

Oliver Waespi' - 'The Graces of Love' (Published by Beriato Music)

A Brief Adjudicators Perspective - Tom Davoren

Oliver Waespi's chosen title for this eleven and a half minute work for brass band, 'The Graces of Love', is nothing if not evocative. Whilst his music certainly possesses the descriptive and emotive power required to bring any extramusical narrative to life, conductors should perhaps be wary of approaching this particular work through too highly romanticised a looking glass.

In the case of this work the composer doesn't take his title from a narrative or programme, but from a book of the same name first published in 1602. The book is a treatise, a kind of manual if you will, on Italian dance tunes and steps. It's from these tunes and steps that he draws both the specific musical source material and elements of wider stylistic character used to construct 'The graces of Love'. On a first read of the score, which is structured in three connected movements, it appears that identifying with it's origins in dance music will be the key to achieving a performance that realises the creative ambitions of the composer. Music of the Renaissance and Baroque era, particularly dance music, can lean towards the spectacular and dramatic as well as possessing the subtle and ornate qualities for which it is most famed. In this context however all of these qualities can only be released if framed by an approach which is founded in discipline and continuity. Though in the band world Waespi is perhaps more famed for his blockbuster championship standard test pieces, 'The Graces of Love' has been scored and pitched technically well for third section bands; with issues of range, tempi, rhythmic content and solo scoring all easily within the reach of participants. It is in this considered approach to the construction of the piece that perhaps the greatest challenge is present for conductors. Putting it simply, in execution performances need to have put their technical 'money in the bank' during rehearsal time, laying a solid foundation in the basic components of performance to the most consistent standard before attempting to realise the stylistic roots of the music in dance.

1. Bianco Fior

The first movement, entitled 'Bianco Fior' after Cesare Negri's dance tune of the same name, is laced with both stylistic opportunity and contesting pitfalls. It's music does in fact

set out the stall for how the majority of this work should be approached in preparation and performance.

As one would expect from dance music finding a sense of continuity and style through pulse should be the underlying focus of the movement. Contrasts in dynamic, varying articulation and a sympathetic approach to percussion should all serve to add colour and contrast to the music without ever detracting from the pulse or feel of the dance. Imagine the thought process of Renaissance dancers. In order for them to execute their performance effectively they will require two key things from musicians; a controlled sense of timing set out by the pulse and a shape within that pulse to cue specific dance steps. Band performances of this music need to retain these qualities in their execution.

In terms of the technicalities of band performance the first page of the score alone is an effective example of the requirements for diligence in continuity and solid basic band skills. Specific details such developing a communal pace and exit to trills, maintaining control of the pulse through dynamic changes (something which should be considered on the basis of individual figures and through the dynamic grading of the entire movement) and achieving subtle contrast between specifically chosen accent types will all prove crucial in creating the desired sense of rolling yet relaxed momentum. In some ways this movement could be considered an adjudicators dream, with each page of the score consisting of pure triadic harmony, melodic lines in unison and parallel motion, and a rhythmic structure which is constantly vertically aligned to crotchet and quaver beats. The importance of a diligent approach to balance, intonation and ensemble can not be over emphasised here.

Looking again beyond the basics, the manner in which the composer marks his music is incredibly specific. Whilst achieving contrast in accent type is essential, conductors should be mindful of the composer's equally specific dynamic markings, which frequently only move by a single degree. Not allowing an understandable desire for style to morph the movement into an ever increasing, accent driven crescendo study will be another important point for consideration. Negari's music would have been originally composed for a guitar like string instrument, most likely a lute, so achieving a lightness of touch is an essential component of the style of this music. To this end it is also important to appreciate that any dynamic or accent markings which brass bands may traditionally interpret as

'weighted', from experience of their own original repertoire, should be given a more deft approach.

The most exciting part of the moment is perhaps the closing shift from a lilting 3 / 4 dance time into a 2 / 2 vivace. Again, closing the movement with poise through a sense of control in dynamic and articulation, underpinned by an accelerando to an even and convincing pace and buoyant vivace style, should be at the forefront of a conductor's thinking; note that the vivace mark is only actually set at crotchet equals one hundred and four beats per minute.

2. Vaghe Bellezze

The second movement draws on material from another dance tune in the collection, 'Vaghe Bellezze'. In this case a translation of the title is perhaps a little more important, it meaning 'Veiled Beauty'. Broadly the movement consists of two embellished solo lines for euphonium and cornet, bookended by the dance tune in its original form scored for full band. With solo sections marked as 'poco rubato, colla parte' it is, as the title suggests, subtlety of shape that will prove most successful here. Any more florid elements of the line should be executed by soloists with fluidity and direction, underpinned by accompanying figures which contribute to the flow in the most even way possible, without stagnating or interrupting. With each solo falling predominantly in middle range and neatly under the fingers this level of stylistic engagement should really be expected.

Though set in a compact looking 4 / 8 meter, the broad tempo marking, quaver equals circa ninety, and sparing use of 'cantabile' and 'espressivo' markings detail that a subtle sense of flow and singing quality to melodic lines are key considerations here. The music needs to feel as connected and unfolding as possible in a linear sense, and once again it is pulse that serves as the key ingredient in realising this ambition. Realising this sense of space despite the compact musical language chosen by the composer may prove a challenge to conductors.

Reflecting the beauty of simplicity in this movement is another factor which may well prove challenging to conductors. Though brass bands sometimes see the 'middle movement' of a test piece as an opportunity to flex their rubato muscles, conductors should be mindful

that this music was originally conceived to accompany a formal and disciplined kind of dancing. The beauty of this particular dance comes in its regular and poised execution. As such finding moments of expressive interest without any major distortion of tempo, allowing for a solid vertical rhythmic alignment of the score, should be a key consideration; dynamic contrast and emphasis are the key tools in the box here.

The execution of both tuned and untuned percussion is perhaps at its most critical in this movement. Sporadic contributions from triangle and glockenspiel act as an effective highlighter, adding sparkle to melodic material, whilst timpani and suspended cymbal should support accompanying lines and underline the harmonic and dynamic progression of the movement without dominating. Getting these effects to be as cohesive as possible with the brass section of the band in terms of ensemble through aligning brass articulation with any percussive striking and blooming any timpani and suspended cymbal crescendi together are key effects.

3. Saltarello

The final movement takes the form of an exciting 'Saltarello'. It's traditionally a lively and vibrant triple metre dance, which interestingly is referred to as a 'hopping dance' in German folk culture. Though this description certainly offers a clue as to the spritely approach to style required, conductors should be aware of the steady tempo indication at the start of the movement and its subtle dynamic grading throughout. It's yet another clue from the composer that finding a sense of feel in this music is much more impressive than using rapid tempo or an overzealous dynamic approach to convey excitement.

Much like the first movement, seeking out the hallmarks of a dance style through control and contrast within the pulse should be a key consideration for conductors. The composer is again very specific with his use of accent marking and articulation, setting out a clear indication of first beat emphasis and general brilliance of articulation through his placement of varying accent types, staccatos and tapering diminuendos throughout the opening bars of the movement. Once again contrasts in articulation and accent marking should be approached in as cultured a manner, never confusing poise and brilliance with a stagnant metallic sound.