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Sonata for Clarinet Choir

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SONATA FOR CLARINET CHOIR

A PAPER PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
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MASTER OF SCIENCE IN EDUCATION

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PREFACE

The available literature for clarinet choir is quite limited, and much of this literature is an arrangement of orchestral music. There are few original compositions written for this ensemble, and little of this music, either transcriptions or original, is written for performance at the high school level.

It is not objectionable to play transcriptions of orchestral works because students need to become familiar with these compositions, but it is also important to play music composed specifically for the clarinet choir. The clarinet choir creates a sound that is unique because it has the most complete range and choice of colors of any instrumental choir found in the band. Also, it has almost unlimited technical capabilities.

The purposes then for submitting a composition for clarinet choir entitled, "Sonata for Clarinet Choir," are as follows: to have original music for the clarinet choir which was written for the high school level of ability, to incorporate into a composition the complete range playable by high school clarinet players, and to make use of the tone color and flexibility which is inherent in the clarinet. This is a composition written specifically for the clarinet choir.

THE CLARINET CHOIR

Since the Mannheim school of the late 17th and early 18th century, the orchestra has had a set instrumentation based on the string orchestra. All other instruments are an accrement to the string orchestra and increase the dynamic forces and nuances of the symphony orchestra. This is the reason composers have written for the orchestra when they have felt the need to express themselves through the medium of a large ensemble. Through the orchestra the composer has had at his command an almost endless source of colors, ranges, and a wide range of tonal opportunities for musical expression.

This has not been true with the band. In the early development of the band, its primary function was one of performing at various military activities. It was often very brassy, and it did not offer to the composer the versatility of the orchestra. As more woodwinds were added, the instrumentation presented the opportunity for greater tone and dynamic possibilities, and by 1878,¹ the band had become a popular concert ensemble. Men like Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore (1829-1892) and John Philip Sousa (1854-1932)²

1. Fennell, Frederick, Time and the Winds, Kenosha, Wisconsin, G. LeBlanc Corporation, 1954. Page 38

2. Ibid., Page 37-38

demonstrated the potential of the band as a concert group. With the tremendous growth of the band movement in the public schools, a great deal of study and experimentation has taken place. This plus the fact that prominent composers are writing for the band has raised its status to a high level.

The development of the balanced clarinet choir has provided the band with a basic sound or tone color. Many serious contemporary composers and arrangers such as Gustav Holst, Paul Hindemith, Percy Grainger, Vincent Persichetti, and William Schuman have written music with this new concept of sound, that is, the clarinet choir, as the basic tone of the band. This has resulted in more demanding parts being written for the alto, bass and contra bass clarinets.

"Not only is the clarinet choir an essential part of the modern concert band, it is also a beautiful and satisfying performing medium of its own."³ Because of the combined ranges of the clarinets and the uniformity of sound, the clarinet choir offer many opportunities to the composer. With the recent development of the contra bass clarinet, capable of playing the fundamental of the overtone series, the technique of writing for clarinet ensembles has changed. Recent improvements in the alto and bass clarinets make technical passages easier to perform. The Eb soprano clarinet has been given the prominence it deserves.

3. McCathren, Don, The New Sound-The Clarinet Choir, Kenosha, Wisconsin, LeBlanc Educational Series Publication. Page 3

The clarinet choir is capable of performing soft, expressive, and lyrical passages and is effective when performing dramatic and rapid passages.

The suggested instrumentation for the balanced clarinet choir is as follows:

"1 Eb soprano clarinet
4 1st Bb clarinets
4 2nd Bb clarinets
4 3rd Bb clarinets
4 Eb alto clarinets
4 Bb bass clarinets
2 Bb contra bass clarinets"⁴

The Eb soprano clarinet is of special value in a group of this nature. Many high school Bb clarinet players have difficulty playing in tune above high C concert. A high school Eb clarinet player with the same ability is capable of playing in tune up to high F concert and in some cases to high G concert. This, of course, extends the limits of a high school choir an interval of a fifth higher. For high school clarinet choirs, the instrumentation should be reduced to the following:

1 Eb soprano clarinet
2 1st Bb clarinets
2 2nd Bb clarinets
2 3rd Bb clarinets
3 Eb alto clarinets
3 Bb bass clarinets
1 Bb contra bass clarinet

This reduced instrumentation will give a well balanced

4. Reed, Alfred, The Balanced Clarinet Choir, Kenosha, Wisconsin. G. LeBlanc Corporation, 1955. Page 12

sound and is more practical for high schools. Most high school band memberships are usually less than 75, and one contra bass is sufficient for maintaining the balance needed. Performance in the state high school competition-festival requires the smaller instrumentation for eligibility; whereas the larger instrumentation would not, under present rules, be eligible.

Clarinet choir music, like band music, offers a challenge to all clarinet players. Alto, bass, and contra bass parts are just as important as Bb clarinet parts and often are technically difficult. Ensemble playing is one of the great assets of an organization because its performance depends on the individuals playing their parts and not depending on someone else. In a small group, it is possible to work on individual problems along with the problems in the score. A student can readily understand the importance of his part and how it is performed in a small group. This is of special value to all players. Because of the demands placed on students in clarinet choir music, the fact that they are willing to meet these demands makes ensemble playing an important part in their musical education. It enables them to be more prepared for participation in other organizations as well as the clarinet choir. Emphasis placed on the clarinet choir as a performing group has resulted in one of the finest means of motivation for the clarinet student.

There is a great need for clarinet choir literature especially for the high school level. In February, 1962, the G. LeBlanc Corporation published a complete list of available music for the clarinet choir.⁵ At first glance the list is quite impressive, for over one hundred (100) compositions are listed. However, a closer look will show that the total number of compositions for the balanced clarinet choir totals twelve(12). The remaining compositions call for instrumentations other than the one suggested. In addition to these twelve numbers, a collection of nine transcriptions has recently been published for clarinet choir by Robbins Music Corporation. Thus, the total number of available publications for the balanced clarinet choir is twenty one (21). Publishers are beginning to realize the need for materials, and they are beginning to add clarinet choir literature to their catalogues. In order to encourage composers to write for the clarinet choir, the G. LeBlanc Corporation is sponsoring a contest for original music and transcriptions for clarinet choir. This is an annual contest with cash awards for the winning composers and their compositions will be published. Because of the increased interest on the part of composers, publishers, and teachers, the future of the clarinet choir movement is assured.

5. "Literature For Clarinet Choir," The Bandsman, Kenosha, Wisconsin, G. LeBlanc Corporation, Vol. IX, No. 2, February, 1962. Page 7

AN ANALYSIS OF THE COMPOSITION

The composition entitled, "Sonata for Clarinet Choir," is in three movements. The first is designated Moderato. It is in sonata allegro form. The initial statements for the first and second themes are played by the Bb clarinets. This is followed by a short transition leading to the development section. The development section utilizes fragments of both the first and second themes, and the melodic and rhythmic interest is passed around in order that all instruments will have an opportunity for performing melodic, rhythmic, and technical passages. This section closes with a traditional cadenza which features the Eb soprano, Bb clarinet, and alto clarinet in solo and soli passages. The recapitulation is in standard form with changes in the melodic tone colors. A short coda brings the first movement to a close.

The second movement is marked Andante and is in A B A form. The first section is stated by the Eb soprano clarinet and then by the entire choir. The second section is in a slow 6/8 rhythm and is in the relative minor of the original key. The alto clarinet states the theme and is followed by a restatement of the theme played two octaves apart by the Eb soprano and bass clarinets. This tone color is quite an effective one. A short transition brings the return of

the first section of which only a portion is played. This section has different scoring for contrast and interest. The mood of this movement becomes quieter as it draws to a close.

The third and final movement is in sonata allegro form. Commencing with an introduction marked Adagio which is derived from the theme of the first movement, the main section starts at the Allegro. A contrasting theme follows and leads to the development section. Rhythms and fragments of the first two themes are the basis of the development section. The section closes with a Maestoso section which recalls the main theme of the first movement. The recapitulation is in traditional form and is followed by a coda which ends with a flurry of scalewise passages for the entire choir.

SUMMARY

The development of the orchestra and band has been entirely different. The orchestra has had a set instrumentation for several centuries while the instrumentation of the band has been in a state of constant development during the past hundred years. As the wind instruments have been improved, they have been accepted into the band. Early composers primarily wrote for the orchestra while they tended to ignore the band, but in the last fifty years, composers have begun to realize the potential of the band as a medium for expression. The development of the clarinet choir has given the band a basic tone color and many contemporary composers have turned to the band when composing, so that many excellent scores are now available for band. If this trend continues, it would be reasonable to assume that at sometime in the future the band and orchestra will stand side by side as interpreters of musical compositions.

The clarinet choir is also capable of being a medium in itself. The range and technical facility available in the clarinet choir has resulted in a new interest in composing clarinet literature. Leading clarinet choir authorities have suggested an instrumentation that will produce a complete and satisfying sound. The individual parts are equally

important and often are equally demanding. This has placed renewed interest on some of the clarinets, namely, the Eb soprano, alto, bass, and contra bass.

Students have taken a great interest in the clarinet choir, and they have accepted the challenge that the parts offer them. The meeting of these demands has resulted in a better clarinet section within the band. The band music and the clarinet choir music complement each other. As students master a technical or tonal problem in one medium, it prepares them for the other.

The lack of training material is one reason for the slow development of clarinet choirs in the high school. Very little of the available materials are geared to the high school level. Some publishers are beginning to include scores for clarinet choir in their catalogues; and in the coming years, material for this group should be more readily available. The interest that is being shown for the clarinet choir movement by composers, publishers, directors, and students should continue to grow, and the future of the clarinet choir seems assured.

In composing a composition for clarinet choir, the author feels that he has gained an immeasurable amount of experience. This experience has given him new insights toward the clarinet and clarinet performance, and also, new goals in the field of composition.

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