

❖❖❖ November 17, 2009 ❖❖❖

SYMPHONY IN FIVE EPISODES  
by George K. Halsell (1956 - )

In the Spring of this year, I was granted a sabbatical by CSI, during which I composed this symphony under the guidance of Dr. Randy Earles, Chair of the Music Department at Idaho State University. Even though I've written a number of smaller works, I've never had the opportunity to tackle a project as large as a symphony before, and I sought Dr. Earles' experience and assistance in making this the best piece I could. His feedback and suggestions during the composition process were invaluable.

The Symphony is in five movements (or episodes, as I've chosen to call them), and my inspirations for the work come from a wide variety of sources, ranging from composers such as Igor Stravinsky and Paul Hindemith to music from classic movies and television shows.

The first "episode," "News Music," recalls the music one would hear at the beginning of an evening television news program. Often the music that opens these news broadcasts features insistent repeated chords, and I have included this sort of accompaniment in several places in this movement. The movement opens with fanfare-like figures before moving into a vigorous melody set above the "news" chords.

The second movement, "Dances Lugubrious and Farcical," opens with a sort of waltz over an accompaniment that contains slight rhythmic "bumps". Although it doesn't reflect a particular ethnicity, the genesis of this movement actually came from a YouTube video of a Hungarian folk ensemble. The waltz melody is soon joined by a second melody with a sweeping character to it that contrasts with the lightness of the main melody. The middle section of the movement is reminiscent of some of the French music of the 1920's and 30's from composers such as Eric Satie and Francis

Poulenc. This section is meant to be a tongue-in-cheek, even absurd, antidote to the serious nature of the opening and closing music of this movement.

In writing “Secret Agents and Circus Dreams,” the third movement, I drew from many memories of TV shows such as *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and *Mission Impossible*, in which the theme music featured a solo flute and bongos and had a vague Latin flavor. In this movement, however, I have chosen to substitute another percussion instrument, the tom-toms, for bongos, so that I could get a greater depth of sound. The middle section is a circus waltz that is a little off-kilter, as if in the haze of a dream – perhaps one also involving secret agents!

The fourth movement, “Melancholy Memories” is the symphony’s slow movement. I am a fan of the German composer Paul Hindemith, and particularly sought to capture some of his “sound” in this portion of the symphony. I also wanted to emphasize the sad character of the movement with an emphasis on the double reeds, including the english horn. The middle section is built around a somewhat more optimistic theme, before the movement returns to the mournful opening melody.

The title of the final movement, “Minimalist Fury,” is a reference both to a style of composition utilized by the San Francisco-based minimalist composer John Adams, and also to the aggressive character of the opening theme. The oboe and english horn recall elements of the fourth movement as they present a mournful second theme before the furious first theme returns. The central portion of the movement offers a respite from the earnestness of the previous themes with a canon (or round) in the piccolos and other woodwinds before the fury returns. The furious and mournful themes combine to bring the work to an exciting close.

*–George Halsell*

DR. GEORGE K. HALSELL is a native of Bryan, Texas. He earned his undergraduate degree in bass trombone performance from the Peabody Conservatory of the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, and his Masters and Doctorate of Musical Arts degrees, also in trombone

performance, from The University of Texas at Austin. He also attended graduate school at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, where he completed a cognate in music theory, and has studied at the Aspen Music School and the Aspen Choral Festival. He has performed with ensembles ranging from the Baltimore Symphony and the Baltimore Opera Orchestra to bands for Diana Ross, the Temptations, and the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus. He has taught at West Virginia University, Adams State College, Colorado State University – Pueblo, and numerous community colleges.

As a composer, Halsell first distinguished himself by composing a work that was premiered by the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra in 1988. After joining the College of Southern Idaho music faculty in 1974, he composed several marches for the CSI Symphonic Band and the Twin Falls Municipal Band, orchestral accompaniments, and several choral works, including “I See His Face,” which was composed for, and performed by, the Choir of First Presbyterian Church, Twin Falls.

Dr. Halsell is in his sixteenth year on the music faculty at the College of Southern Idaho, where he directs the Symphonic Band and teaches music theory, aural skills, music appreciation, brass instruments and composition. He also performs in the Twin Falls Municipal Band, and frequently serves as its guest conductor. He is President of the Magic Valley Arts Council, VicePresident of the Danny Marona Performing Arts Scholarship Fund, and recently completed nine years as President of the Magic Valley Symphony.