



## The Eternal Warning: Social Commentary in the Wind Band Repertoire

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Music has been a vehicle of social commentary for hundreds of years. The morality plays of Hildegard von Bingen in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the anti socialist music of Dmitri Shostakovich, the klezmer music in Gustav Mahler's symphonies in fascist Germany, the music of Kurt Weill, and the political protest music of John Lennon and Bob Marley are all examples of this. The musical mediums of orchestra, musical theatre, and popular music have been the prime instruments of conveying social commentary. However, the wind band has experienced a vast expansion in repertoire over the last century with works that have a more profound message than the traditional marches and school band works. The wind band has become a legitimate musical medium with repertoire that has the same depth and artistic value as earlier musical channels. Three works for wind band that can be considered as social commentaries are Gustav Holst's *Hammersmith*, Steven Bryant's *Ecstatic Waters*, and John Corigliano's *Circus Maximus*. These works all convey a profound statement about the human race. Although their musical styles are different from each other, there are large-scale musical ideas that are consistent with all three pieces.

By Gustav Holst, *Hammersmith* is a portrayal of the London borough of the same name during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In regard to the genesis of this piece, Holst wrote "the only two things that I think were on my mind were a district crowded with cockneys, which would be overcrowded if it were not for the everlasting good humor of the people concerned and the background of the river, that was there before the crowd and will be there presumably long after, and which goes its way largely unnoticed and apparently unconcerned".<sup>1</sup> Holst represents the Thames River with a slow moving ground in the

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<sup>1</sup> Holst, Imogen. *Gustav Holst: A Biography*. London: Oxford University Press. 1938. 292-293.



tuba, euphonium, and horn. The crowd, on the other hand, is depicted by a fast and quirky motive that is passed throughout the ensemble. Holst fittingly subtitled the piece “Prelude and Scherzo” to represent these two elements.

Steven Bryant’s *Ecstatic Waters* is a five-movement work for band with electronics. Bryant describes the piece as, “music of dialectical tension – a juxtaposition of contradictory or opposing musical and extra-musical elements and an attempt to resolve them. The five connected movements hint at a narrative that touches upon naïveté, divination, fanaticism, anarchy, order, and post-human possibilities. Or: W. B. Yeats meets Ray Kurzweil in *The Matrix*”. Bryant also states that the title, *Ecstatic Waters*, as well as the first and last movement titles are taken from the poetry of Yeats. Additionally the composer writes that Yeats’ “idiosyncratic personal mythology and symbolism of spiraling chaos and looming apocalypse figured prominently in the genesis of the work. Yet in a nod to the piece’s structural reality – as a hybrid of electronics and living prayers – *Ecstatic Waters* also references the confrontation of unruly humanity with the order of the machine, as well as the potential of a post-human synthesis, inspired by futuristic thinkers such as Kurzweil”.<sup>2</sup>

*Circus Maximus* by John Corigliano is a work written for a large concert band in surround sound with ensemble members strategically placed around the performance hall. He composed the piece in surround sound to emulate the Circus Maximus arena in ancient Rome with the audience in the middle of the arena. Corigliano states in his program notes that “the Roman need for grander and wilder amusement grew as its empire declined”, and “many of us have become as bemused by the violence and humiliation that flood the 500-plus channels of our television screens as the mobs of imperial Rome, who considered the devouring of human beings by starving lions just another Sunday show”.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, in a pre-concert lecture at Northwestern University, Corigliano noted that the piece is a warning about all the distractions of

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<sup>2</sup> Bryan, Steven. *Ecstatic Waters*. Gorilla Salad Productions (ASCAP). 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Corigliano, John. *Circus Maximus*. New York, NY: G. Schirmer, Inc. 2005.



technology and entertainment that we are seduced by today as the Romans were in antiquity. <sup>4</sup>

All three of these composers present the listener with a profound message in these works and do so by using large scale musical concepts that evoke three ideas: human beings are naïve, human beings are in conflict with an outside force in a struggle that cannot be sustained, and a possible resolution to the conflict. Each composer voices these ideas in their own unique compositional style, but with similar character.

Holst's idea of the naiveté of human beings comes from his living in the overcrowded London borough of Hammersmith. He portrays the cockney population in *Hammersmith* with a fast triplet melody that is first presented in the piccolo and is accompanied by the Thames River motive in the low voices as discussed previously. The high tessitura of the piccolo evokes the image of a passing resident whistling an awkward tune and being totally unaware of their surroundings. The portrayal is continued with a syncopated motive that is the primary building block of the *scherzo* section. The naïve atmosphere is amplified with a second triplet motive that is also found in the *scherzo*. These motives are orchestrated around the ensemble in a fugue-like texture, which creates a hectic aesthetic to portray the bustle of Hammersmith.

Bryant portrays the naiveté of human beings in the first movement of *Ecstatic Waters* titled "Ceremony of Innocence". The composer wrote in regard to the movement that it "begins as a pure expression of exuberant joy in unapologetic B-flat major in the celesta and vibraphone. The movement grows in momentum, becoming perhaps too exuberant – the initial simplicity evolves into a full-throated brashness bordering on dangerous arrogance and naiveté..." <sup>5</sup> The movement's prominent motive is a descending line with the intervallic content of perfect fourths and fifths. The open sound of these intervals evokes the joyous and overly optimistic aesthetic.

Throughout the work, Corigliano establishes the unawareness of human beings and their easy seduction in *Circus Maximus* in a multitude of ways. The first is the opening section of the work that is carried by eleven trumpets and three snare drums

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<sup>4</sup> YouTube. "Circus Maximus Part 1 of 4." YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u\\_GDdV3Dwns](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_GDdV3Dwns) (accessed May 6, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Bryant.



that are placed throughout the hall and surround the audience. They play a fanfare that is primal in nature, which is representative of the type of entertainment that the Circus Maximus of ancient Rome once hosted to satisfy the mob.

The focus of the second movement of Corigliano's work is the seduction of human beings. The majority of this section is played by a saxophone quartet and string bass that are placed in a balcony of the performance hall. The musical material can be described as slow, distant calls of seduction that are characterized by ethereal chromatic lines and glissandi. The movement is titled "Screen/Siren" in reference to the mythological creatures called sirens of ancient Greece who lured unsuspecting ships with their enchanting music to a rocky coast and an inevitable demise.

With the third movement titled "Channel Surfing", Corigliano continues with the idea that human beings are consistently distracted and in need of entertainment. This movement depicts someone watching television and switching aimlessly between channels. Each channel has a different style of music and is interrupted abruptly by a woodblock, which represents the click of a remote control. Corigliano describes the music as "sensory overload and infinite variety dilute concentration. Our need for constant change echoes the desires of the ancient mob, only now we can access it all by pressing a button".<sup>6</sup>

The concept of humans being in an unsustainable conflict with an outside force is the second idea that these three works convey. However, each piece portrays a different outside force. Holst depicts humans in conflict with nature. This is represented by the Thames River and cockney motives that are intertwined throughout the work. Holst accentuates the conflict by writing the Thames River motive in a different key than the other motives when they are sounding together. The motives are woven into a complex texture several times in the piece, but result in a dissonant climax, an abrupt silence, or one motive emerging over the other. The back and forth struggle between human beings and nature is seen throughout the work.

Bryant portrays humanity in conflict with technology in *Ecstatic Waters*. Like Holst, Bryant represents the two forces in the work by intertwining them together, however, he does this with timbre instead of musical motives. The piece was composed

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<sup>6</sup> Corigliano.



for wind ensemble and electronics, but Bryant treats the electronics in a unique way. The electronics are not a separate entity, but woven into the texture as if it were another ensemble member. The composer at times changes the color of the acoustic instruments by adding mutes, amplification with effects, aleatoric sections, crystal glasses, and altering pitches by a quarter step. These acoustic adjustments change the instrumental tone color to an almost electronic timbre, which aids in making, at times, a unified musical fabric that is a hybrid of the ensemble members and the electronics.

The middle movements of the piece depict a struggle between the two forces. In regard to this struggle Bryant writes, “While it (the electronics) erupts at the outset with overwhelming wrath, it quickly collapses into a relentless rhythm of simmering sixteenth notes. Lyric lines and pyramids unfold around this, interrupted briefly by the forceful anger of a chorale, almost as if trying to drown out and deny anything but its own existence. A moment of delicate lucidity arrives amidst this back and forth struggle, but the chorale dominates, subsuming everything, spiraling out of control, and exploding.”<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, Corigliano portrays the struggle between humanity, technology, and nature in *Circus Maximus*. The conflict with technology is presented in the “Channel Surfing” movement as discussed previously. The clash against nature is depicted in the movement titled “Night Music I”. This movement is the fourth of eight movements in the piece, which makes it the centerpiece of the work. The movement is characterized by unique timbres that emulate sounds of nature. These sounds include a wolf howl in the horn, birdcalls in the string bass, and pointillistic and antiphonal crotales to imitate stars. The placement of this movement is what illustrates the conflict of nature with humanity because it is preceded by the “Channel Surfing” movement and followed by “Night Music II”, a movement that depicts the wild nightlife of the city.

*Circus Maximus* also presents the conflict of humanity with itself. The events held in the Coliseum and Circus Maximus of ancient Rome, the hundreds of television stations of the present day, the nightlife of the city that many indulge in regularly, and humans being easily seduced by these are all self-imposed distractions that Corigliano is warning about in the work. The piece comes to a climax in the sixth movement titled “Circus Maximus” where all of the music from previous movements is layered on top of

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<sup>7</sup> Bryant.



one another. The sensory overload of this section reaches a point of unsustainability and climaxes with a very loud chord that is followed by a two-minute dynamic descent.

Each composer resolves all of the conflicts with humanity in these pieces uniquely. The final moments of *Hammersmith* include a climactic silence that is followed by the Thames River motive with the whistling cockney motive feebly attempting to gain strength in the conflict. Holst ends *Hammersmith* with the cockney figures gradually dying away while the Thames River motive continues on, unchanged, and unconcerned.

Bryant expresses a more optimistic idea by creating a harmony between humanity and technology that is a synthesis of the live players and the electronics. He does this by using the extended techniques discussed previously and adapting the electronic sounds to emulate more acoustic properties. The final movement titled “*Spiritus Mundi*” or “*Spirit of the World*” fuses the ensemble with the electronics to a point where the listener can barely distinguish between the two.

Corigliano, on the other hand, composed a less comforting end to *Circus Maximus*. The sixth movement titled “*Prayer*” is a plea for humanity that they may overcome the distractions that human beings have invented for themselves. The movement consists of a lyrical melody that is accompanied by a series of plagal cadences that insinuate the religiousness of the prayer. The movement grows in intensity as the plea becomes more insistent, but is overcome by the opening primal fanfares of the *Circus Maximus* as the piece transitions to the final movement titled “*Veritas*”, a reference to the Roman goddess of truth. An exclamation by a 12-gauge shotgun ends the work.

*Hammersmith*, *Ecstatic Waters*, and *Circus Maximus* all present humankind as naïve, in an unsustainable conflict with nature, technology, or humanity itself, and a possible resolution to these conflicts. These works can convey an innumerable amount of messages and have as many interpretations as there are listeners. One of these interpretations is that these three pieces have a single message for humanity: an eternal warning. This warning is the danger of humanity’s unawareness; the ignorance of our effect on nature or the appreciation of it, the unawareness of its dependence on technology, and the obliviousness to the human-made distractions that blind them from what is truly important. However, the fate of humanity is not sealed. Holst suggests that



the reign of human beings could simply run its course and nature will survive long after their demise. Bryant proposes that humanity can embrace technology instead of being consumed by it, and Corigliano insinuates that humanity of today should learn from those from antiquity and not make the same mistakes.

These works of social commentary are landmark works in their own rite, not only as wind band pieces, but also as members of the musical repertoire as a whole. Their unique compositional elements and their over-arching musical ideas make them exceptional pieces. Like the music of Shostakovich, Weill, and Lennon, *Hammersmith*, *Ecstatic Waters*, and *Circus Maximus* can be interpreted in many ways; but nonetheless, there are messages to be heard.



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