



Wind Orchestra Concert

by Manchester University Wind Orchestra

at Martin Harris Centre, Manchester

Reviewed by [Matthew Dougall](#) November 2017

Manchester University Music Society, or if you prefer their more homely acronym, MUMS, are all students at Manchester University and give regular public concerts at their Concert Hall within the university complex.

This evening it was the turn of the Wind Orchestra (sometimes known as a wind band) to shine. However, I was just a little perplexed this evening since the traditional configuration of wind orchestra was not present. There was no string bass or guitar, and instead we had a piano.

The programme this evening could easily have been entitled, Little Greats of 20th Century

America, or something similar since that is what this concert consisted of; either arrangements for or original compositions for wind ensemble were presented this evening by 4 American composers and one Brit, showcasing a very American sound particular and peculiar to the 20th century.

In a rather unusual start to the concert, the first piece conducted by **Holly Redshaw**, was a slow, emotive piece by the Illinois composer Mark Camphouse entitled, 'Watchman, Tell us of the Night'. The title comes from the Thanksgiving Hymn, and is a perhaps very personal cri-de-coeur since taken directly from the score notes it reads, 'A hymn for all children, this work portrays the loneliness, loss of innocence, and yet enduring hope of the survivor of child abuse. The work is a musical tribute to survivors, often dreamlike in nature, as seen through the eyes of a child.'

Indeed this was the longest piece in tonight's repertoire and the dynamics are quite astounding with crescendos and fortissimo passages coming to false endings before dipping into something else, changing mood between a slow march, atmospheric thriller film style music, a hymn or indeed a prayer. A very atmospheric and intelligent piece of music.

Then before the interval, a short suite of three movements by a British contemporary composer, Nigel Hess, with his jaunty and clever suite 'East Coast Pictures'. The first movement is about Shelter Island, and we hear the busy main street shoppers going about their business. It's jolly and bright, with a lovely swell up to the rather more quiet and sobering end notes. For the second movement we move inland to The Catskill Mountains, and a simple hymn-like melody forms the basis of this very melodic and beautiful piece of writing.

It was most unfortunate this evening that the solo trumpeter, so integral to the melodic line of this piece, was not at his best. For the final movement we are in New York City and the music here is deliberately reminiscent of Bernstein or Gershwin with catchy jazz-based rhythms and interesting percussion. Conducted by **Anna Beresford**, I do feel overall that more could have been gained from finding more depth in both ends of the dynamic spectrum in this piece as the overall sound was a little bland.

After the interval, and to **Charles Ives**, and his Variations of 'America'. It is a traditional folk song despite the fact that everyone in this country will immediately recognise it as the music to our own national anthem! I am in two minds therefore about the Union flag waving by the band during this piece: on the one hand it shows patriotism and was also perhaps a little light-hearted and harmless; on the other hand however, this was not Last Night of the Proms, the music is not in this instance English, and it somehow lowered the tone of the concert in general.

I have only heard this set of variations live once before, and that was some years ago when they were played by full symphony orchestra and concert organ. The work was originally written for solo organ, and so the addition of a full symphony orchestra to this created an incredible sound. This evening the work had been arranged for Wind Band configuration by the conductor, **Hugh Morris**, and it worked surprisingly well.

Next was a piece of music called 'Cloudburst' by Eric Whiteacre. Perhaps the most ambitious of this evening's pieces in the sense that it reminded me very much of a student experimental composition trying to throw everything he has learned at the piece and impress his tutor. The band were required to sing and chant at certain points in the music, and everyone, including the audience were asked to click their fingers, presumably to represent rain for the final few bars of the piece. A novelty piece which was performed extremely well, but as a piece of music,

instantly forgettable.

Finally, and we are back on terra firma for the last piece of the evening by Leonard Bernstein (and they don't come more American than that!). His music never fails to enthrall and his ability at composing in many different genres second to none. Here we heard a short suite of three pieces from his music from the Musical, On The Town. Jazzy, bluesy, dance-hall style pieces which evoke the era and the place so wonderfully. Conducted by the most animated of this evening's student conductors, **Jasmin Allpress**.

I always enjoy my visits to MUMS concerts. They are always very down-to-earth and unpretentious and there is a wonderful homely atmosphere about the place which I truly enjoy. Moreover, these are all students, in the middle of learning their craft and they deserve and need every encouragement and support to help them along their journey. It was a great pity then that the auditorium this evening seemingly had less in than there were musicians on the platform. Heartbreaking.