

CORNUCOPIA OF ROUNDS

(Short program note by the composer)

This work began its life as the intended finale to my “Lifeboat Variations” for band, which I wrote to fill a role in the serious Symphonic Band literature for a work comparable to Benjamin Britten’s “Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra”. To end mine, I wanted to write something more complex than the zippy little fugue with the final augmented brass chorale and gigantic D Major ending that the young genius Britten tossed off for his work. So I did. But when the Variations themselves came in at a maximum duration of 23 minutes (with narration), it became obvious that the added 12-minute movement I had written would not serve as a finale. Even with plenty of rests and thin-scored passages, that would add up to a very long time for a band to blow. So the Cornucopia got a life of its own. (The Variations, in the end, use just its *incipit* and Coda to finish.)

But the thematic connection between the two works remains. The “Lifeboat Variations” were based on the round, “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” (because I needed something familiar and *short* to write 20+ variations and still have a tight piece). When I came to write the Cornucopia, I had the brainstorm to base it on a *bunch* of rounds (a “horn of plenty” of them), as many as I could remember from my childhood without searching for more. I settled on six others plus Row Your Boat (all are shown at the end of the score, and can be sung by band members as an introduction). Then I set out to write a completely free-form, totally fun, wild fantasia based on them, first exposing them, then playing with them with every technique of variation and development that I knew. The work begins with a loud full unison band statement of the opening of Row Your Boat that cuts off suddenly. Then each of the seven rounds is presented by a different instrumental choir as a round *per se*, voices joining in one after another, each round in a different and jarringly unrelated key, each in its traditional affect (lively, slow, etc.). When the seventh is fully voiced, the play takes off.

Episode after episode follows, with some side references (Medievalists will recognize an echo quote of “Sumer Is A-cumin In”; also “The Bear Went Over the Mountain” and “The Fly Has Married the Bumblebee”). Everything is free play, inspired and powered by the energy of Melody, because rounds are melodies, but also Harmony—because each comes with built-in harmonies as the voices join in—harmony to be exploited—or contravened, soured, twisted, etc. The whole thing turns into a giant chopped salad. And finally it builds to a huge Cosmic ending celebrating Row Your Boat Triumphant. (A prankster alternate ending is also provided for.) Total fun if you have a sense of humor . . .

GRADE 5/6

LIST OF EPISODES

Episode 1 sequences bits of each fast round with side references, finally arriving at a big slowed held cadence in full band.

Episode 2 starts with a slower round (“White Sands and Grey Sands), piles on several others, then “Scotland’s Burning” leads us to an urgent “Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!” alarm with police whistle, followed by a pastiche reference to a well-known Sousa March.

Episode 3 starts thin, cycling among the rounds for only one bar each (fully voiced), further reducing to frenetic repeats of single motives, a drum cadence, then narrow chromatic diminution of the tunes, polymeters (5/8, etc.), single-motive manic repeats like a stuck LP record, then it all builds up (and down) in a quieting pile—and the band goes to sleep (time to Dream).

This Sleep Episode (4) devolves to just air blown through most horns for ghost notes, plus tiny wispy bits of some round motifs in dissonant versions, and a totally lost feeling. After this soft dream texture has gone on a while, a long quiet low pedal tone builds to “Who’ll Buy My White Sands?”, and at its cadence the other 6 rounds are added on one after another (each in its original key—*megapolytonality*) to build a huge busy texture that suddenly pauses, is wiped clean with a chimes swipe, and then spin-cycles frenetically into the Coda.

The Coda is an apotheosis of Row Your Boat in augmentation as a great brass fanfare/tattoo, with other rounds piled on but now in harmonizing keys; the full band lands on a big pedal tone and a last cosmic statement, richly re-harmonized, articulates “Life, yes Life, is But a Dream . . . a Dream”, and the choirs build up and pound their way to a great emphatic ending. And the audience wakes up.