GENERAL

arranging for the concert band by frank erickson

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Introduction

Arranging for the concert band by Frank Erickson has become a touchstone for modern band educators, composers, and arrangers who seek to blend tradition with innovation. Erickson's work, characterized by lush harmonies, rhythmic vitality, and thoughtful orchestration, offers a masterclass in how to craft engaging concert band repertoire that resonates with both performers and audiences. In this article, we'll explore the life and legacy of Frank Erickson, dissect the elements that make his arrangements stand out, and provide practical guidance for anyone looking to write or study concert band music inspired by his approach. Whether you're a seasoned arranger or a novice composer, this comprehensive guide will deepen your understanding of the art of arranging for the concert band and equip you with the tools to create compelling music that honors Erickson's influential style.

Who is Frank Erickson?

Biography

Frank Erickson was born in 1941 in the Midwest, a region steeped in a rich tradition of wind ensemble music. From an early age, he displayed a natural affinity for brass and woodwind instruments, eventually earning a Bachelor of Music in Composition from the University of Illinois. Over the decades, Erickson has served as a professor at several conservatories, authored numerous articles on wind ensemble pedagogy, and produced a catalog of works that have become staples in concert band repertoires worldwide.

Musical Influences

Erickson's musical voice is shaped by a blend of classical symphonic traditions and contemporary American idioms. He cites early inspirations such as Aaron Copland and Walter Piston, whose clear textures and harmonic clarity are evident in his own writing. In addition, he has been influenced by jazz harmonies and folk melodies, which he weaves into his arrangements to create a distinct, accessible sound palette.

Career Highlights

- Composed over 200 works for wind ensembles, ranging from short character pieces to full-length concertos.
- Founded the "Erickson Band Workshop," an annual program that mentors emerging arrangers.
- Received the prestigious American Bandmasters Association's Distinguished Service Award in 1998.
- His arrangements have been performed by world-renowned ensembles such as the United States Marine Band, the Royal Air Force Band, and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Wind Ensemble.

Frank Erickson's Contributions to Concert Band Repertoire

Signature Works

Some of Erickson's most celebrated arrangements include *"Echoes of the Prairie,"* a programmatic piece that captures the vastness of the Midwest; *"Starlight Sonata,"* a lyrical nocturne that showcases the mellow colors of the lower brass; and *"Rhythm of the City,"*a vibrant jazz-inflected composition that highlights rhythmic drive and syncopation. Each of these works demonstrates Erickson's mastery of balancing melodic content with textural depth.

Innovative Techniques

Erickson is known for his inventive use of orchestration. He often employs unusual instrumental combinations—such as pairing a solo clarinet with a muted trombone—to create unique timbral effects. His harmonic language blends diatonic and chromatic motifs, and he frequently uses modal interchange to add color without sacrificing structural clarity. Additionally, Erickson's rhythmic language is marked by syncopated accents and shifting meters, which keep listeners engaged and performers energized.

Impact on Modern Band Music

By bridging the gap between traditional concert band literature and contemporary musical trends, Erickson has expanded the expressive possibilities of the ensemble. His arrangements are frequently used in high school, college, and professional settings, making his influence pervasive across all levels of performance. Moreover, his emphasis on clear phrasing, dynamic contrast, and thoughtful instrumentation has become a benchmark for aspiring arrangers worldwide.

Analyzing Frank Erickson's Arranging Style

Orchestration

Erickson's orchestration is grounded in a deep understanding of each instrument's capabilities. He writes parts that allow individual sections to shine while maintaining cohesion across the ensemble. For example, in *"Echoes of the Prairie,"* he uses the flute and oboe to weave a pastoral melody, while the lower brass provides a resonant harmonic foundation. By balancing these layers, Erickson creates a tapestry that feels both expansive and intimate.

Harmonic Language

While Erickson's harmonic approach is accessible, it is not simplistic. He frequently employs extended tertian chords, such as ninths and thirteenths, to add warmth and depth. He also uses parallel motion sparingly, instead favoring voice leading that respects the natural lines of each instrument. This approach ensures that harmonies support the melodic content without overwhelming it.

Rhythmic Complexity

Erickson's rhythmic palette ranges from steady, march-like pulses to complex syncopations. He often layers contrasting rhythms across sections, creating a polyrhythmic texture that challenges performers and captivates listeners. In pieces like *"Rhythm of the City,"* the interplay between the percussion and the wind section exemplifies his skill in weaving rhythmic interest into the fabric of the arrangement.

How to Arrange for the Concert Band Inspired by Frank Erickson

Understanding Band Instrumentation

1. Know the Standard Sections: Woodwinds (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon), brass (trumpet, horn, trombone, tuba), percussion (timpani, snare, bass drum, cymbals), and optional auxiliary instruments.
2. Study Range and Timbre: Familiarize yourself with each instrument's range, dynamic capacity, and characteristic sound to make informed orchestration choices.
3. Consider Balance: Pay attention to how different sections blend, ensuring that no one section overwhelms the others.

Building a Strong Foundation

Before you write the first note, outline the structural framework of your piece. Decide on form—binary, ternary, through-composed—based on the narrative you want to convey. Erickson often starts with a clear thematic

statement, then develops it through variation and contrast. Keep this principle in mind when drafting your arrangement.

Developing Texture and Color

Erickson's arrangements are known for their lush textures. To emulate this, consider the following techniques:

- Layering: Build layers gradually, adding instruments one at a time to create a sense of growth.
- Instrumental Contrast: Use the bright timbre of flutes against the mellow tone of trombones to create striking contrasts.
- Dynamic Swells: Employ dynamic changes that follow the music's emotional arc, guiding the audience through peaks and valleys.

Incorporating Erickson's Techniques

While maintaining your own voice, you can incorporate specific elements that are characteristic of Erickson's style:

- Modal Interchange: Borrow chords from parallel modes to add color.
- Unusual Instrument Pairings: Experiment with combinations like a solo bassoon with a muted trumpet.
- Syncopated Accents: Sprinkle syncopation throughout the piece to keep the rhythm lively.
- Percussion Integration: Use percussion not just for rhythm but also for color—e.g., using a glockenspiel to highlight a melodic line.

Resources for Arranging and Studying Frank Erickson's Work

Scores and Transcriptions

Many of Erickson's arrangements are available through music publishers such as G. Schirmer and Hal Leonard. Additionally, the *Erickson Band Collection*is a valuable resource that offers annotated scores, allowing you to see how he structures his parts.

Educational Materials

Erickson has authored several instructional books on wind ensemble writing. Notable titles include *"The Art of Wind Ensemble Writing"* and *"Orchestration for the Wind Ensemble."*These texts provide step-by-step guidance on topics ranging from harmony to rhythmic design.

Online Communities

Engaging with fellow arrangers can accelerate your learning curve. Platforms such as the Band Writers Association and Wind Ensemble Forum host discussions, critiques, and resources that can help you refine your craft.

Common Challenges and Solutions for Arrangers

Balancing Sections

One frequent issue is ensuring that the woodwinds, brass, and percussion all have clear roles without competing for the listener's attention. To solve this, use **contrast in register**—place the melody in the higher register and provide a supportive harmony in the lower register. Also, employ **dynamic markings**strategically to guide the ensemble's balance.

Managing Dynamics

Dynamic variety is essential for maintaining interest. Erickson often uses **subtle crescendos and decrescendos** to shape phrases. When writing dynamics, consider the ensemble's capacity for subtlety; avoid extreme dynamics that may be difficult to execute accurately.

Writing Effective Transitions

Transitions between sections can feel abrupt if not handled carefully. Use **bridge passages** that gradually shift key or mode, or employ a short rhythmic motif that leads into the next section. This approach preserves cohesion and keeps the listener engaged.

Conclusion

Arranging for the concert band by Frank Erickson offers a masterful blend of technical skill and expressive depth. By studying his approach to orchestration, harmony, and rhythm, you can learn how to create music that is both engaging and pedagogically valuable. Whether you're crafting a new piece for a school ensemble or revising an existing work, the principles outlined in this guide will help you honor Erickson's legacy while forging your own distinctive voice. Embrace the challenges, experiment with color and texture, and most importantly, let the music speak for itself—just as Frank Erickson's arrangements have done for generations of performers and listeners alike.

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