

A Composer You Should Be Playing: Jess Langston Turner's Music For Wind Band

Dr. Tamey Angley

Finding high quality literature to perform with your concert band should be a career on its own. There are a multitude of resources listing the “best in band literature”, but these lists usually only include pieces written before 2010. While the band standards of the 20th century should be ever-present in your concert rotations, so should new music. To have a balanced music education curriculum in your band program, it is recommended to vary time periods so that our students have a well-rounded knowledge of basic music history.

Shuffling through the endless amounts of newly commissioned band pieces can be difficult, especially for a middle school or high school band. However, in the past decade, a pattern has begun to emerge—high quality composers composing for all levels of bands. John Mackey, Steven Bryant and Carter Pann are great examples of composers who are being commissioned to write works of the highest level for ensembles ranging from university wind ensemble to middle school region honor band. There is a new, young composer that should soon be added to this list: **Jess Langston Turner.**

Each fall semester, our band department at Stephen F. Austin State University organizes a residency for a guest composer. We schedule it to coincide with either a Wind Ensemble concert, our premier group, or a Wind

Symphony and Symphonic Band concert, our second and third groups. We feel it is important for all three of our concert bands to gain experience from working with a guest composer, so we program pieces for all three

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concert bands from the composer's list of works. However, it can be difficult to find high quality compositions ranging from grade 3 to grade 6 for the three ensembles to perform. In the past, we have hosted outstanding composers that have achieved great success with their compositions: Frank Ticheli, John Mackey, Michael Daugherty, Steven Bryant and Kevin Walczyk.

In the fall of 2015, however, we brought in a newly graduated doctoral

student from Indiana University named Jess Langston Turner. Being the son of a band director, he began studying music at a young age and completed his bachelor's and master's degrees in trumpet performance. However, he composed throughout his undergraduate and graduate years and won national composition awards. These awards include first place in the MTNA Young Artist Composition Award, finalist in the NATS Art Song Composition Contest, the John Ness Beck Award for choral composition, finalist for the ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composer Awards, the Walter Beeler Memorial Prize, and the Merrill-Jones award for best composition for young band. We noticed he had recently been receiving multiple performances of his grade 6 piece, *Rumpelstilzchen*, throughout the country. What we found in Turner's list of works was a wide variety of high quality music written for varying grade levels including three grade 4 pieces: *Noche Triste*, *Oh, What a Morning!*, and *The King of Love My Shepherd Is*.

Written in 2013, *Noche Triste* (translated “the night of sorrows”) refers to an important event during the Spanish conquest of Mexico that occurred on June 30, 1520. It uses standard wind instrumentation along with string bass and piano. The percussion utilizes a wide variety of standard and non-standard

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instruments, such as a wood plank struck with wooden rods. The percussion and piano are of the utmost importance for the success of this piece.

Turner is very successful at achieving the desired mood of this programmatic piece without the high level of difficulty. He creates interesting colors throughout the ensemble by his mix of orchestration, muted brass and percussion instruments. The piece is structured in many sections that include multiple tempi, styles and dynamic ranges. There are many opportunities for individual playing with solos and independent entrances within sections of instruments. It also includes aleatoric techniques in the clarinets and percussion, which provide an opportunity to teach aleatoric music to a younger band. The piece concludes with the band vocally humming a unison 3-note motive with percussion and piano building in intensity underneath. *Noche Triste* is a very creative and fulfilling piece for both the students and the conductor.

Oh, What a Morning! was also written in 2013 and is characterized as a spiritual for wind band. Turner references traditional African-American spiritual texts about the image of the dawn of a new morning and the rejoicing that comes thereafter. The instrumentation is similar to *Noche Triste*, except the piano is not used in a soloistic manner. There is a wide use of percussion again, but the instruments are more standard than in *Noche Triste*. *Oh, What a Morning!* opens with a saxophone quartet statement of a chorale melody. It is beautifully balanced and is a wonderful feature for your saxophone section. The faster-paced celebration section features three soloists while the remainder of the band stomps and claps. The three solo instruments are clarinet, alto saxophone and trombone and the solos are written out to sound like jazz improvisation. I have recommended this piece to numerous conductors for honor bands and spring concerts because of its versatility and accessibility. Again, Turner balances a beautifully crafted composition with achievable technical demands that is perfect for younger bands.

Arranged for wind ensemble in 2008, *The King of Love My Shepherd Is* is based on an old Irish hymn tune of the same name. Turner arranged the wind ensemble setting

from a choir arrangement by Dan Forrest, one of Turner's former composition professors. Turner uses standard wind band instrumentation along with string bass. There are not as many percussion instruments in this composition as well as no piano. The score states the piece is a grade 5, but it is listed as a grade 4 on Turner's website. Technically and musically speaking, *The King of Love My Shepherd Is* should be categorized as a grade 4. However, the first two-thirds of the piece are in D major. This is not a key that younger students play very often, if ever. I hope conductors do not shy away from this piece due to the key, but choose to use it as a teaching tool for their students to feel more comfortable playing in D major. I found it to be a great motivation for us to do daily scale work and technique exercises in the key of D major. Similar to *Noche Triste*, there are many opportunities for individual playing with solos and independent entrances within sections of instruments. Turner also features the woodwind and brass families separately within different styles. This is a beautiful setting of a chorale that has possibility for multiple educational and musical achievements for a younger band.

If you are looking for a new composer to champion or just one new piece for your spring concert, you should listen to Jess Turner's music. He has a very bright future and a distinct musical voice. You can find more information about Jess Langston Turner at his website bluejaywaymusic.com.

Dr. Tamey Anglley is the Assistant Director of Bands at Stephen F. Austin State University. She began her tenure at SFA in 2011 and conducts the Symphonic Band and Basketball Pep Bands as well as serving as instructor of undergraduate instrumental conducting at SFA. Prior to her appointment at SFA, Anglley was Director of Bands at Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa, where she oversaw the winds/brass/percussion department including concert, athletic, and jazz bands and all instrumental music education courses. From 2006-2009, Anglley was a Doctoral Conducting Teaching Assistant at Texas Tech University where she studied with Dr. Sarah McKoin. While at Texas Tech, Anglley worked with the four university bands, the Goin' Band from Raiderland, and the basketball pep bands. She was also awarded the Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant Award for the School of Music in 2009. From 2003-2006, Anglley was Associate Director of Bands at Cooper High School in Abilene, Texas. Anglley is an active clinician and teacher, conducting honor bands and clinicing band programs in Texas, Oklahoma, Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota.