

Commission a Composition - and Create a Lasting Legacy . . .

Bruce Wilson

25 years ago, Melvin West was invited to participate in a choir festival at Shenandoah Valley Academy. In the concert, given in the spring 1986, a work of his for choir and organ, There's a Wideness, was presented. The inspiration of that event for festival students and their directors led to a series of commissions for pieces for choir and band festivals at SVA and appearances by guest conductors that continued until 1997. In the following article, Bruce Wilson, SVA band director at that time and now Washington Adventist University band director talks about that experience and subsequent works he commissioned as a college band director.

In the spring of 1986, I invited James Curnow, a well known American band composer, to write a sacred work to be played at a band festival in the spring of the following year that would include students from nearby academies and be hosted by Shenandoah Valley Academy.

Curnow accepted and in his role as festival guest conductor directed the world premiere of that work. It was a wonderful experience and the start of regional band festivals hosted by SVA. It was also the beginning of a series of commissions for several new sacred band pieces for festivals at SVA then and later for my band at Columbia Union College, now Washington Adventist University.

For many years, quality arrangements of and fantasias based on hymns for band were in short supply. The need for music in that area made sacred music the genre of choice for commissions and led to the addition of thirteen new works. The Curnow commission, titled *Psalm Tune Variations*, was a set of three variations based on the old American Psalm Tune "Pleading Savior," a hymn that had first appeared in Leavitt's

collection, *Christian Harmony*, published in New York in 1831.

The text usually associated with this tune is "Hail, Thou Once Despised Jesus" by John Bakewell. Jenson Music (owned now by Hal Leonard Music) published this arrangement and the piece sold out within 8 months of publication.

During the final rehearsal at the festival, Curnow spoke with the students regarding the song and how he wrote it. He also remarked, "You students probably don't realize how fortunate you are to be attending Christian schools where you can learn about God and speak of his love freely." It was a special moment in the festival.

Two years later, I contacted popular American composer Claude T. Smith to write our commission. He graciously agreed and said he had several commissions he was working on and would get me the music by the middle of January.

In December of that year, Smith's wife phoned me and told me that he had come home from a rehearsal for a Christmas program and lain down on the floor in his study to rest for a moment as he was not feeling well.

She checked on him 5 minutes later and found that he had died of a heart attack. She reported that he had only sketched in a title on our commission, *Hymn for a Festival*, not mentioning the hymn tune or his plans about it.

I immediately called a young composer, David Shaffer, who was writing for C.L. Barnhouse Music Publishers at the time. He accepted the commission and wrote a fanfare and short development based on the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers." It features opening and closing brass and percussion fanfares and woodwinds on the hymn tune.

Inside the front page of the score, Mr. Shaffer mentions the death of Claude Smith and how he had the privilege of finishing the project. C.L. Barnhouse published the piece under Claude Smith's original title, *Hymn for a Festival*, and it is still available from Barnhouse.

In 1990 Calvin Custer agreed to write our hymn arrangement. He was the director of the Syracuse Symphony and had written a considerable amount of band music for both Belwin and Hal Leonard Music. Of all of the composers, he was the most humorous and was a real

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character. I met him at the airport and found him wearing a French beret and smoking a cigar. His intellect was obvious, as was his humor. He had done some nice fantasias on hymn tunes, so I asked him if he would write in that form. He called me and told me his choice was *Overture On "Break Forth Thou Wondrous Heavenly Light."* I could not find the history of it anywhere and discovered that he had miss-named the tune. It should have been "*Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light.*".

The tune was written by Johann Schop in 1641 and harmonized by Johann S. Bach in 1734. Custer's fantasia on the hymn was a wonderful piece, but for some reason he never submitted it for publication and as far as I know, I have the only copy.

Two years later, I contacted Jared Spears. I had always enjoyed doing his music, which often featured percussion, one of my stronger sections that year. Spears decided to do a fantasy on the 15th century Agincourt Hymn by John Dunstable and titled it *Deo Gratius* (*Thanks be to God*).

It is an exciting and emotionally moving work, percussive in nature. It opens with the winds playing in unison with a medieval effect and then continues with a 6/8 section where the original tune is developed. It was published by Queenwood/KJOS Music Publications and is still available from the publisher.

Our 1995 festival featured a very seasoned and well known American composer, Warren Barker. During the 1960's Barker wrote many classic TV theme songs for popular programs including *The Flying Nun*, *Daktari*, *That Girl*, and *Bewitched*. For the latter he wrote the little xylophone motif that played whenever Samantha (Elizabeth Montgomery) wiggled her nose to cast

a spell. He told me that he is still getting royalty checks for *Bewitched* re-runs and the twitch of her nose.

He retired from the studio scene in the early 1980s and devoted his time thereafter to writing and conducting original compositions for concert bands and wind ensembles. For our particular commission, I specifically asked him to write a set of variations for the hymn tune "Hyfrydol" and sent him a copy of the hymn "Alleluia, Sing to Jesus" from the 1984 Adventist hymnal.

The result, *Festive Alleluia*, immediately became one of my all-time favorites. The composition, which opens with a brief statement of the theme by the trumpets, is followed by the complete tune stated first in the flutes and clarinets and then by unison trumpets with a counter melody in the saxophones and horns. Both woodwind and brass sections develop the melody further, a fugue is introduced in the middle section, and the work concludes with a triumphant chorus.

Although listed by the publisher as a grade three work, it is really a grade higher in difficulty because of certain woodwind passages, high register playing in the brass, and exposed solo parts requiring good players. It took some time to work out all of the "kinks" in rehearsals, but it was very rewarding musically. It was published by TRN Music in 1995 and is still available.

While all of my commissions included a "commissioned by" on the score and all of the parts, Barker never gave the needed information to them so it isn't listed on the work. The *Instrumentalist* in a review of the piece stated that it should be on state contest required music lists.

In 1997, I contacted Stephen Bulla, a fairly new band composer writing for Curnow Music Press. I had earlier noticed that he had written several hymn arrangements for band and after some research found that he had actually

been writing brass band arrangements for Salvation Army brass bands for years (he and Curnow had both grown up in the Salvation Army Church). Bulla at that time was staff arranger and composer for the "president's own" United States Marine Band. He had recently worked directly with film score legend John Williams and had transcribed music from *Star Wars* and *Catch Me If You Can* for performances by the Marine Band with Williams conducting.

His musical arrangements had also been featured on the PBS television series *In Performance at The White House* and performed by many artists including Sarah Vaughan, The Manhattan Transfer, Mel Torme, Doc Severinsen, Nell Carter, and Larry Gatlin. Although he came with plenty of pedigree, I found him to be a soft-spoken Christian who was delighted to write for and direct our festival band.

I chose the hymn *The Morning Trumpet*, an early American revival hymn sung by Adventists during the formative years of the church. John Leland, an early nineteenth-century Baptist preacher in Culpepper County, Virginia, not far from where SVA is located, had written the tune in 1833. It has a primitive melodic quality and was first published in *The Sacred Harp*. Bulla developed it through a set of contrasting variations. It was published by CMP and is still in print.

Five years passed. I left SVA and moved to Washington, D.C., to teach at Columbia Union College, now Washington Adventist University. I decided to continue with the commissions for our Columbia Union Music Festival. Since the college band was now involved, the grade level for the commissions moved up a level to four or more. Since Bulla lives in the area, I contacted him in the summer of 2001 with an offer of a commission for a work to be performed in 2002.

When the tragedy of September 11 happened, I called him right away and observed that "considering the current events, I think a patriotic piece would be appropriate." He agreed and wrote *Trilogy Americana*, a composition featuring three patriotic hymns, "Faith of Our Fathers," "God of Our Fathers" (our national hymn), and "My Country 'Tis of Thee."

The three hymns are joined continuously to form a three-movement overture with contrasting moods and styles. Traditional hymns and patriotic themes are the backbone of a solidly arranged work that combines stirring fanfares and stately themes to provide a dramatic and moving effect. It was published in 2002 by CMP and is still available.

For the 2004 festival I went with another CMP writer, James L. Hosay. His first music writing job was as music copyist for the U.S. Army Band (Pershing's Own) in Washington, D.C. This enabled him to work toward his ultimate goal of becoming an arranger for the U.S. Army Band; he is now Staff Arranger/Composer for the U.S. Army Band. After publishing two pieces as a freelance composer, he signed an exclusive contract with CMP.

I asked Hosay to choose his own hymn tune, and he wrote a descriptive piece about Christ's crucifixion, titled *Were You There? (The Crucifixion Saga Told Through Spirituals)*. The work tells the story of the crucifixion using the well-known and beloved spirituals "Were You There?," "Deep River," "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," and "All My Trials Will Soon Be Over."

They are masterfully woven together in this powerful and moving work. The finale depicts the nails being driven in by the percussion section using a steel pipe being repeatedly struck by a large hammer. When the last sounds died away into

silence, the audience was stunned, many in tears. It is an extremely effective and beautiful grade four work.

It was submitted to CMP for publication in the spring of 2004, but because of recent restrictions placed on public schools about performing Christmas or sacred music, Curnow said the piece would not make a profit and declined to print it. He also stated that the twelve-minute work would affect production and pricing and further reduce sales. Hosay, believing in the piece, shortened it to 9 minutes trying not to disturb his original intent and made the piece available through his web site www.jameshosay.com.¹

In 2005, I asked Timothy Rumsey, a young Adventist band director and composer, to write a grade 4 1/2-5 work for my college band. Tim, a gifted composer had written a brass fanfare for me earlier, so I knew about his ability. A graduate of Union College who is now teaching at Bass Memorial Academy in Mississippi, his compositions have been performed by the Czech Philharmonic, London Chamber Group, Nebraska Brass, Paradigm Vocal Ensemble, and Voice of Praise and in numerous universities and churches throughout the country.²

He chose to do *Variations on "God of Our Fathers"*. Brilliant fanfares and soaring melodic lines frame four sets of variations in this showpiece for advanced concert band. Variation one features woodwinds and the clarinet choir, variation two highlights the full band and brass, variation three features percussion (4-hand marimba) and the fourth variation includes an optional organ part.

He has published this 7 1/2 minute grade five piece under his own publishing company, *Laudation Music*. You can view the score and listen to a recording of the premier by the WAU Concert Winds at: www.laudationmusic.com

In the fall of 2005, I had an older adult tuba player, Clayton Nunes, in the CUC band who had composed and arranged a considerable amount of choral and orchestral music for his church in his native Brazil.³ He approached me about the possibility of writing a Christmas piece for our band and I agreed.

When he told me he had written an arrangement of *Angels We Have Heard On High*, my immediate reaction was that we probably didn't need another arrangement of this often-sung carol. However, after the initial reading with the band I was impressed with his fresh and exciting version of that old carol. It is a grade 3 1/2 piece that sounds like a grade four. I have the only copy of the piece and would be happy to share since it is not copyrighted.

The commissioned work for the 2006 band festival was prepared by gifted composer and arranger Jay Dawson. When I had initially contacted him in the previous year, he responded he was too busy, but later agreed to rework a marching band arrangement of *Go Tell it On the Mountain* for concert band. I had played many of his arrangements through the years and knew that he would write something special.

The work starts out as a straightforward chorale and then segues into an exuberant upbeat 1960's Soul Music swing arrangement. It's a rousing number that the players and audience enjoyed. A complete MP3 recording and a free CD of the arrangement is available at www.arrangerspublishingcompany.com.

When it came time to start thinking about the 2008 commission, I went back to Stephen Bulla's brass band arrangements, which I enjoy so much, and listened to one in particular, *Commitment*. It has a beautiful

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melody and features a euphonium solo with brass band. Being a euphonium player, I couldn't resist asking Bulla if he would re-arrange it for wind band. Bulla quickly agreed to do so and then asked if I would be willing to play the solo part while he conducted.

Since at the time I was only five years away from retiring, I thought it was a great idea and possibly one of my last chances to do something like this, so I agreed. Lloyd Scott, a musical Salvation Army officer, wrote the words and music for *Commitment*, which is found in the *Salvation Army Hymnal*. Bulla, who knew him personally, was pleased to make an expanded arrangement for our festival concert band. It will be published in 2011 by Landmark Publishing in London. Bulla can be reached at bullamusic@comcast.net.

Every December, Hosay, who wrote music for the 2004 band festival, and I would get together at the Mid-West Band Clinic in Chicago and chat about his music. He told me he wanted to do one more commission for me, so we agreed he would be the composer for 2010. He asked me what hymn I would like to use, and I decided on *I Vow to Thee My Country*, a setting of Hymn 648 in the *Adventist Hymnal*.

This patriotic hymn of Great Britain was created in 1921 when Gustav Holst set a Sir Cecil Spring-Rice poem to the melody he had written in an earlier work, *The Planets*. The words describe how a Christian owes his loyalties to both his homeland and the heavenly kingdom. The last verse, "And there's another country," is

a reference to heaven. The final line, based on Proverbs 3:17, reads, "Her ways are ways of gentleness and all her paths are peace."

In Hosay's extended arrangement of the hymn, it is transformed into an American patriotic work, depicting various periods in American history. The opening variation of the primary theme is presented by the flute and drums of the Native Americans, followed by a variation with fifes (represented here by piccolo and flute) and drums from the Colonial period. More modern sounds are heard as America weaves through the Industrial Age and into the modern era and the piece ends with a presentation of the hymn and a grand conclusion. It is a stirring and powerful arrangement of a beautiful song.

The commissioning of works by composers has proven to be a wonderfully rewarding experience for me personally and for the students. How many times in their lives do students get to work with nationally noted composers and hear them talk about the music, how they wrote it, and how it should be performed? Commission a composition - and create not only a unique experience for yourself and your students, but a lasting musical legacy.

1. The work is listed under published works at his website. The PDF version is \$90 and you can print out your own parts and score (oversized). You can purchase parts and a spiral bound score for \$140. He can be contacted by phone at 757-405-5581, or through email at jhosay@yahoo.com.
2. A full biography for Rumsey is at the IAMA website: www.iamaonline.com.
3. A full biography for Clayton Nunes can be found at the IAMA website: www.iamaonline.com.



Bruce Wilson is an associate professor and band director at Washington Adventist University. He started commissioning works in his first year at Shenandoah Valley Academy, where he taught and chaired the department for thirteen years. During his tenure at SVA his bands received numerous superior ratings and first place awards. Prior to that he taught at academies in California, Tennessee, and Washington state for fifteen years.

Wilson received a BS degree in music education at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska. He started graduate study at the University of Tennessee and completed a master's degree at the Shenandoah Conservatory of Music. He has since done doctoral work at Catholic University in Washington, D. C.

In addition to teaching, Wilson has written and arranged over sixty works for brass choir. In more than thirty-five years of teaching his bands have gained recognition for their musical playing of new and challenging works. The WAU band is a yearly feature at the Pageant of Peace Christmas program at the White House and travels internationally in alternate years. Four of those tours have been in Europe.

Wilson frequently adjudicates at band festivals throughout the United States and guest conducts at concerts and festivals. He also continues to perform on a regular basis in area brass ensembles.

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Band Commissions/Premiers

1987 James Curnow	<i>Psalms Tune Variations</i>	2004 James L. Hosay	<i>Were You There?</i>
1989 David Shaffer	<i>Hymn for a Festival</i>	2005 Timothy Rumsey	<i>Variations on God of Our Fathers</i>
1991 Calvin Custer	<i>Overture: "Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light"</i>	2005 Clayton Nunes	<i>Angels We Have Heard on High</i>
1993 Jared Spears	<i>Deo Gratias</i>	2006 Jay Dawson	<i>Go Tell It on the Mountain</i>
1995 Warren Baker	<i>Festive Alleluia</i>	2008 Bulla	<i>Commitment</i>
1997 Stephen Bulla	<i>The Morning Trumpet</i>	2010 Hosay	<i>I Vow to Thee My Country</i>
2002 Bulla	<i>Trilogy Americana</i>		