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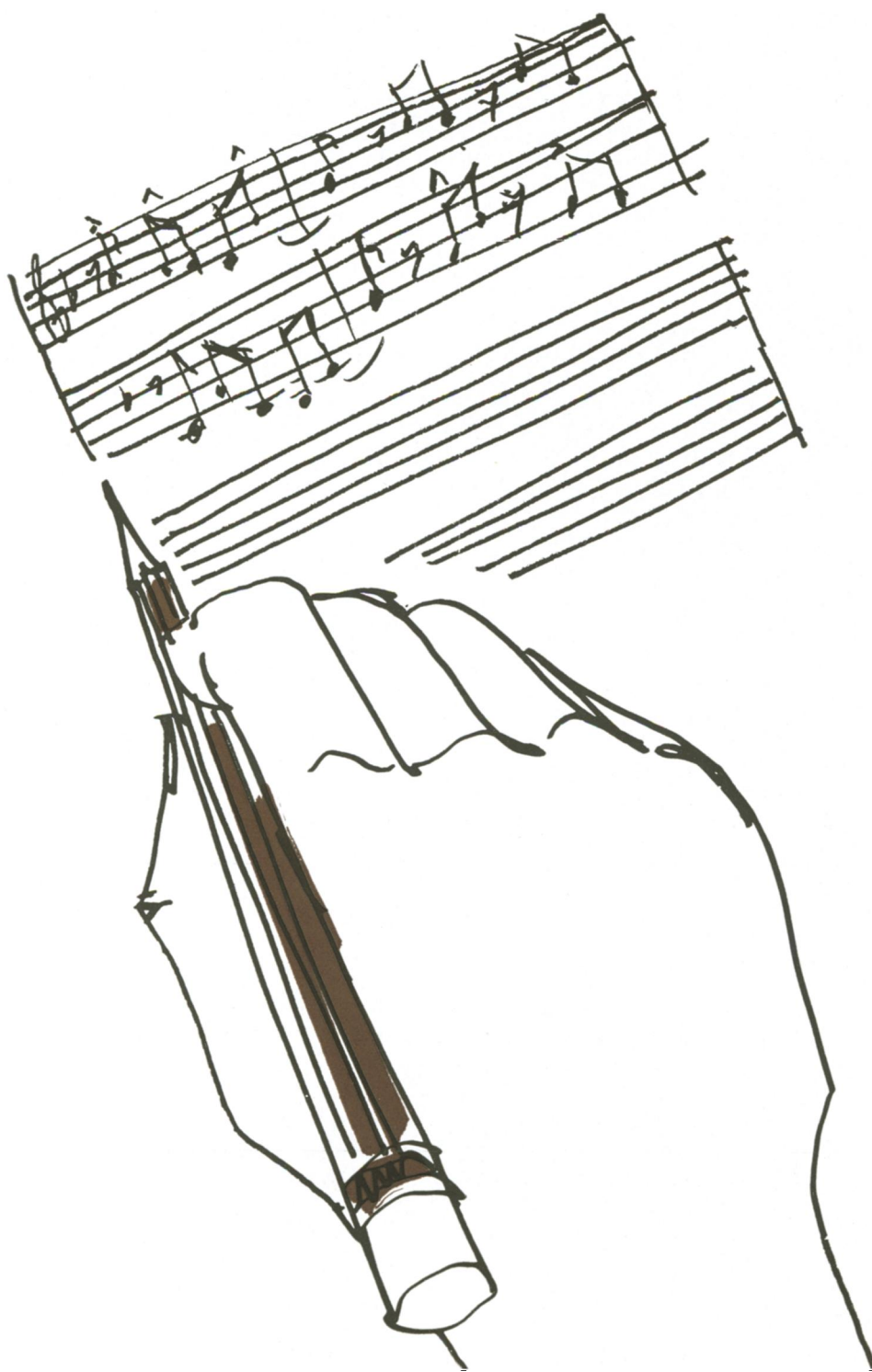
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vaclav nelhybel: composer for concert band

by peter michaelides



■ Thanks to the recent efforts of a good many well-known composers, the old standard wail of band directors bemoaning the lack of a decent repertory is beginning to sound a little hollow. The established diet of marches, pop-tune arrangements, and blasphemous resettings of orchestral classics is now giving way to original, well-constructed, and aesthetically satisfying works by such composers as Vincent Persichetti, Gunther Schuller, Aaron Copland, and Ian Hamilton. A recent addition to this list is the name of the forty-eight-year-old Czech-American, Vaclav Nelhybel.

His background is impressive: composition at the Prague Conservatory and musicology at both Prague and Fribourg Universities. In addition to being a prolific composer, he served as conductor of Radio Prague and the City Theatre in Prague from 1940 to 1946, and from 1945 to 1946 as assistant conductor of the Czech Philharmonic. He held posts as music director and conductor for both Radio Geneva-Lausanne and Radio Free Europe in Munich (1950-1957). As a guest conductor, he has appeared with many of the leading orchestras of Europe, including the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, the Mozarteum Orchestra, and the Vienna Symphony.

In 1957, Nelhybel immigrated to the United States, where he established residency in New York and subsequently acquired American citizenship. He does not seem to care a great deal about money, although his father was a wealthy landowner and Vaclav himself, as a young man, partook freely of the fruits of a privileged society (sports cars held a particular fascination for him). He and his wife now live comfortably in a small New York apartment, and he is content to let the income from publication royalties, performance fees, and guest appearances of various sorts supplement his income as the church

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organist in a nearby parish.

There is a definite element of mysticism in his approach to the creative process. He says, "Creation is like a split-second thought—a compulsion to fill a space of time." And from this admittedly emotional, catalytic experience "an organic growth and ultimate materialization of a basic thematic shape (energy) occurs." The finished work often consists entirely of a carefully structured presentation of this motivic evolution and transformation: "Notes are brought into conflict, out of which the next note (of the motive) emerges." In this way, even in his longer works, he avoids the conventional structural demands of ordered (classical) exposition, development, and close; putting it another way, there is an absence of a formal development per se. This concept of form is but one of several style/structure characteristics that reveal a medieval-Renaissance eclecticism.

Although he has composed works in many idioms—an opera, two ballets, a symphony and an assortment of shorter symphonic works, a concerto for viola and orchestra, chamber and choral music—it was not until 1963 that he composed his first works for concert band. During that year he produced five band compositions, and in the years since, a dozen more. Performances of his works have been given at such institutions as the universities of Michigan, Iowa, New Mexico, and at Northwestern University, Interlochen National Music Camp, and the West Point Military Academy.

The *Cantata Pacis* is one of his recent major works (1964-1965). Scored for six soloists, chorus, solo organ, and symphonic band, it was premiered in the spring of 1966 at the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, the composer conducting. Although the main body of rehearsal time had been under the several ensemble directors, the last three days of rehearsal were turned over to Nelhybel. His conducting ability fully realized the interpretational demands of the score; there was never a release, until the finish, from the high level of tension set at the beginning. For example, dynamics fluctuate from one extreme to another, but these are not complementary in an antecedent-conse-

quent relationship. Similarly, the tension factor is lowered but slightly by the breaks between the many (thirteen) sections: the final cadence of each section fulfills the dual role of local termination and anticipatory, cohesive, bridge. (Similarly, the G Major chord terminating the short first movement of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* comes to mind.)

Both stylistically and structurally, the *Cantata Pacis* offers a curious and fascinating paradox; although its very substance is derived directly from the austere Gregorian chant repertory, the setting and interpretation of these melodies reveals the composer's unusual ability to combine the complex, polyphonic, structural techniques of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance with neo-Romantic color and emotion. Nelhybel is fond of the works of Machaut and Josquin and their contemporaries, and the *Cantata* abounds with paraphrases of their styles. It is with pride that the composer points to the severe discipline he imposed on himself from his earliest years of composition study to learn the style and techniques of these masters.

The thirteen sections of the *Cantata* can be described thus (a) Section One, Gregorian chant "Da pacem Domine," sung by male chorus *a cappella*. Modal scale fragments derived from this chant serve as structural components for Sections Five, Seven, Nine, and Eleven; (b) All even-numbered sections serve as interludes and are scored for solo organ. All are in three voices and consist of free treatment (mostly rhythmic variants) of the "Da pacem Domine" chant. In this excerpt (see Figure 1) from Section Six, the chant line appears in the lower voice, clothed in a fixed rhythmic scheme reminiscent of the medieval rhythmic modes.

Another excerpt (see Figure 2) from Section Ten, proceeds in a Dufay-like *fauxbourdon* style.

(c) The principal (odd-numbered) sections:

Three—Chorus and soloists: based on Gregorian chant (hereafter GC) "Dicimus omnes."

Five—Instrumental introduction: solo based on GC "Extoto

corde"; declamatory section for chorus.

Seven—Soli based on GC "Pro altissima pace"; chorus on pedal point F.

Nine—Three soloists: based on GC "Pro pace regnum—Domine miserere" (brass and drum).

Eleven—Soprano solo, chorus: based on GC "Pro remissione"; five soloists, chorus: based on GC "Domine, miserere."

Thirteen—Soli and chorus: based on GC "Domine, miserere," and "Exaudi nos Deus."

The first notes in Section Three introduce the listener to the kinds of heady sonorities that permeate much of the *Cantata*: a massive attack by the percussion section, which includes xylophone, glockenspiel, chimes, piano, celesta, and finger cymbals. In addition, about twenty-five members of the chorus are provided with metal pipes of varying lengths, which they strike with nails to create a bell sound. The chorus itself enters on the second beat, and in the next few measures, proceeds to build in massive tonal layers, based on the interval of a fifth, the incipit to the chant. The structural procedure employed in this movement represents the key to the structure of the whole; a fluid, rhythmically pliant, linear motion (chant or chant-like) is combined with bold rhythmic and vertical incursions. In this, as in the other principal sections, we see also the technique of motivic domination described earlier. A single, short motive (figure)—usually three or four notes—is established as the dominant force in either an accompanimental or thematic role. Ostinato-like patterns are common, but are subtly varied so that the repetitions create a kaleidoscopic effect; that is, the pattern changes within a fixed area. For example, (see Figure 3) in Section Seven, the celesta and piano play games with the basic rhythmic motive ♩. ♪ ♪ beginning with a short stretch of canonic inversion.

A variant of this technique, also often used, is that of constant manipulation of a basic note series. The example in Figure 4 shows an accompanying line played by all the B \flat clarinets. The variegation of the series creates an ostinato-like

motion sandwiched between two tonic pedals.



FIGURE 5

Note the interesting rhythmic subtleties; these plus the continuous re-shuffling of the note series result in an effective yet disarmingly simple passage. The restatement of the pedal F on each dotted half-note (dotted whole-note for the chorus) adds an additional thrust to the varied rhythmic motion to the principal line.

Related to the above, and of key structural significance, is the technique of motive transformation. The examples in Figures 6, 7, and 8 represent a sampling of the constant reshaping and extension of a basic motive introduced in Section Three.

(a) basic motive (rhythmic):

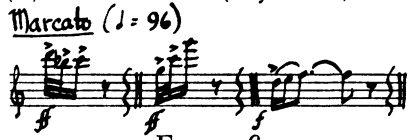


FIGURE 6

(b) motive variants:

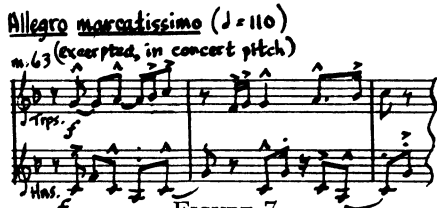


FIGURE 7

SEE ALSO FIGURE 8 AT RIGHT

Perhaps the most fascinating feature of the *Cantata* is Nelhybel's use of rhythm. The two examples in Figures 9 and 10 illustrate rhythmic extremes. The first excerpt (in Figure 9) shows a relatively free rhythmic treatment as three voices engage in a flexible, imitative (motet-like) activity.

In the second excerpt, (Figure 10) the propellant consists of a number of rhythmically distinctive fragments, each of which, by and large, follows its own path.

The past two years have seen a good number of Nelhybel's works for band published as the demand for them increases. It seems that there are band directors who are willing to accept the technical and interpretational challenges of these scores both for the aesthetic reward of the performances themselves and for the high level of audience communication achieved.

FIGURE 1:



FIGURE 2:



FIGURE 3:



FIGURE 4:



FIGURE 8:



FIGURE 9:



FIGURE 10:

