and Wind Ensemble</i>
1998	<i>Shortcut Home</i>
1999	<i>Evolution</i>
1999	<i>Kah! (Out of Darkness)</i>
1999	<i>Vortex</i>
2002	<i>Concerto for Trumpet and Wind Symphony (Leader Lieder)</i>
2004	<i>Black Nightshade (concerto for four percussionists)</i>
2004	<i>...the harder they fall</i>
2005	<i>Colorado Peaks</i>
2005	<i>To set the darkness echoing</i>
2005	<i>Liquid Ebony/Liquid Gold</i>
2006	<i>The Avatar</i>
2006	<i>When I am gone away</i>
2006	<i>Day Dreams</i>

DANA WILSON • COMPOSITIONS FOR WIND ENSEMBLE

Alphabetical List

The Avatar for bassoon and chamber winds, with piano and percussion (2006)
Commissioned by Michael Kroth and the Michigan State University Wind Symphony
First performance: Michigan State University
Published by the composer
16:30

Black Nightshade for four percussionists and wind ensemble (2004)
Commissioned by the Canandaigua Academy
First performance: Canandaigua, NY
Published by the composer
9:00

Calling, Ever Calling... for oboe or soprano saxophone and wind ensemble (1990)
Commissioned by the Mid-American Conference Band Directors Association
First performance: Michael Henschel and the Central Michigan University Wind Symphony, CBDNA
50th anniversary convention, Kansas City, MO
Published by the composer
21:00

Colorado Peaks (2005)
Commissioned by the St. Vrain Valley Association
First Performance: St. Vrain Valley Honor Band, Longmont, CO
Published by the composer
5:00

Concerto for Horn and Wind Ensemble (1997)
Commissioned by Gail Williams
First performance: Gail Williams and the Ithaca College Wind Ensemble, Eastman Wind Ensemble
50th anniversary concert, Rochester, NY
Published by the composer
19:00

Concerto for Trumpet and Wind Symphony "Leader Lieder" (2002)
Commissioned by the International Trumpet Guild
First performance: James Thompson and the Royal Northern College Wind Symphony, Manchester,
England
Published by the composer
15:00

Dance of the New World (1992)

Commissioned by Belmont High School, Fred Harris, conductor

First performance: Belmont, MA

Ludwig Music Publishers

9:30

Day Dreams (2006)

Commissioned in honor of Frank Battisti on his 75th birthday by his former students

First performances: New England Conservatory and Ithaca College Wind Ensembles

Published by the composer

17:00

Evolution (1999)

Commissioned by the United States Air Force Band, Washington, D.C.

First performance: Virginia Music Educators Association

Published by the composer

16:00

...the harder they fall (2004)

Commissioned by the Otsego County Music Educators Association

First performance: Cooperstown, NY

Published by the composer

5:00

Io Rising for brass quintet, percussion, and wind ensemble (1993)

Commissioned by Rhythm and Brass

First performance: Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic, Chicago, IL

Published by the composer

7:00

Kab! (Out of Darkness) (1999)

Commissioned by the University of Dayton in honor of their sesquicentennial

First performance: Dayton, OH

Published by the composer

9:30

Liquid Ebony/Liquid Gold for clarinet or soprano saxophone and wind ensemble (2005)

Commissioned by Larry Combs; wind ensemble version commissioned by the U.S. Military

Academy Band at West Point

Published by the composer

13:00

Piece of Mind (1987)

Commissioned by the Ithaca College Wind Ensemble, Rodney Winther, conductor

First performance: Symphony Space, New York, NY

Ludwig Music Publishers

21:00

Sang! (1994)

Commissioned by Murchison Middle School

First performance: Austin, TX

Ludwig Music Publishers

4:30

Shakata: Singing the World into Existence (1989)

Commissioned by Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia

First performance: University of Texas Wind Ensemble, Jerry Junkin, conductor, CBDNA National Conference, Austin, TX

Ludwig Music Publishers

8:00

Shortcut Home (1998)

Commissioned by Hillsborough High School, Mindy Scheierman, conductor

First Performance: Hillsborough, NJ

Boosey and Hawkes Publishers

3:00

The Shifting Bands of Time (1997)

Commissioned by Ohio University

First performance: Athens, OH

Ludwig Music Publishers

10:30

Time Cries, Hoping Otherwise for alto saxophone and wind ensemble (1991)

Commissioned by the University of Northern Arizona

First performance: Laura Hunter and the Northern Arizona Wind Symphony, Patricia Hoy, conductor, North American Saxophone Alliance Western Conference

Ludwig Music Publishers

21:00

To set the darkness echoing (2005)

Commissioned by the Cobb County Band Directors Association

First performance: Cobb County Honor Band, Marietta, GA

Published by the composer

8:00

Uprising (1995)

Commissioned by Canandaigua Academy, Tom Davis, conductor

First performance: Canandaigua, NY

Published by the composer

6:00

Vortex for piano and wind ensemble (1999)

Commissioned by the Southeastern College Band Directors Consortium

First performance: University of Tennessee Wind Symphony, CBDNA Regional Conference

Boosey and Hawkes Publishers

10:30

When I am gone away (2006)

Commissioned by the South Shore Conservatory, Fred Harris, conductor, in honor of Malcom Rowell's retirement.

Published by the composer

7:00

Winds on the Steppes for sixteen winds, piano, and percussion (1991)

Commissioned by the University of Florida Friends of Music

First performance: WASBE Convention, Manchester, England

Ludwig Music Publishers

9:30

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Emge, Jeffrey David. *Third-Stream music for band: An examination of jazz influences in five selected compositions for winds and percussion (Gunther Schuller, Timothy Broege, Dana Wilson, John Harbison, Donald Grantham)*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 2000.
- Ferrari, Lois. *Two Symphonic Wind Ensemble Compositions of Dana Wilson: Piece of Mind and Shakata: Singing the World into Existence*. Doctoral dissertation, Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester, 1995.
- Halseth, Robert. "Teacher Resource Guide: Dance of the New World," *Teaching Music Through Performance in Band*, Volume 2. Compiled and edited by Richard Miles, 577–583. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 1998.
- . "Teacher Resource Guide: Piece of Mind," *Teaching Music Through Performance in Band*, Volume 1. Compiled and edited by Richard Miles, 444–449. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 1997.
- Hemberger, Glen. "Teacher Resource Guide: Shortcut Home," *Teaching Music Through Performance in Band*, Volume 5. Compiled and edited by Richard Miles, 480–484. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2004.
- Mailman, Matthew. "Teacher Resource Guide: Shakata, Singing the World into Existence," *Teaching Music Through Performance in Band*, Volume 2. Compiled and edited by Richard Miles, 627–630. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 1998.
- Mathes, James. "Analysis: *Piece of Mind* by Dana Wilson." *Journal of Band Research* 25, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 1–12.
- Ostrander, Arthur E., and Wilson, Dana. *Contemporary Choral Arranging*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986.
- Taylor, Robert. *The Vernacular Made Artful: An Analysis of Dana Wilson's Vortex and Dance of the New World*. Doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University School of Music, 2005.
- Wilson, Dana. "Dana Wilson." *Composers on Composing for Band*, Volume 2. Edited by Mark Camphouse, 269–293. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2004.
- . "Guidelines for Coaching Student Composers," *Music Educators Journal* (July 2001): 28–33.
- . Interview by Robert Taylor. Transcript of compact disc recording. October 2004. Ithaca, NY.
- . *The Role of Texture in Selected Works of Toru Takemitsu*. Doctoral dissertation, Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester, 1982.

ROBERT TAYLOR • UNIVERSITY OF PUGET SOUND

Robert Taylor is Director of Bands and Chair of the Wind and Percussion Department at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington, where he conducts the University Wind Ensemble and University Band, teaches instrumental conducting, and serves as mentor to music education students in the Master of Arts in Teaching program.

Dr. Taylor received the Master of Music and Doctor of Music degrees in conducting from Northwestern University, where his primary teacher was Dr. Mallory Thompson. Prior to his time at Northwestern, he received the Bachelor of Arts degree in Trumpet and Music Education from Humboldt State University and served as Chair of the Performing Arts Department and Director of Bands at Eureka High School in northern California. Under his direction, the Eureka High Jazz Ensemble and Symphonic Band earned recognition for excellence by Downbeat Magazine, the Selmer Corporation, and Grammy Signature Schools, placing Eureka High among the finest school music programs nationwide.

Dr. Taylor maintains an active schedule as a guest conductor and clinician. Recent engagements include performances with the Chicago-based contemporary music group, the MAVerick Ensemble, in addition to guest engagements with the Chicago Youth Concert Orchestra and regional honor band performances in California in Washington. As an advocate of music in the public schools, Dr. Taylor adjudicates numerous music festivals annually and is in high demand as a rehearsal clinician. His research in the area of repertoire development has been published by GIA, as part of the *Teaching Music Through Performance in Band* series. Dr. Taylor is a Jacob K. Javits Fellow and a member of the Phi Kappa Phi and Pi Kappa Lambda National Honor Societies, College Band Directors National Association, World Association for Symphonic Bands and Ensembles, and the Washington Music Educators Association.