

**“Today’s Wind Band Literature:  
Where Did the Melody Go?”**

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## **Introduction**

Many high school and college directors already recognize the need to understand the construction of a piece of band literature. Proper analysis includes study of harmonic content and function, rhythmic figures, melodic content (if any), along with form and texture. It is, however, incumbent that the director looks beyond the traditional understanding of each of these elements to find more than we may believe is there.

It is the intent of this paper to bring awareness to the changes in compositional techniques outside the norms of traditional texture, how composers use texture in relation to timbre as a writing and orchestration technique rather than using texture in its traditional relation to melody, while also including exciting harmonic, rhythmic and linear effects with the many musical elements that help produce the final product intended. Texture comes from the Latin root *text* meaning ‘woven’ and musically the term texture refers to the intertwined, or woven, elements of music, such as melody, harmony, and rhythm. Traditionally wind band music deals with homophonic textures and melodic content being the unifying element. Composers of today’s wind band music have begun to explore and develop new techniques in writing and scoring for wind band by utilizing the use of timbralphonic textures to convey the mood, flow, emotion, excitement, intensity, and intent in their music. This is a movement away from traditional textures and melodies, turning toward a new concept I’m calling *timbralphonic texture* (Dr. Cunningham, 2014, in conversation with author), an exploration of the many sounds and colors that lie within the wind band, while creating potentially exciting and effective new music. This new timbralphonic texture flourishes in contemporary wind band music, so rather than deny its existence, it should instead be used in proper score study and analysis, along with the teaching process.

## **The Melodic Beginnings**

Throughout my teaching career, I have been the director of high school band programs that had concentrated efforts in marching band, jazz ensembles, and concert wind bands. Although I was director of the entire band program, the true focal point of my teaching career revolved around my efforts toward my top wind band the Wind Ensemble. Each year we held ourselves to a high standard and strove to play with the highest level of excellence, but further we tried to perform at this high level with challenging and rewarding literature, such as Ron Nelson's *Rocky Point Holiday* and Vincent Persichetti's *Symphony for Band*. Several of the pieces that we were able to perform as a program included music by iconic composers such as Gustav Holst, Percy Grainger, John Philip Sousa, Alfred Reed, Ralph Vaughn-Williams, and Frank Ticheli. Throughout my eleven years of teaching, I was fortunate enough to teach and conduct some of the great core literature works. However, I started to notice in my search for new music to bring to my ensembles a change in how music was being composed.

I first started to notice this change in compositional techniques throughout the competitive marching band arena. There has always been a push for "new" or "innovative" shows each year. Directors try to do more and more, but say less and less in these "new" marching band shows. The music folds into a tidy show that is by and large a collection of sound effects, chord progressions, flashy linear lines, and loud impact points accompanying the visual package. As a conductor and educator, I have always felt that a wind band performance should include substance and content for both the performers and audience members.

Throughout each school year, directors receive in the mail several packets of newly published music for marching and concert bands with the provided mp3's. Some of these pieces would also be presented at the state music conference. I found very few pieces that fit within my

expectations of substance and content that were also fun for the students and would be appropriate as a concert opener or finale. Further, I never found a piece in these packets that I ever thought were worthy of being a part of the core literature.

Throughout my career I regularly attended the annual state music education conference. At each of these conferences there is a presentation of some of the newly published pieces for wind band at all levels of difficulty, some of which may have been present in the packets mentioned previously. Some pieces were better than others, but what really stood out was the noticeable shift in the construct and melodic material of the pieces. Most notable was the absence of melodic content, even from a motivic or thematic standpoint. Historically, the literature of the wind band community has been rich in melodies and folk song settings exemplified Gustav Holst's 2nd Suite in F, Percy Grainger's Immovable Do or John Philip Sousa's Fairest of the Fair. It became interesting, yet concerning, that this genre would move away from such lush styles in composition toward works that lack in the particular musical element that has almost defined its own genre: Melody. Many of these composers are writing works with a more timbralphonic style and have become increasingly successful and renowned for their compositions, such as Karel Husa, John Corigliano, and Joseph Schwantner. Perhaps, this is a significant time of change in the compositional techniques for wind band and we get to witness and take advantage of this process of change.

It seems clear that there is now emerging a body of new music for wind band that contradicts, or at least goes far beyond, the formularized compositional perspective long associated with traditional band music. In this new music, unfamiliar notation symbols abound. Time, freed of metric constraints, is measured by the clock or left to the discretion of the conductor. Individual instrumental parts are uncharacteristic and often appear to be unrelated to each other. The resulting textures are frequently either impenetrably thick or sparse bordering on empty. In short, a new sound vocabulary seems to have replaced the old one. (Battisti 2002, 82)

## **Transition from Traditional Textures & Melodic Content**

Finding and following a melody in some of today's wind band music may not be as easy as most wind band music since 1850. The literature of the wind band genre, since its early stages, had included operatic transcriptions, folk song settings, and melodically rich works. Melodic structure still exists in the traditional sense, however composers have also evolved away from the typical melody, texture, and development. Instead, the focus became more about timbral changes and sound effects to help drive a piece forward in conjunction with other musical elements such as harmony and rhythm.

Composers in the 20th century have given careful attention to texture on both gross and detailed levels. Texture in the 20th century has also provided a means for unification of musical works, chiefly through the recurrence of certain identifiable combinations of timbre. As tonal and melodic organization were minimized or abandoned, they were replaced in many cases by textural organization as a means to achieve formal coherence. (Ott 1982, 2)

The discussion and use of the word texture in musical terms is a fairly new concept and it's quite difficult to find any mention of it prior to the 20th century. This would make sense when we think about what was happening musically during that time. As we transition from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, we begin to see a departure from the traditional use of melody and harmony as composers were looking for other techniques for their 'voices' to be heard.

In fact texture as a musical term belongs principally to the modern age. It does not appear as a separate entry in the 1954 edition of Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, and even its treatment in *The New Grove* (1980) is innocent of much information or indeed the conviction that the term has any important meaning. Dictionaries in the English language tell the same story. No musical reference is supplied for the word 'texture' in the 1933 Oxford English Dictionary, in which, however, its long-standing use as a term in the fine arts is in evidence. (Dunsby 1989, 46)

The study of harmony and the pursuit to move away from these "learned" harmonic structures, has led composers to explore different tonal centers (or lack thereof) in an effort to

write something new. Composers have utilized pan-tonality, serialism, tone rows, and more to create something different during the early 20th century. Due to this movement away from common or traditional tonalities and the fact that melody and harmony are so closely related, music from the mid-20th century has diminished the use of traditional melodic line or direction. Due to this lack of melodic line and potential disjunct qualities that might stem from the new texture, it might be more difficult for students, conductors, and audience member to understand. As composers continued to experiment with tonal centers and progress through a series of compositional techniques (electronic music, Integral Serialism, and Indeterminacy), some eventually began a return toward tonal centers while continuing the departure from traditional melody. Their music became an experiment in texture, timbre, and the development of timbralphonic textures, or rhythmic, harmonic, linear, and phonic effects to create the sound-picture or sound-color desired and these techniques are becoming more and more apparent in wind band literature from composers such as Michael Daugherty, John Mackey, and Michael Markowski.

Some recent composers have come up with their own name for this new style of writing, such as “texture music” (Auner).

While pursuing very different expressive and stylistic ends, composers of texture music share a fascination with how we experience sounds as they move through time, building and fading, coalescing into stratified layers or thick clouds, or dissolving into particles. A clear measure of this ability to communicate a wide range of emotions, from transcendence to terror, is the ease with which the sounds of texture music have become part of popular culture. (Auner 2013, 235)

What Joseph Auner labels as “texture music” is more of a timbral-based sense of composition and orchestration. In a chapter from his book, *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries*, he focuses on the many different sounds that composers have used recently in their work and how these relate to texture, rather than using texture in the traditional sense of the

word, as it relates to melody.

Today, texture has more to do with sound, or timbre and the metamorphosis of timbre in a given piece of music, than it does an effective melody or counterpoint. The changes in timbre from adjustments in orchestration, intensity, rhythm, articulation, and the many approaches applicable to wind band instruments, such as a muted trumpet, using just the head joint of a flute, a cello bow on a vibraphone, and even the development of new instruments, all contribute to this exploration of timbral texture rather than a particular motive, theme, folk song, or other melodic idea.

Timbre is the “tone colour, that which distinguishes the quality of tone or voice of one instrument or singer from another” (Oxford University Press, 2014). The string orchestra has a much different overall timbre than does a wind band due to the nature of the instrumentation. A string orchestra, being all string instruments, is very different from a wind band, which has nearly all the instruments in the woodwind family (typically flutes, clarinets, double reeds and saxes) in addition to nearly all the brass family (trumpet, french horn, trombone, euphonium, and tuba). This provides the potential of having between 9 and 13 (or more) potential different instruments in the wind band where any combination can create a different sound or timbre. An extreme example of this use of timbre as the main focus of musical composition and cohesion, is done by George Crumb (Ott, 1982). Though we can look at myriad a combination of timbral changes in much of today’s music, it is important to find specific instances in wind band music that may utilize timbre as its main source of tension and release, working in tandem with other elements.

*Remember the Molecule* by Michael Markowski is a piece that “borrows it’s title and much of it’s musical imagery from Norman Maclean’s novella, *A River Runs Through It*” (Markowski,

2013). The important term that he uses here is the word “imagery,” and as he goes on to say in the notes in the music score,

The piece is probably my most organic composition for wind band. I say “organic” because the piece is “through-composed,” which generally means that it was written without any traditional form or musical structure. The piece also doesn’t really have a traditional melody. So what ends up taking the spotlight are the smaller musical ideas. These little motifs, energized with rhythm, combine and entangle themselves to form a larger musical architecture. (Markowski, 2013)

Markowski boldly states that his piece “was written without any traditional form or musical structure” and “doesn’t really have a traditional melody.” In further score study, it becomes clear that there is, in fact, no melodic focus, but there is still a driving force that carries the piece forward. He goes on to say that he uses a three-note motive and concept to shape his piece based on the intervallic relationship of these three notes (Ab, Bb, G). It is also clear that there is a rhythmic focus that is intertwined and passed between voices. He uses these rhythmic effects to create much of the tension and excitement in the piece. The listener may not walk away from this piece humming or singing a melody, as there isn’t one, nevertheless, the audience member may understand the piece and realize its intent further if a description of the work would be provided at each performance. They may then be able to hear the piece as it is intended and may develop a better appreciation for the work.

This type of compositional technique works because our brains always try to make sense of what we hear. Though a traditional melody was not written in Markowski’s piece *Remember the Molecule*, we still hear and follow certain linear lines, harmonic progressions, and rhythmic cadences that bring excitement, direction, and meaning to the piece, therefore making the construction of the composition easier to understand and easier to enjoy.

Jonathan Dunsby tells us, “The exploitation of texture as a structural force in the 19th century dramatic music served to reveal texture’s inherent structural potential within the



mainstream of new Western music, which reached its moment only relatively recently, most conspicuously in those compositions of...Ligeti, which are consciously conceived as textural structures.” (Dunsby 1989, 47-48) We also see this type of writing in other composers such as Oliver Messiaen, Arnold Schoenberg, and Paul Hindemith. Timbralphonic texture, instead of homophony, is becoming the style for composers and the purpose for looking into the ‘absence’ of melody in newer wind band literature. Though, the focus of this paper is that of wind band literature, there is much influence from the orchestral world of composition as many wind band composers have studied with, have been influenced by, or themselves are orchestral composers, it is important to recognize the influence and connection.

The wind band is still a fairly new type of ensemble that some composers may well view as having much untapped potential built into the instrumentation of the ensemble that can be utilized further as something new and effective. These possible changes in timbre between each voice in the ensemble, including percussion, can be explored further, beyond what has already been done. The potential for timbral textures is being examined along with the desired departure from tonal center, clear harmonic progression, and structured melody. Composers that use timbre as an effective element in music are Vincent Persichetti, Michael Markowski, John Corigliano, Joseph Schwantner, and Michael Colgrass, among others.

### **Influences for Change**

The experimentation of timbre as a compositional technique takes root from much of the music in history though it has not truly been explored until recently when composers have found more freedom with their orchestration than ever before.

In three- and four-voice organum by Perotinus from around 1200, sections are differentiated more by textural and rhythmic shifts than by changes in pitch content. In the early 19th century, Beethoven and Rossini wrote passages that rely on rhythm and dynamics to generate momentum; later in the century Wagner’s astonishing Prelude to Das

Rheingold was built on nearly five minutes of a sustained Eb-major triad. And as we have seen, throughout the first half of the 20th century composers developed textural ways of working without functional harmonic progressions, including Debussy's techniques of varying "color and light," Schoenberg's tone-color melody, Stravinsky's explorations of rhythm and layering in the Rite of Spring, Berg's crescendo on a single note in Wozzeck, and Verese's sound masses. (Auner 2013, 236-237)

Today, there are several factors contributing to this trend of moving toward a timbralphonic texture in today's wind band music. Dissecting the stylistic writings of a few particular band pieces to describe which "*timbral-texture units*" (Ott 1982, 6) were used to develop the piece and make it effective can help us identify the timbral-texture units or figures in other genres. For example, in some of Joseph Schwantner's music, he used dissonant long tones in the upper woodwinds, particularly after a forte-piano effect. This type of sound can be found in many film scores from many recent movie soundtracks. Further, we can describe timbral-texture figures as they may relate to potential subjects that the piece may be about. For example, in Nelson's Rocky Point Holiday, he uses many different colors and patterns of sound throughout the piece that represent the many sounds you would hear at a carnival or an amusement park. Incidentally, the piece musically represents Nelson's concept of what it would be like at the amusement park in Rocky Point, Rhode Island when it was most popular.

Sometimes the composer's music is representative of something in particular, as we see in Rocky Point Holiday, or the music may be pulled from a simpler concept, idea, or feeling as we sometimes see in movie soundtracks. There seems to always be a purpose to each timbral-texture figure that helps develop the overall timbralphonic texture within these particular pieces, making this style of music programmatic. However, there are other pieces that use the timbralphonic texture, but are not programmatic in style, such as the music of Vincent Persichetti, in particular *Masquerade* or *Serenade for Band*.

Many of the same timbral-texture figures previously mention throughout this paper, like

rhythmic elements (i.e. ostinatos or various syncopations), complex harmonic color and structure (i.e. dense chords and dissonance), and exciting linear passages (i.e. eighth-note or sixteenth-note running figures) are also included in movie soundtracks, video game scores, and electronic music which are common within the minimalistic genre. These and other possible influences such as the massive amount of electronic music, whether it's dance, minimal looping, house, progressive, dub step, sampling/looping, or ambient electronic music are all contributing factors to the changes seen in music compositions. There are even composers that incorporate digital sounds played from a computer within their compositions. The composers creating music based on timbralphonic texture contribute to the adjustments in compositional approach across the music spectrum. These, and many other influences may be contributing to different compositional techniques as well as the exploration in timbralphonic textures in wind band compositions.

This is a time of change in wind band music. The help of technology, the current abilities of today's wind bands, and the potential instrumentations of the wind ensemble all contribute to the tools a composers has to prompt the emergence of a new style of composition. The wind band as an ensemble is still a fairly new genre and may very well continue to move from it's adolescent stage and grow from experimentation. Further, there are more and more pieces being commissioned for wind band because the ensembles at the university and professional levels are excited about premiering new works whenever they can. The 1967 College Band Director National Association National conference report quoted Paul Bryan, as saying, "that there is a tradition whereby composers are actively encouraged to write for band and that it is in a healthy and advancing stage of development" (Battisti 2002, 78). Today, new pieces for wind band are commissioned on a yearly basis and, naturally, there are some that stand out much more than

others. Some are programmatic, some are more absolute in nature, but many are using timbre as a compositional tool to create in addition to the other musical elements and thus expanding the wind band genre to new musical sounds, expressions, and experiences. It is also exciting that this new style reaches across many genres of music, all influencing the next. “Texture music is thus not simply another “ism,” but a more general manifestation of the new possibilities for creating form, structure, and expression when melodic development and harmonic progression play only a limited role” (Auner 2013, 236).

When listening to a piece of wind band music, as a conductor and educator, high school and college directors should be asking themselves if a particular work is worth focusing upon, listening to, or studying. However, it is important to have an open mind when listening to new works for wind band as they continuously become available. It is nearly impossible to hear a truly new piece of music and determine whether the piece has lasting quality. In a discussion about new music, Bradford Marsalis said in a music documentary, “...if it was *really* new, you’d know it was new when you heard it, and you’d *love* it. That’s a (heck) of an assumption.” His thoughts about new, up and coming artists and the current status of new music in today’s popular music industry, mirrors much of what is going on in many other musical genres as well. Regardless of the genre, if a new piece of music is really new, we may not understand it right away, or much less, like it. Philip Glass said of his music in his documentary, *A Portrait of Philip in Twelve Parts*:

By the time my generation came along, it seemed to us that these ideas were exhausted. So, the idea was to start music in a different place. That meant abandoning a whole array of procedures and techniques, and trying to build something new. What’s interesting is, is that a new language requires a new technique. It’s such an obvious thing in a way. If you don’t need a new technique, than what your saying probably isn’t new. (Hicks 2007)

Composers are once again finding ways to say something new in music composition using tools

that will not only continue to push the genre of wind band music (or even classical music) but more so, will push the listener to experience something new and exciting.

## **Conclusion**

It is the obligation of the conductors, listeners, and educators to grow with the art form rather than deny the progression that has been taking place since the mid-20th century. Music that truly warrants study, discipline, performance and most importantly, understanding and appreciation, are pieces that have musical depth and content. They may be filled with great sound effects and intense harmonic progressions, or fast linear passages, but they may also include simple, yet effective melodic lines. The works may be programmatic, melodic, lyrical, thematic, or timbralphonic, but quality music will speak for itself.

Melody is not missing from our music. There is still music being written with melody flourishing. Only time will tell how memorable today's melodies will be. Though, as time passes, music also progresses, and thus our understanding of timbralphonic texture as a unifying element in the wind band music of today requires the constant ability to think beyond the traditional sense. Timbralphonic textures are not necessarily new, but our understanding and ability to recognize a composer's intent in construction of a piece based on these characteristics of writing with timbral-texture figures is new and further, should become more important in our analysis of these compositions. As conductors and educators, it becomes our responsibility to the musical work and its composer to find understanding of the true intent of the music.

...our way must lead forward. We must show no false conceit of progress; but we must continue to produce to the full extent of our abilities...It is not for us to quarrel with the place history has allotted us; we must maintain that place and fill it. (Bekker 1927, 255)

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