



The Alchemist's Journal – Kenneth Hesketh

Over the past fifteen years Kenneth Hesketh has established himself as an exciting voice in British music. He began composing whilst a chorister at Liverpool Cathedral and went on to study at the Royal College of Music, where he now teaches composition, and is also an honorary professor at Liverpool University. He has received many significant commissions including the Royal Opera House, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, BBC Philharmonic and Seattle Symphony. He has written a large number of Internationally-acclaimed works for wind band, some of which have been adapted (as opposed to transcribed) for brass band including **Danceries** Sets I and II (the former being used for the National Finals 2nd Section in 2002) and **Masque** which are now firmly established in the brass band repertoire.

The Alchemist's Journal was commissioned by Paul Hindmarsh, to whom the work is dedicated, for the RNCM Festival of Brass and premièred by the Black Dyke Band (conducted by Nicholas Childs) on the 18th January 2002. It takes its title from a book by the American author Evan S. Connell that fictionalises a number of famous alchemists' writings. A single 'idea' is developed by another's thought and is therefore subject to change and transformation. Hesketh's approach to this work is fundamentally the same, as each of the nine sections is based on the same six notes (C, A, B flat, E flat, F sharp and E) from which he draws the themes and the tonal centres. This is not a thematic set of variations, as the themes are developed one at a time from small segments of the six notes. For example, the opening theme is the complete number of pitches, the second theme uses three notes transposed and repeated at the original level and so on. Harmonically, the six notes can be divided into two triads – A minor and E flat minor – each key beginning and ending the piece respectively. As the composer states in his introductory note in the score the music is essentially abstract with no programme, however the piece emerges in broader proportions with an introduction, a menacing scherzo, a slow reflective section followed by a variation of the scherzo and a final coda.

Introduction (Opening to Figure F)

The key word in the opening section is 'mysterious', which is also clearly defined in the tempo marking. However, conductors should ensure that they keep the tempo flowing (marked at 80) to ensure that the musical line is always moving forward. It is also paramount that the dynamics are adhered to as this adds to the colour and character of this section as a whole. Percussionists beware not to hit the Tam-Tam too hard on the first note otherwise it may obliterate the opening bar making the rising motif inaudible! Conductors must also ensure that the crescendos and diminuendos are graded effectively – particularly those that die away to nothing (i.e. bar 9 for trombones, euphoniums and basses).

The opening solo cornet line needs to be almost plaintive in style (not to short on the staccato crotchet) and only going to mezzo forte on the top of the third crescendo. The 2nd/3rd cornets and trombone interjection in **Bar 6** needs utmost clarity, especially in the trombones, despite its quiet dynamic.

Andante misterioso ♩ = 80

Solo Cors

Hns

Euphs/Baris

Basses

Careful consideration must be given to the sustained note entries as they appear both on the beat and syncopated and the articulation differs as it is sometimes accented, sometimes tenuto yet often neither. The differences need to be heard!

Figure A is only forte – there is a way to go yet before the first tutti fortissimo so keep your powder dry. **Bar 25** there is a significant gear shift in the *poco piu mosso* which will push the tempo on, but be careful otherwise the semi- and demi-semiquaver motifs at **Bar 36** will become tricky and lack clarity if you over egg the momentum. These same semi- and demi-semiquaver motifs must rise out of the chord clusters on which they sit and disappear under the melody line (in the euphoniums and basses) when it reappears.

Sop./Solo Cors

36

Hns

Euphs/Baris

Basses

The *ancora piu mosso* is only fractionally quicker (almost imperceptible) but an accelerando is coming, so again do not over egg the tempo at this point. The triplets in the lower horns will need utmost clarity, although the marked accents will help, and resist the urge to put that first bar on the baritones because it will be very noticeable! The euphonium line in **Bar 46** needs to go to mezzo-forte with a subito mezzo-piano on the following bar. Definition on the semi-quaver triplets are going to be hard but the demi-semiquaver notes will be harder still. As the accelerando begins the alternating rhythm between the cornets and the lower horns and baritones will be difficult to hear but the effect is impressive if it is successfully pulled off! The horn section must be the most dominant line at the bar before **Figure C** as at that last quaver/semi-quaver triplet the piece has reached its first fortissimo.

Conductors take note that at **Figure C** the music is marked *Vivace*, meaning lively or brisk, but the tempo is only 112 so do not get carried away with the speed. Again here definition and clarity is paramount and the dynamics must be heeded as they add to the overall effect as the music moves towards the *Calmo* at **Figure D**. The soaring melody and its subtle accompaniment must take the lead, although the Repiano (later joined by 2nd and 3rd cornets as well as the Soprano) should be clearly audible underneath.

D *Piu calmo* ♩ = 112

61 Solo Cort *p*

Repiano *pp* 3

Flugel

Solo Horn *pp*

2nd Horn

Baritone

Careful with the dynamics at leading up to and through **Figure E** as the top dynamic each time is subito forte. The music is now starting to fold in on itself with the motifs being added together although the euphoniums and baritones (four bars before and at **Figure E**) are technically the lead line. The shift between semiquaver and triplet will need to be measured – it is easy to get caught and play the beginning of the triplet too quick and unevenly. The upper cornet triplets again need to be even (they are three sets of crotchet triplets over two bars in the first instance). Be careful with the overall dynamic leading toward the scherzo because as the accelerando starts it remains forte. Not until **Bar 100** does the dynamic increase to fortissimo – so leave it until then! The accelerando needs to be gauged carefully, not too much all at once.

Four bars before **Figure F** the lower horns and trombones are working in tandem, even though the lines overlap) and the players should be aware of that. The quavers in the rest of the band should be short and heavy and remember the accelerando should still be happening!

Menacing Scherzo (Figure F to Figure Q)

Marked at 92, the Scherzo is deceptively quick. It is also marked *Minaccioso*, which means threatening, and so even at the fairly quiet dynamic it should maintain an unrelenting pulse of 3 or 2 depending on the shifting rhythm (which the composer does throughout until **Figure L**).

A quick note that **Figure F** to **Figure I** is repeated almost in its entirety as **Figure I** to **Figure L** (the only difference being one bar before Figures I and L respectively and the overhang from the horns at Figure F). Therefore conductors should ensure that the style, dynamics and the articulation are treated the same throughout.

The opening motif is placed between the baritones and euphoniums and should be treated as one line shared, so neither should dominate. The semiquaver work needs the utmost clarity to maintain the malevolence within the music line. The crescendos to forte followed by subito mezzo-pianos (or forte to piano) may need to be exaggerated to create the best effect. However the lines need to flow to avoid them sounding disjointed. Those parts playing two semi-quavers/quaver pattern must ensure that the semiquavers are even and not rushed.

105 **F** *Minaccioso* ♩ = 92

Baritone/Euhponium written above should be relatively seamless, as below.

At **Figure L** to **Figure O** the semiquavers are marked *leggiero* (light/nimble) but the other parts now take on a more grotesque/sinister scherzo feel. The one-in-a-bar pulse should be subtle from the basses and sit below the overall dynamic elsewhere. The sforzando at **Bar 292** need not be overdone!

Figure O is a new section alternating between 3/4 and 6/8 and the tenutos on the crotchets should be treated as light accents here, and therefore not to elongate the note. The Snare Drum needs to be *sotto voce* as do the tom-toms four bars later. At **Bar 323** the 2nd and 3rd cornets need to be equally balanced and must avoid adding accents (except where written). The overall dynamic is forte, so be careful with the tutti in **Bars 326, 330** and **334**. At **Bar 339** it is subito mezzo-piano for the semiquaver run (there is an error in the score here as the slur is missed off the baritone parts) leading to forte only at the 3/8 before **Figure P**. At **Figure P** itself it is subito fortissimo and the notes here should be hard and short.

The *ritenuto* in to the slower section should be measured to, as indeed should the dynamics to ensure that the music flows seamlessly into the following section.

Reflective Section (Figure Q to Figure S)

The tempo here at 34 will almost certainly be too slow to beat in two, so most will probably opt for beating in quavers thus sub-dividing each bar into two bars of three. This will be fine until the third bar of **Figure R** when it moves into 3/4 where the quaver beat must remain constant. The Flugel, Repiano and Solo Cornet triplets and semiquaver bars must remain in time.

In this new edition, the original cornet solo has been divided between Solo Cornet and Soprano. Presumably, as it is cued, some bands may consider the Solo Cornet playing the entire solo – either way, the solo should not sound strained or frantic, with a well-paced *accelerando* to **Figure S**.

(Figure S to Figure X)

At **Figure S** the music is again marked *Minaccioso* (threatening) but the underlying dynamic is piano, although the chords are again marked short and accented. Keep this section short throughout, emphasising the staccato but keeping the momentum as it drives to a variation of the scherzo theme at **Figure T**, where the music is marked brutal, and should be played as such and in a martial-like way. The horn and first baritone entry two bars before **Figure U** should push the music in to 6/8 before the 3/4 is restored at **Bar 459** (although the Timpani continues to keep the 6/8 pulse in the background) and the dynamic drops back to mezzo-piano. There is tension in the music here as it approached **Figure V** as the two and three fights together before the grotesque/malevolent scherzo re-emerges. If the conductor has selected the correct tempo at Figure S, then the syncopated dotted crotchets in the bars before **Figure V** should morph easily

into the one-in-a-bar required for the return of the scherzo. This time the music should appear slightly more urgent as it drives towards the Coda.

Coda (Figure X to the end)

From here on the music is building to the end of the piece, so be careful to pay close attention to the dynamics, rhythm and articulation. Peak too soon and the ending is spoilt, but leave it too late and the music has neither drive nor momentum.

Starting at forte, pay close attention to the detail in the demi-semiquavers and semiquaver triplets. They need to be clearly defined in the cornets, whereas the trombones are going to get closer to glissandi. The tremolo parts are accented but should be in context with the following line so that they do not 'stick out'. From **Figure Y** the music is increasing its intensity but do not push the tempo and make sure the triplets and semiquavers remain defined. From **Bar 538** the cornet motif should be an explosion from the previous bars leading to the *con fuoco* (with fire) at **Figure Z**. Make sure there is a contrast between the notes with and those without accents. As a point of order, it is almost certainly the case that accents in the baritones, trombones and euphoniums in **Bar 553** are missing from the crotchets (as they are there in the cornets and horns). The semiquavers need to be clear and distinct.

At **Bar 565** make sure the fortissimo-piano in the chord comes right down to piano to enable the horn and euphonium line to speak. The two bars of semiquavers need to be clear with a very noticeable and even crescendo to the final four bars. Be prepared to move from the flutter to the final bar without a significant break and whoever is on the Tam-Tam make sure they cut it off with the final quaver from the rest of the band!

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Further information regarding the Association of Brass Band Adjudicators performance assessment criteria (PAC) can be found on the AoBBA website:

(<http://www.aobba.com/performance-assessment-criteria-pac-a-guide-for-conductors-and-bands/>)