

Writing for COMA

by Diana Burrell, Open Score Artistic Director 2003-4

The first in a two-part series

Amateur musicians bring a passion and commitment to their art that is not necessarily always there in the professional world, and for this reason - even if there were no other, they are a joy to work with. They are usually up for anything! and composers often discover a certain freedom in their approach to writing for COMA which in turn helps develop their compositional technique and informs their future pieces for professional groups. It is a good experience.

However, when writing for COMA there are two things one must never lose sight of, and these are **technical difficulties and scoring**.

1. Technical Difficulty

Some COMA players will be very good, others less able, and some might have been learning only a few weeks; it is important to find a way of dealing with this. At any rate, one 'difficulty' at a time is best - if there is to be a slightly tricky rhythm, then the pitch should be easy, and conversely, if players have to concentrate on placing awkward intervals, then they shouldn't have to worry about counting. Professional players are able to deal with all these things at the same time, but amateur players however musical and intelligent (and COMA has some of the most intelligent people I know among its ranks) don't necessarily play regularly enough together to build up this skill. This goes for the physical aspect as well. Unless - as is the case with professional players - one plays every day, it is extremely tiring to hold a violin or viola up for a long time without a break, and a wind or brass player needs frequent spaces in which to breathe. These are issues which crop up in 'minimal' type of pieces where the notes and rhythms look temptingly easy, but where the relentless repetitive movement can cause real physical problems.

Amateur musicians care immensely about what they do, and the first job of any composer writing for them is to make them sound as confident and as good as possible at all times. Musical examples of pieces written for COMA which illustrate some of the above-mentioned points:

PHILIP CASHIAN *The Forest of Clocks*

This is a successful mix of precisely notated music/mobiles/improvised music which makes the orchestra sound good. It is for a large group of players and singers, and is, in fact, quite precisely scored.

Consider bar 202 onwards:

[Example 1, below. *Cashian* p30]

Here there is an 'unusual' and therefore slightly 'difficult' rhythm, but the pitches are easy and the pattern repeats enough times for it to feel natural.

Bar 291:

[Example 2, right. *Cashian* p39]

Here, a combination of different and simple rhythmic patterns produces a pleasing 'complex' texture. When the choir enters, they have heard their pitches already so there are no problems finding the notes.

Philip Cashian, *The Forest of Clocks*, example 1, below and example 2, above, both reproduced by kind permission of the composer

Not fast.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for five staves. At the top, it says "Not fast." in a box. The staves are numbered 3 and 4 in a box on the left. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like "mf". There are also some handwritten annotations like "etc." and "mf" written in the margins.

DIANA BURRELL *Anima*

This illustrates the opposite point from the Cashian, i.e. finding pitches but in the context of an easy rhythm. It is quite difficult in this opening section for the violas to pitch their Bflat against the violins B in bar 3, and for the 2nd violins to find F while the 1sts are playing Fsharp in bar 4. However, the rhythm is very straightforward and all the rather unusual harmonies are 'grounded' by the repeated C in the double bass part.

[Example 3. Burrell p1]

Example 3, *Anima*, Diana Burrell: page 1, opening bars
Reproduced by kind permission of United Music Publishers Ltd

First Entry

Slow

The image shows a musical score for three staves. It starts with a double bar line and a key signature of one flat. The tempo is marked "Slow". The first staff has a dynamic marking of "pp sempre". The second staff has a dynamic marking of "pp". The third staff has a dynamic marking of "repeat ad lib." and ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Example 4, *A Bhirlinn Taibhseil*, William Sweeney: last page, 'Harmony' section
Reproduced by kind permission of the composer

WILLIAM SWEENEY *A Bhirlinn Taibhseil*

A wonderful example of a piece where the beginners actually have an important role. They play a simple modal melody which can be learnt by heart if a player doesn't yet read music fluently and which fits underneath all the more complex sections. It is this melody that finishes the work, the other players having stopped, thus beautifully illustrating the point that all the players are valuable no matter what their ability and experience.

Writing for COMA

by Diana Burrell, Open Score Artistic Director 2003-4

The second in a two-part series

Amateur musicians bring a passion and commitment to their art that is not necessarily always there in the professional world, and for this reason - even if there were no other, they are a joy to work with. They are usually up for anything! and composers often discover a certain freedom in their approach to writing for COMA which in turn helps develop their compositional technique and informs their future pieces for professional groups. It is a good experience.

However, when writing for COMA there are two things one must never lose sight of, and these are **technical difficulties and scoring**.

2. Scoring

All COMA ensembles have a different make-up and music written for them must take this on board. The piece can either be totally freely-scored, i.e. it doesn't matter whether an accordion, sax, bassoon and double-bass turn up to play it - or, in fact, a keyboard group, or a string quartet etc. etc. - the work can still be performed; or it can have rather more fixed scoring, but still be flexible. For example, a particular solo might be ideally imagined for the oboe, but if none is available a clarinet or harmonica will do just as well. Composers have come up with various imaginative solutions to the scoring issue.

MICHAEL FINNISSY *Plain Harmony*

An example of totally free scoring. The piece is in a maximum of 8 parts, often 4 and the conductor assigns instruments to the different parts; helpful suggestions are given at the beginning of the score. In the 3rd section (of 4) a pleasingly complex texture is created by the simple device of having 6 metrically-independent soli, each in a different tonality- thus making it easy for the individuals to hear and play their own parts confidently, but the whole adding up to a typically rich and melismatic 'Finnissyian' sound-world. This takes place over a 2-note 'drone' played by everyone else. Theoretically, it would be possible for this section to be played by 6 technically able players and other complete beginners who have managed to learn just one note for the occasion!

MORGAN HAYES

Dislocated Chorales

Also in 8 parts. I find the first section particularly interesting. As in the Finnissy piece, parts 1,2,3 and 4 are strictly notated but the instrumentation is free and instruments must be assigned to the parts. Parts 7 and 8 are for unpitched percussion - anything - including tapping the body of a double bass, key clicks, vocal sounds as well as conventional drums. (It is important to mention in this context that COMA ensembles tend not to have a vast array of expensive percussion instruments, but their percussionists are extremely adept at finding

substitutes - I once actually had the proverbial kitchen sink in one of my pieces!)

Parts 5 and 6 are rhythmically precise but no pitches are indicated, though the players must follow the contours of the line. The effect produced is an extremely interesting series of oddly spaced cluster chords in rhythmic unison which cuts through the 'chorale' writing in a (to my ears) very pleasing way. It is a strong musical effect which seems to have grown out of the specific needs of writing for COMA. [Example 1, below and right. Hayes pp1 and 2]

Dislocated Chorales

Morgan Hayes

♩ = 112-120 Brittle

The score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 1-4) shows parts 1-4 in 4/4 time and parts 5-8 in 4/4 time with a 2-measure rest for parts 5 and 6. The second system (measures 5-8) shows parts 1-4 with complex rhythmic patterns and dynamics (pp, sfz, fff), and parts 5-8 with a 2-measure rest for parts 5 and 6. The third system (measures 9-12) shows parts 1-4 in 3/4 time and parts 5-8 in 3/4 time, with a 4-measure rest for parts 5 and 6. The score includes various dynamics (pp, sfz, fff) and articulation marks.

Four Minutes - Four Daydreams

Paul Burnell

Relaxed $\text{♩} = 60$

Minute one

solo instrument in c or e flat, with expression

for ensemble with instruments in C, Bb, F, Eb, voices & percussion
Where no clef is given, play with clef as directed in the text (see minute two). Play as written. Do not transpose.
There should be a few seconds silence between each of the four sections

during Minute one other players strum fingers rapidly on the body of their instruments, chairs etc, ppp - an almost imperceptible dull sound (not 'tinny' or bright)

Minute two

upper part, insts in c and e flat (treble clef)

Minute three

upper part as before

lower part as before

Minute four

upper part as before and add voices

lower part as before

piano, tuned percussion etc (nb: octave higher)

organ, accordion etc

cymbals, triangle etc (l.v.)

tambourine, drums etc

The score is divided into four sections, each with a different time signature:

- Minute one:** 4/4 time signature.
- Minute two:** 5/4 time signature.
- Minute three:** 4/4 time signature.
- Minute four:** 7/8 time signature.

The score includes parts for upper and lower voices, piano, organ, accordion, cymbals, triangle, tambourine, and drums. It also features dynamic markings such as *ppp*, *sim.*, *ff*, and *sfz*.

PAUL BURNELL

Four Minutes - Four Daydreams

The most flexible piece of all and now typical of a certain genre of pieces written for COMA. No clefs or transposed parts are given; the harmonies are built up according to the key in which an instrument plays. The opening chord of Minute 2 therefore, which looks as if it is simply F and B? on the treble clef, could actually contain the notes F, B?, A?, E?, C?- or just some of these notes.

Balance of the parts within the chords in any of these flexibly scored pieces is something to consider. One can either view it as a problem - the horn part is always going to sound louder than the recorder line - or one can make a virtue out of the textural unevenness produced and consider it an integral part of the sound-world.

[Example 2, above. Burnell, 4 Minutes - 4 Daydreams]

Above: Example 2, *Four Minutes - Four Daydreams*, Paul Burnell, full score. Reproduced by kind permission of the composer

Left and opposite page: Example 1, *Dislocated Chorales*, Morgan Hayes, pages 1 and 2.

Reproduced by kind permission of Stainer & Bell Ltd.

Right: Example 3, *The Four Temperaments*, Diana Burrell; section from p 41, and below: Example 4, *The Four Temperaments*, Diana Burrell; detail of solo violin from p6. Reproduced by kind permission of United Music Publishers Ltd.

In my own piece *The Four Temperaments* which was written at the very beginning of my year as Artistic Director of the Open Score project, I was keen to tackle the issue of 'virtuosity' among technically less developed players. Why shouldn't such musicians also have difficult-sounding, exhilarating music to play? My starting-point went back to the 'one difficulty only at any one time' mentioned at the beginning of this seminar. Very fast music which moves all over the instrument sounds most exciting, but is only possible if the player doesn't have to worry about pitching notes correctly. However, it must be rhythmically precise otherwise the music will sound a mess. This led to the creation of such passages as those around bar 203 for example, where the players play loud, energetic semiquavers, and simply follow the contours of the -very rigorous! - musical line. [Example 3, right. Burrell, *Four Temperaments* p41]

A dramatic violin solo near the beginning uses a similar technique whilst also employing faster and faster string crossings at the same time. [Example 4, below. Burrell, *Four Temperaments* p6]

All of the above-mentioned pieces are only a few examples. In reality, there are as many ways of writing for COMA as there are composers out there. It is an exhilarating challenge to take on, and an important one; amateur musicians vastly outnumber the professionals and they deserve the very best music to play.