

THE Instrumentalist

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Eugene Migliaro Corporon

The Art of Composing, Part 2
Midwest Ensemble Directors
Flute • Tuba • Timpani • Cello

forget them. Every piece is unique, and you have to let it develop in its own way. I also spend a lot of time listening to the piece upon completion, and then I go back for edits, usually trying to cut out any extraneous material or unneeded ideas.

Who are your favorite composers?

My favorite band composers currently are Eric Whitacre and John Mackey, both for similar reasons. When I listen to their music, it doesn't sound like anything I have heard before, and that excites me. I love Whitacre's use of harmony, and I think Mackey is a master at orchestration. In addition to these gentlemen, I am a big fan of Elliot Goldenthal, Philip Glass, David Maslanka, Bruno Coulais, and Danny Elfman. I enjoy cinematic, romantic music that transports me to another place. I think that movie music is one of the most underappreciated art forms in the academic circles of music. There is a definitive language and expressive quality to this music that appeals to me. All of the composers mentioned above make me think of and consider new colors and textures every time I hear their work.

What is a work of someone else's that you think is underplayed?

I think *April* by Aaron Perrine is extremely underplayed. It is one of the finest works written for young bands in the last 20 years. It is an amazing example of up-tempo lyricism and does not follow the stereotypical ABA format of most music composed for young musicians. While providing real substance, it also can be played by younger and smaller ensembles. I program it at every opportunity.

What is your approach to writer's block?

I just keep writing. If that does not work, I study scores or listen to music to help ignite the creative spark. I don't get writer's block very often; I think it has to do with my approach to composition in general. I think that most writer's block comes from the fear of writing bad music. There is a certain level of expectation by most composers, I think, that everything they write needs to be a masterpiece. While that is a nice ambition, I readily accept the fact that not everything I write will be good. I have written some really bad music in my time. However, my goal is to not let you hear any of it. For every piece I have had published, I have at least two more that will never leave my computer. You just keep writing and develop a sense of aesthetic for what is good and what is not.

The worst case of writer's block I ever had occurred in 2012 when my grandmother passed away. I found myself unable to write at all. I avoided my work station for months afterwards. Slowly, I began working on a piece in honor of her and my

other grandparents, an arrangement of the hymn *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. It took me almost a whole year to write, and it slowly brought me back to the creative process.

What is the most embarrassing music that you love on your iPod?

That would be a difficult one to answer, as I don't find any music embarrassing. However, a few that some of my friends have told me I should be embarrassed about include Lady Gaga, Josh Grobin, polka music, They Might Be Giants, and several heavy metal bands. My tastes are very eclectic, and I find worth and value in anything I listen to.

If you have had compositions premiered at the Midwest before, what is your most memorable premiere?

It was not a premiere, but one of the most memorable performances of my work occurred at the 2013 Midwest Clinic. The VanderCook Symphonic Band performed my work *When the Spring Rain Begins to Fall*. Shortly before the performance, I had an opportunity to speak with Charles Menghini, conductor of the ensemble. He said, "I hope you won't be mad with what we have done to it." This, of course, aroused my curiosity. The work in question used the trumpet for the primary melodic instrument for much of the piece. They stationed their trumpets around the performance hall and created an immersive, 3D effect with the melodic line being passed all around the space. It was absolutely magical.

Vince Oliver

How did you get started composing?



liked, or that I found exciting to explore.

I fell in love with film scores when I was in middle school with music by John Williams, Michael Kamen, Jerry Goldsmith, and James Horner. I would sit at the piano and listen to their scores and try to pick out as many melodies and harmonies as I could. Eventually I began composing my own music, emulating styles that I

What is the best composing lesson you learned?

My sophomore year at the University of Southern California I studied composition with Erica Muhl; she was one of the last students of Nadia Boulanger's and was trained with the Paris Conservatory's notorious discipline when it comes to the craft of composition. In one of our composition classes, she handed out a piece of paper with four measures of an obscure impressionistic piano



Vince Oliver's workspace.

piece and told us to finish the piece. It needed to be thirty measures long and continue and develop material based off of the original four measures. My colleagues and I returned to the next class – each with a completely different version of the piece. Muhl then took our pieces and completely destroyed nearly all of them:

“You changed the motivic rhythm here – why? You have to develop a single idea for more than four or eight measures, especially if it’s rhythmic.”

“You used chromaticism here – there’s nothing harmonically in the four bars that would warrant this decision.”

“You used a tritone in the melody – there’s nothing with the pitch relationships given that would suggest this is okay.”

It was then that I realized that there were actually rules to composition. Some people consider composition an art, while others would consider it more of a craft, but either way there are definitely considerations to be respected, and to merely improvise your way through the writing process won’t always and consistently lead to the most sophisticated or coherent outcome.

What was the inspiration and development of the piece of yours being performed at Midwest?

I have recently had some amazing opportunities and commissions for pieces or projects that juxtapose electronics with acoustic instruments. Michael Boitz requested a closing piece for the Saratoga String Symphony, so I tried to write a piece, titled *Press*, that would conceptually turn the string orchestra into a rock band.

Do you have a set routine as you compose?

No, I usually have a sense of the feel or form of the piece before I start writing, but the actual writing process is different for different pieces. Sometimes I start at the piano, figuring out some harmonic and melodic cells that I would like to explore. Sometimes I hop on my computer and sequence

some ideas. For *Press* I stepped away from the studio altogether and started with manuscript paper and pencil for several hours figuring out my system. My fear in developing a routine is that my pieces may all start to sound similar. Additionally, I get bored pretty quickly, and a standard composition routine would either make me sleepy or frustrated – neither of which for me is conducive to creativity.

Who are your favorite composers?

Ravel was a master of orchestration, a revolutionary with his use of harmonies (which I still find interesting today), and he composed one of the most beautiful moments in the history of Western music. I’ve probably listened to the second movement of his Piano Concerto in G Major no fewer than 300 times, but it still elicits an emotional response from me every time I hear it. There have been many pieces throughout my life that I have felt emotional or intellectual connections with, but this particular piece, and this particular composer, have stuck with me throughout the years. Stravinsky is another favorite. There are few works by him that I do not love or find masterful in their construction and execution.

I am completely in awe and enamored by many contemporary composers, but I have to acknowledge John Adams for changing my life. I heard *The Chairman Dances* live as a freshman in college and was exposed to sounds I hadn’t heard before. Over the years I continue to study and listen to most of his works. I have immense appreciation for his creative honesty, complexity, and sophistication.

What is your approach to writer’s block?

I take a nap. Usually when I know things aren’t going well with a piece I will get really tired.

cont. on page 47

Vince Oliver is the percussion director and composer-in-residence at Saratoga High School in California and endorsed by Innovative Percussion. While in high school, Oliver was introduced to percussion and immediately fell in love. He participated in drum corps – Santa Clara Vanguard, and Concord Blue Devils – and went on to major in Percussion Performance and Music Composition at University of Southern California’s Thornton School of Music. Oliver toured with the show, *Blast!* for two years throughout the U.S., Canada, and Japan. As a composer/arranger, Oliver has written for various ensembles throughout the world. He arranges for several marching bands across the United States and is the music arranger for the Yokohama Inspires Drum and Bugle Corps the electronics designer for the Bluecoats Drum and Bugle Corps.

Thoughts from the Directors

We contacted a few of the directors taking a performing ensemble to the 2014 Midwest Clinic to ask them about their teaching experiences as well as what they had learned in their preparations for the trip to Chicago. Here are their responses.

David Wyss

**Lindbergh H.S. Jazz Ensemble
St. Louis, Missouri**

Life Lessons from a Baseball Coach

Baseball was a very important part of my life in high school, particularly pitching. During my freshman year try-outs, I blew out my arm and thought I would never be able to play again. My dad contacted a man by the name of Sterling Redfern, who was a businessman in his upper 60s, to help me recover and give me pitching lessons. I was hesitant, but I decided to give it a shot. He ended up being the greatest



teacher I have ever had. I showed up once a week for five years, taking Mr. Redfern's lessons home and doing every single thing he asked – religiously. He taught me the

importance of a strong work ethic, dedication to a craft, persistence, and, above all, humbleness. The only compensation he ever asked for was that I did the work each week. There is no way I could ever repay him for all that he taught me about life. He earned my ultimate respect.

Getting Ready for Midwest

My goal going into the preparation period was to try to keep the semester as normal as possible leading up to Midwest. My message to students has been to remind them of all the hard work it took to get here and to trust our process of preparation.

As we are preparing, I have found myself being much more efficient at time management. My teaching goals are now more focused and zeroed in than ever before, and the ensemble is

more focused on reaching a new and better level as well.

Two Cornerstones of a Good Program

I would definitely emphasize the importance of having some form of daily music experience during the student's initial year, and ideally this will continue each year after that. Daily learning is where habits are formed, good or bad.

The other thing that I recommend, which we have here at Lindbergh, is a strong vertical teaching approach. All of our band directors teach and get to know our students for the entire band experience – a total of seven years. This is invaluable at times of key student transition points, such as recruiting of beginners, as well as the transitions from beginning to second year and from eighth grade to high school. This structure is also important to our teaching curriculum. Our teachers know where the curriculum leaves off each year, and they can then pick it up from there. If I could set up an entire music program at a brand new school, these two items – daily music, vertical team teaching – would be my cornerstones.

Michael Link

**McKinney Boyd High School
Honors Chamber Orchestra
McKinney, Texas**

Wisdom from One Who Went Before

The person who is responsible for why I am an orchestra director is my life-long friend and colleague, Bart Ghent, who was the director of bands at VanderCook College. Later Mr. Ghent was the Director of Bands at Louisiana Tech University, where I was assistant band director and percussion instructor. Bart made the transition from band to orchestra about 15 years ago here in Texas, and soon after that he gave me the chance to be the assistant orchestra director at his feeder middle school. I then went on to teach high school myself. From that point on Bart has always been my mentor and go-to person. We both had experience as band directors, so the

challenge we faced was in learning how to transition those skills from band to orchestra.

Advice for Other Directors

Do not limit yourself. If you are a band person, do not think you cannot also be a good orchestra director. If you are a good orchestra director, do not think you could never do anything with a wind band.



On Competition

I would encourage directors to remember that music is not a competitive sport. Competition can be a motivator, but if it drives your entire program, then that isn't a good balance.

Alex Kaminsky

**Buchholz H.S. Wind Symphony
Gainesville, Florida**

Experience Teaches What Matters

Having done this twice before, I knew that efficient rehearsing was key. Because we also present an annual Veterans Day Concert that involves all of our bands, it is especially important for me to have specific rehearsal plans and not waste a second of valuable rehearsal time.

A Firm Foundation

Be sure the fundamentals are in place, both individually and as an ensemble, before attempting to rehearse the concert music. In the end, the music comes together much more quickly after fundamentals are solid.

A firm grounding in fundamentals enables students to achieve a level of excellence in ensemble playing that will truly affect them in a profound way.

