

## MUSICAL ADVENTURES WITH MICHAEL COLGRASS

BY DANIEL ALBERT



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My journey into the world of creativity for children started in July 2002 at the Art of Wind Band Teaching Symposium, sponsored by Craig Kirchhoff and the University of Minnesota School of Music. The opening presentation featured wind band composer Michael Col grass, a Pulitzer Prize winner who told us about his Winona Drive School project. He explained how he helped groups of Toronto middle school students create soundscapes, music notated with graphic symbols that approximated sounds. In addition, the

Winona Drive School Band tested his now famous composition, Old Churches (BandQuest).

### Creating a Soundscape

During the Minnesota workshop, Michael asked the band directors to create a soundscape composition just as the Winona students had. First, everyone had to think of an abstract sound, and then a volunteer went to a large whiteboard to draw an abstract image of that sound.

The parameters for the piece were simple: the soundscape would start at the left of the whiteboard and end at the right. Symbols for high sounds would be placed towards the top of the whiteboard and low sounds towards the bottom.

For example, if a person thought of a long whoo sound (going from a high head voice to low and back up), he might draw a snaking line with an arrow starting from the top left of the whiteboard, continuing down to the middle of it, then creeping back up towards the top right end of the whiteboard. If he used dots to represent short sounds, the volume and pitch of each sound would depend on the size of the dot and its position on the soundscape.

With only a few parameters to creating the soundscape, everyone could be creative. One person volunteered and drew an abstract symbol on the whiteboard representing the music, which the audience sang. After some laughter that broke the ice, other participants went to the whiteboard, filling the growing composition with a dizzying variety of symbols that became a beautiful piece of art.

The matter of how to perform this untraditional composition was next. Michael asked for a volunteer to direct the group, reminding us that there would be no one correct interpretation of the work. The band director who stepped up to the whiteboard divided the soundscape into four sections and then the group into four sections; he assigned each group an equal portion of the soundscape, and each person selected the symbol he would sing.

The conductor moved his hand slowly from left to right across the board indicating the beginning of each sound. As his hand approached each symbol, the person assigned to it would start to perform it, and as his hand moved past it, the person stopped.



After some brief instructions and clarifications, the conductor began his hand motion, with the participants producing an incredible mix of thick and thin timbres. They ranged from high whistles to low pedal tones. It was a marvel to witness and musical in its own right.

After hearty congratulations from Michael, another leader directed the group but with an entirely different interpretation. This time the conductor divided the soundscape in half horizontally, with the women singing the symbols in the top half of the whiteboard while the men sang the symbols in the bottom half. The soundscape took on a different character and changed dramatically.

### **Composing with Imagined Sounds**

After several interpretations, Michael told us that this was basically what he did for a living.

He explained that he imagines sounds in a similar way to what the group did, then uses traditional music notation on a staff to assign pitches and rhythms to instruments based on the timbres, textures, and other details he wants to hear.

He went to the whiteboard and drew in clefs and music staves, and then added rhythms and pitches over the shapes we had created. At that point we could see that our drawings and shapes could be carried on to a higher musical level; our scribbles were actually the sum and substance of the form and content of a composition, albeit with less specific notation.

Michael went on to say that composing begins by imagining a sound, then creating another sound, and another, organizing and refining them until he has a satisfying structure. The same idea applies to soundscapes. Michael pointed out that by using this type of abbreviated form of notation, children could create music quickly, often being as creative as adults. Whether using conventional or graphic notation, the process is the same.

### **New Music in Longmeadow**

I found myself hooked on Michael's ideas and thought his method could be used by students of all ages. It easily engages them in being creative and in the compositional process, at first bypassing the need to learn traditional musical notation, which can be time consuming to teach and overwhelming for beginners. With this approach, students create their own musical shorthand, which is a creativity exercise on its own. From there, teachers can demonstrate that traditional notation is a more detailed and exact method of communicating the sounds of a graphic notation soundscape.

I was also intrigued with the different tasks students had to undertake during this process. In addition to creating new sounds and a new method of notating them, they used both logic and intuition to create a satisfying balance of sounds as a composition took shape. The conducting aspect of this process encouraged communication, leadership skills, decision making by the group, and a feeling of ownership of the music. In other words, students have to do the very same things a conductor does.

Before the opening of school that year, I heard about a new local grant organization, the Longmeadow Educational Excellence Foundation that was starting its first round of grant applications. My thoughts immediately went to the Colgrass presentation and the idea that through Michael's method, I could involve as many Longmeadow students as possible in a new kind of musical experience.

I met with the other middle and high school instrumental music directors in my district, Christopher Unczur and Michael Mucci. Both were enthusiastic about the possibility of involving their students in a composition project similar to that of the Winona Drive project in addition to having their ensembles perform a commissioned work by Colgrass.

I immediately contacted Michael Colgrass, and we agreed on a price for one composition plus two residencies. The first residency, The Creativity Project, would introduce the composition project to the other music teachers and the students; it would also give the band members a chance to try out the parts of the newly commissioned work. During a second residency, Michael would work individually with student composers as well as help them with the final touches of the commissioned work. A Commissioned Work Concert at the end of the project would include his piece and the premieres of pieces by student composers.

### **Grant Application**

The Longmeadow Educational Excellence Foundation, the grant organization, was looking for unusual ideas to fund, and this one was quite unusual. The foundation's executive board was a group of parents whose occupations were in the areas of law, business, and medicine. While intrigued with the proposal, the board requested clarification about the commission process and requested a legal document clearly detailing the responsibilities of each of the parties.

After meeting several times to discuss how the commissioning project would work, as well as promising a specific and signed contract, the foundation approved the project with its full support. The project would start in September 2003 with the Commissioned Work Concert held in December.



Michael requested information that would help middle-school instrumentalists perform his composition, such as the ideal range for each instrument played by middle-school students, the exact instrumentation of an ideal ensemble as well as my own ensemble, and common difficulties students typically have with certain rhythms, melodies, and harmonies. He wanted to be sure this composition would be performed correctly the first time.

He kept me abreast of the progress of the commissioned work, asking what was possible to write for middle school instrumentalists, what was questionable, and what was out of the question. We also exchanged ideas regarding the Creativity Project on nearly a daily basis.

The Longmeadow Educational Excellence Foundation contacted the media so they could write articles and devote air time to describe Michael's upcoming residencies and the project's goals to the community. The public relations staff of the foundation was outstanding with its help to

publicize all of the events. Students grew interested and intrigued when we announced the residencies for the projects, and Chris Unczur and Michael Mucci gave their thoughts on the overall vision and scope of the event.

### **A Second Commissioned Piece**

In the late spring of 2003, Michael wrote to say that in addition to the commissioned work, he was also composing a piece for beginning band titled Apache Lullaby, based on the melodies of Native American songs, to perform at the Commissioned Work Concert. After thanking him for his generosity, I discussed the idea of a new work with Chris, who enthusiastically agreed to have his ensemble perform it.

Throughout the summer of 2003 Michael and I continued to exchange ideas and information. When he completed the commissioned work, The Beethoven Machine, I drove to his residence in Toronto to meet him, review the score, and suggest possible changes as well as form a tentative plan for the Creativity Project.

Looking at the music, I thought The Beethoven Machine would be a good challenge for my group. Based on a *sonatina* that Beethoven wrote as a child, it had independent lines and just enough duplication in the parts to foster the idea of interdependence and teamwork. There were also interesting harmonic, textural, and timbral changes. After Michael and I corrected possible pitfalls and approved the final draft, I drove back to Long meadow excited about the upcoming opening of school and starting work on The Beethoven Machine and the Creativity Project.

### **The Creativity Project Begins**

Chris, Michael Mucci, and I met to review the rehearsal and performance plans that Colgrass and I had developed. Next we agreed on how to approach and advance the Creativity Project during rehearsals and in between the residencies. Chris received the score to Apache Lullaby and immediately started to analyze it.



Once school started I dove into The Beethoven Machine with my group. The rehearsals, however, did not go according to plan. There were just too many independent lines and unorthodox harmonies for middle school students to understand and listen for. I talked with Michael on the telephone almost daily, brainstorming strategies to improve the band's performance and understanding of the work. With the first residency coming up, he wanted to listen to a rehearsal of the work and then judge

whether the piece was too difficult to spend time on.

Michael's first residency in late September 2003 began with a Sunday workshop for all of the Long meadow music educators, K-12, to explain the Creativity Project, discuss the theories behind it, and describe the process he planned for the students. Teachers had the fun of creating their own soundscape and asking questions about how to include composition in their

classes and ensembles. A further discussion ensued comparing this technique to the work of Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, who was well known in the last half of the 20th century.

The following day Michael met the 115 members of the Longmeadow High School Concert Band. It would be a test of his theories to engage the thoughts of sleepy students at 7:45 in the morning. All were quiet and attentive as Michael spoke, briefly explaining that they would create a piece of music right there on the spot using graphics, but without detailing how. It piqued everyone's curiosity and left their minds open for myriad possibilities. Almost anything could happen.

When Michael asked for a leader to start the process, one brave student stood up, took the chalk from Michael's hand, and made a mark on the chalkboard. There were giggles when he sang it, but then another student followed, and eventually the chalkboard was filled with graphics. The result was as much a work of visual art as it was a musical composition.

Next a student conducted the class through his interpretation of the graphics, with all manner of sounds emanating from the musicians for 30 seconds, followed by silence. Cheers erupted all around from the smiling students. Others took turns at the podium as the class realized that the piece could be performed in many ways.

Michael linked this process to what he experiences on a regular basis. He challenged the students to study composition through the graphic notation process and to begin writing graphic notation pieces for ensemble performance. The room was filled with thoughts of possibility and optimism. He repeated this entire process with many of the high school ensembles and most of the middle school ensembles in my district. The creativity and imaginations of the students was fascinating to watch.

### **Apache Lullaby**

In addition to the Creativity Project, the concert bands at the Williams and Glenbrook middle schools had to play their commissioned works for Michael. Apache Lullaby for beginning band was off to a great start, although it had a level of independence that was difficult for the students. After a brief introduction about the music, Michael listened to each section and helped with suggestions about what to listen for and which sections should dominate at certain times. Students, he said, would have to open their ears and listen, as well as think at all times.

My middle school band at Williams played The Beethoven Ma chine for Michael with some success, but not at the level we should have after three weeks of rehearsals. Michael gave as much coaching, prodding, and encouragement as possible; but it was apparent that the group would not be able to polish the piece in just three months.

Later Michael showed me sketches of a work he was drafting in case The Beethoven Ma chine fell through. The new piece, *Gotta Make Noise*, drew on his jazz roots, and because I had 12 percussionists in concert band, he wrote what was basically a percussion concerto with parts for up to 12 percussionists. Each player, especially the snare, conga, and tom players, had solos.

Right from the start I thought the piece had great potential because the rhythms were simple with an abundance of *tutti* playing from the ensemble, similar to shout choruses of big band charts. The percussionists were active throughout the work playing syncopated rhythms with hip harmonies and contrasting sections. I thought it was a highly educational work for the jazz idiom that also sounded great. "Let's do it!" I said.



## Rehearsals Continue

As Michael flew back to Toronto, the directors in all three schools continued working with the Creativity Project and rehearsing the commissioned pieces, keeping Michael's comments in mind. *The Beethoven Machine* would now be performed by the Longmeadow High School Wind Ensemble under the direction of Michael Mucci, meaning the wind ensembles from three schools had a work to perform. Now, even more students would be involved in the project. The instrumental students in the high school and both middle schools created a variety of graphic notation pieces, which the bands performed during rehearsals. This was an ongoing process and many students continued writing, further pursuing their interests in composition. The months of October and November were full of hard work. Students at Williams had weekly sectionals to catch up after missing a month of rehearsal time because of work on *The Beethoven Machine*. The public relations staff of the Long meadow Educational Excellence Foundation put together press kits for the second Colgrass residency and the upcoming Colgrass Commissioned Works Concert on December 11. We wanted everyone in the area to know that something special was going to happen.

## The Second Residency

Michael arrived for his second residency, December 8-12, ready to work individually with student composers and assist with the development of their compositions in addition to rehearsing the ensembles and being present for the Commissioned Works Concert. Michael was to help each ensemble put the final touches on the commissioned works, so it was to be a busy week.

At Glenbrook Middle School, Chris Unczur had worked out the technical details of impressing Michael with how well the children played. Now the composer could coach them in stylistic aspects of the work. The rehearsal was an absolute success. For the visit to the Williams school, students played *Gotta Make Noise* very well. There were more rhythmic issues with this piece, especially coordinating 12 percussionists playing jazz rhythms. They also needed to work on keeping up the intensity throughout the piece. To encourage the students to use their voices as strongly as possible, Michael demonstrated by yelling out their parts like a cheerleader at a basketball game; then he whispered loudly to show the players how much air was necessary to project the contrasting shhhh sounds.

The high school wind ensemble did a great job at capturing the contrasting ideas in *The Beethoven Machine*. In addition to coaching these rehearsals, Michael met one-on-one with the middle school students who had composed graphic notation pieces. Imagine the experience for these children of having a private lesson with a Pulitzer Prize winning composer! He took each piece to the next level by making suggestions so the students had choices, instead of forcing them into a particular route.

## The Concert

The media were in the schools throughout the week of the final residency with reporters writing articles giving a preview of the concert. After reviewing the final details with students and having a dress rehearsal, the day of the Commissioned Works Concert arrived. On the night of December 11, the auditorium of Long Meadow High School was abuzz with excitement. Students were ready, directors were excited, and audience members were looking forward to listening to Michael Colgrass' three world premiere performances. Little did they know they would have seven premieres, including the four graphic pieces by students. They were in for a great show.

After introductions from a Longmeadow Educational Excellence Foundation representative and the Longmeadow band directors, Michael took over as emcee of the event explaining briefly the Creativity Project and its process. Four student composers demonstrated their pieces, with the first student using an overhead projection screen to show the graphic score so the audience could follow as it was performed. Three others stepped to the podium to conduct their compositions with the high school wind ensemble and the high school string orchestra. The audience was extremely receptive and gave generous applause to all of the young composers. The ensembles fabulously performed Michael's compositions, for which the audience gave an incredible ovation.

A post-concert reception followed, with many parents thanking Michael and the directors for their work in making this event possible. Many commented on the great music and on what they learned about the art and craft of composition. Michael and all the directors were thrilled by the praise-worthy comments.

Friday was a debriefing day. We asked students their opinions as to how the concert went, what went well, and what could be improved with the concert and with the composition projects. The students gave overwhelmingly positive feedback for the entire process, and parents wrote thank-you notes for days afterwards. Articles in the local and regional media covering the concert showed that the entire process was extremely powerful for all of us in music education.

After a farewell dinner, we said goodbye to Michael. The spirit of his visit, however, remains as students continue to compose and refine their compositions. We perform them in rehearsals to help each young composer in his creative quest, maintaining Michael's intent to keep the project going. It was such a fine experience working with a talented professional like Michael, who has great concern that all children have a solid music education.

If you have the opportunity, consider having a commissioning project or a similar venture in your school. It begins simply by contacting a composer. For those of you who live close to a collegiate music department, invite a member of the composition department to rehearsals or concerts and let them know you are serious about creating more serious works for young band.

There are also a number of up-and-coming composers who would be eager to write for children and are looking for stimulating projects. Experienced directors at the middle, high school, or collegiate level will be able to offer you guidance in the commissioning process. Raising money or securing a grant takes time and effort, but the overall musical experience pays dividends that are worth it.

You and your students will be forever changed by the experience of collaborating with a composer to bring a new work of art to life. As one teacher who heard our Commissioned Works Concert said, "If the children could learn to do this much in a few months, imagine how much more they can learn."

## An Analysis of *Gotta Make Noise*

By Daniel Albert

Michael Colgrass says, “In eighth grade I was full of energy and itching to escape the confines of the conservative pieces we usually played in band. As a percussionist, I would have preferred a piece featuring the percussion of course, one that pulled out all the stops and went for broke.”

“In eighth grade I was full of energy and itching to escape from the conservative pieces we usually played in band,” says composer Michael Colgrass. “As a percussionist I would have preferred a piece featuring the percussion – one that pulled out all the stops and went for broke. With this in mind, I wrote *Gotta Make Noise*, a concerto for middle-school band and percussion ensemble.” The Longmeadow Educational Excellence Foundation commissioned the work for the Longmeadow (Massachusetts) Public Schools; the music is now published by Carl Fischer.

*Gotta Make Noise* is scored for seven percussionists, who should be in front of the band for each performance with soloists in the middle of the percussion line. Although the piece was written for middle school band, it could be a showcase for high school or college percussionists by increasing the tempo from quarter note = 156 to 168 or higher.

Colgrass suggests assigning experienced players to the snare drum, tom-toms, conga drum, and timpani parts. Non-percussionists may be used for suspended cymbal, bass drum and cymbals, and cowbell and bells (in that order), if necessary. The work is based on the 12-bar blues form, influenced by Colgrass’s experiences as a jazz drummer, so the eighth-note rhythms should be played with a swing feel.

### Unison Drums and Cymbal Crashes

The music gets off to a rousing start with the drums playing unison rhythms complemented by cymbal crashes, which is instrumentation that reoccurs multiple times throughout the work. Percussionists need to listen to the entire section, the ensemble, and themselves at all times. They have to be aware of which instrument is driving the tempo by keeping the quarter-note or eighth-note pulse. It is absolutely crucial that the drums play together or the sound will be a big wash.

*Tutti* passages should be practiced repeatedly with a metronome to be certain everyone is playing together and in time, but I never rely on the metronome as a crutch. It should be used only as a tool to help students understand tendencies with tempo; it is better to have the percussion section members learn to rely on their inner pulse and listening skills.

The woodwind and brass players yell in the beginning, which is Colgrass’s idea to cheer on the percussion. For the effect to work, you may need to encourage students to yell to the maximum as they would at sporting events. Because Longmeadow is close to Boston and a number of Red Sox fans are in band, I told them to close their eyes and imagine that they were at Fenway Park cheering on their team. To promote some solid yelling I asked a student leader known for her energy and leadership talent to direct the group in the opening shouting measures. The effect was incredible.

Any non-musical sounds, like the shouting and the rhythmic whispering later in the piece, are just as important as instrumental sounds and have to be taken just as seriously. The shouts and whispering have to be in time and produced with clarity so that audiences understand what is



said. Colgrass wants these sounds to recreate the exuberant and playful atmosphere of youth, which makes it important to carefully perform them with energy and conviction.

The woodwinds and brass play their instruments for the first time in measure 9, sounding a G minor tonality at a *ff* dynamic. As with any other musical work, such concepts as correct tone production, intonation, tempo, and blend have to be addressed and reviewed. Given the nature of the piece, students may think they can be haphazard with tone production or pay less attention to important musical details, but this is not the case.

### **A Critical Transition**

After a short percussion break in measures 13-14, a potential troublesome spot arrives in measure 15. This is a critical transition point that leads to the first major phrase in the work. Each instrumental group enters on successive beats moving from low to high registers. I have found it helpful to have students write in which beat they enter on – one, two, three, or four – and then count quietly to themselves during the two measures of rest before measure 15 to be certain of the beat. They also need to highlight the contrast between the *p* and *ff* change in that measure. Clarinets and alto and tenor saxophones have to carefully anticipate measure 16 because they enter stating the theme at a *p* dynamic.

The main theme begins at measure 16 with the rhythm played exactly as if saying, “Ya Gotta Make Noise.” Clarinets will have to work at comfortably going over the break from A4 to C5, and saxophones need to work at playing E4 at a *p* dynamic.

At the same time, players on cowbell and suspended cymbal have an *ostinato* over solo fills by the conga and tom-tom players. The snare drummer needs to push the time with the notated quarter notes, playing in the traditional jazz wire-brush style with the left hand moving back and forth in a half circular motion on the drumhead.

Snare drum, conga, and tom-tom have a quick change from playing with sticks in measure 16 to brushes in measure 17. To exchange sticks quickly, quietly, and in time, each of these players should have a music stand nearby draped in a towel to muffle extraneous sound. It is imperative that everyone come in together on the downbeat of measure 17.

### **Variations of the Theme**

The next two sections, measures 28-35 and 36-46, present the theme and variations of the theme played in unison first by saxophones and brass followed by all the woodwinds. The percussion play fills throughout these two sections, led by the snare drum, conga, and tom-tom. Be careful here because it is crucial to perform with a consistent tempo; woodwind and brass players tend to delay entrances after the multiple rests that are during the percussion fills. Ask the percussion section to push the tempo throughout these two sections.

A contrasting section, measures 46-52, takes place in between two *ff* sections that give listeners and the ensemble a respite. Here the bell player has the melody. Colgrass suggests using plastic mallets for a fuller sound while the woodwinds play at a delicate *p* dynamic to contrast with the surrounding sections. Brass mallets are too crass for this delicate section.

A build up to the shout chorus begins in measure 53 where all instruments have a *p* dynamic. This may be difficult for the trumpets because they start this phrase in the middle register and gradually get louder as the melodic line climbs toward the high register. The climax of the shout chorus, measures 61-63, has full, accented unison figures immediately followed by big loud shouts to cheer on the busy percussion section. Here, each percussion instrument should sound through, clearly and distinctly, so audiences hear the multiple entries and exits scored in

the music. There is a tendency to drag the tempo in this portion of the composition, so players and conductor alike should be ready to push the tempo.

### **An Improvised Section**

Measure 74 contributes to making this composition special because it is improvisational in nature. Colgrass divides the measure into different sections giving each wind section instructions to “blast on different notes,” “squawk on any notes,” and “moan and groan like a wounded animal,” letting students know that distorted sounds are welcome and are not wrong.

Students *ad lib* simultaneously for 10-12 seconds in the first part of the measure. If you decide not to include the improvisation, the music should continue with little space between measures 74 and 75. At the cut off in measure 74, all sounds cease to make an effective and smooth transition to measure 75.

If you would like to feature some percussionists, measure 74a has an open bar for up to 30 seconds of improvisation. Players may trade twos or fours, going back and forth and building in intensity while the other auxiliary players inject sounds as well. With planning and good execution, this is the place where your percussion section can perform a mini-composition for percussion ensemble.

An optional roll-off cue is included to let the wind players know when to start. Measure 75 returns to regular time. Wind players will have to work on consistent intonation here, while playing a diminuendo from *f* to *p* through four beats.

### **Rhythmic Whispering**

Another interesting part of the piece is the rhythmic whispering section at measure 79. Here, the snare drum, timpani, and tom-tom trade twos with the woodwinds as percussionists play on their drum rims for a timbral change.

Next, the winds tongue chick ti-ka syllables in unison and in a whisper. Colgrass says you may change the actual syllables to something easier for your students to articulate as long as they achieve the desired effect. The sounds should be as loud as possible as well as clear and distinct so audiences can discern the syllables.

Few middle school students will have had experience performing this type of articulation with their mouths, so many will need practice. Work should begin with the first four notes in measure 81. The idea is to use a great deal of breath without exerting a huge amount of effort with the tongue. It should be light. This is probably one of the most fun sections of the piece.

Players will have to be alert as measure 93 approaches because the *ff* downbeat requires the entire band and there is no break between rhythmic whispering and playing. In measures 97-98 have students listen to the balance of the notes in the Eb major-seventh chord with the third in the bass. Next, percussionists play a section similar to measures 17-20 with some slight rhythmic differences. The winds have eighth notes and quarter notes at a *p* dynamic. The percussionists should strive for rhythmic clarity as well as steady time.

In measures 103-111, the coda of the piece, winds make the *shh* sound for four beats that gradually become quiet. The sound should be forceful at the onset but diminuendo dramatically. A percussionist interjects a small rhythmic figure after each *shh* answered by the flutes and clarinets playing the “Ya Gotta Make Noise” motif. After one last *shh* there is a grand pause and complete silence. An explosive “Ya Gotta Make Noise” brings the wild ride to an end.

Middle school percussionists who are used to playing traditional parts will enjoy the contemporary techniques and challenging rhythms of Gotta Make Noise. It also highlights the percussion section, front and center. The work will give your band a chance to learn about the jazz idiom as student soloists have their first experiences with improvisation. Most of all, everyone will enjoy making music created by a talented composer.

—Daniel Albert

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## **An Analysis of The Beethoven Machine**

*By Michael Mucci*

*The Beethoven Machine* divides the band into three sections and pits them against each other, with a wonderful result.

*The Beethoven Machine* by Michael Colgrass is a work for concert band based on a *sonatina* Beethoven wrote as a child. Six minutes in length, the music has the easy ranges and rhythms of grade-two music, but some parts have a certain amount of musical independence that is often seen in grade-three pieces. It was commissioned by The Long meadow (Massachusetts) Public Schools through a grant from the Longmeadow Educational Excellence Foundation; the music is published by Carl Fischer.

Colgrass divides the concert band into a Children's Orchestra made up of woodwinds, an Adult Orchestra of primarily brass instruments, and a third group of musicians who make up a funny-sounding little machine that cranks out music in the style of Beethoven. The personalities of the three ensembles are inherent in the writing so that there is never a question as to how mechanical and funny the machine should sound or whether the Children's Orchestra needs to be different from the Adult Orchestra.

These three groups play different versions of Beethoven's melody with the Children's Orchestra and the Adult Orchestra "talking" back and forth throughout the piece. The Children's Orchestra has light, playful scoring while the Adult Orchestra depicts authority. "As the music develops," writes Colgrass, "the two orchestras gradually find a common ground and finally play together in one style and finish in harmony – although astute listeners will notice that the Adult Orchestra somehow got manoeuvred into playing in the children's key."

Rehearsals should include work on the independent entrances scattered throughout the piece, particularly in the Children's Orchestra. Young students will have to count carefully as well as understand how each part fits into the whole. In addition to regular rehearsals, it may be worthwhile to rehearse the small ensembles separately. The Children's Orchestra part is the most complex of the three.

### **A Tinny-Sounding Opening**

*The Machine* opens the piece primarily scored for one player per part, quarter note = 126. Colgrass asks for a tinny sound so conductors should be concerned about distorted tones made by *f* trills in the woodwinds or the alto saxophone solo labeled honk. Tin cans in the percussion may include large coffee cans placed on cloth and played on their bottoms with drumsticks. The feel at the beginning should be metronomic and certainly not shy.

At measure 6 the Children's Orchestra, represented by a *tutti* woodwind choir and glockenspiel, enters playing the first melodic statement in Bb major. The glockenspiel is important because it ties together the melodic fragments played by the woodwinds. The woodwind choir should play with enough volume here to make the decrescendo at measure 13 effective.

The Machine defiantly interrupts the Children's Orchestra at measure 14 with a brief restatement of the opening two measures, now scored *mf*. It fades quickly returning to the *sonatina* played by the woodwinds. Here the saxophone and bassoon accompaniment should not overbalance the melody in the upper woodwinds.

The return of the Children's Orchestra, again accompanied by an important glockenspiel part, is now twice as long as it was in the opening statement, perhaps showing that the young ensemble is gaining confidence. Even though marked *f*, the music should feel light and playful. Emphasize to the band the importance of playing clear-sounding eighth notes and sustaining the longer-note values.

### **Seamless Transitions**

During rehearsals directors should focus on making the transitions between the material of the three ensembles seamless and convincing. One of the more enjoyable aspects of this work for audiences is hearing the gradual disappearance of one ensemble while the sound of another group slowly appears. Directors have to decide on the speed and intensity of these scene changes.

The first of these transitions begins at measure 30 with a difficult six-measure transition to the entrance of the Adult Orchestra at measure 36. The Children's Orchestra fades out as the Adult Orchestra enters, a few instruments at a time. Ideally there should never be a distinct moment when the Children's Orchestra stops and the Adult Orchestra begins to play. Instead, the conductor should gradually alter the color of the passage, changing the emphasis from a bright woodwind choir tone to a dark brass timbre.

The ensemble now *ritards* slightly to accommodate the entrance of the Adult Orchestra at measure 36. The tempo is now quarter note = 116, ten clicks slower than the Children's Orchestra.

The melody is in a comfortable range for the first trumpets, enabling them to project over the fairly dense chorale accompaniment of the brass and low woodwinds. This section should be played *legato* and have a sense of maturity. During rehearsals give special attention to those moments (another occurs at measure 76) where the scoring favors the brass choir, because projecting the melody can be difficult, depending on the abilities of the first trumpets.

Second trumpet has three important counter phrases to the melody of the first trumpet in measures 48, 50, and 52. These measures have to sound above the overall texture at those moments.

### **A Glockenspiel-Triangle Duet**

When the Machine reenters at measure 56 at the original tempo, the music should again have a metronomic, mechanical feel. This five-measure interlude fades into a reentrance of the Children's Orchestra playing the cute eighth-note *sonatina*. The important glockenspiel part now plays a duet with the triangle, adding a bright sheen to the proceedings as the *sonatina* melody continues to measure 75. An abrupt halt on a dominant chord suggests that the Adult Orchestra has become impatient with the Children's Orchestra, quickly hushing them up. After

a grand pause the music continues with the next lesson between parent and child at measure 76.

The Adult Orchestra plays another chorale, this time in F minor, the parallel minor of its first statement. Colgrass adds timpani and bassoon to this second statement for more texture. The goal for directors should be to achieve a mature-sounding, flowing line in which the melody projects through the accompaniment. Staggered woodwind entrances begin to appear as the brass choir fades at measure 89. The writing here is a refreshing example of the composer's belief that music for young bands does not always have to be tutti and accompanied by a percussion time stream. In this composition young students have to count carefully because of the independent parts.

Saxophones and low brass trade two legato statements written with quarter notes in measure 99. The tubas need to project the F major arpeggio at measure 102 because it functions as the dominant triad in the return to Bb major. This section is an eight-measure transition to the climax of the piece at measure 114. Measures 106-123 should be conducted in two, enabling the music to flow and achieve a majestic, broad sound required for the climax as the Children's Orchestra joins the Adult Orchestra at measure 114.

### **Quintessential Colgrass**

The end of the work, which begins at measure 124, may be the most challenging section. Directors who are familiar with the music of Michael Colgrass might agree that this is quintessential Colgrass with sparse writing, short snippets of previous musical ideas, and a dark, somber tone. The issues for conductors are how to pace and sustain intensity to a thoughtful end of this wonderful work.

At measure 124 a brief *poco allargando* conducted in four prepares for the last tutti Bb major chord, essentially beginning the coda. Woodwinds in the Children's Orchestra start the coda playing fragments of the *sonatina* melody, this time with a more mature sound and depth of tone color. The Bb major chord at measure 124 should quickly decay so the woodwind statements can project. Careful counting and independent playing are important here.

The Adult Orchestra reappears with staggered entrances at measure 128, much like the material in measures 30-36. Again, these entrances should gradually fold into the overall texture and not be distinct. The alto saxophone entrance at measure 131 has to be clearly heard because it begins another chain reaction of *sonatina* fragments.

All of the entrances are for one player per part in measures 128-141, and each player needs to know his function within the phrase: the accompaniment is at a *p* dynamic, and the melody is *mf*. The melodic fragments should respond to each other as if they are playing a musical game of catch.

An overlapping modulation from Bb major to Bb minor anticipates the somber arrival of Bb minor at measure 141. This return of the chorale motif should be straightforward in the brass as the woodwinds create intense swells from *p* to *mf* and back. Here the brass should take special care to not upset the balance the woodwinds.

The Machine returns briefly for a five-measure phrase at measure 152. It begins softly and moves to *mf*, only to quickly fade. This unifying idea, played against a backdrop of sustained chords from the brass and low woodwinds, is one of the many wonderful moments in this work. The music has now come full circle.



Another Bb minor chord signals the beginning of the end. Steady tuba, bass clarinet or baritone saxophone (Colgrass asks that either the bass clarinet or baritone saxophone play, but not both) are crucial here. Five Bbs played by the glockenspiel over sustained low woodwinds and brass chords bring the work to a conclusion.

The wind band world is fortunate to have Michael Colgrass and other fine composers now writing for young bands. Pieces such as *The Beethoven Machine* are technically easier than these composers' overall output, without being watered down. Each provides students with areas in which to improve their instrumental abilities as they enjoy a life filled with music.

—*Michael Mucci*

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