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# Make a Choir out of Woodwinds

by  
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■ The proposal of any new or unusual instrumental group is inevitably met with, "Don't we have enough performing mediums already?" Adequate literature and tradition do exist for the string, brass, and percussion choirs, but not for the woodwinds. Like the other choirs, there is a strong case for the development of the woodwind choir.

The woodwind choir is an excellent way to teach ensemble playing

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to the entire woodwind section of the band. This type of ensemble training is a vital fundamental of band work. It may also serve as a foundation for the small ensembles that are an important part of any well-rounded instrumental program. Basic elements of ensemble playing can be taught to the entire section and should not be restricted to those who will play in small groups. All woodwind players (as well as brass or percussion) in the band should have essentially the same background and training if they are to function well as a unit. Small ensembles permit the extension of this training for the student with superior talent and experience.

As a performance ensemble, the woodwind choir can be programmed on a band concert or on a program with other ensembles. This group could also perform in concerts outside the school where space restrictions would preclude use of the concert band.

The woodwind player in the concert band needs to work apart from the brass and percussion long enough to study his particular problems and functions. When this work is done in the woodwind sectional

rehearsal, it is advantageous to spend some of the time on woodwind choir music, that is, music written for the entire woodwind section.

The function of the woodwind choir in the concert band is primarily twofold: it adds color to the brass choir, which is the heart of the band sound, and provides the facility demanded by florid passages. These functions can be group-taught in the sectional; however, the woodwind parts may sound incomplete when they are played without brass. Woodwind choir literature, on the other hand, provides completeness and musical independence from the other choirs of the band.

The idea of utilizing the woodwind section of the concert band as a performing and training medium is relatively new. Music has been available for the woodwind choir since the 1930's. The early works did not always include saxophone parts or were otherwise incompletely scored for the woodwind section of the modern concert band. A number of these first arrangements were scored for quintet, with extra parts provided for a modified





woodwind choir. They were, in fact, multi-use arrangements.

In contrast, the brass choir has an extensive literature playable by the full brass section of the band. The same is true of both the percussion and clarinet choirs. While much clarinet choir literature is scored for every conceivable type of clarinet, this literature is restrictive in the concert band context because it includes no flute, double reed, or saxophone parts.

The literature lineage of the woodwind choir dates back to the woodwind music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, and before them to the Mannheim composers. Passages from band and orchestral literature suggest the expressive and coloristic possibilities of the woodwind choir. Its modern proponents can be heard in a range of writing from the French "Garde RépublicaineBande" to the American studio arranger and composer.

The woodwind section of the modern concert band exceeds any reference of the past in size and variety of instruments. It stands as a choir of instruments in the band comprising at least five groupings: flutes, clarinets, oboes, bassoons,

and saxophones. It includes a minimum of three-voice coverage in each group. In optimum circumstances, the flute family would include piccolo, two flute parts, and alto flute. The clarinet family would include E<sup>b</sup> soprano, three B<sup>b</sup> soprano parts, E<sup>b</sup> alto, B<sup>b</sup> bass, E<sup>b</sup> contrabass, and/or BB<sup>b</sup> contrabass. The clarinet section alone represents as many as seven voice possibilities. The oboe family would include two oboe parts plus English horn for trio writing. The bassoon family may include two bassoon and contrabassoon parts for trio voicing. The saxophone family would include soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone for four voice settings. The more common practice of including two altos need not be restrictive when one player can transpose for the soprano saxophone.

Inclusion of all these instruments in any one woodwind choir could be achieved by the doublings. A flutist would double on piccolo, a standard practice. Two flutists would be assigned to double on alto flute, transposing second flute parts when an alto flute part is desired. This practice would add power and an improved timbre to the lower

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parts of the second flute line. The transposition is no more a chore for the flutist than the routine work of French horn players.

The band that cannot spare a full-time player for the E<sup>b</sup> soprano clarinet part can have one person double on that instrument in those special passages in which the E<sup>b</sup> must play alone or in combination with the B<sup>b</sup> sopranos. There are many passages in which the combination of E<sup>b</sup> soprano and B<sup>b</sup> soprano produces a timbre that is more desirable than the sound of two B<sup>b</sup> soprano clarinets.

In the oboe family, one person



could play English horn, transposing the second oboe parts. This would sound much better than the usual two unison oboes. Of course, many works now contain a separate English horn part.

In the saxophone family, one of the alto players could play the B<sup>♭</sup> soprano when the voicing warrants, transposing if a part is not provided. This choice would need to be made wisely. To have an alto part transposed on B<sup>♭</sup> soprano saxophone might be in violation of the voice intent of the arranger or composer. There are many passages, however, to which the color of a soprano saxophone would add an expressive finish. Since soprano parts for other woodwinds are written in B<sup>♭</sup> and C, it should not be difficult to find a score for the soprano player without resorting to copying a part.

In the absence of bona fide parts for this versatile instrumentation, it is not unreasonable to have select players transpose where added color is desirable. Such a solution could have a two-fold effect on woodwind practices. It could bring into more general use marvelous instruments such as the alto flute, English horn, soprano saxophone, and contrabassoon, and it could encourage writers to score for these instruments when they are needed for a particular voicing. Few, if any, contemporary arrangers of woodwind choir music would object to this extension of the instrumentation. Since the composer of contemporary band music generally scores his work for varied instrumentations and levels of competency, it is probably reasonable to assume that he would also be amenable to this

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Perusal of the copyrights issued for full woodwind choir music attests to the fact that the literature has expanded considerably during the last ten years. The release of a recording demonstrating the medium is another sign that this ensemble is gaining acceptance.<sup>1</sup> While no figures are known on the number of secondary schools or universities that actively engage in woodwind choir training and performance, the number of new compositions on the market indicates that interest is increasing.

A survey of the woodwind choir literature is also revealing in several other ways. As might be expected, the ratio of arrangements to originals runs approximately three to one. This segment of the repertoire contains some excellent music that would otherwise be unavailable to the woodwind student. From the teaching standpoint, the playing of arrangements often affords the opportunity to teach with music that requires expressiveness and style.

Several musical periods are represented in the literature. This historical spread provides the teacher with a wide choice in presenting the musical heritage. Undoubtedly, representation and coverage within these historical areas will be strengthened as the literature grows. Works of the impressionist composers will gradually come into the public domain. Hopefully, more arrangements of Romantic literature will be forthcoming.

Regrettably, a survey of the literature reveals that the least activity is in the area of original composition. The five distinct instrument groupings mentioned before, the three voices and no less in each group, the variety of tone colors in families and within each instrument, the extensive technical facility that is possible, and the broad, expressive capability of the woodwinds should present an attractive temptation to the searching composer. *Overture for Woodwinds* by Jerry H. Bilik is an example of original literature that explores and exploits many of the possibilities of the woodwind choir. More such works together with well-wrought

<sup>1</sup>Nilo Hovey conducting, "New Dimensions for Woodwind Choir (LP)," The Bundy Woodwind Ensemble (Elkhart, Indiana: H. & A. Selmer, 1966).

arrangements would give the medium a more thorough and broadly based repertoire. In turn, an increase in quality literature, both arrangements and originals, would stimulate an increase in the number of woodwind choirs.

Another useful source of literature is band music in which the woodwind choir is the predominant feature. Included is music in which the omission of brass or percussion parts does not negate the musical experience. Some of the Percy Grainger compositions are scored with this option in mind. The band arrangement of the *Italian in Algiers* (Rossini-Calliet) is a case in point. This type of literature is particularly useful for teaching purposes, but it might be programmed when appropriate.

The woodwind choir comprises an impressive list of instruments, colors, and voicings. No other choir of instruments contains so many subdivisions, nor does any other contain the wide choice of colors. The observable trend is that more teachers are using this medium. Some cities have honor groups with this instrumentation. In the context of the secondary instrumental program the woodwind choir can be a valuable educational tool. It can serve not only as a base for group ensemble teaching but also as the basis for developing general musicianship. It could also provide effective literature for use on instrumental programs or in other community concerts where this size group can function. Characteristics of ensemble playing that are learned through experience in the woodwind choir are easily transferred to smaller as well as larger groups.

One can predict that band clinics will begin to include a series of sessions covering the woodwind section and that band directors will design woodwind clinics for their own group. At such sessions a woodwind specialist will investigate the special problems and possibilities of these instruments, helping students to play this specialized literature at the same time that he reveals the requirements for effective performance of the woodwind parts for the concert band. Conjecture? Yes, but one could say that such developments are definitely "in the wind." ■