Northsong

Neal Endicott

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NORTHSONG

Neal Endicott, M.M.
Western Michigan University, 2015

_Northsong_ is a 20 minute tone poem for Wind Ensemble based on the landscapes of northern Michigan and my own personal and musical background. The piece takes its name from a melody that I composed during my undergrad while recovering from back surgery in Traverse City. Unable to actually play any of my instruments, I started composing for the first time. In addition to a number of jazz and saxophone quartet arrangements, I wrote a short melody that reflected my mood while I was stuck inside during a snowstorm. I titled the melody _Northsong_, but didn’t know what to do with it at the time. In deciding what to compose for my thesis, I settled on a piece of an autobiographic nature, and _Northsong_ seemed like a natural melody to use as a basis for the piece.

The piece uses a standard Wind Ensemble instrumentation that is expanded through the addition of Alto Flute, Contrabass Clarinet, Contrabassoon, Soprano Saxophone, and Piano and is divided into four main sections. The first three sections represent landscapes: a forest, Sleeping Bear Dunes, and the many rivers and lakes of the region. The final section is the unadorned _Northsong_ melody.
NORTHSONG

by

Neal Endicott

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate College in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Music
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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Richard Adams, D.M.A, Chair
Dr. Lisa Coons, Ph.D
Dr. Scott Boerma, D.M.A
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Neal Endicott
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Instrumentation

Piccolo (doubling flute 4)
Flute 1 (doubling alto flute)
  Flute 2
  Flute 3
  Oboe 1
  Oboe 2
English Horn
Bb Clarinet 1 (doubling Eb Clarinet)
  Bb Clarinet 2
  Bb Clarinet 3
  Bb Clarinet 4
  Bass Clarinet
Contrabass Clarinet (doubling Bass Clarinet 2)
  Bassoon 1
  Bassoon 2
  Contrabassoon
Soprano Saxophone
Alto Saxophone
Tenor Saxophone
Baritone Saxophone

Trumpet in Bb 1
Trumpet in Bb 2
Trumpet in Bb 3
Trumpet in Bb 4
  Horn in F 1
  Horn in F 2
  Horn in F 3
  Horn in F 4
Trombone 1
Trombone 2
Bass Trombone
  Euphonium
  Tuba

Piano

Timpani
5 Percussion

1
Notes on Instrumentation

*Northsong* is orchestrated to be played by one person on each part. The flute 2 and 3, clarinet 2 and 3, bassoon 1 and 2, alto saxophone, trumpet 2-4, horns, trombone, euphonium, and tuba parts can be doubled without affecting the overall balance too much, though there are moments that the conductor will need to adjust the balance. Under no circumstances should the flute 1, clarinet 1, soprano saxophone, trumpet 1, or contra parts be doubled. The tenor saxophone part is more active and soloistic than in most pieces, and the conductor may want to assign the part to a different player, though the overall skill level needed to perform this piece may not make this necessary.

A minimum of 6 percussionists are needed to effectively play the piece; one on timpani and 5 to fill out the remaining parts. More may be used, but will find the parts to be fairly sparse, as instruments are frequently used for only a few bars at a time.

The percussionists should set up in an arc behind the winds in score order (perc 1 near the outside) in order to facilitate the sharing of several instruments. Two sets of windchimes, three triangles, and two suspended cymbals are needed to perform the piece. One suspended cymbal, the tam-tam, bass drum, xylophone, vibraphone, and chimes can be shared between adjacent percussionists.
Percussion Maps

Percussion 1
marimba, triangle, suspended cymbal,
3 Chinese Gongs (SML), snare drum, tam-tam

Percussion 2
xylophone, vibraphone, triangle, claves,
bass drum, tam-tam

Percussion 3
xylophone, vibraphone, windchimes,
2 log drums, bass drum

Percussion 4
crotale, sizzle cymbal, ride cymbal,
suspended cymbal, snare drum, vibraslap

Percussion 5
glockenspiel, chimes, triangle, suspended
cymbal, windchimes, 4 toms, 2 woodblocks
Performance Notes

There are few extended techniques/non-conventional notations used throughout this piece, but they merit an explanation:

- Slap Tongue (Saxophones)

- Key Slaps (Flutes)

- Key/Valve clicks

- Breath Sounds
  - Woodwinds; finger specified note and blow air

- Brass; depress all valves 1/2 way and blow air

- “Break Everything”
  - This instruction is given following a dynamic of **ffff** at the final climactic moment of the piece. Every instrument should play as loud as they can with good tone. Low brass should put a good deal of edge on their notes. Contrabass Clarinet, Contrabassoon, Baritone Saxophone, Bass Trombone, and Tuba should be the loudest voices.
  - At the same time, percussion 1 will play rapid patterns of Chinese Gongs. This pattern should crescendo through the bar as much as possible
Program Notes

*Northsong* is a piece that had been in gestation for quite a while before I actually began to write it. The primary theme of the piece, the actual melody that I call “Northsong,” was written while I was recovering from back surgery in Traverse City. Unable to actually play any of my instruments, I started composing for the first time. In addition to a number of jazz and saxophone quartet arrangements, I wrote a short melody that reflected my mood while I was stuck inside during a snowstorm. That melody, which is meant to feel warm, while the material around it swirls coldly, was set aside, since I didn’t know what to do with it at the time. I’ve come back to it on multiple occasions, but have never been able to find where it belongs.

In contemplating what kind of piece to write for my thesis, I was struck by the notion that I should finally make something of *Northsong*. After all, the piece is representative of my initial foray into composition as well as being reflective of my roots in Northern Michigan. With that thought, the structure of this piece came rather quickly as a tone poem based on the natural environment of Northern Michigan.

The piece has five main sections: forests, dunes, rivers and lakes, winter, and “Northsong.” The first section, which, like the main theme of the piece, is also drawn from previous material (in this case, a number of sketches for a brass fanfare that never happened), is depictive of the woods behind my parents’ house on Old Mission Peninsula. In this section I rely heavily on wooden sounds—xylophone, marimba, log drums, clarinets, bassoons, etc.—and on imitation of natural sounds: one of the key
themes is a short figure in the flutes based on a bird-call. Since my walks through these woods were often accompanied by the sound of my father practicing his trumpet in the background, the melodic content of the section is based on a number of jazz licks and patterns, and several jazz harmonies and voicings are used.

The second main section is based on hiking over Sleeping Bear Dunes. Unquestionably one of the most beautiful places in the world, Sleeping Bear has long been one of my favorite places and contrasted well in my mind against the more solitary nature of the woods. The section is comprised of mostly rising melodic lines traded between different tone colors representing the rise and fall of the dunes and the ever-shifting landscape. The section ends, as do the dunes, with a cascade down into the water.

The water section of the piece—rivers and lakes—is slightly more amorphous than the previous two sections, though it does eventually weave itself into a cohesive melody, which represents a lake. The lake melody was initially written to represent Torch Lake, but is far less specific in the actual context of the piece. Towards the end of this section I combine a number of melodies from previous sections and layer them on top of the lake theme. This dissonance gradually builds into the penultimate section, which is a representation of winter weather: cold, dissonant, and constantly shifting. The section climaxes with a large tone cluster that gives way to the final section, which is the unadorned “Northsong” melody.