Strategies for Teaching Contemporary Music, Using Canadian Music for Student Instrumental Ensembles

Reproduced with the permission of CMEA/Acme.

Patricia Shand
Director, John Adaskin Project
Professor, Music Education
Division, Faculty of Music,
University of Toronto

A balanced music program of study should include a variety of contemporary compositions as well as music of other stylistic periods. It is important that students understand how contemporary composers use techniques from previous periods, and also how they have developed new techniques. It is also important to make students aware of the range of styles used by contemporary composers. And if Canadian students are to become aware of their national cultural heritage, a good variety of Canadian contemporary music should be included in the curriculum, along with music produced by composers from other countries and historical periods.

When developing a program of study, the teacher must first select musically interesting compositions which are technically within the capabilities of student performers, and then must develop strategies for teaching those works so that the students understand the compositional techniques, master the technical challenges, and also experience the compositions aesthetically.

The purpose of this article is to present a variety of contemporary Canadian compositions which are suitable for student instrumental ensembles, and to suggest some approaches to teaching these sample compositions, approaches designed to help students hear and understand the musical effectiveness of contemporary stylistic features (e.g. dissonance, unusual timbres, asymmetrical rhythms, varying textures, and improvisation). Consideration is also given to teaching graphic notation, and to developing ensemble sensitivity, precision, and listening skills.

All the compositions discussed in this article have been recommended by experienced teachers from across Canada as being suitable for student performers. The selection of compositions and the development of teaching strategies have been carried out through the John Adaskin Project (Canadian Music for Schools), a national research project sponsored jointly by the Canadian Music Educators' Association and the Canadian Music Centre.

All the selected compositions are contemporary in that all are by living Canadian composers. All these compositions have been written in the latter half of the Twentieth Century, yet there is no single compositional style evident. These compositions are presented as examples of the rich variety of Canadian music currently available and suitable for student performers.

Many Twentieth Century composers have been inspired by the folk music of their own country. It is pedagogically useful to begin the study of contemporary music with something familiar to the students, and many teachers find that Canadian compositions based on folk material are very
suitable for students who have had little exposure to contemporary music. When teaching compositions based on folk songs, it is useful to have the students sing the folk songs to help them develop a feel for the musical phrasing. It is also useful to have the students analyze how the simple folk material is passed from one instrument to another in the ensemble. Students can also try making their own instrumental arrangements of folk songs.

Keith Bissell's A Folksong Suite for Woodwinds\(^1\) is a three-movement suite based on Canadian folk songs. It is tonal in idiom and accessible to young performers. It is scored for two flutes and two clarinets, with the bass line written for bassoon or bass clarinet. The suite provides excellent ensemble training, since balance, blend, intonation, and rhythm require careful work.

Harry Somers' Little Suite for String Orchestra\(^2\) is another three-movement suite based on Canadian folk songs. It is scored for violins I and II, viola, and cello. The first movement is a prelude and fugue based on "Lukey's Boat". The lyrical second movement is based on the lovely Newfoundland song, "She's Like the Swallow". The third movement features variations on "Ah! Si Mon Moine Voulait Danser! (Come and Dance With Me)". All three movements are generally tonal, although there are occasional dissonances. The suite provides opportunities to work on contrasts in style, mood, articulation, tempo, and rhythm.

Morley Calvert's Suite from the Monteregian Hills\(^3\) for brass quintet is based on French Canadian folk song material. It is a challenging work for university or advanced high school students, demanding careful attention to rhythm, intonation, and ensemble.

Many contemporary compositions are written using graphic notation, and require performers to make musical decisions as they interpret that notation. Students need opportunities to develop the skills necessary for performing such music.

Sydney Hodkinson's three-volume Contemporary Primer for Band\(^4\) is very useful for developing students' confidence in interpreting graphic notation, in exploring sound, and in making musical decisions. Since all players read from the graphically notated score, they can see as well as hear how each part fits into the whole, and therefore the short studies in these volumes are valuable for developing ensemble sensitivity. Although the title suggests use in a band situation, the studies are intended to be performed by any number of woodwind, brass, and percussion players, and therefore they are suitable for chamber ensembles, particularly in a situation where there are unusual numbers and combinations of instruments. The studies are also suitable for use with players of various levels of technical ability, since each player can realize the graphic notation according to what he or she is technically able to handle. Each player has freedom in developing his or her own part, but each part must fit into the musical whole. Hodkinson also provides the teacher with suggestions for supplementary listening and creative activities.

Murray Schafer's Minimus\(^5\) provides valuable training in listening, improvising, and realizing non-traditional notation. This work can be performed by any combination of instruments and/or voices. It is well suited to mixed chamber ensembles. Performers explore sound and relate their sounds to those of the other performers in the ensemble. Minimus helps develop the players' ability to improvise while responding to the sounds around them.

Murray Schafer's Statement in Blue\(^6\) for orchestra is another composition which uses some non-traditional notation. It is a dramatically effective work which is programmatic in that it follows the suggestion of the title, moving from the chaos of the opening ff dissonant chords and violent percussive effects and the chaos of unusual sounds and repeated rhythmic figures in an unmetred structure, to a tranquil conclusion. Students should be encouraged to analyze how Bell creates the impression of chaos, and they should also be encouraged to create their own pieces moving from chaos to tranquility. Careful rehearsal is needed to achieve precision and confidence on the opening dissonant chords. Although
the opening is written in 4/4, pauses disrupt the sense of regular metre. The senza misura section which follows also requires careful rehearsal.

Donald Coakley's The Twentieth Century Band was written to expose young performers to a variety of Twentieth Century compositional techniques. The Third Movement, "Polymetrechordalcluster March," provides an interesting example of the use of polymetre and polytonality. As the title suggests, this movement involves frequent metre changes (2/4, 3/4, 4/4 and 5/4 are used, with the quarter note pulse remaining constant), and it also features the build-up of dissonant chord clusters. In form it is a traditional A B A' march. To help players achieve rhythmic precision, the teacher can have some students clap constant quarter notes while the other students play their parts as written. It is also useful to have some students conduct the changing metrical patterns while other students play. For aural training, slow, careful work is needed, building up dissonant chord clusters note by note.

Comparisons can usefully be made between "Polymetrechordalcluster March" and the first of Gary Kulesha's Two Pieces for Band which is also a march in which dissonant tone clusters and polytonal effects are used. The dramatic quality of Kulesha's "March" should be emphasized in rehearsal. The composer writes that there "is no specific image intended, but perhaps this muscular piece could suggest the approach of an enemy army; the middle section is less anxious, but just before the D.S., the low instruments start to suggest the creeping return of the mood of the opening." The second of Kulesha's Two Pieces, "Through Morning Mist," is, as the title suggests, an example of descriptive music. Students could listen to recordings of impressionistic tone poems such as Debussy's La Mer, and could compare these with Kulesha's "Through Morning Mist". Kulesha's use of dynamic contrasts, chromatic movement, and unusual sound effects such as bird calls and unpitched blowing should be noted. There is an effective move from dissonance to consonance at the end of "Through Morning Mist" as a major trumpet chord dispels the mist. Kulesha uses graphic notation, and the performers have considerable freedom in interpreting the notation. There are no traditional metric or rhythmic patterns. Musical events are indicated in terms of second, and careful rehearsal is needed so that players enter confidently on the conductor's cues.

The development of listening skills is an essential aspect of music education. Breaking a large class or performing group into small chamber ensembles can help develop players' aural skills and ensemble sensitivity, since it is easier for a player to hear himself and others in a small chamber ensemble. Nancy Telfer's Inner Space for brass quintet provides opportunities to work on intonation and tone production and to develop ensemble skills. The composition explores the brass ensemble's three-octave pitch and timbral range, using whole-tone melodic and harmonic structures. Drill on whole-tone scales is recommended for each individual player and for the full ensemble. Students should be aware of the A B A formal design in which the ponderous scalar patterns of the Adagio sections contrast with the nervous melodic fragments of the Waltz. Students could also analyze the techniques of melodic development used by Telfer in the Waltz (inversion, retrograde, augmentation, diminution, metric transformation, and contrasts of articulation and dynamics).

Michael Horwood's Asteroids for brass quartet (two trumpets, horn, and trombone) uses interesting spatial effects. The performers, representing four asteroids orbiting the sun (represented by the audience), are placed behind, in front of, and beside the audience. The music seems to move in various circles and complexes, giving the effect of orbital motion. Obviously this piece presents real challenges for the opening in terms of fluency and blend. Horwood uses pointillistic techniques with quarter notes moving from instrument to instrument. A steady tempo must be maintained, and the conductor must help the players shape the pointillistic patterns into musical lines and shapes. This composition also presents intonation challenges, especially where quarter tone effects occur in the final section.

David Keane's Circle Dance is useful as a preliminary study before teaching Asteroids, since Circle Dance involves placing performers in a circle around the room, cuing them to enter one by one. Keane's piece is much less demanding technically than is Asteroids, and therefore the players can concentrate on developing their listening and ensemble skills as the sounds pass from one instrument to the next. Circle Dance is useful in a teaching situation where there is an unusual assortment of instruments available, since it is written for any combination of instruments. Students could be encouraged to create their own compositions using spatial effects and simple graphic notation, using Keane's model.

Several contemporary Canadian composers, most notably Murray Schafer, have written interesting works for performance outside the concert hall, in special natural environments. Like Horwood's Asteroids, Gary Kulesha's Soundings for Brass employs spatial effects. Kulesha's work was commissioned for the Festival of the Sound in northern Ontario. It was designed to be performed with one brass ensemble (a quintet) on a boat moving from island to island, and a second brass ensemble (a quartet) in the distance, on an island. In a more traditional concert environment, the two brass groups are to be placed as far apart as possible. Spatial separation of the players within the "distant" ensemble is also indicated in some points in the score. This of course presents ensemble challenges. The
composition is also challenging because of the degree of freedom yet coordination required in the aleatoric passages.

Twelve-tone technique is an important contemporary compositional device which students should understand. Walter Buczynski's Legend No. 9 for string orchestra is based on a twelve-tone row which students should be able to recognize. Students could develop a fuller understanding of twelve-tone technique by doing compositional projects, creating and developing their own tone rows, and by listening to and analyzing other dodecaphonic compositions. Students could also analyze how Buczynski has developed his musical material in Legend No. 9, passing melodic and rhythmic motives from voice to voice.

Harry Freedman's Monday Gig for woodwind quintet is an interesting study in changing textures. In introducing this work, the teacher should make the students aware of the monophonic, homophonic, and polyphonic textures. The teacher should also emphasize the jazz influence evident in the rhythmic and melodic materials which Freedman uses.

Another composition which uses elements of jazz style is Pastel Blue for string orchestra by Norman Symonds. This piece is an interesting example of the stylistic eclecticism of much contemporary music. Symonds' piece is built on a four-bar ground bass figure, and features contrapuntal textures. This piece provides excellent opportunities for analysis, and for comparison with works of earlier stylistic periods. For example, Symonds' use of a ground bass can be compared with Pachelbel's in his well known Canon. Students should be encouraged to make comparisons between compositions, noticing how two composers may use a similar compositional technique but how each composer will use that technique for his own purposes, making it his own.

The Canadian repertoire and teaching strategies discussed above are intended as suggestions, but obviously each teacher will have to select repertoire appropriate for his or her own students, and will have to develop appropriate pedagogical approaches. In general, however, it is recommended that the teacher seek ways to involve students directly with the music in a variety of ways, not only playing but also singing, clapping, conducting, listening, creating, and analyzing. It is important for teachers to make their students aware of how contemporary composers organize sounds for expressive purposes - how the various elements of music are manipulated by composers and performers to create patterns of repetition and contrast, of tension and release. A teacher cannot force students to enjoy every piece they play or hear, but a teacher can help students understand how a piece has been constructed, and can help them hear what is there to be heard by the perceptive ear. Students without previous experience playing or listening to contemporary music have not learned what to listen for and what to expect in a contemporary composition. Without such expectations, there is no possibility of an awareness of the unfulfilled musical expectations which Leonard Meyer maintains are basic to a meaningful musical experience. Through exposure to and involvement with a variety of contemporary Canadian compositions, students may develop an understanding and an appreciation of the music of their own time and place.

NOTES
1. Published in 1963 by Boosey and Hawkes. For more detailed discussion of this piece, see Canadian Music: A Selective Guidelist for Teachers (Toronto: Canadian Music Centre, 1978), p.143.
3. Published in 1976 by Berandol. See Ibid., p.144. This composition has been recorded by the Mount Royal Brass Quintet on Brass Nova (McGill 80012, available from the Canadian Music Centre Distribution Service).
5. Published in 1972 by Universal. See Ibid., p.162.
8. Published in 1966 by BMI Canada. Copyright transferred to Berandol.


13. Published in 1979 by Berandol.


20. The John Adaskin Project guidelists include a wide selection of Canadian music suitable for student performers. Each piece included in the guidelists is evaluated in terms of its level of difficulty, technical challenges, musical style, and pedagogical value. All the guidelists are available for sale from the Canadian Music Centre, 20 St. Joseph Street, Toronto, Ontario M4Y 1J9.