

Chester – Overture for Band
William Schuman (1910-1992)
Merion Music, Inc. (1957)

BACKGROUND INFO

William Schuman was a major American composer of the 1900's. In addition to winning the inaugural Pulitzer Prize for Music, he taught composition at Sarah Lawrence College, was president of the Julliard School of Music, president of the Lincoln Center, and was awarded the National Medal of Arts "for an extraordinary lifetime of contributions to American culture."

Among Schuman's most successful works is the New England Triptych written in 1956 for orchestra and based on the music of Williams Billings (1746-1800). The three pieces are titled *Be Glad Then America*, *When Jesus Wept*, and *Chester*. Written by Billings in 1778, *Chester* was adopted by the Continental Army and sung around campfires during the American Revolution. Its words express the burning desire for freedom.

*Let tyrants shake their iron rod,
And Slav'ry clank her galling chains,
We fear them not, We trust in God,
New England's God forever reigns.*

*The Foe comes on with haughty stride
Our Troops advance with martial noise
Their Vet'rans flee, before our Youth
And Gen'ral's yield to beardless Boys.*

Schuman developed and extended the orchestral version of *Chester*, making it into an overture for band. He stated in his Triptych score, "These three pieces are not a "fantasy" nor "variations" on themes of Billings, but rather a fusion of styles and musical language." This statement lends helpful insight for analysis and teaching ideas that are discussed below.

Sources:

Brown, Michael. "Enduring Wisdom from William Schuman." *The Instrumentalist* 48:4 (1993): 26-28

William Schuman. "About William Schuman." Accessed August 5, 2010.
www.williamschuman.org

ANALYSIS OF MUSICAL ELEMENTS

Form

Chester is generally composed/arranged in an arch form, with an intro followed by five variations and coda. The music's structure conveys an arch due to the growing and subsiding complexities of the original hymn material.

- The intro and coda follow functional harmonic progressions and clearly state the original hymn material in groups of matching timbres.
- Variations one and five are more dissonant and rhythmically complex,
- Elements of the inner variations (two, three, & four) are very dissonant, sharp, and complex with juxtaposed styles and timbres.
- Schuman uses simple foreshadowing or repetitions of material as transitions for each variation.

Rhythm

- Utilizes rhythmic diminution and augmentation as motivic development in each variation.
- Meter and pulse is also augmented and diminished as a variation tool. For example, variation one begins in *allegro* – four times faster than the intro; variation three augments into 4/4 (but felt in two).

Melody

- Intro features simple double-statement of the Billing's original hymn, first with delicate woodwinds in G major followed by an assertive brass statement of the same material but in Eb major. The woodwinds take over after a deceptive cadence from the brass, closing the intro on a held 2nd in unison.
- In the variations, Schuman develops and trades fragments of the original melody all around the ensemble
 - Var. 1 (ms 38): G major melody, motivic play with two fragments based on ms. 31-32 and ms. 30
 - Var. 2 (ms. 101): melody in Eb/Db simultaneously (bitonality), repeats fragments
 - Var. 3 (ms. 146): melody frequently modulates in asymmetrical phrases, moves in parallel 3rds
 - Var. 4 (ms. 171): Each melodic phrase (four) based on four fragments of hymn
 - ms. 171-173 from ms. 1-2
 - ms. 195 from ms. 7
 - ms. 207 from ms. 11-12
 - ms. 211 from ms. 15
 - Var. 5 (ms. 212): most like original hymn, C major modulates to Db major
- Coda (ms. 228): after brief play on a hymn fragment, a heroic and plagal (thus conclusive) statement in ms. 235 brings closure to the piece

Harmony

Schuman begins with simple, traditional harmonies and progressions, but increased the complexity and near atonality (juxtaposed chords and harmonies avoiding progressions) with each variation, but returning to functional tonality as the piece concludes. He most often features bitonality and other forms of duality (parallel thirds, melody modulating away from accompaniment).

The coda features a repetitive plagal cadence in Db major (note the tritone above original key of G), thus returning to the hymnal focus with the “amen” reference.

Texture/Timbre

Schuman utilizes a wide spectrum of timbres and textures to help exemplify the arch form and duality of the composition. For example, the characteristics of the opening two statements are distinguished by contrasting timbres (in addition to harmony and dynamics). The utilization of contrasting timbre groups helps characterize motivic development in the variations.

Expression/Dynamics

Contrasting dynamics and articulations are integral for expressing the wide variety of variation that occurs to the *Chester* hymn. The expressive qualities help the music flow in a highly unpredictable, almost haphazard manner. A performance will massively suffer if the ensemble does not precisely follow dynamics and articulations.

The intro requires attention to phrasing; Schuman notes four measure phrases in the hymnal statements in a *Religioso* style. This *Religioso* and conventional setting sets the backdrop from where the composition explores “the fusion of styles and musical language,” juxtaposing the modern with the conventional.

HEART statement

The heart of the piece is Schuman’s “fusion of styles and musical language”: the masterful oscillation of juxtaposed ideas that evoke the dualism existing in his music and American history.

Introducing *Chester* to the ensemble

Display the text and music of Billings’ hymn for the ensemble. Without providing context or dates of composition, ask the musicians to determine the era and purpose of the music through observation and discussion. What led to their decisions? Sing through the first verse, with accompaniment if necessary, to get to know the hymn.

SKILL (Psychomotor) OUTCOME:

Student will perform phrases as an ensemble, showing awareness of each phrase as an important expressive element.

Strategies:

- Warm-up Chorales – practice individually and as an ensemble various chorales and hymns being acutely aware of phrase concepts
- Play intro with total disregard of phrases. Discuss the outcome.
- Students sing and conduct the *Chester* hymn. Follow immediately performing Schuman’s intro; try to match phrases and musicality
- Evaluate and compare the phrasing in each variation with the original hymn. Discuss and perform.

Assessments:

- Record a rehearsal and have the students evaluate the performance

- For variations without phrase marks (Var. 2 & 4), small groups create their own and perform them for the class.

KNOWLEDGE (Cognitive) OUTCOME:

Students will identify and examine the arch form and the compositional techniques used to create duality in the music.

Strategies:

- Ensemble warm-ups with bitonality introduction
- Harmony and bitonality comparisons (isolate chords and textures)
- Rehearse isolated variations in sequence; students in groups create a drama chart for *Chester*.

Assessment:

- In small groups, students will arrange a patriotic tune (ex. *Yankee Doodle*) fusing old with new ideas; utilizing variations, bitonality, motivic development, arch form, and other contemporary ideas of today (electronic accomp., etc.)

AFFECTIVE (Feeling) OUTCOME:

Students will explore their thoughts and emotions how juxtaposed elements can function together.

Students will examine their understanding of and their reactions to the fusion, or dualism, of contrasting elements in daily life.

Strategies:

- Students will account for every time duality occurs in their daily life.
- Write a response: Let's assume for a minute the Schuman had a message for us in his music. What do you believe is the purpose of dualism in *Chester* for band? How does that message relate to your current musical taste? (Ex. Studying folk and classical music, liking Lady Gaga and Bach) What about to current events?
- Students will compile a few historical and modern examples of what they feel is American patriotic music. Are there similar and contrasting ideas; what about ironies such as religious passivism and war advocacy.
- Students will listen to remaining Triptych pieces and discuss the similarities and differences between all three (potentially noting how *Chester* ties the religiosity of *When Jesus Wept* and patriotism of *Be Glad then America* together)

Assessment:

- Students create and present artwork or music that illustrates contrasting/juxtaposed elements.
- Read and evaluate responses and music collection.