

In the final analysis, Jim McNeely shows with this score why he is considered to be one of the leading influential composers of our time, whose many innovations are illustrated in this score, not the least of which is the value of simple unisons or octave unisons and in developing simple motives.

For additional details, see the analysis of the full score that follows. In an effort to improve legibility, some dynamic markings in a few individual parts have been removed from the original score to make it less visually cluttered. The score is transposed; however, excerpts of some passages appear at the bottom of the score in concert pitch to more easily show analysis of significant aspects of the composition.

Interview with Jim McNeely

Author's note: The interview was conducted both in real time via FaceTime on 12/19/17 and by email, giving the composer time to jog his memory about the creation of this older score.

RL: *While I've followed your work for many years, I'd like to learn more about your influences as writers and teachers. Who and perhaps what music has had an impact on you as a writer?*

JM: In high school, Rev. George Wiskirchen (band director) encouraged me to write; Oliver Nelson [was an influence], and at the University of Illinois Jim Knapp and Morgan Powell, who was also my composition teacher. The Basie band always killed me; I heard them live a couple of times. But the first time I heard Thad and Mel on WAAF in Chicago, probably 1966, set off a little explosion in me. Then, when Thad and Mel's first live album came out, I knew that Thad was "it" for me. There was a density to his writing that I didn't quite figure out, but it also swung like crazy, thanks to Thad's writing, Mel's playing, and the musicians in the band. And the soloists, including Thad, played in a language that reflected what I was hearing in small group recordings at the time.

The next big influence was Bob Brookmeyer. Of course I knew who he was and [had known] his playing and writing since the mid-'60s. But I'd joined Thad and Mel in 1978. Thad left in early '79, and Mel asked Bob to come in as musical director. The music he wrote in those few years, including "First Love Song," "Ding, Dong, Ding," and the *Make Me Smile* album, really turned my head around. Playing his and Thad's music every Monday for years was the greatest arranging lesson of my life.

RL: *Thad certainly did it for all of us. I had no idea you were a Father George disciple.*

Do you remember anything in particular that one of your teachers had you do that had an impact on your writing?

JM: There are two things off hand that come to mind, maybe even three. Number one, Father Wiskirchen had a six or seven line template for how to arrange for marching band. I forget who put that together ... some rather well known figure in the marching band world. When I was a senior, he would have me and a friend of mine write the shows for the marching band, and that was my first experience writing to a deadline. We'd have a meeting on Monday and he'd say, "OK, by next Monday I need ...," and I remember one time he needed thirty-two bars of "She's Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage" to modulate into Coltrane's version of "My Favorite Things," and I played soprano sax. And you know in those days you didn't call some big music publisher and buy it off the shelf, so he would get us to custom write what he needed. And

another time I did an arrangement of “Intermission Riff,” the Kenton thing. It was kind of jazz oriented writing, but it was also writing to a deadline, and it was the first time I had experienced that.

Another thing that he did that really made an impression on me – he called me into his office one day and he said, “I’ve got two of Oliver Nelson’s original scores for things he’s written for Jimmy Smith, I think, or Jimmy McGriff. [RL: *Well, he did a lot of things for Jimmy Smith, just about all his records, so it was probably for him.*] And he said, “Can you copy out the parts? I have to have them back in a couple of days.” I don’t know where he got them and I didn’t ask [laughs]. So I said sure, and there I was at my little clunky spinet piano at home looking at Oliver’s manuscript and checking out the voicings and saying, “Ah ... so that’s how you do that.” So that was a great experience for me. And then I would bring in recordings of things to just try and piss him off! Here I was, this young teenager, getting into these wild things. I brought in an Archie Shepp record because I was into Archie back in those days. I played something for him and thought, “This will really get under his skin,” and he looked at me and said, “Write something like that for the band.” He completely called my bluff. And I did. He was great in that way, encouraging me to write, and that was the first time I had a band at my disposal, and for the day it was a very good high school big band in the Chicago area.

When I got to college, my composition teacher was Morgan Powell, who was writing music that was really in the cracks between big band music and contemporary chamber music. He wrote a massive piece for orchestra, and he had me copy and prepare the score for him. And that was a big thing for me ... looking at how he did things and trying to learn from that. I’ve always found it valuable to look at scores and figure out how they did that. And I also learned to look with my eyes if I’m playing something, and if I heard a sound that is attractive I’d just look up and see who’s playing.

The more I think about it, Wiskirchen really is the guy who messed up my life [laughs]. He’s the reason why I’m doing what I’m doing today; at least he was the first one.

RL: *He was also the first one to write a pedagogical book about running a jazz ensemble in the precollege schools.*

JM: Stage band, as they had to call it back then.

RL: *Yes, and that book was very formative for me when I was working on my first book.*

JM: I think that was his master’s thesis, I think from Quincy College, though I’m not sure. I was impressed because I knew this guy who wrote a book. I was impressed with that, thinking he must be famous. He had a great attitude, too, because I think the few bands around Chicago at that time, the few schools that had bands, those directors were more into Stan Kenton and Maynard Ferguson, and Wiskirchen was into Count Basie and getting the band to swing. He really worked us on that, and that was really valuable.

RL: *Copying parts can really be a valuable exercise. I remember when I was a TA and doing some work for Bill Dobbins. He had transcribed and sort of merged the two recorded versions of George Russell’s “All About Rosie,” and I copied it all in felt tip pen. There was a lot to be learned by doing that, even though I was cursing him under my breath! [laughs]*

Do you see an advantage of writing arrangements as well, and not just focusing your time on composing original work? It’s a lesson I didn’t learn until very late in life. I was always writing original music, though