

RAISE THE ROOF & RAISE THE REPERTOIRE



A Conversation with Michael Haithcock

The University Symphony Band released Raise the Roof, a CD of works by composition faculty member Michael Daugherty, commissioned by Michael Haithcock, Director of Bands, and his predecessor, H. Robert Reynolds. We talked with Haithcock about the project.

Q. Tell me about the genesis of this recording project with Michael Daugherty.

A. The genesis of *Raise the Roof* is Michael's creativity, his nonstop whirlwind of ideas. One of the reasons I came to Michigan was to work with composers like Michael Daugherty, Bill Bolcom, Bright Sheng, Susan Botti, Evan Chambers, Erik Santos, and the many guests who come to campus—Louis Andreissen, John Corigliano, Michael Colgrass, Christopher Rouse—all of this creativity going on, which I find extremely stimulating. Over the long history of the Michigan bands, repertoire creation has been a signature of the program.

Q. How did this legacy of commissioning new works start out?

A. When Revelli came in 1935, concert bands were transitioning from doing a lot of warhorse orchestra transcriptions in the days when professional bands—the Sousa Band or the Pryor Band—would go out on tour. There were no orchestras in a lot of towns; even in the big cities orchestras were relatively young. During the

Great Depression, we saw the demise of the professional bands. The bands in schools and communities gradually began to look for a different kind of repertoire; it wasn't necessary to play the same old von Suppé repertoire over and over.

One of the things Revelli immediately latched onto was creating this new repertoire. He even started a publishing series. Repertoire building was a new concept at that time, so it was just a confluence of circumstances. He created a repertoire of original works and arrangements by such famous Michigan names as Floyd Werle and Jerry Bilik. He also raised the level of performance standard. His first claim to fame, before he came to Michigan, was that his high school band, the Hobart (IN) High School Band, won the national championship several years in a row, a factor that made Revelli a hot commodity for colleges.

Q. How have those early beginnings been continued?

A. When H. Robert Reynolds, who played in the Symphony Band under Revelli, joined the faculty in 1975, the composition faculty was growing up around him: Ross Lee Finney, Leslie Bassett, George Wilson, William Bolcom, William Albright, and a fascinating host of composition fellows who were in Ann Arbor for short periods of time. All these people converged around the opportunity to create new repertoire

for the band and the extremely high musical standards that Bob continued to refine. That laid the foundation for the relationship between the composition and band programs. An endowment, established by Bob to generate funds to commission new works, facilitates our shared vision. It's become a Michigan tradition. We're dedicated to it, and the endowment makes it possible to plan long range and dream.

When I came [in 2001], I wanted to continue that tradition. Michael Daugherty had been writing for wind groups since the late 1980s. He's extremely popular with young players and our collaboration seemed a natural. We were born in the same year, so we have a lot of common background in our life experiences. The beauty of Michael's music is that it can be as hard as you are good. His music works on a number of different levels; it's so well written that it can be played very well without it being too hard. But to play it at a very high professional level is as hard as anything else.

Q. What are some of the challenges in performing Daugherty compositions?

A. First of all, I can't say enough about the students—you set the bar for them and they will go for it. Michael's orchestrations are brilliant, and in order to make them 'pop,' to make them sound just right, the players have to put in a lot of work. The technical aspects, for example in *Bells for Stowkowski*, are

very challenging. The 16th-note mix in the trumpets is notorious among the trumpets who have played them—just very fast and technically difficult. It's the same with some of the clarinet pattern passages in that piece. The tympani part in *Raise the Roof* sounds improvised, but it's not; it's written out and it is very difficult. The tuning changes for the soloists are extremely challenging, as is the solo part for clarinet in *Brooklyn Bridge*.

Q. How would you describe Daugherty's writing?

A. I think his work is multi-layered. There's always a feeling of the groove or tune that anyone can appreciate without feeling put off. Both Michael and Bill Bolcom have this ability to connect with the audience immediately, but there are deep layers of sophistication underneath what is accessible. I've worked on a lot of projects with Michael and watched him tinker and fix and edit and change and I always find it fascinating to watch this spinning of ideas. Something will sound just fine to me, but he'll make a change and I'll see that obviously it was the right thing to do. Sometimes I make a suggestion that clicks with him and it becomes part of the piece. This all happens in rehearsal and the process is similar to a laboratory with the students participating as well. Michael is very astute at making the parts clear to the players and accepts student feedback consistently. The way he orchestrates is very colorful—it can be very sensitive but it's also very powerful.

Q. Tell me about the premiere of William Bolcom's 1st Symphony for Band on February 1st.

A. It was extremely well received; the applause went on and on and on. The Symphony Band played at a level that would have made all alumni proud, but it also reflected people's

love and appreciation for Bill. The piece is typical Bolcom. It's built on a familiar neoclassic symphony model in four movements. The orchestration is ingenious, as is his ability to surprise you with the smallest detail of harmony or color. I found rehearsing it to be extremely pleasurable, because the deeper you got into the process, the more things were uncovered, and the more we all got a sense of the depth of the man's creativity. The chords settle in and then you're finding, oh, that's different than what he did last time and this really works and he just made that little twist. It's a piece I will look forward to performing every four or five years.



Daugherty and Haithcock

Q. How do these experiences enhance the training of the conducting students here?

A. For my conducting students, forging the relationships with young composers is really an ideal thing. When we hosted the Midwest Composers Conference here, we did a concert that Friday night of music by two Michigan composers and three compositions by composers from other schools. The Michigan composers were assigned to the masters' conducting students and they worked together in the rehearsals. The dialogue it takes on both sides of the coin is very instruc-

tive. The composer and conductor both learn a lot, for example, they might learn because the percussionists are saying there's no way humanly possible to play this, you've got to edit it.

One of the initiatives I have tried to promote is working with doctoral composition students in hopes that they might write their dissertation piece for the Symphony Band. In the process of this academic "exercise" we can also help them establish a voice within this ongoing repertory building. The composer creates a viable work and the doctoral conducting students develop a relationship with the composer that extends for both as they graduate and move to the next step of their work. For example, four recent composition graduates—Roshanne Etezady, Kristen Kuster, Matthew Tomassini, Carter Pann, and Joel Puckett—have written multiple pieces for band over the past five years which were championed, if not commissioned, by recent conducting graduates—Miller Asbill, Caroline Beatty, Brian Doyle, Kevin Gerald, and Emily Threinen. This is a fantastic opportunity for everybody!

That sort of hot-house environment is why we're here. We're preparing students to live in an ever-changing landscape, so there's always going to be music of the past and music of the future. You can specialize, but you really have to establish yourself before you go off onto those tangents. We're trying to find ways to make them prepared and steeped in the past, but also aware of and available to the future.

The School is a great environment for that. They can have Steve Whiting come into the seminar and talk about Mozart and Beethoven. They can have Glenn Watkins come in and talk about Stravinsky. All these resources are right here. That's the beauty of the place. 