

## **Band Music Reviews (August 2009)**

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Two relatively recent events in the band world have, in that weird way our brains tend to mix and match information, called to mind the image of a sign familiar to anyone who has travelled the London Underground. Small plaques throughout the subway system remind passengers to “Mind the Gap” between the train door and the station platform. The two events that conjured this bit of trivia from the back shelves of my brain were the College Band Directors National Association Conference in Austin, Texas last spring and the Nebraska Bandmasters Association Summer Conference in Columbus, Nebraska this past July. The gap to which I refer probably isn’t the one you’re anticipating. It isn’t the one that inspires a litany of explanations about the challenges facing rural schoolteachers and the perceived lack of funding and moral support for music in the public schools of Nebraska. It doesn’t have anything to do with wayward students, aggressive coaches, clueless principals, obstreperous parents, or the imperious manager of the local Runza.

The gap to which I refer is the widening chasm between so-called “serious” or “artistic” music for bands and what is commonly referred to as “educational” band literature. The gap is not the difference between college/pro repertoire and compositions for developing bands. It is a difference in awareness brought about by professional circumstances. Each of us inhabits a compositional neighborhood defined by myriad factors. Many band directors sit behind the walls of their metaphorical gated community without ever glancing toward, let alone visiting, what lies beyond.

As a devoted gap minder, I spend a great deal of time visiting the broadest spectrum of literature neighborhoods possible. One goal to which I aspire as an educator is to shrink the gap between “serious” and “educational” until it is no longer apparent. Consider for example a high school orchestra director who has never heard a Beethoven symphony. Absurd, you say (I hope). Although most high school orchestras don’t have the means to tackle the biggies, they keep them on the radar screen. They act as a beacon to assist with artistic navigation – if you’re headed toward them, you’re in safe water. Now consider a high

school band director who has never heard Holst's "Hammersmith." Far from absurd, it's common. As a result, many band directors are floating around aimlessly hoping to catch a stray breeze. This was never more apparent than in Columbus, where an intrepid band of dedicated educators endured a four-hour new music reading session: fifty new compositions with barely a hint of artistry among them.

At the recent World Association for Symphonic Bands and Ensembles (WASBE) conference in Cincinnati, Ohio, author Stephen Budiansky spoke in a session called "The Problem with Band Repertoire in Music Education." Evan Feldman reviewed the session and the complete text of the review can be found online at <http://www.wasbe.org/conferences/2009/> Two passages from Feldman's article resonated with me after the experience in Columbus. The first:

It's true, as Budiansky observes, that many pieces seem to have the same titles, a conglomeration of "nature" words and topographical locations: Eagle Point Overture; Yosemite Creek Saga; or plays on the word "Festival," with or without an exclamation point and Latin American twist ("Fiestival!"). It's true that publishers often market these pieces with the same language that Procter & Gamble uses to sell soap. Instead of "great smelling soap that will give you the smooth skin you've always wanted," we get: "a playable piece that will wow your audience and make your band sound great!" It's true that some directors are obsessed with only the newest works, possibly at the expense of the finest, most timeless works. And it's true that for better or worse music education is fueled and supported by music business.

It's as if Budiansky had been at the new music reading session in Columbus. Eerie. Feldman continued with this passage much later in the article:

Mr. Budiansky admits the solution goes beyond "Shooting the Composer" and that the problem can be traced throughout society: teachers feel pressure from administrators and parents to retain students and win trophies; administrators feel the same pressure from school boards; our entire society is under pressure from a cultural aesthetic that values trendy superficiality over thoughtful substance.

Be that as it may, it's our responsibility to mind the gap until we're able to close it. Minding the gap means expecting artistry in all band literature, not just the hard stuff, and getting out of your neighborhood to see what everybody else is up to. To that end, here are some recommendations and resources:

- Descriptions of the literature presented at the WASBE conference is posted at <http://www.shatteringmusic.com/SpecialFeatures.aspx?Keyword=wasbe> Click to view the repertoire session booklet.
- There were a few brighter spots at the Columbus conference. "Little Star," a very easy work by Rob Grice is a lovely lyrical option for young bands, and Gary Gilroy's "Three Stars of Tennessee" provided some compelling variety in the medium category. "Pivot Man" march was a reminder of the solid quality of the Harold Bennett (aka Henry Fillmore) series of marches for younger bands.
- From CBDNA we have several winners: John Mackey's "Asphalt Cocktail," Joel Puckett's "It perched for Vespers Nine," Steven Bryant's "Ecstatic Waters," Todd Malicoate's "La Pequena Habana," Scott McAllister's "Pop Copy," and Ricardo Lorenz's "El Muro."