

LIFEBOAT VARIATIONS

(Notes by the Composer)

This work was created as an "Every Person's Guide to the Band" I wrote it after serving as Walter Welke's band graduate assistant at the University of Washington in 1968, and then 4 years' service in the USAF Band, DC, under Arnald Gabriel. It was my answer to Benjamin Britten's excellent youthful *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, also a theme-with-variations form, written for a BBC educational film, after it became apparent to me that no such piece then existed for band (at least no serious one). The work is particularly good for community and student audiences.

The form consists of a short Introduction and a series of very short, accompanied show-off variations, first one for each choir and then one for each different instrument or section. Britten had Purcell to draw on for his fine 8-bar theme; truly American classical music has really no comparable composer from the same period, only William Billings, who wrote purely choral music. So instead, I chose a popular round, "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," for both its familiarity to American audiences, and its brevity—with the band I had many more instruments to spotlight, so I needed a short theme to enable short variations and a tight piece.

The variations themselves cover a wide range of styles and moods, all of them in my characteristic tonal-modern voice. To end the work, I wanted a finale more substantial than the fluffy, *perpetuum mobile*, pass-by-on-parade fugue that the young genius Britten tossed off (which he redeemed with an augmented chorale in the brass and a gigantic D Major cadence). So I wrote a separate piece, the *Cornucopia of Rounds*, based on wild juggling and distortions of 7 rounds, to finish my work. It soon became apparent, however, that this finale was far too long, as the variations themselves ran 22 to 25 minutes with all hands aboard and narration (see below), so I set the *Cornucopia* aside to live as a separate work and used just its *incipit* and its short, hot, monumental coda to end my *Lifeboat Variations* with a high-energy cosmic finale.

Like Britten, I felt the need to provide (optional) terse narration between movements, just to orient un-versed listeners to the variety of instruments or sections of a concert band, with simplified descriptions of their playing mechanisms and typical sounds, providing a simple road map and focusing the audience's listening on a few basic qualities of each instrument. (The piece can also be performed without narrator if desired.) As an optional introduction, to add to the fun and learning, I made provision for the narrator or conductor to demonstrate and then lead an audience sing of the theme as a round before the piece starts (to help them follow it through the increasing distortions of the variations). And I put in three very quick (optional) sound-making demonstrations in the introduction.

Now I had the delicious task of showcasing the essence of each instrument or section in a variation running between 30 seconds and 2 minutes, with accompaniment appropriate to the weight of the featured instrument. For some of the more versatile instruments, I couldn't take the time to adequately spotlight all their affects, so I had to choose one typical character. Secondly, I had the task of chaining these in an effective sequence of different keys, styles, affects, and weights of scoring in the accompaniment, to keep a sense of variety and momentum. So I had a set of 22 miniature compositional problems to solve, plus the challenge of making a satisfactory arc out of the chain, as it were. The listener will decide if I succeeded.

Detailed notes on each variation follow, for those who like the compositional thought process.

INTRODUCTION (key of C/dissonant): A slow, loud, full band statement of just the first phrase of “Row Your Boat”, but harmonized quite dissonantly and tapering off to a single held clarinet note under the starting narration.

THREE LINKED CHOIR THEME SECTIONS:

1. All woodwinds play the pure theme in loud textured unison/octaves, quick, slightly decorated with high trills in the second phrase. (Key of G.)
2. All brass in slow, quiet, close harmony, slightly soured. (Key of *Ab* major/minor.)
3. All percussion, loud, show off with a rhythmic tattoo around the melody in pitched percussion and timpani, with echoes in the rhythmic nonpitched percussion, showing the rich independence of the modern percussion. I also snuck in the harp and *pizzicato* string bass in that statement, without explanation. (Key of A.)

OBOE (key of *Bb minor*): Here is a wistful, medium-speed, minor-key Tchaikovskian waltz, accompanied by just flutes and solo clarinets (and one bassoon); the skeleton of the theme is still fairly evident. Just the slightest touches of dissonance, and a sweet major-key ending.

ENGLISH HORN (key of E minor): Soft tremolo chords in mallets, flutes, and clarinets sustain under a slightly bitter dramatic slow recitative which builds up to high-range intensity, then drops angrily to lower range, settling on a long held note for transition.

CLARINETS (key of D): Here I had too many sizes to write a full-length individual variation for each size, so I chose to write a section variation for all sizes of clarinets as a choir, with supershort spotlight solos for each size accompanied only by the others—thus, the All-Clarinets section is self-sufficient here, with a few percussion highlights only. This one is a cheery chromatic shuffle in dotted notes. A simple boom-chick accompaniment vamp (with gaps for narration) leads to longer solo phrases for all *Bb* Clarinets, solo *Eb* Clarinet, then cameos for Alto, Bass, Contra-Alto, and the rattling low Contra-Bass. In the final “reprise” section the *Bb*’s spread to a 12-part (!) chord, compress downward, then all parts run up fast scales to a clipped high note, and land on a low dying cluster chord.

BASSOON (key of *C# minor*): Horns slide us to a slow-tread open-fifth *ostinato* with marimba, and the solo bassoon plays a sad high melodic variation starting on downward-snapping motives; the middle section drops to the bottom range, rising with quick staccato notes and speeding up to a high-pitch climax in Ravel style. Accompaniment adds muted brass for short chords. After the climax, the bassoon reprises the slow start, condensed, drops to the bottom range, settles, then surprises with one last loud high note. (This serves as the dominant (V) harmony to the next variation.)

CONTRABASSOON (key of *F# minor*): This macabre variation starts in the solo part with a choppy, short-note motive based on the last phrase of the theme, with rising lyrical answers. Accompaniment is short chords in muted brass. Next, a quick series of rising motives, speeding up, then a drop to a very low note on the instrument, held as though forever. Over this pedal tone, woodwinds, saxes, and glockenspiel build up an enchanting “magic harmony” water fountain that drops back down, revealing the low note still going, then muted horns and trumpets, flutes, and vibraphone build a second, lower spout that quickly drops. The low note is still going. Suddenly the contra repeats the opening phrase, holding the last loud note under chopped chords.

SAXOPHONES (key of G): This is another waltz, moderate speed, for just the sax quartet alone, with rhythm percussion punctuations. It is sarcastic, playful, built on the second half of the theme ornamented by wobbly wiggles. The pair of Alto saxes leads, then Tenor plus Bari answer. Mostly in the major key with a few sour notes and phrases. Vehement ending.

STRING BASS (key of E minor): The solo bass is accompanied by just flutes and vibraphone and one clarinet. This medium-speed, plodding variation squeezes the melody into a series of rising and falling fifths and fourths (mirroring the tuning of the bass strings), with a short pizzicato cadence, a short repeat of the opening, a quick scramble up the scale to some high harmonics, and another pizzicato cadence.

HARP (key of E major): A “guest” instrument, the virtuosic harp gets a tonal showoff solo cadenza (with a few low notes sustained by string bass). The feel is a 6/8 dotted rhythm; the figuration gets more and more showy, ending with big chords, swooping glissandi, closing with solid single bass note octaves for transition.

TRUMPETS AND CORNETS (key of C): The full section gets a straight-ahead major-key showoff fanfare-march, compressing the theme into half its normal time in unison, then in close canon (2 parts, then 5), over long bass tones in low brass and woodwinds. A quiet harmonized section on the starting motif over light marching drums builds up to a passage of fast short crossing scales on the ending motif, now over a rising chromatic bass line. Then a final reprise buildup to a high triumphant climax, interrupted by a false-cadence bass note, and three slow transition chords in horns and saxophone.

TROMBONES (key of B \flat): A solemn processional in a slow 3-beat; the unison trombones intone a soft augmentation of the theme under high shifting woodwind chords, building up to a fast scale arriving at a high climax. Three low descending solo bass trombone notes land on a low pedal tone in bass instruments; the trombones in three parts slide up to a last soft restatement of their opening and a low rich cadence.

FRENCH HORNS (key of C): Here is a moderate, cheery, hunting-horns-on-horseback ride, the 4 horns as a close-harmony quartet over simple drumbeats. Their variation tune is a cross between “Row Your Boat” and Morley’s “Now Is the Month of Maying”, in cantering triplet rhythms. Then in pairs, under a little high tattoo in piccolo, they descend to low range, a drum lick wakes them, and they reprise the opening quartet, re-harmonized, ending with swoop-up octaves and a high pack bark.

EUPHONIUM (BARITONE HORN) (key of A \flat): Here is a busy Gazebo-style showoff fast-notes finger exercise for this horn, over a manic boom-chick accompaniment in muted brass, winds, and Latin percussion. A quick lyrical middle melody returns to the opening solo busyness, with a transitional phrase after the cadence.

TUBA (key of E \flat minor): The soulful side of the solo tuba shows in this slow mournful descending melody, with an emphatic rhythmic middle section, and a return of the start that drops to a superlow note under a 60s TV Drama harmony in the band.

Next, I chose to spotlight *each* of the pitched percussion instruments (mallets/keyboards) in a separate variation, because they were long overlooked but have come to more of their rightful

place in large ensembles just in my lifetime. (And also from natural bias as a former percussionist.)

GLOCKENSPIEL (Key of G minor): From the very depths (Tuba) to the heights; flutes set down a slow staccato background rhythm, and the high tinkling Orchestra Bells play a wistful curling music-box version of the theme, highly ornamented, up to the top range, and down to the bottom, with 2 transitional chords at the end.

VIBRAPHONE (Key of F): Here the featured instrument stands alone, setting out a wide-intervals version of the theme with continually ringing slow notes that build up their own sound space by the end, with a last echo of the theme.

XYLOPHONE (Key of F# minor): Dry, brittle muted brass chords set a quick pattern for a supershort clattering show by this staccato keyboard in quic choppy phrases, with a transition of short rolled notes.

MARIMBA (Key of C# minor): A virtuosic variation. Woodwind and percussion establish a slightly Bulgarian odd-meter wiggly-dance feel and the Marimba shows off in octave-rattling sixteenth notes, jumping to a high middle section with high woodwind in canon, then rattling down to the bottom.

TUBULAR CHIMES (Key of C): After a few slow rising chime notes, the brass lay down long bitter chords and chimes cut loose with a cheery carillonade of fast notes all ringing together, slowing to end as it started.

TIMPANI (Key of Ab minor): Here is almost a short concerto scherzo movement showing off my favorite percussion instrument. Over further forte-piano brass chords, the low drums enter with a slow-starting roll, then lay out a slow 5-pitch melodic recitative in short phrases, building up and finally triggering an explosive series of loud held chords in full band, followed by fast unison-octave short rising scale patterns, each answered by short outbursts in the drums. Over a low pedal tone, the drums rattle a busy-notes elaboration of the last phrase of the theme, joined by the band for a hard cadence.

ALL UNPITCHED PERCUSSION (No key. Seriously.) Again: far too many instruments to spotlight individually, so I lumped them into a large group variation, which turns around and around on a purely rhythmic version of the theme, using relative high-low “pitches” to merely suggest the tune shape. (Example: across 4 Tom-toms or 4 Temple Blocks.) A second section repeats the “gently down the stream” rhythm over and over, then the start returns, and the second section. More and more (and more exotic) instruments pile up on the core rhythm and the echoing off-beats, until a wind-down yields to a fast coda buildup with a huge hammered augmentation ending, relinquishing over a quiet bass drum roll.

FULL BAND REPRISE (Key of C dissonant): The entire band re-enters after a well-deserved rest, quietly restating the very opening slow dissonant version of the start of the theme, adding its rhapsodically-harmonized final phrase, then slowly piling up a 10-pitch widely-spaced quiet chord one note at a time to hold us in suspense.

CODA (Key of C cosmic): And now it's time to row Home. The full band pounds out the original Row theme in unison octaves, but cut off just before its last note. Then they immediately

jump into a fully-scored and harmonized augmented restatement, over a busy trumpets/trombones rhythmic fanfare tattoo on fast repeated notes. At the cadence many lines squeeze slowly together to a unison, then a wholly new, huge cosmic statement emerges in full high winds and brass (“Life, yes Life__ is But_____ a Dream ____, a Dream!). And a final full harmony builds up from the bottom and is pounded out in fast dotted rhythms in three overlapping choirs, settling, after two short chords, on a last long held chord that swells to the final hammer stroke. “Wake up! The Dream is Over!”