A COMPARATIVE PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS OF
UNDERTOW AND XERXES BY JOHN MACKEY

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Kenneth Thompson, Advisor

The purpose of this study was to complete a performance analysis of two recent compositions for young band by John Mackey: *Undertow* and *Xerxes*. The performance analysis of each work included program notes, historical and programmatic background material, theoretical analysis, technical considerations for rehearsal and performance, and conducting challenges. Descriptions and analyses serve to support the view that these pieces are high quality and also consider pedagogical issues. Additionally, idiomatic compositional characteristics of the composer were examined, giving insight to the composer’s compositional style.

The methods described in this study were done in a way that could easily be applied to any piece of band literature, yielding a more in-depth musical understanding, and allowing for a basis to determine quality. The results of the analyses have been beneficial in providing a deeper understanding of the pieces, which in turn allows for a better foundation from which to teach – a concept that can be applicable to all music.

Another aspect of this study included the investigation of the commissioning component of band repertoire and how it affects the quality of literature available to younger, less experienced wind bands. Both *Undertow* and *Xerxes* were commissioned by public schools, however the limit of technical skills needed to cater to these groups doesn’t seem to affect the quality of the works. Other composers can and have been writing quality pieces for young band in addition to John Mackey, resulting in a significant amount of high quality music that has greatly benefitted the developing musicians in public schools today.
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Thanks, K.T.
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Providing students with the best music education possible requires that the highest quality music should be utilized for instruction. Persellin (2000) stated that teachers should select music that helps develop strengths while also targeting weaknesses, and high quality repertoire should be chosen to accomplish this goal. Through the use of high-quality music students gain the most benefits and are challenged, thus facilitating musical growth. In order to determine the quality of a piece of music, the teacher must study the work in depth, carefully noting as many compositional details as possible, including form, phrasing, harmonic structure, melodic gesture, instrumentation, and rhythmic patterns.

When a thorough knowledge of the score is achieved, a comprehensive education can then be provided for students in which fundamentals of musicianship are explored at a deeper level than would be possible through a singular focus on performance practice alone. With the implementation of thoroughly studied high quality literature, musical benefits will extend beyond the classroom, allowing students opportunities to become more informed musicians. The comprehensive musicianship approach enables the teacher to “go beyond purely technical training and provide students with instruction in historical, theoretical, stylistic, and analytical aspects of the music being rehearsed and performed” (Grashel, p. 38). Reynolds (2000) emphasized the importance of high-quality literature and discussed ways teachers relay a knowledge of the score to students, allowing the students to experience meaningful musical growth, but also how information is relayed to the audience, many of whom may experience a greater appreciation for the music they will be hearing.
Compared to some other musical genres, few extensive scholarly critiques have been made of band repertoire, resulting in a lack of resources from which band directors can begin to gain a thorough understanding of music written for band. With so few models to draw upon, a surplus of music of poor quality with little educational value gets performed, and students are deprived of opportunities to participate in a higher quality musical experience. In order for a band director to implement a comprehensive music education for her students, it is imperative to consistently apply appropriate processes of score study to ensure that each piece has artistic and, consequently, educational value.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study will be to complete a performance analysis of two recent compositions for young band by John Mackey: *Undertow* (2008) and *Xerxes* (2010b). Descriptions and analyses will serve to support the view that these pieces are high quality and will also consider pedagogical issues. Additionally, idiomatic compositional characteristics of the composer will be examined, giving insight to the composer’s compositional style.

The methods described in this study will be done in a way that could easily be applied to any piece of band literature, yielding a more in-depth musical understanding, and allowing for a basis to determine quality. The task of choosing quality music from which to teach is crucial to any music program, and as Brashier (2000) states, “why must we sacrifice the quality of music in order to teach our young players? The problem many band programs have is that they are teaching instrumentalists and forgetting to develop musicians” (62). Baumgartner (2009) explained how performance analyses could greatly assist band directors’ understanding of the works their students perform, particularly
because of the limited time in the daily schedules of many band directors. The results of
the analysis could prove beneficial in providing a deeper understanding of the piece,
which in turn allows for a better foundation from which to teach – a concept that is
applicable to all music.

Another aspect of this study will include the investigation of the commissioning
component of band repertoire and how it affects the quality of literature available to
younger, less experienced bands. Both *Undertow* and *Xerxes* were commissioned by
public schools, however the limit of technical skills needed to cater to these groups
doesn’t seem to affect the quality of the works, as the analysis will show. Other
composers can and have been writing quality pieces for young band in addition to John
Mackey, such as Steven Bryant, Michael Daugherty, Michael Colgrass, Chen Yi, John
Corigliano, Dana Wilson, and Gunther Schuller, resulting in more contributions of high
quality music that would greatly benefit the developing musicians in public schools
today.

**Summary of the Procedures**

I will analyze John Mackey’s *Undertow* and *Xerxes*, both of which are recent band
compositions intended to be less difficult than other works by this composer, yet retain
the characteristics that make his music artistically significant. It is important to note that
the issue of “taste” and how it relates to the quality of music will be outside the scope of
this project, as individual preferences for certain compositions and compositional styles
obviously differ on an individual basis. To conduct a performance analysis of these
pieces, I will first consider the compositional aspects of the pieces, beginning with form,
phrasing, harmonic structure, melodic gesture, instrumentation, and rhythmic patterns.
These elements will be assessed for their creativity and ingenuity (based on knowledge of standard works that have been established as high quality), as well as their educational value and potential in the music classroom. Technical aspects that may be considered difficult for the performers will then be assessed, along with any conducting issues found within the pieces.
CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A great deal of research exists regarding the topic of the quality of literature that has been written for the wind band. Selection of the best music from which to teach has become a primary focus of music educators teaching at all levels, and much of the literature given highest regard has been the result of commissioning projects. Because both of the compositions involved in this project are being evaluated for their quality, are considered to be written at a level suitable for young wind bands, and were both commissioned by individual public schools, the review of literature will be divided into three sections: (a) identifying quality literature; (b) music written for young band; and (c) commissioning.

Identifying Quality Literature

The most important and influential duty a music educator has lies in choosing quality literature for their ensembles. Apfelstadt (2000) stated, “through repertoire we choose, we not only teach curricular content to our students, but we also convey our philosophy in terms of what we believe students need to learn to achieve musical growth” (p. 19). While the idea of judging the quality of a piece of music seems inherently subjective, there are still several elements of a work that can be accessed to identify whether or not a work is high quality. Persellin (2000) stated that music of excellence “has vitality, originality, and musical integrity” (p. 17). Cramer (1997) noted that music of artistic merit will include many of the following characteristics: a well-conceived formal structure, creative melodies and countermelodies, harmonic imagination, rhythmic vitality, contrast in all musical elements, scoring that encourages beautiful tone and
timbre, and emotional impact. Cooper (2001) simplified all of these ideas by stating that quality music “has the qualities of excellent construction and genuine expressiveness” (p. 69). Above all, the best literature will be written for artistic purposes and will have a foundation of excellent compositional craft to support it.

The music chosen should be used as a vehicle for teaching basic fundamentals of musicianship, in addition to expanding a student’s knowledge of the music’s cultural impact. Reynolds (2000) stated that the selection of quality literature should be based on the “intrinsic merit” of each piece, just as literature in an English class would be chosen. Persellin (2000) compares the task of music selection to a gardener with seeds: “it takes a combination of good seeds (fine repertoire) and careful nurturing (strong teaching) to result in a beautiful garden (a brilliant concert)” (p. 18). Additionally, the experiences students have with playing quality music will help develop their musical tastes and expand their understanding of music as an expressive art. As Battisti (2002) stated, “those performing high quality music develop musical values and ‘taste’ appropriate for understanding and appreciating high quality Art throughout their lives” (p. 242).

In order to determine a composition’s quality as a work of art, a performance analysis is often conducted, which provides insight to the structural components that determine whether or not a work has academic merit. McCutchen (2009) provided detailed analyses of the winning compositions of the National Band Association’s Composition Contest between 1977 and 2008. Baumgartner (2009) conducted performance analyses of the winning compositions of the Ticheli Composition Contest in 2007. Fennell (2008) has provided numerous detailed analyses of compositions considered to be the standard literature in the band medium, including Persichetti’s
Symphony for Band, Holst’s A Moorside Suite, and Chance’s Variations on a Korean Folk Song. Additionally, research journals such as The Instrumentalist and The Journal of Band Research have provided a wide variety of performance analyses on pieces such as Husa’s Music for Prague, 1968 (Adams, 1983), Reed’s Armenian Dances (Begian, 1985), Grainger’s Lincolnshire Posy (Fennell, 1980), Hindemith’s Symphony for Band (Gallagher, 1966), Dahl’s Sinfonietta for Concert Band (Kloecker, 1993), and Gould’s Symphony for Band (Mullins, 1968). Although these resources represent a significant portion of the highest-quality literature available for to the wind band, it is important that similar research is maintained for contemporary compositions at all levels, and not just the most advanced wind band compositions.

Music Written for Young Band

Although there are numerous examples of great works of art that have been written for the wind band, there are very few examples that are accessible by younger, developing musicians. Richard Floyd stated “children should be taught with only the most musically valuable material – only the best is good enough for the young…Our best composers must be encouraged to write music that is substantive yet accessible” (as cited in Battisti, 2002, p. 278). Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Michael Colgrass (2004) explained that the reasons why many professional composers don’t write for younger musicians include: the lack of prestige that accompanies a piece being premiered by a professional ensemble, the fact that institutions of higher education don’t ask composition majors to write for amateur musicians, and the fact that many techniques that composers write can only be played by advanced players. On the subject of writing within the limitations of amateur ensembles, Colgrass stated:
Every composer knows that writing music within strict limitations is stimulating to creativity. We study Beethoven symphonies and admire the way he based a whole movement on a single motif. Haydn and Beethoven both wrote comparatively easy music for their patrons to play – that’s how the piano trio came into existence, as a medium initially created for amateurs. And Bach’s weekly job was writing for church singers (p. 22).

Although Hilliard (1992) states that younger band pieces are published at a far greater rate than more advanced pieces of grades III and higher, this doesn’t mean that this literature is of high quality. Cooper warns that much of this music is “light, poorly arranged, popular music which is often not even a good representation of the original version and which possesses absolutely no musical integrity” (p. 70). Because of the lack of compositional craft in these pieces, the educational value within them diminishes as well. Hilliard points out that because many band directors rely on a method book as the primary teaching tool for their young ensembles, less value is given to the selection of music for this level.

Hilliard goes on to explain that young band music should embody all of the qualities characteristic of more advanced, high-quality music, and that “there should be a direct correlation between the quality of the literature and the performance skills the student learns” (p. 23). If a student is exposed from a young age to works that are of high quality, the performance skills they develop as a result of this exposure will ensure their development as a well-rounded musician. O’Reilly and Williams (1998) explained that, when judging a piece of literature for young band, the overall tessitura, rhythmic complexity, and distribution of the melody are the key elements to consider. They also
state, “the ideal music for a beginning band is simple in structure but challenges the technique and musicianship of all players” (p. 12).

Commissioning

Because the wind band is a much more recently developed medium than its orchestral counterpart, the commissioning of works has been a crucial element to the development of its literature. Battisti stated, “commissioning works from the greatest composers in the world must be continued in order to insure the development of quality literature for the medium” (as cited in Ripley, 1999, p. 1). Two of the most influential figures in the commissioning of compositions for wind band were Frederick Fennell and Robert Boudreau (Battisti, 2002). When Fennell established the Eastman Wind Ensemble in 1952, he sent out requests to approximately 400 composers asking for original compositions for the wind band, and among the respondents were Percy Grainger, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and Vincent Persichetti – all composers who have written works of unquestionably high quality for the wind band. Since the formation of the American Wind Symphony Orchestra in 1957, Robert Boudreau has successfully commissioned over 400 works for the wind band, included Alan Hovhaness’s Symphony No. 4. Gunther Schuller explained the importance of commissioning for wind band, stating, “only by commissioning and performing music by the best composers in the world can you eliminate the…notion that wind band music is music of a lesser stripe, composed by lesser composers, and thus performed by lesser musicians” (as cited in Battisti, 2002, p. 176). Ripley notes that many commissioned works have been written by Pulitzer Prize-winning composers, including Ellen Taffe Zwilich, Bernard Rands, John Harbison, Karel Husa, Norman Dello Joio, Robert Ward, and Leslie Bassett.
CHAPTER III. PROCEDURES

The purpose of this project was to construct a performance analysis of both *Undertow* and *Xerxes* by John Mackey, which would emphasize the quality of the craftsmanship in both works, as well as reveal pedagogical implications. The overall analysis of each work provided information that was used to create program notes, historical and programmatic influences, theoretical analysis, technical issues for individual players as well as the ensemble as a whole, and conducting issues.

Selection of Works

This study was meant to provide detailed analyses of two recent pieces by a prominent composer who had been commissioned by several public schools throughout the United States. The pieces were chosen based on John Mackey’s merit as a composer, being a recent winner of the Walter Beeler Memorial Composition Prize, the American Bandmaster’s Association Ostwald Award, and the National Band Association William D. Revelli Prize. Additionally, both of these pieces were some of the first pieces written at a grade IV level of difficulty by a composer who until recently had written music at a much higher difficulty level. *Undertow* and *Xerxes* are both representative works from an established composer that are more accessible for younger bands.

Performance Analysis

The first step towards constructing the performance analyses was to create performance notes and identify programmatic or historical influences for each piece. I utilized score notes provided by the composer, as well as information gathered from the composer’s website, ostimusic.com. The theoretical analyses were accomplished through
careful study of the scores of each piece, with the identification of the overall basic structures, key relationships, and motivic developments of melody, harmony and rhythm within each composition. The analyses revealed commonalities between both works, as well as with other Mackey compositions. Difficult technical issues, rehearsal issues, and conducting issues were also determined through the analysis of each piece. Finally, a personal interview with the composer aided in the clarification of all of these aspects.

The performance analysis of each piece included the following: (a) program notes; (b) historical/programmatic background material; (c) theoretical analysis; (d) technical considerations for rehearsal and performance, and (e) conducting challenges.
CHAPTER IV. PERFORMANCE ANALYSES

The procedures described in Chapter III were used in the analyses of both *Undertow* and *Xerxes*. Program notes, along with any historical or programmatic influences, were created first. The theoretical analysis was accomplished through careful score study and the creation of analysis charts, which can be found in the appendices of this document. Rehearsal and conducting issues, along with suggestions for performance were determined based on these findings, along with suggestions from the composer collected in a personal interview.

Analysis of *Undertow*

*Program Notes*

John Mackey relies upon simple rhythmic ostinati, harmonic foreshadowing and various percussion colors along with effective glissandi in the winds in *Undertow*, a composition that is technically less challenging than many of his other works. The most apparent characteristic of the piece is the metric pattern, which alternates between 7/8 and 4/4 throughout the work, with a brief section of 4/4 towards the end of the composition. After the low voices introduce the underlying rhythmic ostinato that persists throughout the piece, the oboes, clarinets, alto and tenor saxophones introduce the main melodic theme, which is written in F dorian. This theme is rhythmically augmented later, while the ostinato remains constant. The piece can be divided into three sections based on tonal center. The first section is centered on F, while the second section starting in measure 114 is centered on C, and finally the third section in measure 170 returns to the F tonal center.
**Historical/Programmatic Influence**

The term undertow, normally associated with an undercurrent of the ocean that flows against the direction of the surface, is a reference to the “pull” that the metric pattern creates through the exclusion of a single eighth note in the 7/8 bars. Because of this “missing” eighth note in the metric pattern, the music has a sense of acceleration that challenges the typical 4/4 feel that would be expected in music of this level. The title of this piece could also refer to the melodic transition throughout the piece, similar to the gradual changes in water currents. In a program note on Mackey’s website, it is stated that the “energetic opening melody cycles though several repetitions before washing away into a gentle stream of percussive eighth notes” (Wallace, n.d., Undertow section, para. 1). The main theme is rhythmically augmented and by measure 154 the melody functions in cut time, although written in 4/4. Despite the augmented melody, the rhythmic ostinato in the bass line remains constant, resulting in two different pulses working at the same time, as the undertow currents of the ocean.

**Theoretical Analysis**

*Undertow* is based more on the development of rhythmic themes and a single melodic gesture than on a traditional framework based on harmonic structure and transitions between different thematic devices. During the first ten measures the bassoons, bass and contrabass clarinets, baritone saxophone, and double bass initiate an ostinato consisting of driving quarter notes with an added dotted quarter note, which immediately outlines the alternating 7/8 and 4/4 metric pattern that remains persistent throughout the piece. Because the 7/8 bars act as a condensed version of the 4/4 bars, this pattern creates a constant sense of acceleration in the piece.
The primary melody in F dorian is first introduced in measure 10 in the oboes and first clarinets, which are then joined by the alto and tenor saxophones in measures 14 and 16 respectively. It is during this section that one of the first percussion “effects” is written. In measure 13, the xylophone has a repeated glissando that spans two octaves from C¹ to C³. These glissandi emphasize the upbeats of the third and fourth beats in measure 13, which are also punctuated by second and third clarinets, alto and tenor saxophones, timpani, and crash cymbals. The F dorian theme is repeated at measure 28, this time in the piccolo, first and third clarinets, tenor saxophones, first and third trumpets, and horns. A brief call and response, which had been alluded to in measure 18, fully occurs in measure 36, beginning with the clarinets and trumpets, and answered by the tenor saxophones, horns, and euphoniums. It is during this section of call and response that the trombones have several glissandi – a frequent effect that Mackey uses several times in this piece.

Measure 42 contains the first significant instance of harmonic foreshadowing that Mackey incorporates throughout this work. While the piece is centered on F during this section, measure 42 contains an F minor triad with an additional G. The G represents a foreshadowing of the dominant of the next section, whose tonal center is C. Another instance of harmonic foreshadowing occurs in measure 92, in which Mackey writes a G diminished triad with an added C. In measure 113, the overall chord is a G diminished triad with an additional G-flat and C. These additional pitches produce a tritone, which is a constant intervallic motif heard throughout the piece. This harmonic language leads to the next tonal section in measure 114, in addition to the critical transition that occurs in measure 162. In a conversation with the composer, it was revealed that this harmonic
foreshadowing was not intentional. The implications of this will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Measure 42 also represents the point at which Mackey begins to manipulate the rhythm of the melodic gesture first heard in measure 10. The scoring thins dramatically, and the maracas begin playing a rhythm reminiscent of the ostinato heard in the beginning. The clarinet solo in measure 54 is a simple chromatic figure, written in a much more elongated fashion, with one note every two measures. This serves as transitional material to the flute solo in measure 62, which is a rhythmically augmented version of the main melodic theme. By measure 78, the flutes, second and third clarinets have been added to this augmented theme, all while the vibraphone and maracas keep a steady eighth note subdivision underneath. By measure 94, the scoring is tutti again, with the rhythmically augmented theme in the flutes, first trumpets, and horns, eighth note subdivisions in the oboes, alto and tenor saxophones, and fragments of the original ostinato in the low woodwinds, euphoniums, tuba, and double bass.

Beginning in measure 114, the tonal center of Undertow is C, which functions as the dominant of the previous section centered on F. There is a section of call and response between the winds and percussion from measure 114 to measure 121, which is a textural foreshadowing of the percussion soli to come in measure 130. The rhythmically augmented theme is heard in the trumpets and horns, accompanied by staccato eighth notes in the woodwinds and a fragmented and augmented version of the low voice ostinato, all leading to the percussion soli. The soli utilizes all percussion parts except for cymbals and the xylophone, which remain tacet save for the pick up notes leading back to the tutti section in measure 146. Another call and response occurs between the winds and
percussion in 146, eventually leading to the 4/4 section in measure 154. This section represents the one significant change in the meter pattern from the 7/8 and 4/4 alternation to 4/4 time. Coupled with the augmented melody in the trumpets, this section has a cut-time feel. The harmonic foreshadowing elements culminate in measure 169, where a polychord consisting of a C minor triad and a G-flat major triad is written. Both of the tonic pitches of these chords represent the tritone that had been consistently alluded to in this work. The use of the G-flat major chord is a tritone substitution, leading back to the tonal center of F in measure 170.

Measure 170 represents a metric as well as harmonic recapitulation, as both the alternating 7/8 and 4/4 time metric pattern and the tonal center on F return at this point. The main melodic theme returns in the upper voices in measure 182, and the coda in measure 194 containing one last call and response between the flutes and upper saxophones and the clarinets and low brass energetically drives the piece to the conclusion.

*Technical Considerations for Rehearsal and Performance*

The alternation between 7/8 and 4/4 meter is a crucial aspect of this piece and will need to be internalized by the ensemble. Because of the combination of the 7/8 bar both “missing” an eighth note and ending on a pulse that feels longer than the pulses in the 4/4 bar (three-eighth note subdivision instead of two), the line may feel rushed to the players at first. The glissandi written in the first and second trombone parts can be much more difficult to emphasize, since they are written to go from E-flat to D-natural (third to fourth position), as opposed to the third trombone part, in which the glissando goes from C to B-flat (sixth to first position).
Because the percussion colors play such a prominent role in this piece, it is important that all seven parts are accurately performed. Mackey (personal communication, February 7, 2011) stated, “in Undertow, probably everybody’s part is a grade III, except for the percussion section, which would be a grade IV. The reason the piece is at all difficult is because of the percussion section.” These percussion parts require the players to use various techniques that will need to be mastered, such as the large glissandi required of the xylophone player, and the need for the tam-tam player to dampen with their knees from behind the tam-tam. The xylophone/vibraphone, marimba, and maraca players need to be able to keep a very steady eighth note pulse throughout the work in order to keep the metric changes smooth. These players will also need to be mindful of their dynamics, as they often maintain a rhythmic undercurrent beneath a soft solo line. The percussion parts can get very complex, particularly at the soli section at measure 130, where all except the cymbal player are engaged in their own independent line.

The flute and clarinet solos occur during sections of the work that are very thinly scored and will need to be brought out. Because these solo lines are rhythmically augmented, the players will need to be very mindful of subdividing the underlying eighth note in order to move across the 7/8 and 4/4 bars at the correct times. There are several instances where a section may have a brief interjection during the augmented melodies, such as the trumpets at measure 53 or the saxophone family at measure 61, which will require players to count their rests accurately and enter without hesitation. This composition goes through drastic dynamic changes that players will need to emphasize, particularly when Mackey writes for a long crescendo over several bars. The ensemble
will need to avoid building too soon to make sure the climactic ending is the most powerful part of the work.

*Conducting Issues*

Because Mackey chooses to change the overall pulse of the main melody in this piece, the conductor should be careful to conduct this line as it sounds, rather than by simply pulsing the beat according to the meter that is written. For example, the section starting in measure 154 should be conducted in two, even though the section is written in 4/4, because the line moves by half note pulses. By conducting this way, the director establishes the metric relationship this section has with the original statement of the theme in measure 10. Similarly, the conductor could choose to conduct these same macrobeats in either a two or four pattern during the rhythmically augmented melody, such as at measure 96. The conductor would need to be mindful of keeping the eighth note pulse accurate, however, as one of the beats would have only three subdivisions as opposed to the four subdivisions of the rest of the metric scheme. Also, the use of the four-pattern would give a more linear shape to the melodic line, as opposed to the two-pattern, which would emphasize the two-bar phrases of the ostinato.

Finally, because this composition goes through such drastic changes in both style and texture, the conductor will need to show these contrasts in their beat pattern. For example, the opening tutti section will need to have strong down beats and intense rhythmic precision, whereas the section at measure 54 with the clarinet solo will require a smaller pattern and a more flowing motion. Intermittent entrances in various instruments will need to be cued clearly, particularly due to the constant alternating meters.
Analysis of Xerxes

Program Notes

According to Mackey, Xerxes was written based on the concept of creating an “anti-march,” utilizing a main theme with characteristics contrary to what is generally expected of a typical march theme. The themes are “heaving and raging,” contrary to the light and patriotic motives that are usually expected. Despite the unusually dark melody, the composer maintains that the piece still retains the basic structure of a military march, with an overall A-B-A format, 4/4 time signature, consistent tempo, and traditional phrase structure (personal communication, February 7, 2011). Modal melodies of the three themes provide structure to the piece, and a consistent ostinato based on rhythmic and melodic motives is heard throughout the work.

Historical/Programmatic Influence

The piece’s dark, accented melody is attributed to Mackey’s desire to write a march that didn’t sound like a march, while also characterizing the historical figure for whom the piece is named. According to the program notes in the score provided by Mackey (2010b), “Xerxes, as the music hopefully suggests, was one of your nastier rulers, even by ancient standards. (His claim to “fame” was invading and burning Athens to the ground).”

Theoretical Analysis

Xerxes, while retaining certain conservative elements associated with a traditional military march, showcases interesting harmonic language, as well as complex rhythmic figures that have become associated with John Mackey’s writing style. Modal melodies are used in addition to functional harmony between sections of the piece.
As in *Undertow*, *Xerxes* begins with a rhythmic, syncopated ostinato in the lower voices, including the bassoons and contrabassoon, bass and contrabass clarinets, tenor and baritone saxophones, tuba, and timpani. This introductory section also includes several wide glissandi in the xylophone part, an “effect” frequently used by Mackey to emphasize upbeats. From the onset of the piece, the percussion, including the snare drum, tam-tam, and bass drum, followed soon after by the flutes and xylophone, introduce a repeated sixteen-note triplet figure – a common rhythmic motive that is utilized consistently throughout the work.

The oboes, trumpets, horns, and euphoniums introduce the F phrygian melody in measure nine, all while the syncopated ostinato continues in the low woodwinds, low brass, and timpani beneath. It is soon after this introduction of the main theme that Mackey incorporates another “effect” in the horn part, consisting of a glissando from F# to G. These horn “rips” continue to accentuate ends of phrases and upbeats, in a manner similar to the xylophone part. The first theme is repeated in measure 21, identical to the first instance in measure 10 with the exception of the added horn glissandi.

Following transitional material, the second theme begins in measure 37 in the upper woodwinds, trumpets, first and second horns, and euphoniums. This theme is contrasting in both style and rhythm, as it is a flowing, slurred melody made up of augmented rhythmic motives.

The third theme, which is introduced by the soprano saxophone solo in measure 63, showcases Mackey’s rhythmic ingenuity, despite the fact that *Xerxes* remains in 4/4 throughout. The repeated triplet and sextuplet figures heard from the beginning of the piece in the percussion and flute parts are now integrated into this melody. After some
transitional material, including another “effect” in which the trombones are asked to both glissando and decrescendo to *niente* over a two-measure span, the third theme is repeated in measure 85, this time with the addition of the oboes, alto and tenor saxophones, and additional ornamentation from the piccolo. More glissandi are written in measure 86, this time in the clarinet part, and again in the trombone part in measure 92. These effects, coupled with a gradual addition of more voices, lead to a boisterous tutti section in measure 93.

It is also at the onset of the third theme where Mackey utilizes interesting harmonic language. The tonal center remains F, however the melodic mode goes from F phrygian to F locrian. The F phrygian mode has a relative key signature to D-flat major, and the F locrian mode has a relative key signature to G-flat major. Because G-flat major is the subdominant to D-flat major, this harmonic progression functions in a way we would expect from a traditional military march going into the trio section. By the time the scoring is tutti again in measure 93, Mackey switches the harmonic device from centering on the same pitch to centering on the same mode, and begins writing the melody in C locrian. Not only does the tonal center of C function as the dominant of F, but the relative key signature of C locrian is D-flat major – the original key signature from the beginning of the work.

In measure 93, the rhythmically complex third theme is played in unison by the piccolo, flutes, oboes, E-flat clarinet, clarinets, and soprano, alto, and tenor saxophones, while underneath, all other voices except the trumpets play the syncopated ostinato from the beginning of the piece. The trumpets, which are “left out” of the final statement of the third theme, are instead used to interject fanfare-like statements at the end of each phrase,
before finally joining in the last two measures of the melody at measure 101. Because the relative key signature to C locrian is the same as that of F phrygian, Mackey is able to easily transition from the third theme back into the original tonality of the first theme for the recapitulation in measure 103. The second theme is restated in measure 119, before the coda in measure 127. After four measures of transitional material, the entire ensemble plays the ostinato, either by two or four measure increments, simultaneously. Material from the third theme is used for the final bars of the piece, which ends on an open fifth between F and C, with an added B in the third clarinet part.

*Technical Considerations for Rehearsal and Performance*

The intervals found within the melody of *Xerxes* can be quite challenging, especially for brass players. The first theme is made up of a complex sequence of descending and ascending tritones, major sevenths, and octaves, all of which can be difficult for brass players to perform accurately. Another prominent issue in this piece lies in the rhythmic complexity of many sections, in addition to the fact that these complex rhythmic figures are often played by many players at once. In measure 93 for example, the melody calls for several sections to play complex rhythms in unison, which will require all players involved to be extremely accurate in how they subdivide that motive. Subdivisions range from simple patterns of two and three to more complex four, five, and six patterns, which also can change from beat to beat.

The texture of the composition thins dramatically from measures 45-49, and the various solis and solos will need to enter accurately and in a dynamic appropriate to make the dovetailing of the line very clear. During sections where the melody is rhythmically augmented or the harmony is made up of slurred quarter notes, players will need to
maintain a steady subdivision of the beat to ensure that they don’t slow down. The ostinato should never be loud enough to cover the main melodic lines, particularly at the tutti section in measure 93. The snare and tom toms/tam-tam players will need to be very accurate in subdividing their parts, as they maintain constant rhythmic patterns based on subdivisions of three and six for the duration of this work.

There are seven percussion parts written for Xerxes, consisting of timpani, xylophone/marimba/tambourine, crash cymbals/crotales/tambourine, suspended cymbal/small china/large china/wind gong (or small tam-tam)/bell plate on top of brake drum/triangle, snare drum, tam-tam, large tom-tom, and bass drum. The percussion IV player has the most instruments to play – six total – and Mackey includes a key for this player as to how these parts are represented in the staff. Mackey also includes notes regarding specific equipment and techniques that should be used by this player to achieve certain sounds desired by the composer. For example, the composer writes that a bell plate should be used on top of the brake drum “because it is extremely resonant. Do NOT simply put any piece of metal on top of the brake drum. Bell plates are ideal because of their resonance, and because their weight is good for this effect.” Mackey stated that percussion players need to be mindful of the specific sounds required of them, noting that mallets are “just as important as the notes,” and there is more to the percussion section than just rhythms (personal communication, February 7, 2011).

Conducting Issues

Because Xerxes is written in 4/4 time with simple 8 and 4-bar phrasing throughout, the conducting challenges in this piece are minimal. The conductor should be mindful to emulate the aggressive nature of the first theme, particularly to set up the
contrasts that occur later in the piece. There are a few instances in which the melody would be best if conducted in two, notably in the second theme, which first appears in measure 37. Using a flowing two-pattern would help to illustrate the distinction created after the intensely accented first theme. During these sections, the pattern should show the contrast between the flowing, cut-time melody and the brash, accented themes heard at the beginning. Cues for entrances need to be very clear, as several entrances occur on fractional beats and within a phrase, such as in measure 86, with stopped horn on the upbeats of counts three and four, or with the flute ornamentations in measure 30 and 32. This also applies to hocket-like sections, such as in measures 49-53, where the melody is quickly passed between the soprano saxophone, first and second flute, bassoon, oboe, e-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, and finally to the first clarinet. Several of the rhythmically complex sections that are played in unison with several sections occur starting on a fractional beat, and it is crucial that the conductor provides a clear downbeat to give the players a sense of timing for their entrances. For example, in measure 94, the conductor would need to provide both a strong downbeat on beat two for the ostinato to be cleanly played on the upbeat, as well as a strong downbeat on three to give reference to the players with the melody entering on the second triplet subdivision of beat three.
CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION

Mackey’s Compositional Techniques

*Rhythmic and Metric Elements*

One of the most recognizable elements of John Mackey’s writing style is his use of complex, often asymmetrical rhythms. Rhythmic ostinati are consistently seen in both *Undertow* and *Xerxes*, and serve as foundations on which the rest of the pieces are constructed. According to Phillips (2007), this emphasis on rhythm can be attributed to the fact that many of Mackey’s early works were written to accompany choreography. As a composition major at Julliard, one of the required academic courses Mackey participated in was the Composers and Choreographers Workshop, and this early experience clearly had a significant influence on the rhythmic nature of Mackey’s works.

In an interview with the composer, it was also revealed that rhythm is the one component that remains uncompromised in Mackey’s compositional process. Mackey says the following about this phenomenon:

> When I’m writing a piece, I will literally sit in my chair and air drum, for example, what a tom part should be…It’s very easy for me if I’m out walking or something, to get some rhythmic thing in my head. Then I can figure out what drums would do that, and I can write it down without it being degraded by the lack of my ‘good ear.’ If I have an interesting chord in my head, I don’t know what those notes are that I’m hearing…So it’s sometimes very difficult for me to figure out especially dense harmonic things that I might come up with in my head and get them actually translated to paper. But with unpitched percussion in
particular, that doesn’t happen. It’s not compromised by the time it’s scored. That doesn’t get watered down at all. What you see in the percussion writing, especially the unpitched percussion writing, is the least compromised of what I originally wanted to do in a piece (personal communication, February 7, 2011).

Another interesting characteristic of Mackey’s compositions is in his use of asymmetrical and mixed meters. The forward momentum in *Undertow* is created through the alternating 7/8 and 4/4 meters, and is made very clear in the ostinato of the lower voices from the very beginning of the work. When asked about the 7/8 metric scheme specifically, Mackey stated that this was influenced by the first movement of Bernstein’s *Chichester Psalms*, which the composer was exposed to at an early age when his mother sang in a church choir. Mackey stated, “The 7/8 meter was the first unusual meter that I wrote with when I was much younger and liked it…I was very comfortable with that and other mixed meters…Almost all of my music has some kind of mixed meter thing” (personal communication, February 7, 2011).

*Use of Percussion*

Because of Mackey’s emphasis on rhythm and meter as a basis for his works, it is clear why the percussion section has such a dominant role in many of his pieces, as well as in *Undertow* and *Xerxes*. Mackey stated that he writes the percussion parts from the very beginning of the writing process, and considers the percussion section to be the most important section in a piece. However, in addition to providing rhythmic structure to his works, Mackey is also very specific about the types of colors and timbres he wants the percussion section to play. When he is working with groups, Mackey says that most of his notes are directed at the percussion section, stating, “I’m very specific about cymbal
types and mallet types, mallet hardnesses, and different mallets in different hands. That’s very important to me and often percussionists just ignore it – and I yell at them.”

Effects

Another technique that corresponds with Mackey’s “thumbprint” as a composer is the use of various effects to emphasize specific points in the music. Most prominent of these effects are his glissandi, which are written most often in the trombone parts, as in Undertow, but are also seen in the clarinet, horn, and xylophone parts in Xerxes. Mackey attributes his use of this effect to his early writing for strings, particularly for the original string quartet version of Strange Humors (1998), which contains several instances of string glissandi. The composer recalled that his first exposure to this effect was in the music of Tan Dun, proving to be an extremely influential force, as the effect has been included in much of Mackey’s work ever since.

Harmonic Elements

Although the composer himself claims that he didn’t consciously focus on the harmonic elements within Undertow and Xerxes, both of these works contain an interesting harmonic structure. Xerxes, although unconventional in many aspects, retains the traditional harmonic structure expected of a march through a functional tonic and subdominant relationship between the modal melodies used. Undertow is built upon a constant foreshadowing of two chords that act as the pivot point of the work. When asked if this harmonic foreshadowing was intentional, the composer responded:

No I didn’t know I did that. That’s interesting to know…Stuff like that I’m really not aware of. But that’s great if it somehow ties it all together and makes it seem structurally stronger…Undertow is basically the same structure as Turbine. And
that was the idea – that it would feel like “Turbine for dummies.” So I’m not really planning, I’m just writing until it feels like it makes structural sense listening to it (personal communication, February 7, 2011).

The fact that Mackey focuses on overall structure as well as rhythmic elements, and is able to still write pieces that are harmonically well crafted, demonstrates the fact that high-quality music is the result of artistry of the composer, and not necessarily of a complex plan.

Implications for Music Education

*Commissioning and writing for young ensembles*

Because the literature of the wind band is limited in comparison to the orchestra, the commissioning of works has been crucial to providing ensembles with more original music to perform. When asked if the fact that a piece is commissioned affects his writing style, Mackey replied:

> It definitely does. Most all of my pieces are commissioned by consortium. And then I’m not considering the technical level of all of the consortium members, because I can’t know that. But more and more pieces now are being commissioned by individual schools. *Undertow* was a single school, *Xerxes* was a single school, and even *Aurora Awakes*, which is a 12-minute piece, was a single school that paid for that. In the case of an individual school, the piece should be tailored to the technical level of that ensemble (personal communication, February 7, 2011).

Although specific instrumentations for each school can greatly alter where a composer chooses to score various aspects of a piece, the ability levels of the groups add another
element that the composer must combat. In a blog entry on his website, ostimusic.com, Mackey (2010a) stated:

> The biggest challenge in writing music for young bands is writing music that easy, but it doesn’t sound simplistic or dorky. It still needs to sound like I wrote it, but it needs to sound like the piece just happened to be technically easy — as if it happened by accident.

More specifically, Mackey states that the two biggest challenges with regard to writing music for young band is the range, which Mackey considers “almost crippling,” and the difficulty in scoring dissonance. To combat this latter issue, Mackey explained that he puts more consideration into splitting half step dissonances between sections, rather than within a section, so that each instrument group “could at least get their section in tune.”

Because he was never formally trained on any instrument, Mackey states that he often doesn’t know the technical limitations for young instrumentalists. However, he also states:

> It’s probably okay that I have no idea. I think with the end product it works in my favor. The pieces are probably harder to pull off then they sound like they should be. Generally, I think with all the pieces I’ve done for young bands, the intent is not “educational music,” as much as writing something that happens to be playable by younger players that will push them somewhat (personal communication, February 7, 2011).
It is important to note the fact that the composer’s intent was not to create ‘educational music,’ but rather to create an artistic work that is technically accessible by younger musicians. Fonder (2000) notes that by categorizing music as either ‘educational music’ or ‘artistic music,’ it is implied that the former has less musical value than the latter, and that if a piece of music is of high quality, then it naturally will be educational because of its compositional craft.

The primary issue is that wind band pieces that are considered to be the highest-quality are technically very demanding, leaving very few options for younger, developing musicians. In addition, music that is written solely for educational purposes will not offer students enough substance to develop their artistic ear. Budiansky (2005) states, “If I’ve heard That Piece once, I’ve heard it a hundred times. Different composers, different titles, same bombastic banality.” The fact that Mackey himself was unaware of the complex theoretical structure within his own works proves that his compositions are created through artistic and aesthetic decisions, rather than with a specific educational purpose. The analyses constructed in this project give further academic merit to both Undertow and Xerxes, and legitimize the decisions made by the composer. By learning and performing these works, students will be exposed to technical challenges that will help them develop as players, but will also experience a piece of music that was written for its own artistic sake, fulfilling the comprehensive goals of music education.

*Score Analysis as an Educational Tool*

This project resulted in an in-depth analysis of two works by John Mackey, which revealed the compositional devices used by the composer that are prevalent in both his
advanced as well as his technically less demanding works. Through an in-depth analysis of these works, lesson plans can be structured in a way that allows students to benefit the most from playing them. Rehearsal and conducting considerations can particularly aid in planning efficient rehearsals for young ensembles, and the theoretical analysis coupled with the composer’s own insights yield a greater understanding of the works themselves as pieces of art. The analyses from this project give evidence that both *Undertow* and *Xerxes* are works of high quality for younger players, and the knowledge gained from performing these analyses can then be applied to any work by any composer to determine quality.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

The analyses from this project support the argument that both *Undertow* and *Xerxes* are works of high quality by John Mackey. Further analyses of other works by Mackey may provide more evidence of his compositional craft. Particularly, it may be beneficial to construct performance analyses on his works written at a grade III level, to determine more compositional devices that can be seen in his more challenging works, but also translate into his pieces for younger ensembles.

This project also focused on the commissioning component of *Undertow* and *Xerxes*, and how it affected the construction of those pieces. Further research may include analyses of other works by prominent composers that have been commissioned for wind band. Investigation of works by Steven Bryant, Michael Daugherty, Michael Colgrass, Chen Yi, John Corigliano, Dana Wilson, and Gunther Schuller, for example, could all provide significant insight to the contributions being made to the wind band literature, as
well as other compositional elements that determine a work of high-quality.

This project investigated works that are intended to be played by developing musicians. Further research may investigate other pieces that are technically less challenging, but maintain intriguing compositional craft within the limitations of the amateur musician. These resources will further aid directors in the selection of works of high quality, which will simultaneously provide students with a more well-rounded music education.
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APPENDIX A. *UNDERTOW* ANALYSIS CHART

Diagram showing:
- Recap of theme in upper voices and call/response
- Centered on F
- Return to 7/8 + 4/4 meter
- mm. 170-209
- Coda
APPENDIX B. XERXES ANALYSIS CHART

mm. 93-142

93
Theme 3 tattu

103
Recap of Theme 1

119
Recap of Theme 2

127
Coda

135
Rhythmic
ostinati continue
to the end

C locrian

F phrygian
APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR JOHN MACKEY

1. Now that you have written pieces that are less demanding technically, what do you find to be most difficult about writing a piece at a grade 3 or 4 level?

2. Does the fact that a work is being commissioned affect your writing style? If so, in what ways?

3. I’ve noticed that you frequently utilize tritones as a harmonic device throughout Undertow and Xerxes. Is that intentional? And if so, why?

4. I’ve also found that you use harmonic foreshadowing to precede upcoming key changes. Is that intentional as well?

5. The percussion voices have a prominent role in both pieces. Can you elaborate on your use of the percussion colors and why you use them to the extent that you do?

6. Your use of rhythm and mixed meter (particularly the 7/8 time signature) is especially interesting. What are your thoughts on this aspect of your compositions?

7. Sometimes within an easy work there are outlier parts (such as in the trumpet and horn) that are significantly more difficult than the others. Is that intentional?
1. Now that you have written pieces that are less demanding technically, what do you find to be most difficult about writing a piece at a grade 3 or 4 level?

With Xerxes, I wasn’t thinking that it was going to be a young band piece at all. I guess it’s probably a little bit harder than Undertow, but the goal was not for it to be a high school-level piece. I just thought, “I’m going to write a march,” and if I stay in 4/4, with the same tempo, and write the phrases in traditional ways, then it would end up technically much easier than most of my stuff. But that was just an accident. It’s harder to write a complex march and have it still be a march. So, for that one I was just thinking ‘march’, not ‘easy.’

With Undertow, I was definitely thinking ‘younger band piece.’ I just finished a real grade 3 piece in December, and the biggest challenge for sure is the ranges. The range is almostcrippling. I tried to write a grade 3 piece a little over a year ago – I did write it, but no one will ever see it, except the people who paid for it. It’s terrible. And I’m not being modest. It’s terrible! It’s really bad, and the biggest problem I had was the range. Also, there was a lot of difficulty with finding ways to score any kind of dissonance. Even if it was diatonic dissonance it was difficult, because they were having trouble getting things in tune, sitting right next to each other and being a half step apart. There was more consideration with splitting half step dissonances between different sections in the group so that they could at least get their section in tune. Normally, I would not score things that way. I would normally put voiced dissonant chords within the same instrumentation generally. In Xerxes too, it is scored that way. There is dissonance within the same instrument type. And in Undertow, for example, there is a spot in the trumpet part with a chord made up of a G, an A, and a B-flat. This is in the trumpets, which they’ll probably never get in tune in a middle school band, but oh well.

But those I think are the most difficult things. Register, which is very hard, and trying to get things in tune, but part of the problem is that I never studied any instrument at all. So I don’t know what notes are harder to get in tune for younger players, specific notes that are difficult, and what notes are always going to lay well and be more in tune. So if I knew those things, I guess it would be easier, but then it becomes even less about the music and more of just an exercise. It’s probably okay that I have no idea. I think with the end product it works in my favor. The pieces are probably harder to pull off then they sound like they should be. Generally, I think with all the pieces I’ve done for young bands, the intent is not ‘educational music,’ as much as writing something that happens to be playable by younger players that will push them somewhat. But my goal is not “I’m going to teach you how to do this in this piece.” I think there are plenty of people who do that, where each piece is approached as an educational tool. I don’t need to do that. It’s great if someone can use it as a teaching tool. For example
Undertow, kind of by accident, is a good rhythmic teaching tool with alternate meters.

2. Does the fact that a work is being commissioned affect your writing style? If so, in what ways?

It definitely does. Most all of my pieces are commissioned by consortium. And then I’m not considering the technical level of all of the consortium members, because I can’t know that. But more and more pieces now are being commissioned by individual schools. Undertow was a single school, Xerxes was a single school, and even Aurora Awakes, which is a 12-minute piece, was a single school that paid for that. In the case of an individual school, the piece should be tailored to the technical level of that ensemble.

With Undertow, that was scored very specifically for the instrumentation that Cheryl Floyd had in her band. I wasn’t sure whether to put a piccolo in Undertow. I was going to put a piccolo in, because I didn’t know any better, and she said that piccolo for middle school can be problematic, and that there might be someone who can hold a piccolo, but you probably don’t want to hear a piccolo in a middle school band. But she’s a flute teacher, so she had a really good piccolo player, and there’s a fairly prominent piccolo part in Undertow. Undertow also has an extra percussion part. I was originally going to write for just six players, but the assistant director at the school is also the percussion teacher. The percussion students in the top band could all play four-mallet marimba – at the middle school level. So he was a crazy good teacher and wanted prominent percussion parts, but what I was going to do was just six parts with no timpani. After I started the piece, he saw the early sketch and said that he really wanted timpani in it. I couldn’t find another percussion part I could eliminate to add a timpani part, and I knew that they only had six players in their percussion section, so he said he would just play the timpani part. So that’s why there are seven percussion parts in it.

3. I’ve noticed that you frequently utilize tritones as a harmonic device throughout Undertow and Xerxes. Is that intentional? And if so, why?

That’s just a crutch that all of my harmonic stuff has in it. I’m not ever consciously thinking, “I should go to the tritone!” It’s just a sound that I like and so I use it all the time. It’s not pre-planned or premeditated or anything. I just like tritones.

4. The percussion voices have a prominent role in both pieces. Can you elaborate on your use of the percussion colors and why you use them to the extent that you do?

I like the percussion a lot. As I said, I can’t play anything, but I can air drum pretty well. When I’m writing a piece, I will literally sit in my chair and air drum, for example, what a tom part should be. Especially with unpitched percussion, it’s very easy for me if I’m out walking or something, to get some rhythmic thing in
my head. Then I can figure out what drums would do that, and I can write it down without it being degraded by the lack of my ‘good ear.’ If I have an interesting chord in my head, I don’t know what those notes are that I’m hearing. So if I go to a keyboard to try to find that chord, whatever I play first now has completely wiped out whatever chord I had in my head, and replaced it with what I’m now actually hearing, and the original chord is gone. So it’s sometimes very difficult for me to figure out especially dense harmonic things that I might come up with in my head and get them actually translated to paper. But with unpitched percussion in particular, that doesn’t happen. It’s not compromised by the time it’s scored. That doesn’t get watered down at all. What you see in the percussion writing, especially the unpitched percussion writing, is the least compromised of what I originally wanted to do in a piece. I’m always writing the percussion stuff at the same time, with each bar. As I’m writing a piece, the percussion is there from the beginning. I know composers who will write a piece, and then go back and write the percussion parts. That is completely not my approach at all. I feel like for me, it’s the most important section in a piece. I think it’s fun. I’m most picky about percussion in rehearsals. With every group I work with, at least 80% of the notes I will give in a rehearsal will be for the percussionists. Often, this will be regarding the lack of attention that the players will give to specific things in a part, such as specific mallets. You don’t see that so much in Undertow and Xerxes, but with the more advanced stuff I’m very specific about cymbal types and mallet types, mallet hardnesses, and different mallets in different hands. That’s very important to me and often percussionists just ignore it – and I yell at them.

5. I’ve also found that you use harmonic foreshadowing to precede upcoming key changes. Is that intentional as well?

No I didn’t know I did that. That’s interesting to know. Somebody did a dissertation about my sax concerto a couple years ago. I would kind of worry to see it, because then I would know what I was doing. I’d become self-conscious of it, and try to avoid doing it, or do it even more because I think that’s what I do. Stuff like that I’m really not aware of. But that’s great if it somehow ties it all together and makes it seem structurally stronger. Some of these pieces are planned really, really meticulously before I start writing notes down. But Undertow I just wrote and Xerxes I just wrote. Undertow took probably 3 or 4 weeks to write. It’ll take 4 or 5 months to write a bigger, more planned piece. With Undertow and Xerxes, their structure is so straightforward. Undertow is just the tune, and then slow arch up, and then we’re done, basically. So, Undertow is basically the same structure as Turbine. And that was the idea – that it would feel like “Turbine for dummies.” So I’m not really planning, I’m just writing until it feels like it makes structural sense listening to it.
6. Your use of rhythm and mixed meter (particularly the 7/8 time signature) is especially interesting. What are your thoughts on this aspect of your compositions?

The 7/8 meter was the first unusual meter that I wrote with when I was much younger and liked it. That came from the first movement of the Bernstein Chichester Psalms, the first time I heard that. My mom was in a Unitarian church choir, so I was exposed to all kinds of stuff, including the Chichester Psalms. I saw the score and studied it, and the first movement is all in 7/4. I think that was the first time I heard “seven.” I was very comfortable with that and other mixed meters. The way Undertow was planned, I must have come up with the 7/8 and 4/4 ostinato pretty quickly and then stuck a tune on top of it. It looks complicated, but it’s totally singable, so it should be very teachable. I thought it would be pretty doable for younger players to learn and play and still be unusual and a cool kind of groove for them to do. I was thinking, “what can I do in a mixed meter that’s not going make their heads explode?” I just like the feel of mixed meter grooves. Almost all of my music has some kind of mixed meter thing.

7. Sometimes within an easy work there are outlier parts (such as in the trumpet and horn) that are significantly more difficult than the others. Is that intentional?

No. In Xerxes, for example, it’s just because I wanted this really militaristic-sounding march, and to me that’s all that could play that stuff, and have that kind of sound. I wasn’t thinking, “the trumpet part should be really hard.” But the trumpet and horn parts are the only reason why people might find that piece tricky, I think. However, the soprano sax solo is prominent, so you need someone who can play that.

When I’m working on a piece, there’s something that to my ear the instrumentation calls for. My horn parts used to be very straightforward, and kind of dull – until this obnoxious kid at a Texas All-State Band was playing Redline Tango. She came up to me with her part and she said, “Mr. Mackey, I play horn, and your horn parts are really lame!” She was totally right! The horn parts were really very conservative. Most of my oboe parts are not very interesting, either, and the reason is that most oboe players, especially at the high school level, but even at the collegiate level, don’t play very well. It’s not a very pretty sound to hear most oboists. If you want something to sound really pretty, generally it’s safer to just give it to a soprano sax and it will probably be more in tune and safer, and nobody will have a heart attack worrying about what’s going to happen.

However, I recently did a trombone concerto that has no saxes, so all of the things that would have gone to the saxes did end up going to oboe and English horn and bassoon. So there are tons of double reed solos in the piece, because I didn’t have saxes anymore. And I thought, “that actually sounds kind of nice!” I’m trying now with future pieces, because of the positive result of the trombone concerto, to have more interesting oboe parts, for example. It seems like all the people who play in the wind ensemble, the one section that doesn’t want to be there the most
is the oboe. They would so much rather be in a really bad orchestra than a really
good band, and I think often that’s because the repertoire is not stuff that they
want to play, and everything is really loud! So I’m trying to make more
interesting oboe parts.

With the other pieces that I’ve already done, the trumpet parts and horn parts in
Xerxes for example, when I was scoring it, that’s what the piece felt like it called
for. In Undertow, probably everybody’s part is a grade 3, except for the
percussion section, which would be a grade 4. The reason the piece is at all
difficult is because of the percussion section. In Xerxes it’s the same kind of thing,
extcept for the trumpets and horns it’s really not very hard. They can count it, but
there are leaps and it goes really high, so for those reasons, I guess it’s hard. But
I’m not really aware when certain instruments have more challenging parts when
I’m working on a piece - it just ends up that way. It’s not like with Steven
Bryant’s Concerto for Wind Ensemble. I feel like he was very aware “everything
has to be ridiculously hard.” And he accomplished that very well! But I’m not
thinking that. When I’m working on a younger band piece, I might write
something that I know is going to be pretty tricky. But if I think it’s doable, I’ll
just leave it alone. Let them figure it out.