

A Conductor's Outline of Frank Erickson's *Air for Band*

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Frank Erickson's *Air for Band*, published by Bourne, Inc. in 1956, is a somewhat neglected classic that begs to be rediscovered by music educators and wind band aficionados generally. It is a composition that brims with small, beautiful details. This brief, simple, affecting work, if played as artfully as it is composed, would constitute a welcome enhancement to almost any concert program, lending warmth, dignity, humanity and profundity to the occasion.

The *Air* is in C minor, with a shift to C major at measure 43 (one measure before **E**). Its form is as simple as may be imagined: A-B-A₁-Coda.

The work is scored in such a way that reduced wind forces can perform it without sacrificing a single one of its expertly interwoven polyphonic lines. The instrumentation calls for undivided flutes, oboe (mostly doubling the flutes, occasionally at the octave), bass clarinet, bassoon, baritone, tuba and string bass. The B_♭ clarinets, trumpets and trombones are divided into two parts instead of the customary three, and the horns are also divided into two parts as in his *Toccata*, published a year later. The saxophone choir consists of single alto, tenor and baritone parts, with alto clarinet suggested as a pairing with the alto saxophone. The percussion *batterie* includes only snare drum and cymbals, and these are used sparingly.

It would be a good idea to make some amendments to the full score before taking this work into rehearsal. I suggest numbering the measures (there are 53 in all, with letter **A** occurring at measure 9, letter **B** at 17, letter **C** at 28, letter **D** at 36, and letter **E** at 44), and excising the obsolete E_♭ horn and treble clef baritone parts.

A (mm. 1-16) The "A" section of this work is a sixteen-measure parallel period.

Antecedent phrase (mm. 1-8) This phrase consists of two four-bar subphrases, both of which end on half cadences. The general tendency of the first four measures is from C minor into E_♭ major, and the cadence in measure 4 is a half cadence in that (barely-established) new key. Measures 5-8 bring the music back to C minor, once again concluding with a half cadence. Both half cadences (mm. 4 & 8) are enhanced by decorated non-chord tones in alto saxophone, 1st horn and 1st trombone – the first an *appoggiatura*; the second a suspension. For the first four measures of the antecedent phrase, the melody is carried consistently by the 1st clarinets; the 2nds rejoin them in unison for the second subphrase, beginning at the upbeat to bar 5.

Suspensions play a key role in this section of the piece: they are found in the melodic voice at the beginnings of measures 2, 5, 6 & 7. The "pan-diatonic" conflict between the bass line and an inner voice 9-8 suspension/*appoggiatura* in measure 2 contributes a degree of tension that imparts a "driven" quality to this music, its slow tempo notwithstanding. The decorated figures in measures 4 & 8 have already been mentioned.

Sequences are also an important feature of this passage. They may be found in the bass voice in measures 2 f., and in the melodic voice in measures 5-7 (the melodic voice in measure 7 is an "adjusted sequence," and the decorated suspension that follows it may also be heard as a leg of that same sequence).

I want to call attention to a particularly attractive feature of the theme's opening. Its first five notes represent a "closing down" of musical space; and its first two measures, a thwarted attempt to rise from the tonic. The impression that is conveyed is initially one of great sadness, and (were it not for the bass line's A \flat and the inner-voice suspension) perhaps even despair:

There is an important performance-practice point to be made in light of the above: The 1st clarinets' dotted quarter note in measure 2 is *not* a finishing gesture, despite its appearance on the page: the bass line and active inner voice say otherwise. So the players must not take a breath after this note, nor relax the line in any way.

To continue with our examination of the antecedent phrase, it will be useful to look at a reduction of its counterpoint, with non-harmonic tones identified (these are the "expressive" notes, and should get extra attention in performance) along with some other noteworthy features including parallel fifths, two different roles for the bass voice within the first eight measures, and two recommended breathing places for the melodic line:

The most expressive suspension of all is the one in the melodic line in measure 7. Note that the half cadences in measures 4 & 8 are in E \flat major and C minor respectively. The half cadence in measure 8 is of the Phrygian type, also considered an expressive (structural) gesture.

Consequent phrase (mm. 9-16) The consequent phrase is structurally identical to the antecedent phrase, differing only in the cadence type in the final two measures; the periodicity is therefore strongly parallel. In the reduction that follows, I have not bothered identifying the non-chord tones and parallel fifths: they must be understood to be the same as in the antecedent phrase.

The empty octave at measure 16 – a return, in fact, to the composition’s initial sonority – is stark and hopeless-sounding (and the performance should reflect this fact). It will be the concern of the “B” section to seek a more positive-sounding alternative.

B (mm. 17-downbeat of 28) An increasingly energetic and impassioned climb in E_b major begins with the upbeat to measure 17. This part of the composition is structurally more complicated than the “A” section. It begins regularly enough: the first four measures would lead us to expect the same kind of periodicity that we heard in the first sixteen bars. But the music breaks free of its moorings beginning at measure 21, quickly rises to a somewhat desperate-sounding climax, and subsides just as quickly back into the gloom of C minor.

The harmonies beginning at measure 21 are very rich, with their focal point at the common-tone diminished seventh chord in the second half of measure 22. Despite the placement of the cymbal crash at the beginning of measure 23, I want to suggest that the true climax of this passage is at the downbeat of the *following* measure, on a more active harmony than in measure 23.

Regarding the dynamic nuances in this “B” section, I suggest ignoring the *cresc. poco a poco* marking at letter **B**, as the music will rise in intensity naturally enough without additional “help” from any of the players. A *mezzo piano* should have been achieved by everyone by the beginning of measure 21, and the crescendo should proceed naturally through *mezzo forte* and *forte* levels in measure 22 to reach the *fortissimo* in 23. I recommend playing the first half of measure 24 at a slightly more generous *fortissimo* than in the preceding bar (the topmost *diminuendo* hairpin is printed one beat too early), then regulating the dynamics very carefully for two measures back to the *piano* that finishes measure 25 and continues at measure 26.

In the melodic voices, be aware that the downbeat F in measure 23 is an *appoggiatura*, and the downbeat D in 25 is an accented passing tone. A roll indication needs to be supplied through the stem of the snare drum half note in measure 25.

The directed motion in the final measures of this section is continuous into the elaborated return of “A.”

A₁ (mm. 28-43) This passage is structurally identical to the first sixteen measures, but there are some surprises in its surface features.

Antecedent phrase (mm. 28-35) The first four measures of this phrase are almost identical to the first four measures of the piece. The clarinets are brought in a half beat late, however, and play an embellished version of the original line; moreover, they remain undivided throughout this passage. There is a *crescendo* to a new dynamic level in the third measure, unlike the original statement.

The orchestration enhancements that begin with the upbeat to measure 32 are corroborated in an embellishment of the line plus a middle voice; compare this:

to this:

Consequent phrase (mm. 36-43) The consequent phrase is completely re-composed, so the comfortable parallelism of the original periodicity has disappeared. The phrase begins as a kind of dialogue between middle and high voices and then takes a new, more positive direction – which finally yields the music’s redemption. In the following, the melodic voice of the original consequent phrase is represented by the top staff, and the freshly-composed alternative is on the bottom staff:

The Picardy third at measure 43 is the antithesis of the empty octave at measure 16, and signals that the music has been put to rights and all is finally well.

Coda (mm. 44-53) The tonic major cadence in measure 43 is “covered” by a figure in “horn fifths” in the upper woodwinds; this opens up naturally onto the coda proper, which begins at letter **E**. The coda is essentially in two four-bar phrases, but the second of those phrases is extended by means of an elision at measure 51. The music is in C major, and exhibits harmonies borrowed from both darker and brighter regions. Two-part thematic writing as at measures 36 f. is again in evidence in the first four measures of this passage, and measures 48 f. bear a striking resemblance to two similar measures in Erickson’s *Toccata*, written a year later (mm. 85 f.).

The presence of much tritone voice-leading in this coda calls for sensitive playing from several players. The tenor saxophone player in particular will have to be certain that he is “carrying his weight” in the first half of measure 45. The penultimate chord – a ii^{o7} – is an unexpected one, setting up a kind of plagal cadence.

There is a performance practice issue in the penultimate measure that needs to be addressed. In the second half of this measure, the flutes and clarinets apparently continue to trill to $A\sharp$, while the middle voices have introduced the chromatic passing tone $A\flat$ (producing a harmony borrowed from the parallel minor key). This has always sounded unconvincing to me in performance, and I recommend having those high woodwind players change their trill to $G-A\flat$ in the final two beats before the fermata. Also, if there are enough trumpet players in the section to achieve good balance, I recommend having one player play a high written A for the final note.