

"Music exists in an infinity of sound. I think of all music as existing in the substance of the air itself. It is the composer's task to order and make sense of sound, in time and space, to communicate something about being alive through music." — Libby Larsen

An Introduction to the Moon

Libby Larsen

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are needed to see this picture.

Background Information

Libby Larsen (b. 24 December 1950, Wilmington, Delaware) is one of America's most performed living composers. She has created a catalogue of over 400 works spanning virtually every genre from intimate vocal and chamber music to massive orchestral works and over twelve operas. Grammy Award winning and widely recorded, including over fifty CD's of her work, she is constantly sought after for commissions and premieres by major artists, ensembles, and orchestras around the world, and has established a permanent place for her works in the concert repertory. Her music has been praised for its dynamic, deeply inspired, and vigorous contemporary American spirit.

Larsen has been hailed as "the only English-speaking composer since Benjamin Britten who matches great verse with fine music so intelligently and expressively" (USA Today); as "a composer who has made the art of symphonic writing very much her own." (Gramophone); as "a mistress of orchestration" (Times Union); and for "assembling one of the most impressive bodies of music of our time" (Hartford Courant). Her music has been praised for its "clear textures, easily absorbed rhythms and appealing melodic contours that make singing seem the most natural expression imaginable." (Philadelphia Inquirer) "Libby Larsen has come up with a way to make contemporary opera both musically current and accessible to the average audience." (The Wall Street Journal). "Her ability to write memorable new music completely within the confines of traditional harmonic language is most impressive." (Fanfare)

As a vigorous, articulate advocate for the music and musicians of our time, in 1973 Larsen co-founded the Minnesota Composers Forum, now the American Composer's Forum, which has become an invaluable aid for composers in a transitional time for American arts. A former holder of the Papamarkou Chair at John W. Kluge Center of the Library of Congress, Larsen has also held residencies with the Minnesota Orchestra, the Charlotte Symphony and the Colorado Symphony.

An Introduction to the Moon was commissioned by the Apple Valley (MN) High School Band, Dr. Scott A. Jones, conductor. It was written in 2006.

Music Selection

Unlike a vast majority of music for concert band, this composition incorporates the use of improvisation as a major component. The improvisation goes beyond just sounds and may include text, lighting, PowerPoint slides, etc. Not only does the work provide the opportunities to work on several of the national standards, it is a well crafted composition. The work stretches any ensemble to be acutely sensitive to dynamics and timbral shifts. Additionally, Libby Larsen is one of the prominent composers in the United States.

A serendipitous combination of events adds reasons for selecting this composition. 2009 is the International Year of Astronomy - a global effort initiated by the International Astronomical Union (IAU) and UNESCO to help the citizens of the world rediscover their place in the Universe through the day- and night-time sky, and thereby engage a personal sense of wonder and discovery. Also, the opportunities provided by the 40th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing (July 20, 1969) are impossible for me to pass up!

Form

Larsen describes the form of this piece as –

Page-EAR-Page-EAR-Page-EAR-Page-EAR-Page-EAR-Page-EAR-Page-EAR-Page

“Using a form found in our everyday culture, the partitioned carton, I created a musical container with several partitions or sections. I composed nine unified sections of music which the musicians rehearse and perform in the traditional manner by reading and reproducing exactly what I have written for them. These nine sections surround eight sections which are reserved for the music the musicians created themselves by improvising and performing by ear. In each of the EAR sections a poem is read.”

Rhythm

Larsen makes regular use of dotted quarter notes or the equivalent and short gestures of 32nd notes, 5's and 6's over one beat, half a beat or a portion of a beat. Meters are all quarter note based, ranging from 3/4 - 7/4. The tempi range from 52 to 80 beats per minute.

Melody

Great use of chromatic primarily disjunct motion in brief musical gestures. There are a number of instances where the gesture begins with two consecutive fourths followed by a minor second. There is a sense of tone-row in several of the gestures. These gestures, combined with the use of extended chords provide a unifying sense to the composition.

Harmony

Quite a use of extended harmonies, seventh and ninth chords. At times these chords are used in a pedal point manner. Repeated minor thirds add to effect sought by the composer. Although not a home key, the pitch “C” provides a sense of repose in the work.

Timbre

From the very outset, Larsen expands the general confines of timbre in the wind band. Bowed vibraphone and wind chimes begin the work in a section marked “Freely”. Next, the upper woodwinds “play” tuned water glasses (G) while the orchestra bells are added in a sparse and free manner also. There is also a very light stroke on suspended cymbal and then on the tam-tam while the first poem is read. The main portion is written in comfortable ranges, but using tessitura for definitive timbral effects. At the end, the light use of harmonica, water glasses, singing and tone clusters with the use of morendo in a specified order makes timbre the essential final aspect of the composition.

Texture

Generally speaking, I feel the most appropriate descriptor of this work is delicate. Even at rehearsal “J”, where one finds the greatest combination of instrument usage and dynamic indicators, it is not an overbearing feel. There is a combination of pedal point chords with chromatic musical gestures interspersed. It is more homophonic in spirit.

Expression/Dynamics

The dynamic requirements of this work are clearly delineated. The range is from forte to pianissimo. There are a few subito dynamic changes and a variety of crescendi and decrescendi lengths. Additionally there are some rather unusual expression markings, such as “shimmer”, “quiet glow”, and “glowing”.

Other Compositional Devices

Unusual scoring requirements include tuned water glasses, crotales, Marine Band C harmonica and three alto saxophone parts. You will also need cello bows for the crotales and vibraphone. The flutes, oboes, clarinets and alto saxophones have a simple singing part at the end of the composition. If readers are used, they will need to be amplified. Other amplification or projections are at your discretion. The percussion writing is masterful, using the section at times as an integral part of the ensemble and at other times as coloristic strokes of sound.

Program Note

“In our contemporary world, musicians imagine, create and perform music in two ways – one, by writing and reading it from the page, and two, by improvising and playing it by ear. A good musical education offers practice and experience in both. In doing so, music education can provide practice and experience in the two most prevalent models for problem solving and cooperative existence in our culture – the hierarchical management model and the cooperative consensus model. An Introduction to the Moon combines two distinctly different and wholly essential musical practices – music of the page and music of the air.

Using a form found in our everyday culture, the partitioned carton, I created a musical container with several partitions or sections. I composed nine unified sections of music which the musicians rehearse and perform in the traditional manner by reading and reproducing exactly what I have written for them. These nine sections surround eight sections which are reserved for music the musicians create themselves by improvising and performing by ear. You might think of the form of my piece as:

Page-EAR-Page-EAR-Page-EAR-Page-EAR-Page-EAR-Page-EAR-Page-EAR-Page

In each of the EAR sections a poem is read. Each poem refers, in some way, to the moon. During rehearsals for the piece, the musicians listen to each poem and respond musically by improvising their impressions, discussing their improvisations, and deciding among themselves which musical ideas best work with their ideas about the poetry. And so, *An Introduction to the Moon* is not my composition, it is *our* composition – you, the musicians and me. I hope that you experience our work as poetic in every way and that when the music has left the air, you will have met the moon and remain suspended in its peaceful light.”

Heart

I believe the heart of An Introduction to the Moon arises from the musical sensitivity demanded by the piece combined with the openness fostered in the performers by allowing them to contribute in a most meaningful way – to become a significant part of the compositional process.

SKILL (Psychomotor) OUTCOME:

Students will be able to aurally and visually identify and accurately perform note groupings of 5, 6 & 8 over one beat and a grouping of four over half a beat.

Strategies:

1. Echo-playing will be used to demonstrate the various rhythms.
2. Words representing the rhythms will be written on the board. First they will be chanted and then used in a warm-up.
Rationality (5) Nationality
Irrationality (6) Transferability
Chattanooga (4) or (8)
3. Echo-clapping will be used with both the listed words and rhythms written out.
4. Students will circle all occurrences of note groupings of 5, 6 & 8 over one beat and a grouping of four over half a beat.

Assessments:

Instructor observations.

Music shall be checked for circling of rhythms.

Students will perform an eight measure example created by the instructor that will contain an example of grouping of 5, one of 6 and one of 8 over one beat and a grouping of four over half of a beat. They will use the same example, listening to eight measures performed by the instructor and mark the rhythmic errors made in the performance.

KNOWLEDGE (Cognitive) OUTCOME:

Students will understand the concept of improvisation (both sound and silence) as a natural part of the arts and life.

Strategies:

1. Students will discuss the number of times we “improvise” during a rehearsal.
2. A student will perform a four beat “improvisation” that begins and ends on concert C. After 4 beats of silence, a pre-selected student will perform a four beat improvisation in response to the first students’ performance. Various students will flow suit.

3. Students will spontaneously move to select musical excerpts in class. Students will engage in a brief discussion of improvisation in movement and why they moved certain ways to certain excerpts.

4. Given a written statement to be read as a catalyst, pairs of students will engage in a conversation for fifteen seconds. At the end of fifteen seconds, the last statement made will be written down, turned in and posted. Students will read and reflect about how varied the “improvised” final statements were even though they all started from the same statement.

Assessments:

Instructor listens to the improvisation as it progresses around the ensemble.

Students will choose from one of the following projects:

1. Journal on a consecutive Friday, Saturday & Sunday, accounting for every time Improvisation occurs in their life. Describe two particular instances and what the feelings were afterward.
2. Participate in a 2 person musical improvisation thirty seconds in length. Although the concepts must be practiced, the presentation must not be notated or memorized.
3. Create and present an arts event that uses the concept of improvisation in life.

AFFECTIVE (Feeling) OUTCOME:

Students will explore how musical gestures evoke feelings representative of physical objects or events.

Strategies:

1. Students will listen to selected works (posted on-line without titles) meant to evoke feelings associated with physical objects. They will describe three of the works and how the composer creates the desired impact.

Clair de la Lune

Mars

Train Heading West (remember this one from middle school)

Voices of the Sky (last year)

La Mer

Grand Canyon Suite

Niagara Falls

Symphony No. 6 (Pastorale)

Night on Bare Mountain

Four Factories

The Great Locomotive Chase

List other stuff from CDs purchased

2. Students will be given a list of terms. They must create a sound or short series of sounds that represents the term. Volunteers will demonstrate in class. Each student will journal about the creation of their aural representation of the sound(s).

Dark

Bright

Immense

Shimmer

Glowing

3. Students will create a rubric, focusing on what makes a musical representation of the physical object or event successful.

Assessments:

Students will be grouped in quartets. Each group will compose a brief work to represent a natural physical object and perform it for the class. The students and instructor shall use the rubric created in class to assess their peers.

Students shall critique a recording of their performance.

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Vision

Everyone should realise the impact of astronomy and other fundamental sciences on our daily lives, and understand how scientific knowledge can contribute to a more equitable and peaceful society. IYA2009 activities are taking place locally, nationally, regionally and internationally. National Nodes in each country are running activities throughout 2009 which will establish collaborations between professional and amateur astronomers, science centres and science communicators. 137 countries are already involved and over 140 are expected to participate eventually.

To coordinate this huge global programme and to provide an important resource for the participating countries, the IAU established a central Secretariat and an IYA2009 website (www.astronomy2009.org) as the principal IYA2009 resource for public, professionals and media alike. The International Year of Astronomy 2009 is endorsed by the United Nations and the International Council of Science.