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Lauridsen's *O Magnum Mysterium* Transcribed for Band: A Conductor's Analysis

BY J. STEVEN MOORE

Chorale-style playing is vital to the development of every instrumental musician. As music educators, we are constantly looking for quality repertoire that will enhance our students' understanding of how to play in a "singing" style. H. Robert Reynolds' 2003 transcription of Morten Lauridsen's *O Magnum Mysterium* (1994) is a gorgeous lyrical composition that provides many opportunities for learning musical concepts. The six-minute transcription is written for standard band instrumentation in the woodwinds and brass; suspended cymbal and timpani are the only percussion requirements. There are no parts for double bass, piano, or harp. A moderately advanced high school band will enjoy this work; however, it is probably too harmonically advanced and transparently scored for a middle school band. During 2009, I had great success playing the piece with Kentucky high school students in the Western Kentucky University Honor Band and the Stephen Foster Camp Band at Eastern Kentucky University.

I recently attended a concert by our Colorado State University chamber choir, conducted by Dr. James Kim, in which both ensemble and conductor performed the entire ninety-minute program from memory. The absence of printed music allowed for a deep connection between conductor and choir, which resulted in tremendous music-making, particularly in regard to the degree of nuance achieved by the ensemble. Inspired by this experience, when our wind ensemble performed *O Magnum Mysterium*, we tried to create that same level of communication by playing the composition from memory. Of course, it is not imperative to memorize this or any piece to achieve a beautiful choral style, and this composition is perfect for teaching concepts in phrasing, nuance, harmony, blend, balance, tone, and cantabile style.

GENERAL CONCEPTS FOR CHORALE STYLE PLAYING

1. Chorale style (song style) requires a commitment to every note, with direction given to both melodies and accompaniments using principles of note grouping. An appropriate aphorism is to "play the accompaniment like it is a melody." Energize long

tones, weak beats, and upbeats.

2. Chorale style also requires the use of rubato (from the Italian rubare, "to rob"). The piece should not be performed in strict tempo, as would be appropriate in a march or dance style. Stretch the anacrusis (arsis) beats 2, 3, and 4 leading to each downbeat; beat 2 leading to beat 3; and beat 4 leading to beat 1. Speed up or energize some phrases. ("Rob Peter to pay Paul.")
3. Chorale style conducting is enriched by the following recommendations:
 - Shape the sound with your gestures. Sculpt the music; don't beat the pattern.
 - "Hold" the sound with your left palm facing up, keeping your hand at or below chest level.
 - Continue moving your hands while the air (or bow) continues moving. When your hands stop, the air tends to stop.
 - Conduct passive beats with a completely horizontal pattern. (Passive beats occur when a note is being sustained and is not articulated. Active beats occur when a note is articulated on the beat.) There should be no vertical impetus to the indication of the beat.
 - Utilize a "diffused" ictus instead of a "pointed" ictus.

CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORK

*O magnum mysterium,
et admirabile sacramentum
ut animalia viderent Dominum
natum, jacentum in praesepio!
Beata Virgo, cujus viscera
meruerunt portare
Dominum Christum. Alleluia!*

O great mystery
And wondrous sacrament
That animals should see the newborn Lord
Lying in their manger!
Blessed is the Virgin whose womb
Was worthy to bear the
Lord Jesus Christ. Alleluia!

- **Sacrament**—a visible sign of inward grace, one of the solemn Christian rites considered to have been instituted by Jesus Christ to symbolize or confer grace.
- Determine if composition employs the Golden Ratio, $(a + b)/a = a/b$ (1.60).
- Enter the Latin text and the English translation from the choral score into the band transcription.
- Sing the Latin text by using the following pronunciation guide:
 - ae = i as in aisle
 - a = ah as in father
 - e = a as in they
 - i = ee as in machine
 - o = o as in clover
 - u = oo as in rude
 - y = ee as in machine
 - r = flipped
 - c = hard

as you conduct. Choose a curvilinear pattern that allows your hands to float with smooth changes in direction. Use a flat, horizontal plane for the ictus. Avoid central ictus or focal point pattern in chorale style.

- Be sure the brass are blended into the woodwind sound.
- All entrances: Have the ensemble breathe and move together for a beautiful, precise beginning.
- Measure 1: In your left hand sustain the sound of the accompaniment by keeping the left palm up and use it to show the direction of the line. Show the active beats in the accompaniment parts.
- Measures 1, 5: Give direction to the melody line in the flutes and clarinet I singing “O.”
- Measure 2: In your right hand use small, primarily horizontal beats throughout the piece. Notice the passive beat that occurs on beat 2 in measure 2. Keep this gesture completely horizontal. Otherwise, conduct all the active beats with the right hand.
- Measure 4: Place a caesura (//) after the fermata to follow the vocal score approach. (This clearly delin-

SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS FOR THE OPENING SECTION

- Throughout: Allow your hands to “float” or “glide”

O Magnum Mysterium Lauridsen/Reynolds

Phrase Analysis J. Steven Moore

The score is divided into measures 1-73. Key annotations include:

- Measures 1-4: Adagio, molto legato (66-72), rit.
- Measures 5-8: A tempo
- Measures 9-10: 3/2 time signature
- Measures 11-18: 4/4 time signature, add trumpet, clarinet, horn
- Measures 19-22: poco piu mosso (76), poco rit.
- Measures 23-26: A tempo
- Measures 27-28: 3/2 time signature
- Measures 29-37: 4/4 time signature, add flute, clarinet I
- Measures 38-41: A tempo, poco rit.
- Measures 42-45: A tempo, rit.
- Measures 46-48: A tempo, *deliberamente*
- Measures 49-53: A tempo, *molto rit.*
- Measures 54-55: 3/2 time signature, minus tbn, tuba
- Measures 56-62: 4/4 time signature, horn and clarinet melody, rit., *molto rit.*
- Measures 63-73: 4/4 time signature, euph solo, horn solo, tpt solo, cl, hn, tbn, euph, *rit.*, *lunga*

KEY

Phrases

1 measure

2 measures

3 measures

4 measures

eates the repetition of the “O Magnum Mysterium” text.) Release the fermata with your left hand.

- Measure 8: Encourage a feeling of direction for the anacrusis quarter notes on beats 2, 3, and 4.
- Measures 9, 10, 13: Pause for the ensemble to breathe after beat 3, thus matching the text. (Less experienced bands may have more success if they don’t breathe in these measures.)

Measure 10: Cue trumpet entrance on beat 4, and show the crescendo.

Measures 11-12: Allow your pattern to increase in size to show *mf* dynamic.

Measure 13: Flute, oboe, bassoon, saxophone, and horn should play *through* beat 3 (i.e., full value on 3) before breathing.

Measures 17, 18: Allow the phrase to “settle” and relax from the earlier tension at measure 11.

Measure 18: Conduct a completely horizontal passive gesture on beat 2. Place a fermata on beat 3. (Keep hands moving slightly to keep the air flowing.) Ensure a clear articulation on the note that repeats on beat 3. Release with your left hand after beat 4.

Measure 18: Measure 18: Balance and tune the B flat chord first, then mix in the added 4 tone (concert Eb) in Clarinet II, Alto Saxophone II, and Horn II.

INSIGHTS FROM THE TRANSCRIBER, H. ROBERT REYNOLDS

One of the first decisions you will need to make is in regards to when your ensemble will breathe. To inform your decision, you may wish to hear contrasting examples that are available on iTunes. (Original with breath marks—Robert Shaw Chorale; wind band, using the choral score breath marks—Northwestern University, Mallory Thompson, conductor; wind band, not using the choral score breath marks—University of Michigan, Michael Haithcock, conductor.)

I asked the transcriber, H. Robert Reynolds, to comment on the breath marks:

There were actually two printings of this publication. In the first one, I put in the breath marks that were in the choral score. In performances which I heard, the breath marks were overemphasized so greatly that the overall flow of the composition was greatly interrupted. When the second printing was made, I decided, along with the composer, to eliminate all breath marks. Wind ensembles interpret breath marks quite differently from choral ensembles.

Regarding the omission of the poco piu mosso in measure 19:

Yes, that’s true. If you feel that it should be put in, by all means do it (but only slightly). I always feel that if a piece has been transcribed, the interpreter has every right to change what he/she feels would better represent the composer’s wishes.

Regarding the slight truncation of the euphonium solo “alleluia” in measures 63-68:

I actually used several versions of the composition when making the wind ensemble version. Morten (“Skip”) Lauridsen made versions for SATB choir, TTBB (men’s choir), medium solo voice with either piano or organ, and a version for brass ensemble made for the San Francisco Bay Brass. In the one with solo voice, the line does not extend past what I have written for euphonium. On the other hand, I inserted a fermata in measure 69 where none was indicated in any of the versions. I also doubled the note values in the horn solo in measures 69-70 and eliminated the *meno mosso*. You will also note that the words “like tolling bells” (at the suggestion of the composer) is inserted. All these details were approved by the composer, and he attended several rehearsals (as well as the concert) while this piece was in preparation.

General comments from Reynolds:

I should say that the one compromise I made was scoring the solo at letter C for trumpet. My preference was to have it an oboe solo, but I could hear in my head bands performing this with less than wonderful oboists. Perhaps I should have cued it in trumpet and given it to oboe.

CONCLUSION

The composition is simple and elegant, yet evokes an emotional response. The melodies and countermelodies remain faithful to the text of the choral composition and transcribe well for wind instruments. The standard harmonies sound fresh to the modern ear as a result of added tones and inversions, yet the piece retains a Renaissance character. I believe you will find the composition exceptional and that your students will be inspired by performing it. For all conductors in search of a beautiful, chorale style work, O Magnum Mysterium will certainly elicit an enthusiastic “Alleluia!”

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