

# Getting Their Story Right: What Composers Want You to Know About Interpreting Their Music

Robert J. Ambrose, Julie Giroux, Omar Thomas, and Frank Ticheli

## CLINIC SYNOPSIS

Ensemble directors have the great responsibility of helping composers tell their story. Music sits on a page, silently. Composers rely on conductors to bring it to life; to study it, to internalize it, and to interpret it. Interpretation requires conductors to take the analyzable elements of a score such as form, thematic material, harmonic motion, and rhythmic structure, and infuse them with their own musicianship and intuition into a refined viewpoint of the music. This viewpoint should honor the composer's intentions and help to tell their "story." While resources focusing on score study are plentiful, it is more difficult to find those devoted to interpretation.

The purpose of this clinic is to empower ensemble directors to interpret courageously. The session will begin with a brief overview of score study and interpretation strategies. Next, conductor Robert Ambrose will provide practical interpretation tips, and composers Julie Giroux, Omar Thomas, and Frank Ticheli will offer specific suggestions for interpreting their music that can be universally applied to the interpretation of all scores. The session will conclude with the composers answering prepared interpretation-related questions.

## CLINIC OUTLINE

### SECTION 1 – INTRODUCTION (2 MINUTES)

- I. Goals and outcomes of the clinic
- II. Why the four of us?

### SECTION 2 – BRIEFLY FRAMING THE DISCUSSION: SCORE STUDY AND ARCH MAPS (3 MINUTES)

- I. Score study processes and resources
- II. The power of arch maps

### SECTION 3 – GETTING THEIR STORY RIGHT: THOUGHTFUL, INFORMED INTERPRETATION (5 MINUTES)

- I. Factors that promote thoughtful, informed interpretation
  - A. Very thorough scores study and enough understanding of the composer's intent to make informed decisions
  - B. Self-trust
  - C. Musical imagination
  - D. Having the courage to be "wrong" (Mark Manson quote)
  - E. Asking the right questions, such as:
    - i. Is this decision serving the music?
    - ii. Is this decision helping to tell the composer's story
    - iii. If the composer was in the room, what would she think of this decision?
  - F. Some thoughts that may encourage you:
    - i. Most composers leave space for interpretation. They allow for flexibility with some or many of the musical elements.
    - ii. Most music allows for multiple viewpoints
    - iii. A thoughtful interpreter is the expert on THEIR interpretation of a work

- iv. There is no single authentic interpretation of a work. You didn't miss an email to the entire profession that said *this is how you interpret these measures of this piece*.
- II. Factors that inhibit thoughtful, informed interpretation
- A. The fear of being “wrong”
  - B. Believing that you're not experienced enough to have a valid viewpoint
  - C. Worrying about what others will think of your interpretation
  - D. Over-reliance on recordings
  - E. Interpreting with the limitations of your ensemble in mind
  - F. Dishonest interpretation
    - i. Uniformed interpretation
    - ii. The goal of “being different”
    - iii. Trying to sanitize the music to make elements of the music “match” (i.e. Posy dynamics and articulations)
    - iv. Making interpretive decisions based on what is easiest to conduct

**SECTION 4 – GETTING THEIR STORY RIGHT:  
IN THEIR OWN WORDS (20 MINUTES)**

- I. What elements of the music can we interpret?
- A. This can be a lonely, somewhat scary journey with few clear-cut answers. This can be very time consuming. The payoffs are many (1) the positive impact on rehearsals; (2) the feeling that it gives you to lead something with such strength, (3) the gratification of telling the composer's story to the best of your ability. So . . . what's open to interpretation?

YES! ALWAYS! (well, sort of)	USUALLY/SOMETIMES	RARELY/NEVER
Balance and blend	Number of players	Pitches and rhythms
Relative volume	Tempo (how is this different from tempo modifications?)	
Phrase shape	Instrumentation	
Tempo modifications	Register	
Breaths	Dynamics	
Chair and player placement	Articulation	
Expressive content (meaning and emotional import of the music)	Note durations	
	Percussion mallet choices	

- B. A discussion of each of these elements of music.
- II. A composer-led discussion of their own compositions with discussion of interpretation
- A. Julie Giroux – *Beyond the Gates* and *One Life Beautiful*
  - B. Omar Thomas – *Of Our New Day Begun*
  - C. Frank Ticheli – *An American Elegy*

**SECTION 5 – GETTING THEIR STORY RIGHT:  
SPECIFIC STRATEGIES FOR INTERPRETATION (5 MINUTES)**

- I. Imagine that you wrote the music
- II. Ask good questions of the score. For example:
- A. Why did the composer make a particular decision? Why didn't they do this?
  - B. What is the purpose of this section? What would the impact be if it wasn't there?
  - C. Why did the composer choose this meter? Why didn't they choose another meter?
  - D. Why did they include this percussion? Why didn't they include these instruments?

- E. Why did the composer use a tenuto marking on these notes? Why didn't they use another marking?
- III. Move (don't conduct) to the music in your head
- IV. Use recordings sparingly, and not at all once you've solidified your interpretation. The value (and peril) of using recordings
- V. Daydream the music . . . an intense 5-minute exercise
- VI. For transcriptions, get a copy of the original, no matter what

### **SECTION 6 – COMPOSER QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION (25 MINUTES)**

Questions to be selected from the following:

1. What words of encouragement can you offer conductors to empower them to interpret thoughtfully and courageously?
2. What qualities do the best interpretations of your music possess?
3. What makes a great performance of your music?
4. Under what circumstances do you believe it is acceptable for a conductor to alter your written instructions?
5. Please share with us a time when you enjoyed a conductor's interpretation that may not have aligned exactly with your written indications.
6. It is said that Gustav Mahler the conductor often quarreled with Gustav Mahler the composer. In other words, as a conductor/interpreter, Mahler would disagree with his own score markings. Please discuss a moment where this has happened to you. What about that experience should empower conductors to interpret more courageously?