

Report on 'New Music for Schools' Project - Rockhampton District

By Jeanette Douglas

In April 2003, a proposal was put forward to me as advisory co-ordinator for instrumental music in the Rockhampton District from the Young Conservatorium, Griffith University. As part of the 'New Music for Schools Project' (an initiative of the Young Conservatorium) our district was being offered the opportunity of hosting a Band Festival incorporating Primary and Secondary Bands. The proposal included a performance by each ensemble followed by a workshop with Ralph Hultgren (Head of Pre-Tertiary Studies, Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University.) The prize for the best primary and secondary schools was to be a commissioned work by Ralph Hultgren - much nicer incentive than a trophy!

A quick survey of instrumental staff in the District indicated a sufficient number of ensembles to make the project financially viable. All schools agreed that Education Week would be an excellent time to hold the Band Festival with media attention being on schools and educational activities.

During Thursday 22 May and Friday 23 May, fourteen ensembles performed a 15 - 20 minute own choice program. Following their performance Ralph Hultgren worked with the students on various aspects of their performance, but specifically concentrated on the importance of producing a quality ensemble sound at all times.

In June 2003, Taranganba State School (Yeppoon) and Yeppoon State High were notified that they were the recipients of the commissioned works. As the conductor of both ensembles I was excited at the prospect of preparing a piece specifically composed for us but at the same time I was more than a little nervous at the responsibility I now had, to live up to the expectations of the composer. The students were just incredibly thrilled and had no idea that the journey to bring the music to life had just begun. There was a long way to go!

In October 2003, I received an initial draft of the score for 'Cyclone'. The students were as eager as I was to study the score and get a feel for the piece. They were intrigued by the hand-written score (they had never seen one!). By November, we had a full set of band parts and our first rehearsal of 'Cyclone' was in fact the final band rehearsal for Seniors. Unfortunately none of these students were able to participate in the Premiere Concert as they scattered far and wide from Yeppoon. Students reaction to the first rehearsal was enthusiastic - especially the sound effects (created by cans of nuts/bolts, fans, cyclone circle, rattling valves, etc). My band is around Level 3 - 4 standard and the piece did not technically challenge them being around Level 2.5 but it would provide plenty of challenge to stage successfully and effectively. The students had plenty of ideas about how to make the most of the visual and sound requirements and I continually sought Ralph Hultgren's opinion about staging ideas.

In Term 1 2004, I received 'Cinque Quattro - Alla Marcia' for Taranganba State School. I knew immediately that the preparation for this piece was going to pose more problems than the Secondary piece. 2003 Year 7 students were scattered

across three different Secondary schools. The year 6 students were in their first term of Senior Band and I was asking them to deal with 5/4 time and quite challenging woodwind parts. I planned four rehearsals to occur during March with the Year 8 students returning to Taranganba State School to rehearse for the Premiere Concert now scheduled for 03 April, 2004. I also encouraged my Yeppoon High students to attend rehearsals to help tutor the younger students. I was astounded by the success of the four rehearsals with 5/4 not being an issue for any of the students. They fell in love with the music, enjoyed playing 5/4, loved the flowing woodwind counter melodies and worked hard at home to perfect their own parts. The concert preparation became a high priority in March and the entire Performing Arts staff became involved in the planning of this major event. My ensemble manager, Rickie Fisher (drama teacher) saw great possibilities of adding visual interest into 'Cyclone' with slides or video. He began creating a video which was a collection of footage of cyclonic weather and damage. We didn't talk to Ralph about this because I felt it was important for him to actually see the video in combination with the music to understand the dramatic effect of the two together. At the same time I had contacted Chris Scott (inventor of the 'Cyclone Circle') to find out how to make one. He realized pretty quickly my lack of mechanical ability and offered to freight his up to us for the concert. There was quite a bit of local media interest in the instrument which helped give the whole event a media hook.

On Friday 02 April and Saturday 03 April, the students from both bands workshopped with Mr Hultgren. I had programmed several of his other compositions to perform (including *Gladiator*, *Beyond the Frontier* and *A Joyful noise*) and the students had the benefit of rehearsing these with him. We held a technical rehearsal on the Friday night to 'try out' the video idea. Everyone immediately recognized the great dramatic effect created with a combination of visual image and percussive sounds. We breathed a sigh of relief!

The concert itself was an incredibly positive experience for both performers and audience. The students finally understood the value of the prize they had received. If I had to identify the benefits of the entire experience my students and I have been through, these would be some of them:

- We have experienced first hand the process of composition and bringing someone's creative ideas to reality.
- This concert was more rewarding emotionally and musically than any other performance/competition I have ever been involved in. Evidence that winning a trophy is not the only way of experiencing musical success.
- It became a community effort and new partnerships were forged.
- The schools' profiles were raised significantly.
- Parents value the instrumental program even more than previously.
- Administration staff value the instrumental program even more than previously.
- Musically the students have grown enormously with a greater understanding that getting the notes and rhythm correct is only part of a musical performance.

- Students had an invaluable opportunity to personally interact with the composer and ask questions about his music. They now realize that composers are just people like them who have a special gift.

- Some of the students are now interested in pursuing studies in composition. Personally I have learnt so much from the whole experience. I am very proud of what my two ensembles achieved and grateful that I have had this experience in my career. Instrumental teaching constantly throws up new challenges and I now feel confident that I can deal with the ongoing challenges of being a school band director. 'Cinque Quattro - Alla Marcia' and 'Cyclone' are now part of the history of Taranganba State School and Yeppoon State High and will remain so for all the future students who will perform in their ensembles. I hope that in the future other instrumental music teachers have the opportunity to receive the spiritual gift of music for their ensembles.