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The Mind Grows Heated: A Composition for Wind Ensemble

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The Mind Grows Heated: A Composition for Wind Ensemble

AN HONORS THESIS

College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Distinction

in the Department of Music

by

Michelle Isaac

April, 2014

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis changed tremendously since its initial conception. My original intent for this project was to apply structural elements of successful pieces for wind ensemble to an original composition. I intended to achieve this by analyzing scores of standard concert band literature, comparing and contrasting elements such as orchestration, form, harmonic and melodic functions, and effective compositional techniques. I planned on organizing my results based on effectiveness and commonality, and then on using that information to create a compositional sketch upon which I would base my original piece for wind ensemble. While my main goal was to compose a well-received work of music for wind ensemble, just as important to me was creating a systematic compositional method for writing successful wind ensemble pieces. My initial approach to the project was scientific and analytical in nature, and I viewed this thesis as an objective look into applicable compositional techniques for wind ensemble.

It did not take me long to realize that this methodical approach was completely inappropriate for the kind of creative endeavor I was undertaking. I abandoned my analytical mindset and concentrated on one primary goal: composing a piece of music that is exciting and expressive, musically coherent, and makes good use of the wind ensemble medium. My process shifted to become more subjective, primarily focusing on my creative needs and the development of my personal musical style. I realized that if I wanted to create a piece of programmatic music that was both engaging and expressive, I would have to rely primarily on my own musical intuition and creativity. I used score analysis as a learning tool, and it was vital to the success of my project, but I was less dependent on the works of others than I originally intended to be. The ultimate purpose of this thesis became to combine musical knowledge, compositional instinct, and creativity to create an excellent piece of music for wind ensemble.

In the following pages, I will present a brief analysis of my original composition, *The Mind Grows Heated*, as well as the process I used to compose it. I will first present the main thematic material and the basic form of the piece. I will then present an overview of my creative process and how I applied my musical knowledge and research to the piece. I will present an analysis of the challenges I faced, and I will reflect on the experience as a whole. This thesis concludes with the original score of *The Mind Grows Heated*.

THEMATIC MATERIAL

Musical coherence is essential, so it was important that all of the thematic material in *The Mind Grows Heated* was interrelated from beginning to end without introducing many new musical ideas throughout. One of the ways to achieve this is to develop material from a limited amount of basic themes by means of variation. The entirety of my ten-minute composition consists of a few main themes, variations of those themes, and motivic or accompaniment material derived from the themes. The opening and closing section of the piece are based off of the sixteen-bar Theme A, the second phrase of which is developed from the first. The Allegro middle section of the piece is comprised of Themes X₁, X₂, X₃, Z, and an ostinato. Themes X₂, X₃, and the ostinato are all based off of two different motives from Theme X₁, whereas Theme Z is loosely based off of material from the opening of the piece.

Theme A

The musical notation for Theme A is presented in three staves, all in a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a 4/4 time signature. The first staff contains the first phrase, which is 16 measures long. The second staff, starting at measure 7, contains the second phrase, which is based off the first phrase (same ranges/note direction). The third staff, starting at measure 13, contains a variation of the first phrase, sequenced up a perfect fourth.

7 second phrase - based off first phrase (same ranges/note direction)

13 (same as previous 4 measures, sequenced up a perfect fourth)

Theme X₁

Musical notation for Theme X₁ in 4/4 time, measures 1-4. The first two measures are boxed and labeled 'a', and the last two measures are boxed and labeled 'b'.

Theme X₂

Musical notation for Theme X₂ in 4/4 time, measures 1-4. The first two measures are boxed and labeled 'a', and the last two measures are boxed and labeled 'b'.

5

Musical notation for Theme X₂ in 4/4 time, measures 5-8. The first two measures are boxed and labeled 'a', and the last two measures are boxed and labeled 'b'.

Theme X₃

Musical notation for Theme X₃ in 4/4 time, measures 1-4. The first two measures are boxed and labeled 'a'.

5

Musical notation for Theme X₃ in 4/4 time, measures 5-8.

Theme Z

Musical notation for Theme Z in 4/4 time, measures 1-4.

6

Musical notation for Theme Z in 4/4 time, measures 5-8.

Ostinato

Musical notation for Ostinato in 4/4 time, measures 1-8. Each of the four two-measure phrases is boxed and labeled 'a'.

FORM

The Mind Grows Heated has an overall ABA form, with a slow melodic opening A section, an aggressive Allegro B section, and a return to the A material in a sweeping, grandiose manner. The first section consists of two statements of Theme A, the second statement being a variation of the first. A coda section follows the opening, and it also acts as an introduction to the B section, foreshadowing the main themes from the Allegro section (Themes X₁, X₃, and Z) in reverse order of appearance and in a slower tempo. The Allegro B section alternates between variations of the X₁₊₂ and X₃ themes, all of which are held together by the ostinato, until finally reaching the lyrical Z theme, which is presented as an oboe solo. Theme Z is then stated as a canon in the upper woodwinds while a variation of it is played in the lower woodwinds. Throughout this section that is building to a climax, fragments, variations, or full statements of themes X₁, X₂, and X₃ appear. Ultimately, the original Theme A returns as a brass chorale underneath a variation of the ostinato material in the woodwinds. But just when Theme A is building to its climactic second phrase, the texture abruptly dies down, and a softer and lighter variation of Theme A is played by a saxophone choir. This soon builds to a tutti presentation of the latter phrase of Theme A at the Grandioso, which leads to the final coda. The coda triumphantly ends the piece with motives from Themes A and X.

Section	A		Coda/Intro				B					A		Coda
Theme	A	A	A	Z	X ₃	X ₁	X ₁₊₂	X ₃	X ₁₊₂	X ₃	Z (X ₃ , X ₁ , A)	A		A, X
Measure	1 – 18	19 – 39	40 – 61				61-89	89-111	112-141	142-170	170-246	246-262	263-271	272-278

OVERVIEW OF PROCESS

The process I used to compose *The Mind Grows Heated* consisted of two main components, compositional and psychological, and both presented their own major challenges.

Compositional Challenges

The compositional component my process related to the technical aspect of composing a piece for wind ensemble, and it involved how I gained and then implemented musical knowledge into my project. I would divide the compositional component into three parts, which progressed simultaneously: the process of composing, the process of orchestrating, and the process of attaining the level of musical sophistication for which I was aiming.

The composition process itself was daunting for a project of such magnitude, but I broke it down into a series of manageable steps. I first came up with dozens of potential themes to use. I did not have a story or setting in my mind off of which to base the music, so I composed many themes of differing styles. I eventually narrowed down my stockpile of themes to two that seemed to fit well together. I then took both of those themes and developed them using various compositional techniques until I had a surplus of usable material. I physically wrote out each of the themes and variations on note cards and tried to organize them in a logical order, thereby creating a sketch of the form. After I had a workable arrangement of themes, I created a piano document with only the melody using Finale 2011 notation software. I then added basic block-chord harmony underneath the melody. As I created the piano sketch, I imagined and made note of which wind instrument I wanted on each line.

After successfully creating a piano sketch for the opening section of the piece, I put the melodies into a full score for wind ensemble, assigning to each theme to what I imagined were

the desired instruments. I continued working on my piano sketch and full score simultaneously, moving material around in each until I had a workable form. Since by this point in the process I had learned a great deal about wind ensemble orchestration, I was able to decide on the texture I wanted underneath each melodic statement, and I added block-chord harmonies to the full score. Finally, little by little, I added variety and rhythmic interest to the accompaniment lines. Each time I looked over the score, I added more details to the melody, accompaniment, and percussion. I made several, sometimes major, revisions to the piece even after I started rehearsing it with the CSB/SJU Wind Ensemble, but towards the end of the composing process, I was able to go through the steps of sketching, adding harmonic accompaniment, and adding interesting effects with much more ease and speed than when I started.

I began this project with composing experience and knowledge that was easily applicable to this thesis. Many of the compositional challenges I faced were the same basic issues I encountered in previous composing experiences, even if on a larger scale, and so I knew how to overcome them. I had many skills from classes in composition, music theory, counterpoint, and orchestration, and all of these skills were put to use to keep the composition process moving. The different compositional techniques for developing and varying material were crucial to my building an arsenal of usable material. I experimented with inversion, retrograde, augmentation, diminution, fragmentation, and other techniques I learned in Introduction to Composition for every theme and variation I wrote. I also depended on skills I gained in Introduction to Composition to know how to build climaxes in the piece, remembering that climaxes are best reached gradually by steps. I looked to my music theory skills to determine the best harmonic progressions for my piece and the voice leading for harmonic accompaniment. There were many instances in which I approached writing accompanimental lines, especially sixteenth and eighth

note runs in the woodwinds, as if they were homework for a counterpoint class, lining up chord tones on the beats and adding ornamentation around it. Finally, I used my basic knowledge of orchestration to add variety and interest to my piece by varying the texture and passing the melody to contrasting instrumental timbres. I also made sure that the basic form of my piece, the points at which sections closed and new material began, was discernable through the way in which I scored material.

Besides the musical knowledge I gained through past experiences and classes, the greatest compositional resources available to me were a piano, blank staff paper, and my musical instincts, which I learned to trust with increasing confidence throughout the process. All of my original material was created by spending hours playing at a piano or going on solitary walks with just a notebook of staff paper and a pencil. For the entire summer that I worked on composing the themes for *The Mind Grows Heated*, I was never without my staff paper notebook, and I learned how to write down themes whenever they came to me, whether that was when I was playing piano, walking in the woods, or trying to fall asleep at night. Musical creativity is a muscle that I learned to exercise daily, and it paid off in a growing ability to imagine and notate musical ideas with ease.

Although I had previous composing experience, I lacked knowledge of wind instruments. I had a basic idea of wind ensemble orchestration from my many years of playing in various ensembles, but as a percussionist, I was never aware of the intricacies of each instrument and their particular idioms. In Orchestration class, I learned the ranges and capabilities of each instrument, but I still had a lot to learn about what kind of musical lines each instrument usually plays and which instruments worked best together. I found this information from a variety of sources, including orchestration books, books on the history of the wind ensemble, scholarly

analytical articles on wind pieces, and most importantly, wind ensemble scores. It was through studying scores that I gained the best idea of the role and capability of each instrument in the wind ensemble. The problem with orchestration books is that all but a select few only focus on the symphony orchestra and therefore do not have much helpful information on scoring for wind ensemble. Books that list the ranges and musical capabilities of each instrument usually fail to divide the ranges into what a first, second, or third part would normally play, and they almost always provide the ranges that professional players can reach, not the average college or high school player. Scores were much more helpful in my hunt for orchestration knowledge, and whatever the scores failed to tell me, I learned by asking instrumentalists themselves.

There was an even deeper level to the orchestration process than simply learning what each instrument can and should do, and that was learning how to use the wind ensemble medium to create a sophisticated sound. In other words, I had to learn what colors were available with the wind ensemble and how I could achieve those colors, and I also had to learn what overall effects the wind ensemble is capable of and how could I create those effects. My greatest resource for gaining insight into the intricacies of the wind ensemble was once again scores, and also recordings. My process of figuring out how certain sound qualities and effects were achieved involved listening to recordings and trying to match what I heard to what I saw in the score. I would then emulate in my own music what I had observed, trying to achieve the same effects but in my own style and voice.

Although I gained invaluable knowledge from every score I studied, there were a select few that had the greatest influence on *The Mind Grows Heated*. The wind ensemble or concert band is mostly a twentieth century phenomenon, and the scores that had the greatest impact on my project spanned from the early, middle, and late ranges of that century. (Readers interested in

looking at the scores can find citations in the References section at the end of this document.) Gustav Holst's *First Suite in Eb for Military Band* was composed in 1909 and is the perfect example of superior band scoring. The first movement, Chaconne, contains an eight-bar melodic and harmonic progression that is repeated sixteen times in various ways, whether in a chamber setting with only a quartet of instruments playing, or a tutti with woodwind runs and a punctuating brass line. This movement gave me very useful insight into how variations in orchestration and accompaniment shape can bring out different colors in the wind ensemble, and its influence is apparent in my use of varying instrumental combinations in *The Mind Grows Heated*. Holst's *Second Suite in F for Military Band*, composed in 1911, was also extremely helpful in learning about standard use of wind instruments. The second movement, "Song without Words," is a beautiful example of a flowing melodic accompaniment that contains arpeggios and scalar figures that flow from one instrument to another. The influence of this movement is seen in the gracefully fluid accompaniment parts of the opening section of *The Mind Grows Heated*.

Alfred Reed's *Armenian Dances*, composed in 1972, represents the middle era of band standards. Its greatest influence on my composition was its use of woodwind runs to build to climaxes, its seamless and sometimes overlapping transitions, and its effective use of solo percussion sections. Finally, the most influential wind ensemble composition from the end of the twentieth century was Frank Ticheli's *Vesuvius*, composed in 1999. *Vesuvius* repeatedly switches between different modes and altered scales, and this greatly influenced my early compositional ideas for *The Mind Grows Heated*. While I ultimately strayed away from a modal composition, the impact of *Vesuvius* can be seen in the use of B-natural in Theme X and the tonicization of A in the theme that is presented in measure ninety-seven. Ticheli's *Vesuvius* also has a narrative,

almost cinematic quality to it: it tells a very specific story and evokes very particular emotions. Although I did not have a story in mind when composing *The Mind Grows Heated*, I knew I wanted it to have the same exciting dramatic elements presented in *Vesuvius*.

From all my years playing in wind ensembles, and from all my research for this project, I knew there was one musical effect that evoked the greatest emotional response from me, and I wanted to attempt that in my original composition: the simultaneous playing of two contrasting musical ideas. Three great examples of this effect are in Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Folk Song Suite*, Percy Grainger's *Lincolnshire Posy*, and Holst's *Second Suite for Military Band*. The effect begins in measure sixty-four of the first movement ("Seventeen Come Sunday") of Vaughan Williams' *Folk Song Suite*. The high woodwinds switch to a 6/8 time signature and carry a compound duple melody while the saxophones and low brass remain in 2/4 and present a simple duple melody. This juxtaposition of contrasting meters and melodic ideas creates a very satisfying musical effect. This idea is also present starting in measure thirty-six of the first movement ("Lisbon") of Grainger's *Lincolnshire Posy*. Similarly, the upper woodwinds continue the 6/8 jig-like melody that was established in the first thirty-three measure of the movement, while at the same time the saxophones, horns, and trumpets erupt in a completely contrasting simple duple melodic phrase. Perhaps the most obvious example of this simultaneous playing of two contrasting musical ideas is in the fourth movement of Holst's *Second Suite for Military Band*, "Fantasia on the 'Dargason.'" This movement once again establishes a compound duple jig-like melody that continuously repeats. At rehearsal letter C, the euphonium comes in underneath the jig with the folk tune "Greensleeves," which has the feeling of one beat per measure. This happens again at rehearsal letter G, where the woodwinds are playing the jig while the "Greensleeves" melody is stated as a brass chorale. The emotional effect of this musical

technique is indescribable, and it is something I knew I needed to attempt in my own composition.

In two places in *The Mind Grows Heated*, I put together two contrasting musical themes as described above. The first is in measures 195 through 209, where an augmented version of Theme Y appears in the trombones underneath an already-established canon of Theme Z in the upper woodwinds. The themes are very different in nature, and the slow movement of the trombone theme underneath the quick-paced woodwind theme creates an interesting musical effect. The other passage is in measures 230 through 245, in which the woodwinds are playing the ostinato or a sixteenth-note scalar variation of it, and the brass come in as a chorale on Theme A, the opening material of the entire piece. This is the first major climatic moment of the piece, and its successful expressive quality can be attributed to my study of putting two contrasting thematic ideas together. Although I did not attempt the compound versus simple meter juxtapositions that were present in the three abovementioned pieces, I believe I successfully created a similar musical effect in these two areas of *The Mind Grows Heated* that evokes similar emotional responses and displays comparable compositional sophistication.

The greatest lesson I learned about sophistication, through both studying scores and trial and error, is that complexity cannot be achieved in one step. At the beginning of the composing process, I was full of anxiety at the thought of creating a piece that sounded too elementary. I was desperate to find the key to a complex sound, and I believed that key was hidden somewhere within the scores of the standard wind ensemble repertoire. As I studied those scores and picked up different techniques from them, I realized that the key to complexity is a series of simple steps and layers. It hit me that composing a piece of music for wind ensemble was similar to painting a mural in that it started with a sketch, and only after the sketch was complete could large sections

of color be filled in, and only after large sections of color were filled in could intricate details be added. This realization completely shaped the way I went about composing *The Mind Grows Heated*. Instead of worrying about coming up with interesting harmonies and complicated rhythmic accompaniment lines, I started with simple melodies and harmonies in block chords. Each time I went through the piece, I added or tweaked something, whether it was changing the quality of a chord, adding an unexpected dissonance, or altering a rhythm. It was through building up these simple actions that I was able to unlock the sophisticated colors and effects of the wind ensemble.

Psychological Component

The second component of my overall process was not concerned with practical musical knowledge at all; it was the psychological process of figuring out how to tackle the largest creative project I ever attempted. The obstacles inherent to this component of the process were much more challenging than any composition or orchestration difficulties I faced because I could not look up their solutions in books or draw any conclusions from extensive score study. I simply had to live through it and learn along the way. This psychological process was truly a journey during which I learned an incredible amount about my creative abilities and myself as a composer. It was filled with innumerable ups and downs, and I was constantly switching between experiencing self-doubt and anxiety, self-confidence and pride, and back again. At times I could work for twelve hours straight, not feel a minute go by, and be incredibly pleased with my work; at other times, I became so frustrated with myself and felt so inadequate that I could not even bring myself to open the project for weeks. It was incredibly challenging to have myself as my

harshest critic throughout the entire process, but along the way I learned how to overcome the psychological obstacles I created for myself.

I quickly learned to be resourceful in my composing in order to avoid getting stuck on something for too long, because it was in those moments of not knowing how to proceed that I experienced the most anxiety and self-doubt. If one compositional tactic was not working, I learned how to switch to another. Whether it was other works of music, my past compositions, or simply walks in the woods, I drew inspiration from all available sources. It was in learning how to switch gears and look at a problem from all angles that I was eventually able to move past any compositional issues that came my way without stewing too long in my own frustration.

I also had to learn how to trust my musical instincts, especially in those times when I did get stuck on an issue for a long time. I learned how to take musical risks, make intelligent guesses, and accept imperfect solutions until later revisions so that I could move on to the next issue. There were many times that I added the first notes that came to my head into the piece, and I learned to trust that those notes would work instead of wasting time trying to perfect material that I could always improve later. As a perfectionist, this was an incredibly difficult lesson to learn, but it was crucial to my successful completion of the piece.

In addition to being resourceful and trusting of my musical abilities, it was absolutely necessary that I was patient with myself throughout this entire process. In my times of self-doubt, I was convinced that I was some sort of fraud and that “real” composers never struggled with their projects as much as I did with mine. I eventually learned, through research into other composers and their processes, that this was a completely natural feeling. Frank Ticheli, composer of *Vesuvius*, stated in an interview that he felt like a beginner each time he started a new piece. He said that it took a lot of time and soul searching for him “to begin to learn that the

bad days are a necessary part of the creative process,” and that all it takes is patience, hard work, and courage to proceed past those bad times (Ticheli 354). As I became more comfortable with the inherent ups and downs of the composing process, I became more patient with myself as I struggled through the low points.

The greatest lesson I learned throughout the psychological process of composing *The Mind Grows Heated* was that I simply had to start composing, keep going, and never look back. When I started this project, I was hesitant to start the composing process because of my lack of knowledge of wind ensemble orchestration. I did not feel adequately prepared to write a piece for wind ensemble, and I did not feel comfortable starting until I was confident in what I was doing. The more I read about wind instruments and the more I studied wind ensemble scores, the more I realized that I could study every aspect of the wind ensemble for years and still not feel prepared to compose for it. I had to take the risk of beginning, despite my insecurities and ignorance. It honestly took a lot of courage to complete that initial step of starting. I had to accept the fact that I was going to make mistakes and that, since my piece was going to be performed, these were mistakes that other people would be able to see. I had to make myself vulnerable to criticism and learn how to accept it graciously before even writing the first note.

The title of the piece comes from the saying, “Only begin and the mind grows heated; only begin and the task is completed.” I chose this title because beginning the project was the most difficult step I took and the most crucial step towards completing it. There were countless struggles throughout the composition process, but I would not have had the courage to face those difficulties if I did not overcome my fears of starting a project I knew would not turn out perfectly. In fact, the entire piece tells the story of the psychological process of composing it. The melodic Andante opening represents the worries, doubts, and insecurities I had when I

started my project. I was apprehensive about what the outcome would look like and what the process would entail; yet at the same time I was hopeful that my vision of success would come to fruition. The rising, open-ended melodies and the flowing accompaniment of the opening section speak of the worried, yet hopeful, anticipation I experienced as my compositional journey began. The percussive and aggressive Allegro section represents the rollercoaster ride of emotion I experienced throughout the majority of the time working on my project. This section has militaristic qualities that represent the fear and anxiety inherent to this kind of creative project, as well as the personification of doubt and insecurity as foes that one must battle against. The ostinato, or the repeating rhythmic figure, in this section represents my determination to endure and continue pushing past all obstacles. The hopeful theme of the opening section finally rises out of the chaos to which the middle section builds, and this represents how, given enough hard work and endurance, even the most difficult of challenges can resolve in a bright outcome. The triumphant grandioso ending of the piece represents the successful completion of my thesis and the pride I take in my accomplishment.

REFLECTION

Working on *The Mind Grows Heated* was an invaluable learning experience. I gained practical knowledge of the wind ensemble, its instruments and capabilities, and the effects and colors that can be produced with it. I was able to put all of my collegiate musical knowledge to use, such as compositional techniques, music theory concepts, orchestration norms, and counterpoint skills. My creative abilities expanded greatly, and my composition skills developed an incalculable amount. More than anything, however, I learned a great deal about my own character. I learned to trust my instincts and be patient through rough times. I learned how to endure through self-doubt and insecurities to keep working towards my end goal. Most of all, I learned that with enough hard work and persistence, I can create something magnificent out of nothing, and that the first step is simply to begin.

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