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University Band—Purple Band

Dr. Frank Tracz, Mr. Jay Koupal

Unit Study 1: “Primal”by Sean O’Loughlin

**Composer**

Sean O’Loughlin was born in 1972 in Syracuse, New York. Sean O’Loughlin grew up in Syracuse with a passion for music and a supportive family. During his undergraduate years O’Loughlin attended Syracuse University, during this time he worked closely with Larry Clark, who is the current Vice-President of Carl Fischer Music. O’Loughlin also holds composition degrees from the Henry Mancini Institute, the New England Conservatory, and Syracuse University. In his professional career Sean O’Loughlin is the Principal Pops Conductor of Symphoria; a new orchestra based in Syracuse, NY. He was also recently named the Principal Pops Conductor for the Victoria Symphony in Victoria, B.C. Canada. O’Loughlin is also known as an extensive composer and arranger, working with chamber orchestras, symphonies, television productions, and pop artists around the world. He currently resides in Syracuse, NY.

**Composition**

Sean O’Loughlin states the following about his composition “Primal”:

“Primal is an intense composition for the developing concert band. The word means ‘of first importance’ or ‘fundamental.’ Musically, for me, this translates into a raw display of rhythm, power, and melody. The opening fanfare immediately sets the tone for the music to come. A rhythmic pattern follows at m. 7 that includes multi-rhythms for a colorful tapestry. The low voices provide a foreshadowing o the harmony and the bass line to follow. The horns and trumpets announce the main melody at m. 15. The eighth notes that were originally separate lines then join forces at m. 23 to accentuate the melody further. The brass and low voices take on the rhythmic eighth notes to a fever pitch to lead into a percussion break at m. 35. The melody is treated with imitation between the woodwinds and trumpets and horns at m. 39. The opening fanfare returns at m. 48 to set up the slower, softer section at m. 52. This contrasting section should have lyrical lines and rich chords. The rhythmic eighth notes and main melody return at m. 62 to bring the composition to an exciting ending.”

--Sean O’Loughlin, *(composition notes in the score).*

This piece was not commissioned or dedicated to any specific ensemble, however at a Grade 1.5 it is very accessible to middle school or junior high concert bands. Published in 2016, it is one of O’Loughlin’s recent compositions.

**Historical Perspective**

While this piece does not explicitly address a specific time in history, the title does allude to a state of simple and fundamental being. The music itself sounds like the opening to a film score, which can draw to mind images from films such as *Ice Age, The Revenant, or Apocalypto.* As O’Loughlin states in his program notes, his thought process was to address the fundamental, or “primal” parts of music, rhythm, melody, and power. Through imagery, this translates to a more raw, less civilized lifestyle. Rather than directly addressing an historical period, O’Loughlin allows the listeners mind to create its own images and scenes to go along with the music.

**Technical Considerations**

The first consideration I would make is to focus on the key the piece is in; Concert Eb Major, there are no accidentals in the piece which takes away any extra printed markings. However, this key may not be a familiar key to new students in band. Concert F and Concert Bb are (usually) the first keys students learn to play in. With Concert Eb, I would take just a simple scale exercise to address the tonal center and work the technique for playing with the correct number of flat notes in the key signature.

In regards to rhythm and tempo there are a few considerations. The first being air control and sustain of long notes in the slower sections of the piece. During the “A” sections of the piece it can be easy to cut notes short due to a lack of air control or a shallow breath, addressing this as a simple reminder could correct the “mistake” before it even happens.

In the faster “B” sections there are three major considerations; the rhythmic ostinato, the melody, and the harmony. The ostinato is actually split into two parts, creating a continuous eighth note metronome. This alone can be a warm-up exercise in independent rhythmic control; working with two parts and having some ensemble members play line 1 and the others play line 2. In the context of the piece when the melody comes in at measure 15, the members performing the ostinato will need to dial back dynamically, allowing the melody to be the prominent voice. The melody is in tonal unison, which presents a possible tuning issue. If necessary, working with the melodic players to focus on tuning would be beneficial, so long as the other ensemble members remain productively occupied and this isolated work does not take up too much time during a rehearsal.

The harmony line is set primarily in the low brass and woodwind voices, the goal here is to build a solid foundation for the other players; focus on tuning and tonal control as to not become harsh or too loud is important to the overall effectiveness of the performance.

The final major consideration involves the percussion setup and performers, and what part of the musical puzzle they fit. Each percussionist, with any necessary help from the director, should know where they fit and who they play with, or what sort of rhythmic answer they have, which is the case with the snare drum and the woodwind ostinato.

**Stylistic Considerations**

In the first 6 measures of the piece, every part that plays has a weighted accent mark over each note head, with the exception of measures 4-5 in the Bass Clarinet, Baritone Saxophone, and low brass; this is a foreshadowing of the melody. The primary focus here should be to match the articulation to the instrument with the greatest effort to produce sound in each musical part; in this case it is Tenor Saxophone with the eighth notes, and Tuba with the half notes. Arriving at measure 7, the ostinato begins and again the Tenor Saxophone is the lowest voice, matching the staccato is extremely important in order to make the rhythm clear and precise. The melody at measure 15 does not have any articulation markings present, however I would suggest to my ensemble to play with a little weight on the front of each note, this makes each note pop just a bit, and matches the intense “fast” style in this “B” section. A consideration with articulation is to never allow it to get too short. The presence and quality of the actual note is important, then that note is made more interesting with a type of articulation.

Dynamically, as a new part joins, an old one shifts down, it is vital that the ensemble and director be on the same page about what volume each dynamic marking is at. “Forte” is not a set mark, neither is “piano”. This is why each dynamic should be approached as relative to what melodic or interesting part is being performed, and by how many people. For example, the woodwinds are marked “mf” at measure 15, however there are many more of them than there are trumpets and horns, I may ask them to bring that “mf” down a bit to accommodate the melody, or I may ask my brass players to bring their “forte” up a bit in order to be heard over the ostinato and percussion. Dynamics are all relative.

**Musical Elements**

* MELODY
  + The melody of this piece begins at measure 15 in the trumpets and horns. It is an 8-measure phrase that stays in the home key of Concert Eb. The first statement of this melody is repeated creating two 8-measure phrases. At measure 39 we see the return of this line in the woodwinds.
* HARMONY
  + The harmony is fairly standard chordal structure for beginning band literature. It stays within the home key the entire piece and has cadential points throughout. One main consideration would be to address the voicing and balance of the middle and low brass long tones, in order to have a well-balanced foundation for the melody.
* RHYTHM
  + The primary rhythmic structure is a steady ostinato formed in the woodwinds at measure 7, it is then continued in whole or in parts throughout the piece. Different instruments play this ostinato at different times; this plays into the change of timbre and color. Keeping the ostinato steady is a major focus throughout the piece.
* TIMBRE
  + The timbre of the rich and dark, with shimmers of high brass and high woodwinds to add some brightness to denser sections. My main focus with timbre is to help create the darkest sound that is characteristic for each instrument, and allow the range and dynamics to create the shimmers of bright color.

**Form and Structure**

Analyzing “Primal” from macro-micro-macro in terms of form, this piece has two major sections denoted by tempo markings, this piece follows a repeated binary form; the opening 6 measures are “A”, from measures 7 through 47 there is section “B”. Section “A” returns at measure 48 and continues through sixty-one. Measure 62 is the final section “B” that flows all the way to the end, at measure 81. Simple rhythms and dense, sustained chords define section “A”. Section “B” is faster and opens with a rhythmic ostinato in the woodwind parts, the first iteration of what O’Loughlin writes as the melody appears at measure 15. Throughout the rest of the piece, the melodic line, harmony line, and ostinato shift between different parts to create tonal and color interest.

**Suggested Listening**

* Carl Fischer Music recording: can be found on YouTube.
  + <https://youtu.be/dWI7SAdZHhs>
* Prattville Junior High School Band: can be found on YouTube.
  + <https://youtu.be/HGv8-qgA7c4>

**Additional References and Resources**

* Score to “Primal” by Sean O’Loughlin
* *Teaching Music Through Performance in Band Vol. 1 Ed. 2*
* Sean O’Loughlin’s professional website
  + <https://www.seanoloughlin.com>
* Carl Fischer Music website
  + <https://www.carlfischer.com/shop/catalogsearch/result/?q=sean+o%27loughlin>