

The Composer's Comments on...  
*A Passing Fantasy*  
— Fisher Tull

Almost 20 years ago I read a short book by Dr. Raymond A. Moody, Jr. titled, *Life After Life*. This book, along with subsequent ones by Moody and other authors, chronicled case histories of persons who had undergone a “near death experience”—that is, people who were clinically dead for a short time but who were subsequently revived. I was struck by the similarity of the descriptions of these phenomena reported to the author. Almost all subjects reported an out-of-body existence for a short time before entering a dark tunnel and traveling toward a bright light. All of them described the experience as an extremely positive one and several were reluctant to leave the blissful existence to return and continue their mortal lives. Moody’s research has been a source of comfort to me and to others with whom I have shared his writings.



#### Background

Early in 1991 I was offered a commission as part of an exceptional and ambitious project initiated by Marc Blanchette. The goal of the project was to commission several composers to write a work for a specific grade level which would introduce the students to some of the new notation techniques which have arisen over the past several decades. Four composers were selected and each was assigned a specific level of difficulty ranging from junior high school to college. I was enthusiastic about the proposal, both for its aesthetic and educational goals. It did not take long for me to decide to compose a programmatic work based on the “life after life” experiences of Moody’s subjects. The title is an obvious play on words of the near death experience.

I began working on the piece during the summer of 1991, and the sketches for the majority of the work were on my desk in early November when a devastating fire in our home burned everything in my studio. I was forced to ask for an extension of the original deadline and begin anew. My memory retained only the faintest outlines of the original version of the piece. It was as if my brain erased everything from my memory once it was committed to paper, so I had only the basic concept as I started writing again. The work was finally completed in early April of 1992. The premiere performance was presented by the combined American Band and the Rhode Island College Wind Ensemble conducted by Dr. Francis Marciniak on May 2, 1992, in Providence, Rhode Island.

## Instrumentation

The avant-garde aspects of *A Passing Fantasy* include not only new notation but also the use of instruments not usually found in music for school bands. The work is scored for standard symphonic band instruments including double bass, piano, and a large battery of percussion instruments requiring at least five players. Additionally, the saxophone players are required to play on tuned crystal goblets. Four plastic hoses of different lengths are whirled overhead to produce different fundamental pitches and their respective overtones and are assigned to the percussion and tuba players. The flutes are required to play overtones without vibrato and there are some passages in which the vibraphone is played arco with a double bass bow. Some of the players are asked to produce sounds without their instruments such as moaning and whistling.

The use of the boxed notation and the “rotation” device are two means by which avant-garde notation can produce very complex effects without requiring virtuosic technique by the ensemble members. The freedom of speed and the non-coordinated rhythms allow the music to be effectively performed by students with varying levels of technique.

## Notational Devices

Almost all the players encounter a group of notes enclosed in a box (see ex. 1) wherein the motive is to be played repeatedly for the duration of the line which follows. In these situations it is important that there be absolutely no attempt to coordinate the rhythm but, rather, each player perform as an individual.

### Example 1: Trumpets with box notation

The image shows a musical score for four trumpets. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first measure of each staff contains a group of notes enclosed in a rectangular box. Below the first measure of each staff is the dynamic marking *mf*. The second measure of each staff contains a horizontal line with a wavy, undulating shape underneath it, followed by the dynamic marking *pp*. The third measure of each staff is empty. The fourth measure of each staff contains a horizontal line with a wavy, undulating shape underneath it, followed by the dynamic marking *ff*. The notation is consistent across all four staves, indicating that all four trumpets play the same material.

A “Rotation” measure requires a special conducting gesture whereby the conductor makes a sweeping cue from one side of the ensemble to the opposite side. The players begin the motif in the “Rotation” measure at the precise time the cue reaches him or her. The resultant effect should be a movement of the sound from one side of the stage to the other.

The opening section (mm. 1–17) depicts the pain and struggle of the act of dying. Layered above this mass of sound, the upper brass signal the ultimate break with life by a sequence of

straining dissonant chords. The struggle is abruptly aborted at m. 18 and a feeling of freedom and release is signaled by the consonant triad played by flute (harmonics) and the tuned goblets. The out-of-body experience is depicted by the random whistling and the clusters produced by the overtones of the three different hoses. At m. 27 the passage through the long tunnel begins. The emergence of childhood memories is reflected by a plaintive melody introduced in the piccolo at m. 37 with a bitonal background. As the melody begins to be caught up in more confusion, generated by the glissandi motifs in boxes (m. 48), the final fragment is merged with the initial statement of the chorale “Kom süßer Tod” which begins with a similar interval content as shown in ex. 2.

Example 2: Oboe and Euphonium melodies



This final section represents the immense joy experienced by the person as a bright light gradually appears at the end of the tunnel. All of Moody's subjects mention its "indescribable brilliance." He goes on to say, "The love and the warmth which emanate from this Being to the dying person are utterly beyond words and he feels completely surrounded by it and taken up in it, completely at ease and accepted in the presence of this Being."

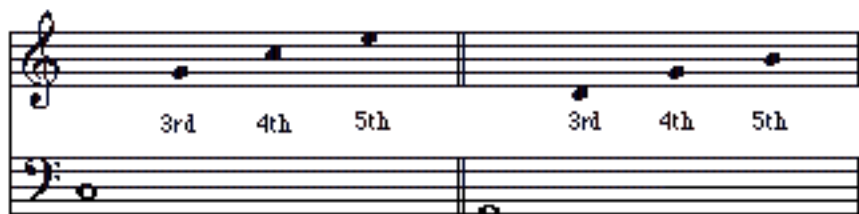
The climax of the work occurs at measure 83 when the person surrenders completely to the new existence. The tonality has now settled on B minor where it remains to the conclusion. A final philosophical statement is made by the ending on a unison F-sharp, the dominant of the tonality, which implies a half cadence and suggests that there is still more to come in this adventure.

### Programmatic Form

As the conductor begins the process of score study, the importance of the piano/percussion group should receive due attention. A minimum of five percussion players is required. The conductor should make a commitment to see that all required instruments are available. A grand piano of at least 6 feet in length is essential to achieve the desired sonorities.

There are four hoses of different lengths required in the score. The hoses, made of corrugated plastic and approximately two inches in diameter are sold in many toy stores under a variety of names. To construct the hoses, it will be necessary to either trim or fuse several pieces in order to arrive at the proper length to produce the desired pitches. After experimenting with varying sizes, the added pieces should be taped firmly in place. As the hose is rotated in a circular motion above the head, the third, fourth, and fifth harmonics are readily produced by varying the speed of the rotation as shown in ex. 3.

Example 3: harmonics produced by hoses in C and G



The flexatone is a percussion instrument which imitates the sound of the musical saw. The production of exact specified pitches is difficult so the conductor should be willing to accept a glissando approximation of the pitches called for in the score.

Conductors of wind groups may not be familiar with the notation of harmonics for the double bass as written in mm. 19–30. The diamond shaped notes indicate the location on the G string where the finger is to touch (not stop) the string. The result will be a pitch produced by the natural overtone series of the G string as shown in ex. 4.

Example 4: harmonics on the bass G string



Players assigned to make a “low moaning” sound in the opening measures should imagine being in severe, excruciating pain. The percussion boxes, beginning in m. 4, should conjure up boding fear and dread of the unknown. Beginning in m. 6, the trombone glissandi should be performed slowly. If there is more than one player to a part, each should go at his/her own rate of speed once the boxed notation is reached.

Beginning in m. 11 (horns), and m. 15 (added trumpets), it is essential that these sonorities be balanced equally to enhance the dissonance. The portion of the melody at m. 44 deserves special attention by the conductor to assure proper balance to the “overtone” harmonization. The prominent or fundamental pitches begin on the note C. The flutes, oboe, and vibraphone are playing the overtones generated by each melody pitch. The result should resemble the sound of a pipe organ.

For the conductor, the three “Rotation” measures (64, 69, & 76) present the problem of the speed of the gesture. This will be further influenced by the size of the ensemble. If the cue is too fast, the result sounds like a sloppy entrance. If too slow, the motives sound broken and disjunct. The conductor is urged to experiment in rehearsal to achieve the most effective speed of each occurrence. Obviously, each different seating arrangement will produce different results in the rotation measure. This is expected and should not be of concern to the conductor. There is no “correct” sound for these measures.

The 6 measure phrase beginning at m. 83 should be rendered with great warmth and breadth. The conductor should guard against the tendencies by the players to play too loud and to press

ahead in this passage. The tempo should remain slow and calming as the music leads to a reflective solitary trumpet statement on the transfiguration which has occurred.

The question of suitable tempi was one I continued to ponder as I changed the approximate metronome markings several times while writing the work. It later occurred to me that every tempo modification I made resulted in a slower speed. Overall, there is not a single spot in the piece that calls for moving the tempo ahead or pressing forward. If the conductor is to err in the interpretation of tempo, he/she should lean toward the side of slowness and breadth. Near the end, a divided beat would often be appropriate.

In conclusion, *A Passing Fantasy* should not be presented as a morbid experience but rather, as a positive view of a phenomenon which will eventually affect all of us. The conductor is urged to read at least one of Moody's books (see below) before beginning his/her study of the score. The insights obtained from this reading should be passed along to the performers during rehearsals so that each player may become aware of his/her role in the interpretative experience.

*A Passing Fantasy* by Fisher Tull is published by Southern Music Company of San Antonio, Texas. The duration is approximately 7—8 minutes and its level of difficulty is grade 4.

Books by Dr. Raymond A. Moody, Jr:

*Life After Life* (1975) Bantam

*Reflections on Life After Life* (1985) Bantam

*The Light Beyond* (1989) Bantam

*Coming Back* (1992) Bantam