THE CRANE WIND ENSEMBLE

Program Notes • 22 April 2016

A FESTIVAL CELEBRATION

Several celebrations embody tonight’s program. Not only is this final performance of the Crane Wind Ensemble the culmination of a semester-long collaboration, it heralds both the beginning of SUNY Potsdam’s Spring Festival season (with associated LoKo events) and the “beginning of the end” of our college bicentennial. We celebrate the 65th anniversary of Hindemith’s Symphony in B-flat premiere while lauding the life of composer Leslie Bassett who passed away in early February. We share in the homage Steven Bryant’s Alchemy in Silent Spaces pays to his mentor, W. Francis McBeth, while celebrating (finally) the coming of spring with Febris Ver and its minimalist and effervescent landscape.

SOUNDS, SHAPES, AND SYMBOLS

Leslie Bassett

Leslie Bassett received training on cello, piano, trombone, and other instruments as a child and studied composition with Ross Lee Finney at the University of Michigan from 1947-49 and 1952-56. He also studied composition with Arthur Honegger at the École Normale de Musique de Paris and analysis privately with Nadia Boulanger in Paris in 1950-51, both on a Fulbright Scholarship. He later had private studies in composition with Roberto Gerhard in Ann Arbor in 1960 and in electronic music with Mario Davidovsky in Ann Arbor in 1964.

His honors include the Prix de Rome (1961-63), the Pulitzer Prize (1966, for Variations for Orchestra), two Guggenheim fellowships (1973-74, 1980-81), and the Naumburg Foundation Recording Award (1974, for Sextet [piano, strings]). He has been a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters since 1976 and has earned grants from the Koussevitzky Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation.

He taught composition at the University of Michigan from 1952-91, where he was chair of the composition department from 1970-88 and the Albert A. Stanley Distinguished University Professor of Music from 1977-91. He was also a co-founder of its electronic music studio in 1964 and of its Contemporary Directions Ensemble in 1966.

H. Robert Reynolds commissioned Sounds, Shapes and Symbols: Four Movements for Band for the University of Michigan Symphony Band in 1977, at the time of his return to his alma mater as Director of Bands. Reynolds studied with Bassett during his undergraduate years, and both gentlemen played in the Michigan Symphony Band under William D. Revelli, Director of Bands from 1937-71.

ALCHEMY IN SILENT SPACES

Steven Bryant

Alchemy in Silent Spaces is music of transformation. Born from music I wrote while an undergraduate student of W. Francis McBeth, it embodies both musical and extra-musical symbols from that period of my life.

The first movement, the logic of all my dreams, is music of simple, optimistic delicacy and beauty. The opening, based around a singular repeated “P” in the piano, is extremely sparse in texture. Intended to evoke a floating sense of stasis, it nevertheless gradually gains momentum and mass, building slowly, yet irrevocably, toward and all-encompassing, harmonically consonant, blanket of warmth.

The second movement, points of attraction, again, opens quietly, this time gaining momentum more quickly. Instead of arriving at a particular musical destination, however, it continues spiraling upward and outward, reaching a precipice, and falling into the still point of destruction. The third movement is a ferocious, harmonically divergent hybrid of propulsive dissonance and bittersweet nostalgia. Composed of the same motives from the first two movements, they have transformed in character and context, producing an alloy of pleasure and pain in relentless rhythmic release.

Note by Steven Bryant

FEBRIS VER

Nancy Galbraith

Born into a musical family in Pittsburgh in 1951, Nancy Galbraith began piano studies at age four. She later earned degrees in composition from Ohio University and West Virginia University, and continued studies in composition, piano, and organ at Carnegie Mellon University.

Galbraith is currently Professor and Chair of Composition at the Carnegie Mellon University School of Music. In a career that spans over three decades, her music has earned praise for its rich harmonic texture, rhythmic vitality, emotional and spiritual depth, and wide range of expression.

Her works for concert bands are standard repertoire for ensembles around the world. Her most popular work for this genre, Danza de los Duendes, has been performed in hundreds of concerts and appears on four recordings, most notably the North Texas Wind Symphony’s CD, Dream Catchers.

Febris Ver (Spring Fever) is a variegated post-minimalist landscape that evokes the sensuous essences of spring. The aromas, colors, flavors, and aural delights of Earth’s perennial rebirths are interwoven with chorale-like textures, first introduced by the brass, then playfully tossed about by the rest of the ensemble.

The work was composed for the College Band Directors National Association (CBDNA) 2012 Eastern Division Conference at Indiana University of
Pennsylvania, where it was premiered by the IUP Wind Symphony led by Jason Worzbyt.

Note by Nancy Gabraith

SYMPHONY IN B-FLAT

Paul Hindemith

Born in Hanau, Hindemith was taught the violin as a child, but his parents objected to his musical ambitions, and he left home at the age of eleven as a result. He entered the Hoch Conservatoire in Frankfurt am Main where he studied conducting, composition and violin under Arnold Mendelssohn and Bernhard Sekles, supporting himself by playing in dance bands and musical-comedy outfits. He led the Frankfurt Opera orchestra from 1915 to 1923 and played in the Rebner string quartet in 1921 in which he played second violin, and later the viola. In 1929 he founded the Amar Quartet, playing viola, and extensively touring Europe.

In 1922, some of his pieces were heard in the International Society for Contemporary Music festival at Salzburg, which first brought him to the attention of an international audience. The following year, he began to work as an organizer of the Donaueschingen Festival, where he programmed works by several avant garde composers, including Anton Webern and Arnold Schoenberg. From 1927 he taught composition at Berlin and in the 1930s he made several visits to Ankara where he led the task of reorganizing Turkish music education. Towards the end of the 30s, he made several tours of America as a viola and viola d'amore soloist.

Despite protests from the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, his music was condemned as "degenerate" by the Nazis, and in 1940 he immigrated to the United States, where he taught music at Yale University and Harvard, influencing several generations of composers and performers. He became an American citizen in 1946, but returned to Europe in 1953, living in Zürich and teaching at the University there. Towards the end of his life he began to conduct more. Hindemith died in Frankfurt am Main from acute pancreatitis.

Commissioned by Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Curry, commander of the United States Army Band, the Symphony in B-flat was first performed in Washington, D.C. on 5 April 1951, with the composer conducting. This three-movement work is the only symphony that Hindemith wrote expressly for the wind band. Although Symphony in B-flat features unique uses of dissonant chords and non-harmonic tones, it preserves neo-classical tonality, forms, and rhythmic and melodic patterns. Short figures are apt to form themselves into ostinatos to provide the background to broad and declamatory melodies; these melodies will often repeat characteristic phrases of awkward lengths so as to disturb the even flow of the basic rhythm. A slow section will alternate with a scherzando section, and the two will combine to form the third portion of a movement.

The symphony’s opening movement is ternary in form. The A section contains three ideas: the first is a wide, sweeping melody; the second an extended passage built on a short figure and set exclusively for woodwinds; and the third, which is preceded by a long unison woodwind passage, an impressive chorale-like melody announced by the horns and building in the brass to a triumphant climax. The short B section is concerned with a jerky fugato and its characteristic episodes. The “Andantino grazioso” is largely comprised of a dialogue between alto saxophone and cornet on a quiet but oddly cheerful little tune, while the scherzo, which it afterwards joins in combination, is a rapid, bustling affair given entirely to woodwind and tambourine.

The symphony ends boisterously with a fugue whose energetic exposition is followed by a further exposition in stretto. After a quieter middle section in which a graceful new theme is worked out at length, the fugue subject returns suddenly in full force and the two combine. When this is in full swing, the broad opening melody of the first movement is thundered out by trumpets and trombones, with all the three themes making a splendid counterpoint. Eventually the two subjects of the last movement drop out, and the symphony ends with tremendous final statement of the melody with which it began.