

In the Mind's Eye: A *Konzertstück* for the New Millennium

by Renée Menkhaus

In the Mind's Eye: Images for Horns and Orchestra by James A. Beckel Jr. was given its premier performance in May 2010 by the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra with its horn section as the soloists. The work was co-commissioned by the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra and the Wichita Falls Orchestra. The piece was originally requested by Mario Venzago, (the former conductor of the Indianapolis Symphony) who wanted a concerto that would showcase the ISO's horn section, which includes Robert Danforth (principal), Julie Beckel Yager (second), Gerald Montgomery (third), Jill Boaz (fourth), and Richard Graef (assistant).

Inspired by Robert Schumann's *Konzertstück*, Venzago wanted a modern work with an opportunity for all five players to shine. Beckel was the perfect choice for a composer. As principal trombonist with the Indianapolis Symphony, he knows the horn section well both personally and professionally. In fact, Julie Beckel Yager (the second horn) is his daughter. His compositions come from a practical understanding of how the instrument works and how it feels to perform as a brass player. Already known for his horn concerto, *The Glass Bead Game*, Beckel has the ability to write intuitively for the horn while incorporating inspiration from visual art forms and literature. In following with this tradition, he found five paintings at the Indianapolis Museum of Art that became the basis for the programmatic element for *In the Mind's Eye*, which refers to each person's unique view of the world.

Beckel believes in trying to reach an audience on as many levels as possible, and thus has taken advantage of YouTube to display a short video explaining the origin of this piece as well as musical clips and interviews with the performers. The night of the premiere, the audience was able to view this five-minute video on a large screen. Future performers of the work can use the video to hear the composer speak about it.

In the Mind's Eye is set for five solo horns – the first and third parts are high, the second and fourth are low, and the fifth horn part is also high, specifically for an assistant horn. There are cues in the first and third parts if only four horns are available. The four-horn version will be performed by the Wichita Falls Symphony on November 13, 2010. Similar to *The Glass Bead Game*, there will be optional accompaniments, including a version for five horns and piano, premiered by the ISO horn section at DePauw University.

Beckel is known for being flexible and collaborative during the compositional process. Horn players will be happy to know there is no high $e^{b\flat}$ in this *Konzertstück*. Beckel wrote the piece with inspiration from the Schumann but as a trombone player he understands the pressure a high $e^{b\flat}$ can put on a performance. "I wanted to write something challenging that people look forward to performing, and not dread walking out on the stage," Beckel said. When asked what he drew specifically from the Schumann, he said mostly the instrumentation and the texture of the orchestration. Beckel always insures that the horns are the main voice, whether just one or any combination of the five. For this reason the only other brass voice in the orchestral version is one trumpet.

Although the concerto is written to be playable by any group of 4 or 5 horn players, the influence of the musicians Beckel works with on a daily basis is unmistakable. The piece shows each horn player's individual strength – the bright, soaring leadership of Robert Danforth; Julie Beckel Yager's warm, enveloping sound; Gerald Montgomery's masterfully crafted lyricism; Jill Boaz's rock solid bass; and the captivating athleticism of Richard Graef.

The three movements are inspired by artwork from the Indianapolis Museum of Art, as seen on the YouTube video.

Beckel also showcases specific aspects of the horn in each movement – in the first movement technical finesse is displayed. Entitled "Random Abstract," this movement is dedicated to local artist Ingrid Calame whose work, *From #258 Drawing: Tracings from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and the L.A. River*, focuses on tire tracks from the Indianapolis 500. Some artists are inspired by music and Beckel reverses this process by attempting to imitate art. For instance, you will hear the horns and orchestra making musical reference to the brush strokes an artist would use to create an abstract work. In order to unify this abstract movement, Beckel uses the five soloists as if they are visitors to the museum commenting on what they see – each player interprets the abstract art. Then there is a conversation between the players about their impression of the art, which sounds almost improvised. The movement is an exciting and challenging start to the concerto.

The second movement, "Daniel in the Lion's Den," features the lyrical ability of the horn – hauntingly beautiful chants start the movement. While this movement is based on the biblical testing of faith, it specifically represents Robert E. Weaver's painting with the same title. Beckel's program notes state, "The movement opens quietly with the horns in a quasi-Gregorian chant, setting the stage for Daniel's overnight trial in the den of lions where his belief in God is tested. The trials and tribulations associated with man's faith over the millenniums are reflected in this dialogue between horns and orchestra throughout this movement in G Minor. At the end of the movement is a tremolo in the strings, taking us to a moment of E^b Major, which represents the answer to Daniel's prayers as morning arrives and Daniel has been spared from the jaws of the lions." For Beckel, this is an example of how music can express what words cannot: "the grace of accepting things we have no control over."

The third movement entitled "Reflections" is inspired by three separate works on the subject of water: *The Regatta Beating to Windward* by Joseph M. W. Turner, *The Channel of Gravellines* by Georges Seurat, and *Roussillon Landscape* by Georges-Daniel DeMonfried. This movement opens with five horns calling in unison to begin the regatta depicted in the Turner painting. Lush orchestration adds to the cinematic quality of this movement. As the piece moves into a pointillist section representing the art of Seurat, we hear an impressive array of sounds from the horns and orchestra. DeMonfried's painting depicts the classic beauty of light reflecting off water. The harp depicts the flowing water, while the soloists show light bouncing in quick, bright colors. Lightening-fast technical passages build to the exciting climactic ending of this piece, which brought the audience to its feet both nights of the performance.

In the Mind's Eye will hopefully become a staple in our repertoire. While challenging for the soloists and orchestra, by professional standards it is only moderately difficult to achieve a strong performance. The work is fresh and modern, with luxurious melodies, colorful harmonies, and challenging technical passages. You can listen to the piece on Instant Encore (instantencore.com) and contact the composer at musbeck@sbcglobal.net to order the recital version or rent the orchestral version. Listen to Beckel speak directly about the piece and hear interviews with the performers on youtube.com. You can also see the works of art, listen to and purchase the live recording of *In the Mind's Eye*, and read Beckel's program notes on Instant Encore. Please note Beckel's advertisement on page 14 above.

Renée Menkhaus is a freelance hornist with a large private studio in Indianapolis. She has a B.M. from Ohio State University and a M.M. from Indiana University. Her principal teachers include Michael Hatfield, Charles Waddell, and Richard Seraphinoff.