

PRESENTING
THE FIRST PRIZE WINNER
JODIE BLACKSHAW
FOR **WHIRLWIND**

CATEGORY 1—BEGINNING BAND

AUSTRALIA



by Dr. Keith Kinder

Photos by Rolf Einhaus

Whirlwind by Australian composer Jodie Blackshaw was the unanimous winner of Category 1—Beginning Band of *The Frank Ticheli Composition Contest* in the spring of 2006, sponsored by Manhattan Beach Music. The work is an innovative approach to composing for musicians of limited ability. Technical demands are minimal. The melodic material employs only four notes, concert pitches A–C–D–E, voiced in each instrument’s easiest register, and used to construct a simple, wistful tune that appears unaltered as so-

los, in two-part canon and in four-part canon throughout the piece. The most complicated rhythms are eighth notes, except for some snare drum figures in sixteenths.

However, around these uncomplicated elements, Blackshaw has created an unusual and appealing soundscape that employs “home-made” instruments (water-glass chimes and various kinds of rattles), and “whirlies” (lengths of

corrugated plastic pipe that are spun by the player to generate sound) in addition to the customary band complement. These

Example 1, the solo melody

Like a whirlwind: slowly - getting faster - then slowly again

unexpected constituents allow Blackshaw to introduce graphic notation, draw attention to timbre, balance and listening, and encourage dynamic sensitivity. The score contains an extensive prelude that explains the composer's concept of the piece and offers suggestions for its realization. The composer has developed a pedagogical package called "Know your stuff" that is intended to assist with the teaching of all the elements of this piece, and is available as a free download from the Manhattan Beach Music web site.

Whirlwind is constructed as a series of contrasted events. A pedal "A" drone through much of the piece establishes a tonal anchor, and, when combined with the work's four melodic pitches,

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establishes an A minor tonality. The first event, A, and the last event, I, are entitled Soundscape, are freely notated and involve only the "home-made" instruments. The pulsating, eerie sound

of the "whirlies", played by four percussionists, is an obvious evocation of the title, and the waterglass chimes and rattles suggest rain. The score is only an approximation of what might result. The composer encourages experimentation so that no two performances would sound the same.

At the B event the melody is introduced as a solo accompanied only by the whirlies [See Example 1, solo melody, prior page]



As can be seen in the example, this section is *senza misura*. The solo is printed in all parts permitting a variety of soloists to be selected. The B event elides into C, which uses the last phrase of the melody to gradually incorporate the full band. Each player is to be directed when to begin by the conductor and to hold the final note (A) of the melody until everyone arrives at that pitch. Again, the composer presumes that each performance will be unique; however, this section introduces the idea of imitation, which will be explored later in the work.

At event D, the piece becomes measured in 3/4 meter for the first time. Only the drone and layered percussion appear. The composer, however, has carefully specified mallets and sticking patterns and also demands considerable sensitivity from the players. For example: every part has a different dynamic, and the bass drum is required to execute a long roll with very carefully placed *crescendos* and *decrescendos*. The pitched instruments, glockenspiel and timpani, again establish A minor.

The percussion layers and the drone continue into event E, where they support a two-part canon using the four phrases of the melody. Since each phrase ends on either A or E, players should be encouraged to match their pitch to the drone. Event F is another series of percussion layers, but, unlike event D, they are fragmented and employ six carefully differentiated sounds. Since this section is at a loud volume and is more rhythmically



The composer playing the whirly — in Canberra, Australia, the Australian Parliament building in background.

animated than previous sections, it has the character of a dance — a rain dance, perhaps?

Event G is the climax of the work. The full band presents a four-voice canon accompanied initially by only the pitched percussion, but gradually other percussion and the whirlies are added. Event H involves only percussion and two soloists. The soloists are clarinet and muted trumpet, the latter instrument intended to act as an echo to the former. Each performs the four phrases of the melody once. A striking percussion effect is called for at this point. The timpanist is instructed to place a suspended cymbal upside down on the largest timpani and roll on the cymbal while moving the timpani pedal up and down — another extraordinary evocation of wind sound. As noted earlier, event I is a recall of the beginning of the composition, which gives the impression of starting over. Like a whirlwind, this work is circular in form.

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learning opportunities, this composition reaches well beyond pedagogy. The events flow smoothly one into the next and the blending of continuity and contrast offers a convincing musical experience. *Whirlwind* could well be the highlight of your next performance! — ❀ —