

# OCTOBER (2000)

Eric Whitacre (1970)

## Analysis

Broad Description: A pastoral piece that captures the essence of fall with simple melodies and expanded harmonies inspired by the great English Romantics, Vaughn Williams and Elgar

Type/Genre: Pastoral ballad

### Background Information:

- Whitacre composed his first instrumental work, *Ghost Train*, at the age of 23. It became an overnight hit, receiving countless performances in over 50 countries and having been featured on over 20 different recordings.
- Whitacre received his masters degree in composition from the Juilliard School of Music, where he studied with John Corigliano. Classmates there included Steven Bryant and John Mackey.
- Whitacre is primarily known for his choral works. His opera, *Paradise Lost*, was completed in 2003 and received its world premiere in 2007 in Pasadena, California. He has also organized three virtual choirs to date via Youtube, whereby individual singers submit videos of themselves performing one of his compositions with Whitacre conducting. The individual recordings are then compiled and blended to create a virtual choir.
- *October* was commissioned by a consortium of high schools and colleges in Nebraska under the leadership of Brian Anderson, whose high school group premiered the work.
- Other significant works for winds by Whitacre include *Lux Aurumque*, *Sleep*, *Equus*, *Noisy Wheels of Joy*, and *Cloudburst*. Many of the wind settings are transcriptions of his original choral works, re-scored and often reorganized by Whitacre himself.

### Unique Considerations:

- Although it can be performed any time of year, *October* is particularly effective when performed in the fall season since it provides the inspiration for the piece.
- Requires only three percussionists.

## ***Elements of Music***

Form: The form relies upon the manipulation and repetition of specific motives, rather than the restatement of larger sections. Indeed, only one broad section, the A theme, is used more than once:

Intro A B A' Interlude C Intro' D A'' Transition E

Melody: Whitacre carefully constructs a few key melodic phrases and motives that bind the piece together. The A theme is the most pervasive melodic idea and is built on wide intervals and an extended range. Whitacre contrasts this theme with highly conjunct lines that slowly descend as if to depict leaves slowly and wistfully falling. Two other motives that are central include the oboe solo built on a one bar idea with a lamenting grace note and the shifting light motive based on three ascending notes in minor.

Although the majority of phrases are four bars in length, Whitacre typically connects two bar sub-phrases to complete each one. This allows him to create shifts in tone color as described under timbre.

Rhythm: Eighth notes are used almost constantly to propel the piece forward. Longer note values are reserved for phrase endings, and no rhythmic value faster than 8<sup>th</sup> notes appear anywhere in the piece other than a tremolo effect at letter D. From Letter F-G is the only time that Whitacre takes a substantial

break from the use of 8<sup>th</sup> notes, replacing it with almost constant quarter notes. The consistent use of the same note values deftly implies the subtle changes in light and the ever-changing colors of the leaves in the fall. Although primarily in 4/4, *October* contains a variety of time signatures that allow the melodic ideas to evolve naturally.

**Harmony:** The harmony of *October* is largely diatonic in the following tonal centers: Db, Ab, Bb, and G. It is interesting to note that the interval from the first to last tonal centers is a tritone – the piece arrives in a substantially different place from where it begins. The occasional use of chromatic passing tones creates mixed modes as chords shift from major to minor. This technique is used rather dramatically during the climax of the piece in measures 94-98; what has created subtle shifts of color elsewhere in the piece suddenly creates rather blatant shifts here. Whitacre also employs extended chords at times that result in major seventh chords, sus2 chords, etc., giving it a contemporary harmonic feel. The piece is primarily in major tonalities, with the light motive interjecting moments of a pensive minor sound.

The use of suspensions is so rampant throughout the piece that one might consider it a theoretical exercise in writing every type of suspension. However, Whitacre embeds the suspensions so artfully that the listener does not tire of their use. Similar to his approach with rhythm, Whitacre is able to achieve a unique effect through his “overuse” of suspensions that truly evokes the subtle shifts in mood that he desires.

**Texture:** The texture is largely homophonic throughout with occasional countermelodies that intertwine closely with the primary melodies. The light motive is only two beats in length, so even though it is staggered by a beat, it is not perceived as canonic or polyphonic. There is a more intentional canonic statement four measures before letter E that serves to build intensity there. Whitacre employs a wide variety of scoring in terms of density. There are many chamber-like moments to contrast the larger tutti sections in the work. The oboe and Euphonium solos in particular create a feeling of intimacy with the listener.

**Timbre:** As expected, Whitacre manipulates tone color frequently in *October*. In fact, the scoring changes as often as every two measures for the majority of the work. His careful attention to scoring makes these subtle shifts exquisite in effect. Whitacre clearly favors woodwind colors for the softer sections (of which there are many) with the occasional addition of horns for extra warmth. The use of brass is generally reserved for more expansive moments.

The light motive is revealed as an important transitional link that helps bind the piece together. By overlapping this simple motive every beat, he creates a gently pulsing shift in tone color that reminds us of swirling or rustling leaves. The minor tonality of this figure also inspires feelings of nostalgia.

**Dynamics/Expressivity:** The dynamic structure is sensible and appropriate for a pastoral piece. Softer dynamic levels pervade most of the piece, allowing the nostalgic feel to grow organically. Whitacre reserves the use of louder dynamics for key moments and only uses fortissimo during the climax of the piece (letter G – I). Nearly every phrase in the piece is slurred, which creates an evenness and beauty to its expressiveness.

<p><b>Heart Statement:</b> The consistent and masterful use of suspensions in a pastoral setting mimics the changing colors of the leaves and subtle changes in light that occur each fall, which inspire feelings of nostalgia.</p>
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How to introduce the piece:

Students will view a slide show of pictures and videos of leaves in transition during the fall season. There will be kaleidoscopic pictures of light shining through the trees, videos of leaves swirling in circles on the ground, audio of leaves rustling, etc. What types of feelings does this evoke? What might a piece of music sound like that is meant to depict these pictures? What does the term pastoral mean when describing a piece of music or art in general? Students will be invited to take pictures/videos of the fall season throughout the rehearsal process and share them with the class whenever we rehearse the piece.

Take out the piece:

1. Written by Eric Whitacre
2. Inspired by the English Romantics
3. Melody is primarily disjunct with large leaps
4. Main rhythm is constant 8<sup>th</sup> notes
5. A Pastoral melody/setting
6. Uses suspensions continuously
7. Nearly every phrase in the piece is slurred
8. Primary tonal centers shift by a tritone from the beginning to end
9. Inspires feelings of nostalgia
10. The climax consists of multiple suspensions simultaneously

## Outcomes, Strategies and Assessments

Skill Outcome: Students will play with intensity across slurred, lyrical lines.

- *Skill Strategies:*
  - *Spinning Forward:* Using the transcribed melody sheet, students will perform the A theme of *October*. Students will scan their music and identify how many times this melody occurs throughout the piece (3 times). It is the only extended melodic idea that appears multiple times in the piece. What makes this melody difficult to play smoothly? (large leaps in the melody; known as disjunct intervals) How wide is the range of the melody overall? (12<sup>th</sup>) How does this compare to a “typical” melody? (usually more conjunct with a smaller range overall) What are some strategies we can use as performers to smooth out these wide intervals and range? (focus on the vertical line, spin the wind forward, and blow steadily across/in between notes)
  - *Spring Board:* When executing large interval leaps in cantabile music, it is common to fill up the lower note and provide a spring board for the upper note. The air should push through the interval change and then back off as they arrive on the upper note. Students will apply this approach to various melodies at measures 35, 40, 49-53, 61-62, etc.
  - *Push and Pull:* It is vital in a lyrical, cantabile piece that the tempo push and pull. It should rarely, if ever, be metronomic in pulse. The general approach will be:
    1. Fill the first note with sound by stretching/lingering on it
    2. Push forward slightly in tempo through the first half of the phrase
    3. Pull back slightly toward the end of the phrase and taper the phrase gently
 The same approach can often be applied to the contour as well: push as the phrase ascends and pull as the phrase descends. Students will explore this concept with the instructor by playing various phrases (Intro, A Themes, and letter F) both in perfect metronomic time and then with the above approach in mind.

- *Sound Consultants:* Using members of the percussion section, they will critique the band on their performance of large sections of the work, paying particular attention to the phrasing. They will help identify any problems with vertical alignment, energy across leaps, ensemble breaths, tapering phrase endings, etc.
- *Skill Assessment:* Students will listen to their performance of *October* on the concert recording and write about the effectiveness of their phrasing. Students will be asked to briefly define each of the strategies we learned, including 1. Spinning Forward, 2. Spring Board, and 3. Push and Pull.

*Knowledge Outcome:* Students will identify and explain the use of various suspensions.

- *Knowledge Strategies:*
  - *Guesstimate:* The instructor will produce a glass jar full of candies and ask students to guess how many candies are in the jar. Students will be given slips to write down their guesses. What would be useful for us to count in *October* and why? How would this increase our understanding of the piece? Students will perform various phrases in the piece and try to count how many suspensions they hear (aurally only). The instructor will post copies of the score online for any students that wish to fully investigate the number of suspensions present in the piece. Students will report out on the number of suspensions discovered in a subsequent rehearsal.
  - *Number Game:* Students will learn how to label suspensions by measuring the interval from the bass note to the suspended note. Various music examples will be provided on a worksheet introducing each kind of suspension: 9-8, 6-5, 4-3, 7-6 (1<sup>st</sup> Inversion), 2-3 bass, and 2-3 retardation. Students will examine select phrases in *October* that demonstrate the most common suspensions Whitacre utilizes.
  - *Authentic vs. Counterfeit:* Composers often use non-chord tones to create tension and release, but true suspensions include the same note tied over from the previous beat. A suspension includes three basic parts: preparation, suspension, and resolution. Students will examine select parts of the score (as a class on document camera) to identify whether Whitacre uses true suspensions or “imitations.” Can students think of other examples of imitations in their daily lives? (generic prescriptions, brand name vs. generic, replacement parts, etc.) Does the use of an “imitation” lessen the effectiveness of the intended moment?
  - *Chain Suspensions:* Students will discuss a chain of events that heightened the total effect of something. In terms of suspensions, composers can create a unique effect known as chain suspensions. On the back of the suspension worksheet they received earlier, students will write a chain suspension with the assistance of the instructor. Students will then investigate where chain suspensions occur in *October*.
  - *Creating the Climax:* Students will explore Whitacre’s use of suspensions two before letter I, the climax of the piece. The instructor will project the score and draw the students’ attention to the trumpet parts so that they can efficiently identify what is happening. How does his use here differ from other moments in the piece? (rhythmically augmented and simultaneous suspensions)
- *Knowledge Assessment:* Students will complete a short quiz on suspensions requiring them to:
  1. label the three parts of a suspension (prep, sus, res)
  2. label examples of each type of suspension (4-3, 9-8, etc.)
  3. define a chain suspension

***Affective Outcomes:*** Students will appreciate the role of nostalgia in their lives.

- ***Affective Strategies:***
  - ***Fall Images:*** Students will consider specific moments in *October* (beginning, m. 8-10, m. 40-43, m. 49-56) and brainstorm programmatic images that are brought to mind: light shining through the trees, leaves swirling on the ground, leaves rustling, etc. Students will read the program note for *October* and comment on Mr. Whitacre’s effectiveness at creating these images through his music.
  - ***Nostalgic Music:*** The instructor will begin class by playing a song that inspires feelings of nostalgia for him. (*Nightswimming* by R.E.M.) The instructor will explain what about the song creates this feeling and some of the specific memories that it brings back to him. Students will select a piece of music that generates feeling of nostalgia for them. They will post the title of the song, the composer/group, and a brief explanation on a discussion board for the class. Students will be encouraged to comment on each other’s posts.
  - ***Nostalgic Scents:*** The instructor will share various scents that instantly remind him of various people, places, or times. Why does this occur to us? Using the online discussion board, students will identify various scents that have the same effect on them and describe what it reminds them of. Students will be encouraged to comment on each other’s posts.
  - ***Nostalgic Moments:*** The instructor will share a moment from his life that triggers strong feelings of nostalgia. Students will think of a moment that does the same for them and provide a brief narrative on the online discussion board.
  
- ***Affective Assessment:*** Students will review the discussion board online, which now contains threads regarding music, scents, and moments that inspire feelings of nostalgia for them and their classmates. In their last post, students will reflect on the role of nostalgia in their lives. What purpose does it serve? How does nostalgia make you feel? Happy, sad, both? Is it healthy to feel nostalgic?

## Music Selection

*October* is a grade 5, pastoral piece for the mature high school through professional level. As Whitacre accurately states in his program notes for the piece, “there just isn’t enough lush, beautiful music for winds,” and he achieves his goal quite substantially here. In his effort to emulate the simple, pastoral melodies and harmonies of the great English Romantics, Whitacre asserts his own unique and worthwhile voice. Whitacre is highly regarded as a choral composer, so it is no surprise that *October* is so well constructed in a cantabile, lyrical style. It is truly a feat of accomplishment at how artfully he negotiates the continual use of suspensions and spins naturally contoured, nostalgic melodies. Although it was composed relatively recently (in 2000), *October* continues to be performed and recorded frequently, a sign of its endearing and enduring qualities.

## Resources

- Melody sheet (A theme) transcribed for every instrument
- Jar(s) full of various candies for Guesstimate
- Music Suspension worksheet with blank music staff paper on the reverse side
- Recording of “Nightswimming” by R.E.M. from the album [Automatic for the People](#)
- Online Class Discussion Board entitled “Nostalgia” including individual threads for nostalgic music, nostalgic scents, nostalgic moments, and the role of nostalgia
- Final Quiz with written section regarding phrasing and labeling section regarding suspensions