

# From the Score to the Podium

## Conductor's Guide to Score Preparation and Presentation

**James F. Keene**

**An Outline in Four Phases, as presented at the 2009 TBA Convention/Clinic**

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### **First Phase: Initial Preparation**

#### **Step 1: A Commitment to Discipline**

Discipline yourself to work sequentially by the numbers, avoiding the continued temptation to “cut-to-the-chase.” This approach is similar to building something from a kit, thus avoiding the danger of leaving out a few components. Remember that this learning process is and should be “cyclic.”

#### **Step 2: Information from the Composer and Publisher**

- a) Composer dates and bio
- b) Program notes
- c) Who premiered the work, when and for what purpose?

#### **Step 3: Sources/Source Persons**

- a) Did you hear a particular performance of artistic merit, and was the composer directly involved or consulted?
- b) Is there someone who has significant insight on this particular work or composer?
- c) Is there someone who has performed the work and is aware of any errors or revisions in the score and/or parts?
- d) Is the composer living and available for consultation? Don't hesitate to attempt to make contact with composers as questions arise.

#### **Step 4: Bibliography**

- a) General Bibliography
  - b) Selected Bibliography
- Bibliographic reference and research is essential no later than the second perusal and is a continuous/ongoing process not only through the study-analysis phase, but throughout the preparation phase and up to the performance.

#### **Step 5: Perusal**

“Flip through” (straight through) the score. Get the overall “feel” of the work.

#### **Step 6: Second Perusal**

Note key, style, and tempo changes. Sing through sections; note terminology, transitions.

#### **Step 7: Diagram**

Diagram the score on a separate sheet of paper. (You may wish to include “sub charts.”)

Beginning in a very large and general way, indicate measure number of each section. It is advisable not to make many markings in the score early in the study process.

#### **Step 8: Play or Sing**

I encourage both; obviously the piano is the most useful tool in harmonic analysis, but singing, or playing an instrument, contributes expressive and interpretive insights.

The importance of sight singing skills cannot be overemphasized.

### **Second Phase: Analyze - By the Numbers!**

Before this phase begins, recommit to the discipline of tasking BY THE NUMBERS. It will be tempting to skip or avoid steps and tedious details.

#### **Step 9: Thematic Materials**

Find all themes and fragments. Immediately begin to think in terms of allowing the melody to be heard at all times throughout the composition. Look for melodic “references” and important counter-subjects as well.

#### **Step 10: Harmony**

Think *vertically* and be careful that orchestration and instrumentation do not distort or alter composer's intent. (Do not be afraid to use margins to block chords of special or unusual significance. See #10 of Third Phase: Marking the Score.) Study prep should have provided clues regarding the harmonic language.

#### **Step 11: Rhythm and Pace**

Pick apart rhythmic configurations, recurring patterns, incidences of augmentation, diminution, hemiola, etc. Search

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for mathematical relationship between sections, metric modulations, transitions, etc. Pace and plan midpoints of accelerandi, ritards, etc. Are there stylistic implications in the rhythmic motifs and patterns?

#### **Step 12: Texture**

Analyze density, instrumental combinations. Internalize color possibilities. How are the harmonic implications of Step 10 affected by the scoring?

#### **Step 13: Contour**

What is the basic form or “scheme”, highs and lows, tension-release points, etc.? Establish moods in their most simplistic forms.

#### **Step 14: Intent**

The cumulative, albeit cyclic, information of phases one and two—to this point—should now have provided a number of solid conclusions. At this time, we should begin to consolidate these insights in order to make “musical decisions.” Do not hesitate to alter these decisions following Steps 17 and 18 (or even up to the final rehearsal and performance); however, do so based *only* on honest conviction.

#### **Step 15: Dynamics**

Dynamics are subjective and relative within the piece and between players as well as sections and must always fit within (and to the extent of) the composer's intent. This step reinforces the need to be disciplined in our stepwise approach in that Steps 7, 8 and 10 will be determining factors in decisions regarding dynamics.

#### **Step 16: Accents/Style**

Keep in mind such things as stress note grouping and proportion.

#### **Step 17: Technical**

What are the basic and/or subtle technical problems for individuals as well as within and between sections?

A study of each individual part can provide valuable insights on performer's problems ranging anywhere from technique to range, endurance, flexibility, and breathing and even as subtle as page turns.

#### **Step 18: Conducting**

Enough said!

#### **Step 19: Start over and seek outside resources.**

As mentioned earlier, the stepwise study approach is a “cyclic” process and having completed Steps 9-17, a return to the numbers brings new insights as well as reinforcement of previous convictions. Share these ideas with resource persons who may be familiar with the composer, composition or other philosophical and/or historical implications. (It is at this point in the process that recordings should be evaluated and/or dismissed.)

#### **Step 20: Self Evaluation**

Am I actually prepared to hear what should be going on? Am I in a position to approach the rehearsal process with the ability to:

- a) analyze?
- b) diagnose?
- c) prescribe?

### **Third Phase: Marking the Score**

This tends to be an individual process. It is usually better not to make many markings in the score-proper early in the study process (as mentioned in Step 7 of the study prep.) Most conductors experiment with various symbols and markings until finding a system with which they feel comfortable. Some markings and aids include:

1. Colored pencils to color code dynamics e.g.
  - a) Blue - for pp or p
  - b) Red - for ff
  - c) Brown - for mf
  - d) Green - for mp

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2. Felt-tip or "highlighter" for thematic materials
    - a) Pink - primary themes
    - b) Blue - secondary themes
  3. Highlighting soloists in concerti/accompaniments
  4. Inverted L-shape marks for entrances
  5. Abbreviations for instrumentation
  6. Percussion symbols/icons
    - Notation of equipment changes
  7. Triangles and vertical lines for 3's and 2's
  8. Brackets to indicate new sections
  9. Phrasal analysis by measure in bottom margin
  10. Editorial markings and corrections in black, bold felt-tip
  11. Use of margins and empty space to reinforce meter changes; marking new sections; marking additional editorial, interpretive, and programmatic notes; illustrating chords and clusters, etc.
  12. Be careful not to turn score into a "roadmap" or "graffiti billboard." Do not try to compete with Rand McNally!
- D. Does the work have historical, social or national significance?
  - E. Who premiered the work and for what occasion?
  - F. Does the work offer a model of a particular musical form or an important musical style?
  - G. Make it clear that you believe in the piece!
  - H. Isolate and demonstrate important thematic material.
  - I. Familiarize students with programmatic considerations, composer's intent and other aspects of the piece not covered by B, C, or D above.
  - J. Don't hesitate to prepare handouts and have students keep them in their folders for reference.
  - K. Prepare (or have students prepare) a list of descriptive works relating to style, mood, and emotion of the music.
  - L. Use fine recordings for demonstration purposes.
  - M. Point out significant aspects of the work so that the ensemble CAN "see the forest for the trees."
  - N. Expedite the reading process and early rehearsal facility through warm-ups and preparatory exercises employing challenges that will be encountered within the composition key signatures/changes, meters, technique, listening, control, etc.
  - O. Make music, strive for perfection and ENJOY!

### Fourth Phase: Introducing the Music to the Ensemble (and Vice Versa) - Teaching & "Sales"

- A. What are your goals and aspirations?
- B. Does the work offer insight into the work of a significant composer?
- C. Composer bio (anecdotes)

*James E Keene retired in Fall 2008 from the University of Illinois where he held the title of Director of Bands and Brownfield Distinguished Professor of Music. Appointed as director in 1985, he is only the fourth to hold that position since 1905. During his 24-year tenure at Illinois, the Symphonic Band and Wind Symphony, under his direction, have been selected to perform for every major music conference in the U.S. They have toured throughout the country and Great Britain, and his ensembles have produced an extensive recording series on several labels.*

*Professor Keene received his undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Michigan, where he was a student of the legendary William D. Revelli, Elizabeth A. H. Green, and Larry Teal. He returned to his alma mater in 1973 to serve a two-year tenure as Assistant Director of Bands. In addition, he has produced outstanding programs at all levels and prior to his appointment at Illinois, his career highlights include building nationally acclaimed ensembles at East Texas State (now Texas A&M-Commerce) and the University of Arizona.*

*Keene is Past-President of ABA, NBA and The Big Ten Band Directors Association. For several years, he served as chairman of the ABA/Ostwald Composition Contest, and is currently a member of the Editorial Board of The Journal of Band Research. In addition to membership in several professional and honorary societies, Mr. Keene is an Evans Scholar, a Past-President of the Champaign Rotary Club, and a Paul Harris Fellow of the Rotary International Foundation. In 1993 Professor Keene was named as an honorary member of the Board of Directors of the International Percy Grainger Society in recognition of his devotion to the music of Grainger. He also serves on the Board of Directors of the John Philip Sousa Foundation and the historic Goldman Memorial Band of New York City. In 2002 Keene was named a TBA Honorary Life Member.*