A Conductor's Interpretive Analysis of Michael Markowski's "The Cave You Fear"

By Marc R. Dickey, Ph.D.
California State University, Fullerton School of Music
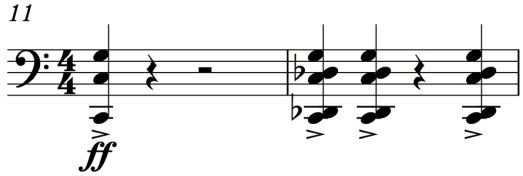
From the very first note of "The Cave You Fear" there is a sense of drama. Cinematic drama: the piece feels like a film score from its first downbeat. Those who are familiar with the sense of adventure in Indiana Jones films and the creepiness of much of Tim Burton's work will relate to this piece immediately. While this four-minute piece is well within the capabilities of most middle school and junior high school bands, it is full of Michael Markowski's idioms found in his more advanced works. The scoring is pragmatic enough for this level of player, but the overly safe doublings found in so much middle school band music lose out here to genuinely inventive, colorful harmonies and textures. "The Cave You Fear" also provides opportunities for your percussion section to utilize some instruments and equipment that will likely be new to them, and possibly to you as well. The percussion part writing is reasonable for younger players, yet will provide engaging challenges.

"The Cave You Fear" begins not so much with a sense of introduction (although it is one) as just being in the moment from the very start. The piece is written without key signatures, and begins in C Major. Notice that the *fp* on beat one does not contain any accent, and also that the quarter note in m. 2 is not *staccato*. And the tympani part is marked a gentle *mp*. We just ease in to "The Cave You Fear."

The harmonic motion in the first four measures moves back and forth from C Major to A♭ Major, and the slurred eighth notes in the upper woodwinds create a sense of optimism and wonder with their undulating *crescendos* and *decrescendos*.

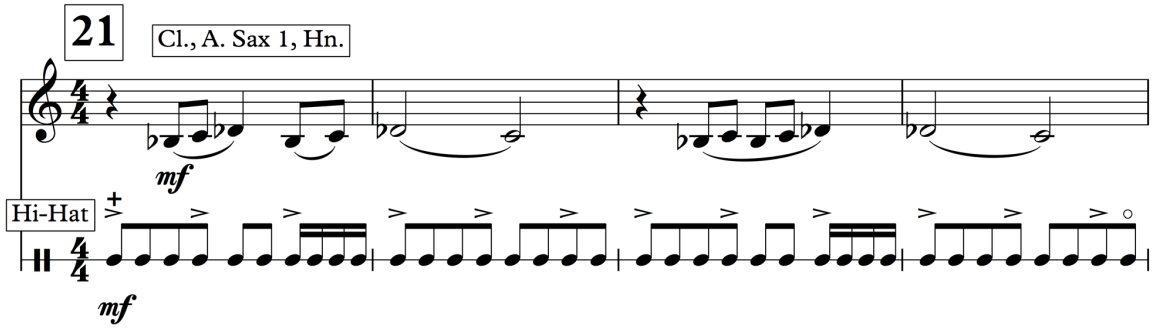
Things quickly turn ominous at m. 5! The harmony shifts to e minor, and the style of the eighth notes changes to an eerie *staccato*. Beginning in the pickup to m. 6 there is a sequence of *legato* half note lines, each beginning with a minor third. This sequence is soon enough interrupted by a prominent signal in the snare drum (mm. 11-12), accompanied by low brass thuds utilizing D♭'s to create dissonance (see Ex. 1). The motive returns, and this time leads to two measures of suspensions that bring us to a new section of music. Note the prominence of the pitch A♭ in this opening section; it appears in each of the first ten measures, taking on various roles throughout the harmonic progression. These D♭'s and A♭'s are used in mm. 15-16 to help prepare us to return to C Major. C Major sounds safe; moving just a half-step away sounds a bit scary!

Ex. 1

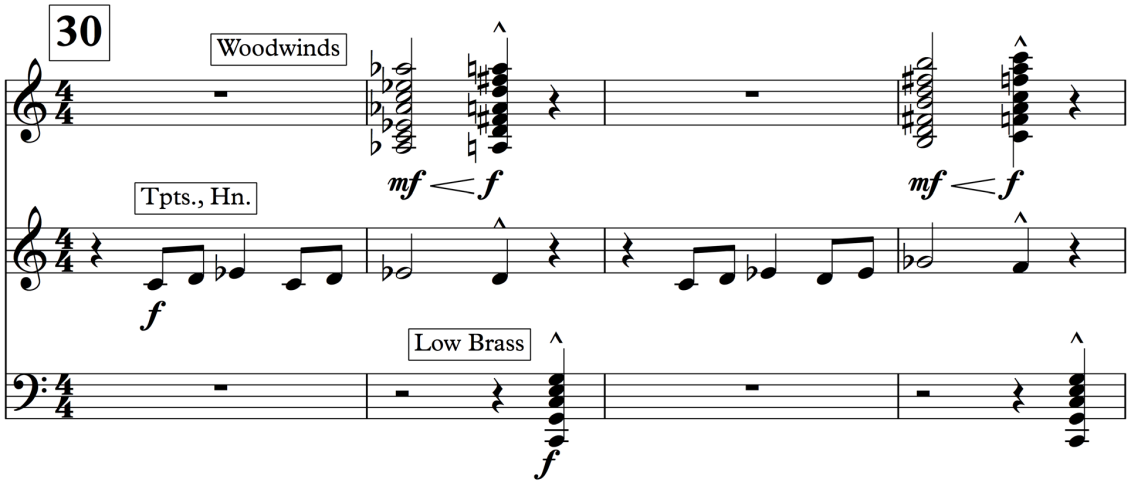


Rehearsing this opening section more slowly than written will be time well spent; there is a lot of harmonic shifting going on here from C Major to A♭ Major to e minor and more, and the harmonies often consist of more than the three basic members of

Ex. 2



Ex. 3



primary chords. Your players will need time to learn to hear and understand it. Then for performance, be sure to observe the tempo indicated to allow for the contrast Markowski calls for in the next section.

The next section of the work, beginning at m. 17, is 36 measures in length. It opens with a descending *ostinato* in the flutes that uses the pitches C-A♭-G-E, again creating a sense of near safety in C Major, but not quite. Following a brief sequence of sustained harmonic shifts, an urgent melody appears at m. 21, based on the minor third that is foreshadowed by the *legato* half note sequence in the first section (see Ex. 2). The hi-hat accompaniment adds to the sense of the urgency without predominating.

After a brief interlude in mm. 28-29 in which the low brass thuds from mm. 11-12 appear in only snare and bass drums, the melody returns at m. 30, announced by a snarling trombone *glissando*, which also utilizes the minor third. Rarely one for literal repetition, Markowski varies the orchestration, articulations, and accompaniments here, to a more martial affect (see Ex. 3).

Following this second iteration of the urgent melody, the interlude returns at m. 37 and is extended into a transition to the next section of the piece, with no *ritard*. This transitory section incorporates much material from throughout the piece up until this point. Conflict is present here, from mm. 37-45, between the two-measure question-and-answer phrases of the low brass thuds vs. the fleeing woodwinds. The fighting continues from mm. 45-52, pitting the upper instruments vs. the lower.

Be sure to once again slow down in rehearsal to allow time for students to hear the rapidly shifting harmonies in mm. 45-52, and to make sure the quarter notes on beat 3 in each measure are given full value, yet not accented. Note how the detailed percussion parts dissipate away to facilitate the transition.

The slowest section of the piece, beginning at m. 53, is exactly half the tempo of the previous section, and is set up by a tri-tone modulation from F Major to B Major. Amidst some other-worldly sounds from the percussion section, the tri-tone is heard melodically in the clarinets in m. 57, quite dissonantly atop a gentle tone cluster. At the same time, a simple multiphonic sounds in the alto saxophone section. The fingering for the multiphonic is indicated in the score and the saxophone parts, and Markowski has provided an instructional video[1] on his website that explains and demonstrates the technique.

The other other-worldly sounds emanate from superball mallets scraped across tympani head and tam-tam. It was noted in early rehearsals of the work that the superball mallets work only on plastic tympani heads. If the tympani heads you are using are other than plastic, such as calfskin, your timpanist could use his or her thumb to create the effect, just like a thumb roll on a tambourine. Video demonstrations of these effects are posted at the same web address as the multiphonic video referenced above. Self-described

[1] Instructional videos can be found here:
http://www.michaelmarkowski.com/music/the-cave-you-fear/

metal percussionist Michael Bettine explains how to make your own superball mallets on his website[2]. These mallets are also available commercially, at a variety of prices.

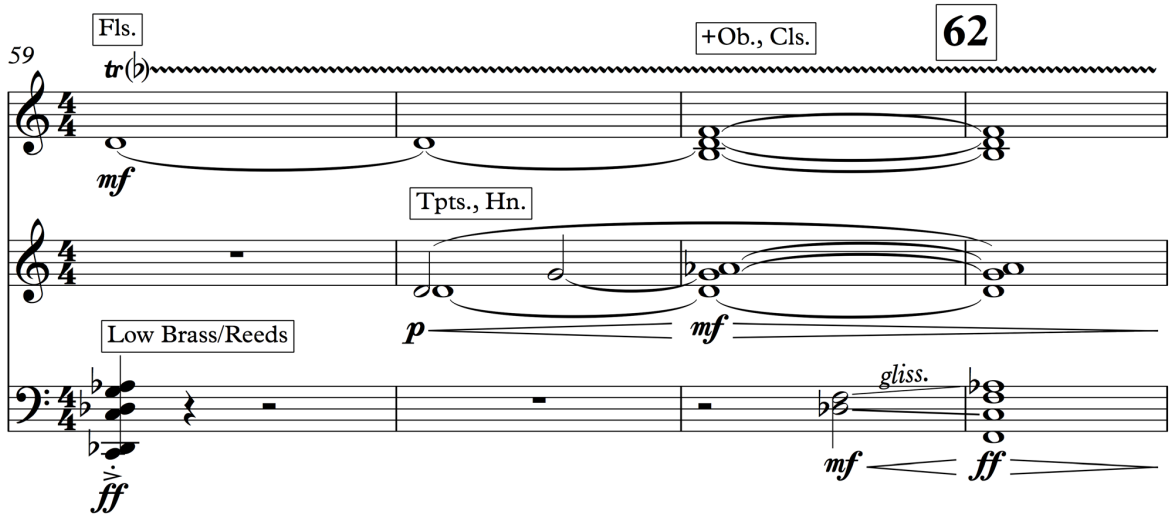
Following a crack of thunder at m. 59 (harmonically appropriated from m. 12), the melodic tri-tone reappears with expanded instrumentation, and revealing a menacing f minor chord at m. 62 (see Ex. 4). The f minor chord devolves into an e minor chord a measure later, and a new motive emerges, yearningly expanding to a minor sixth (m. 63) (see Ex. 5). The pitch F becomes a focal point for the bass line for several measures amidst a chorale texture. The intervallic content of "The Cave You Fear" keeps opening wider (from the minor 3rd of m. 21, to the tri-tone of m. 57, to this minor 6th), encouraging us to keep our minds open to the possibilities as we traverse the path before us, expanding our horizons whole-step by whole-step.

In m. 67, the oscillating woodwind eighth notes from the very beginning return, this time accompanied by the scrape of the tam-tam with the superball mallet. This is followed by a whispered "hah" by members of the trumpet and percussion sections, while a cymbal is scraped with a coin. After what we've been through so far, we should remember to exhale! The first harmonic progression of the piece, C Major to A♭ Major, returns, but the chords are in weaker inversions rather than strong root position this time. The yearning motive is stated a last time at m. 70, leading into a brief, somber, reflective chorale. A strike of the tympani with a rudimental ruff adds gravitas. The chorale *crescendos* to a return of the tempo doubled.

The urgent minor third melody from m. 21 returns at the very beginning of this final section, which begins at m. 75. The harmony is different now, an f minor melody over an F Major chord. The flat 10 in mm. 75 and 77 seems to whine a bit, like a car battery that won't turn over. The woodwinds retort in accented eighth notes, using the C and A♭ chords from the beginning of the piece.

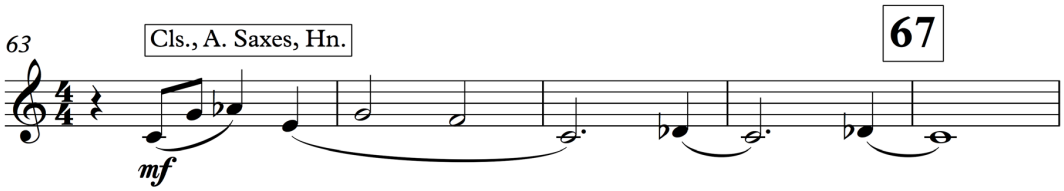
Then, at m. 79, the melody takes right off in a shock-and-awe texture, still in f minor, all of the low brass and reeds pounding away at the tune, reinforced by rim shots and interspersed with a hammered brake drum. Although Markowski notates "aggressively," your low brass and reeds must also play cleanly, and a bit *marcato* so the tune is heard clearly. Perhaps the cavalry has arrived (or at least AAA road service)! Things seem to simmer down a bit at m. 87, as a slightly expanded version of the slurred eighth note woodwind accompaniment from m. 1 returns, again alternating between C and A♭ Major. Optimism and wonder replace the shock and awe, as the tune lays back in the clarinets and saxophones. Buoyant Holstian *staccato* quarter notes ascend from the low brass, and then, yikes...

Ex. 4



[2] Michael Bettine explains how to make your own superball mallets here:
http://www.gongtopia.com/sound-chamber/friction-mallets.html

Ex. 5



At m. 91 a lion's roar enters, to be "Amplified with reverb and delay, if possible. Monstrous!" In describing the desired effect to me, Markowski said "it's important to amplify the Lion's Roar because it gives the musical effect a magical larger-than-life quality, like sound design in a movie, especially when it fills an auditorium over their PA." The technique for playing the lion's roar is demonstrated in the same set of videos referenced above. And percussionist and music producer John Emrich clearly explains how to easily make and play one in his excellent YouTube video[3].

As the lion's roar inserts itself into our musical situation, the low brass again come to the fore at m. 96, this time with powerful pedal B♭'s in the tuba and tympani, and the melody in the bassoon, 1st trombone, and euphonium. Chaos reigns as the lion's roar roars again, the multiphonic breaks loose once more in the saxophones, wild *glissandos* are unleashed by the trombones, while the trumpets flutter tongue alarmingly (following the approximate shape of Markowski's notated line), "like some kind of monster." All this is held together by *ostinato*-like lines in the woodwinds and percussion, and then it all pulls back in quite a grand *ritard*, even as the lion's roar is heard one last defiant time. Take your time on this *ritard*, including the last note.

And then, as suddenly as the piece began, it is over. A flourish of woodwind trills sets up the entrance of an uneasy cluster built on B♭ in the low brass and reeds. Five heavy strokes poke at the dissonant minor second we've endured and survived ever since m. 12. We exit the adventure on a rich, satisfying open fifth in the low reeds and brass, with the rich harmonics of the tam-tam to match.

I encourage you to take time to re-read Markowski's program note about this piece, and then, when you've got the piece pretty well tamed, share it with your students. It is one of his more personal program notes, and it is especially likely to resonate deeply with the age level of student for whom "The Cave You Fear" is written. And then, go make that lion roar!

❖

DR. MARC R. DICKEY is Director of the School of Music and oversees the instrumental music teacher program at California State University, Fullerton, where he has taught since 1988. He has conducted the CSU Fullerton Symphonic Winds for more than ten years. His research has been published in the Journal of Research in Music Education and the Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education. He has served as a member of a Music Subject Advisory Panel to the Commission of Teacher Credentialing of the State of California, and has adjudicated bands throughout the U.S. and Canada. He was one of the youngest conductors to be awarded the NBA's Citation of Excellence.

[3] John Emrich explains how to make and play a Lion's Roar: **http://youtu.be/lBBvK5wpeog**