

Band Music Reviews (June 2010)

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To celebrate NMEA's upcoming 75th anniversary, I thought I'd take a look back at literature premiered in the 1930s. Sadly, the '30s were not a banner decade for the art of wind band composition. Aside from *Lincolnshire Posy* and an odd Russian march or two, there really isn't anything to write home about. So on to Plan B. The 75th is traditionally the diamond anniversary and there are a surprising number of compositions that relate, even if few of them are gems.

We'll start with the big dog: Robert Jager's *Diamond Variations* (Belwin-Mills, grade 5, 13:30). This piece won the Ostwald Award in 1968, and like too many excellent works it went out of print for a time. Fortunately it is available once again, but there is a regrettable cut-and-paste error circulating among publisher's websites that list it as "medium easy" (grade 3). Nope – it's a solid grade 5 and well worth the effort to prepare it. Written on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Illinois Concert Band, *Diamond Variations* was dedicated to that ensemble and its director, Mark H. Hindsley. Jager describes the piece in these terms, "*Diamond Variations* is a set of five variations on the trio melody of the march *Illinois Loyalty*. The variations are not thematic as such, but rather based upon fragments of the melody." Which leads me on a brief tangent to another overlooked gem in theme and variations form: Gardner Read's *Dunlap's Creek* (Franco Columbo – out of print, grade 5, 4:15). If you have this sitting in your library, check it out. There is a remarkable amount of compositional ingenuity packed into such a small frame.

Our next anniversary selection is Robert Longfield's *Black Diamond* (Hal Leonard, grade 2, 4:11). The title refers to the notation and the audible diamond shape of the thematic material (e.g. crescendo/decrescendo, ascending/descending scale patterns scored in contrary motion). The form is predictably ABA, with a lovely lyrical section, limited ranges, simple duple rhythms, and both major and minor modes. *Black Diamonds* isn't a blockbuster, but it is a solid little piece for younger bands.

And speaking of things that aren't blockbusters: Tim Mahr's *Diamond Celebration* (Kjos, grade 4, 2:51). This bright yet somewhat pedantic piece is too long for a fanfare, yet too short for an overture. It is pleasant but ultimately forgettable. If you'd like to perform some of Dr. Mahr's work, you'll do much better with *Blue Sky Day*, or *Spring Divertimento*. Visit www.kjos.com to peruse scores and listen to complete recordings of many of Mahr's compositions.

In a lighter vein we have David Weirich's *Diamond Joe's Riviera Club* (Grand Mesa, grade 2, 3:00). This cute little tune really swings. It's *Minnie the Moocher* meets *Blues for a Killed Kat*, or Cab Calloway for beginning band. Well worth a look, and while you're visiting www.grandmesamusic.com check out David Bobrowitz's *One Night in Athens*.

Following the anniversary theme, we come to Sam Hazo's *Diamond Fanfare* (Hal Leonard, grade 4, 4:30). This piece is strongly reminiscent of John Williams' compositions for the Olympics in its bold, if cliché, brass theme followed by extended sentimental woodwind material. The lyrical material is eerily similar to the opening theme of Maslanka's *Symphony No. 4* cast in the orchestration of Larry Daehn's *With Quiet Courage*. That is to say, there is little that is original or even particularly interesting in Hazo's fanfare with the possible exception of the heartbeat device in the intro and outro. The proportions are skewed heavily in favor of the lyrical material, and the composer's programmatic assertions simply protest too much: "Following the grand chorale, the memory of the heartbeat is played alone, fading 'a niente'." *Diamond Fanfare* is written in arch form; A-B-C-D-C-B-A, symbolizing the cycle of life and of generations." One brief cautionary note: Mr. Hazo is in danger of becoming overexposed. With a whopping 13 pieces in Hal Leonard's most recent catalogue (Spring 2010), one begins to wonder if his inspiration is sufficient to sustain such a volume of work. For more on this topic, read on.

Here's a fun fact: Of the 817 new concert band works published between September 2008 and September 2009, the most-published composer was Robert W. Smith with 22 pieces. Michael Story was next with 18, then Johnnie Vinson with 11. James Swearingen and Rob Grice both weighed in with 10, and then there was a quadruple tie at 8 apiece for Jack Bullock, Victor Lopez, Richard Saucedo, and Robert Sheldon. Let's pause for a moment. If you aren't appalled by these figures you should be. Let me be clear: I mean no disrespect to these composers. However, I believe it is reasonable to question the quality of music produced at such a break-neck pace. Let's put this in perspective. In his most mature

years, Mozart averaged 25 compositions annually and most of those were miscellaneous etudes, solfeggios, and dance ditties intended for one-time use. In the major categories (symphonies, operas, concertos, sonatas) he averaged just 5 or 6 compositions a year – and he was one of the greatest and most prolific composers of all time. Next time you open your Midwest Clinic program or publisher's catalogue and see the same name over and over again, don't think, "Gosh, he must be good if so many people are interested in his work." Think of Mozart.