

A Composer Focus on Fisher Tull¹ - Interview With the Composer² by Andrew Yates transcribed by Steve Matchett³



Andrew Yates:

What I thought I'd do is segmentize our interview. I wanted to spend some time biographically with you. First of all, you received your degrees from where—the University of North Texas?

Fisher Tull:

I earned my Bachelor of Music in 1956, and stayed on to get my Masters in Music Theory in '57.

A Y:

And you got your Doctorate from where?

FT:

Also from the University of North Texas.

A Y:

Oh, I see.

FT:

But that was about five or six years later.

A Y:

How did you get involved in all this jazz business?

FT:

Well that started in my high school days. I had the usual background in a Texas high school in Waco Texas, and I was a trumpet player enamored with the big band jazz of the 1940's. And I started to try to write some arrangements in high school. All this was self-taught of course. And after I graduated from high school I spent the next summer playing with a traveling... with a traveling commercial band. And after I entered North Texas State I was playing with the lab

¹The Fisher Tull interview took place March 19, 1991 from 8-9pm Central Time. It was produced and aired over commercial classical radio station KXTR 96.5 FM in Kansas City. The interview was conducted by Andrew Yates by phone and recorded at the radio station. The program aired Saturday May 4th, 1991 at 7:00pm. The program was titled "The Sound of the Winds." The show was titled "A Composer Focus on Fisher Tull."

²The title of the interview audio track from the recording *Tull: Piano Concerto & Works for Wind Ensemble*. Klavier Records 2015

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band there, and continued to write many arrangements. I don't know, as many as 50. And after I completed my Masters Degree and began teaching here at Sam Houston State⁴, I also conducted the jazz ensemble here. So I kept writing arrangements for them as well. I think everybody needs to realize that in the early '50's there were no Xerox machines, and there were very few published jazz arrangements that were of any quality at all. So, if you wanted to have a good jazz group, you had to have an arranger, or several arrangers, to write the music for you. Then... oh when I was conducting the group here, I continued to write arrangements for them.

A Y:

When did the tide turn away from writing arrangements in the jazz idiom?

F T:

Well, a couple of years after I joined the faculty here at Sam Houston, I had an additional assignment to conduct the brass ensemble, which was a large group of brass and percussionists. And I found the same thing with that ensemble as with the jazz ensemble—was that there was very little literature. After about two concerts we played about everything that was decent to play, and so I just started doing some arrangements for them as well. And finally I got bored of doing arrangements of other people's music, whether it was legitimate or jazz music. So, I'd try to write my own music. And since I had the brass group at my command, the first pieces were for that large brass and percussion ensemble. The first one was called *Liturgical Symphony* [completed in 1960], and the second one was called *Variations on an Advent Hymn* [completed in 1962]. They were sort of the bridge between my arranging and my composition, in that these two works were based on borrowed melodies. And so, in a sense, particularly the first one, the *Liturgical Symphony* was sort of a glorified arrangement of several hymn tunes. So it was a sort of natural evolution from being an arranger to being a composer. It sort of happened without my knowledge really. I really got frustrated with the whole jazz movement around that time, because that's when all the amplification came in and the doo-wop thing was getting to be big. So I kind of bowed out of that arena at that time, and devoted all my interests into composition.

A Y:

What was your biggest influence in writing into a more 'serial' style?

F T:

Well, back when I was a student I did a lot of reading and score study on my own. I wasn't only interested in jazz, an ah, I sort of absorbed all of these things. And, I guess I sort of created in my own mind, some vocabularies that I could deal with later.

A Y:

Okay

F T:

You're probably referring to my *Toccata*.

⁴ Sam Houston State University in Huntsville Texas. Fisher Tull served on the faculty from 1957, at age 23, until his death in 1994. He was the Chair of the Music Department from 1965 to 1982. He was named a Piper Professor and at the time of his death he held the rank of Distinguished Professor and served as The Director of Graduate Studies in Music.

A Y:

That's the one I played as a matter of fact.

FT:

And ah, this is really my very first band piece.

A Y:

Uh huh. It's language seems so mature for a first piece—of a wind work.

FT:

The idea for this was basically a rhythmic idea, with all the 'multi-meter' and 'meter changes' that go on. And I had not been really enamored with 'serial' music through my study. But I realized that one could control the 'twelve-tone row' and make it as consonant or dissonant as you chose. So, I think this is very well controlled. It isn't all that dissonant, it isn't all that 'avant-garde', as one might associate with a 'serial' piece. And so this was written in 1969. I entered it in the ABA—American Bandmasters Association, Ostwald Contest. And lo and behold it won first prize.⁵ And this was a breakthrough for me because at the next years convention they presented the piece. It was really a very important thing for me. This one piece, the *Toccata*, probably meant more to my career than anything else that I've written.

A Y:

Is it perhaps your biggest seller?

FT:

Probably not. Another work, *Sketches on a Tudor Psalm* [completed in 1972], has probably sold more copies.

A Y:

Uh huh. What about the *Tudor Psalm*, how did it come about?

FT:

That was written a couple of years after the *Toccata*, so that was another early piece. Back when I was writing new works for brass and percussion, I was drawing heavily upon the repertory of hymn tunes. And the *Variations on and Advent Hymn*—I thought was one of my better pieces for brass and percussion. At the time, the piece was delayed in publication for six or seven years. I got very frustrated, and I said "Well why don't I write a piece just like it?—And write this for symphonic band, since the other piece isn't going to be published anyway." And so I went back into my repertory of hymn tunes, and ah, decided on the setting of the "Second Psalm" of Thomas Tallis [c. 1505-23 - 1585], the 16th-century English composer, which appeared in a collection of 'Tudor' church music, and of course it was in the American Episcopal Hymnal at that time. And that's where I was familiar with it. It was also the same tune that Vaughan

⁵The Ostwald Award is now known as the Sousa/Ostwald Award in a collaborative venture between the American Bandmasters Association and the John Phillip Sousa Foundation. Fisher Tull's band composition *Toccata* won for 1970. More information about the award is found here: <http://americanbandmasters.org/awards/>

Williams used for his *Fantasia on a Theme of Tallis* for double string orchestra, which was written back in the early part of the century⁶.

A Y:

Uh hum

FT:

Several people told me I ought not to use that for a theme and variations, but I didn't pay any attention to them.

A Y:

So from there we hear *Terpsichore* and *Antiphon* before the *Tudor Psalm* comes in.

FT:

Yeah, right. Those were small pieces that were, sort of interjected between those two. I don't consider them veery significant works.

A Y:

Are they the same style as *Toccata*?

FT:

The *Terpsichore* is written around the same time.

A Y:

From there I see *Studies in Motion*, and ah, *Cryptic Essay*.

FT:

This is probably my attempt to take the sort of form I had used in some of the earlier works, with a borrowed tune, and to use a technique of variations whereby the listener doesn't hear the theme. So it's a variations on an unheard theme, in a sense. It's a pretty stark piece. It's a complex pie e because I used regular notation, which is a little more difficult to perform—more difficult for the players. And it is also based on a borrowed hymn tune that most listeners would only recognize at the very end of the piece.

A Y:

I wanted to ask you about [?]. Let's go back to *Jargon*, because that's a good piece.

FT:

Yeah. That was a commission from a friend of mine who had a high school band in Arlington Texas, and he wanted a new work to play at some festival they were going to that Spring.

A Y:

Uh huh.

⁶ Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872 - 1958), English composer; wrote the *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* which premiered in 1910, and is perhaps his most popular work.

FT:

And this must of been the bicentennial year that he was dong that. And he wanted a work that would be appropriate for the bicentennial of the United States.

A Y:

Uh hum

FT:

A musicologist friend of mine had shown me a short one page work by William Billings called "Jargon" that appeared in his second volume of works back in the 16th-century⁷. The first volume had been published and it was criticized fir being too 'consonant', and so in answer to his critics he wrote this short piece he called "Jargon." It had all sorts of very unusual dissonances that we would call "wrong notes" in the harmony, as in reply to his critics. And I thought this was a very funny kind of thing for him to do. And so I took that work and used it as the basis for this piece for the high school band from Arlington. When I was talking to the conductor about what [personnel] he had, what [personnel] he didn't have; what he wanted for the piece, ah, he mentioned that he had a whole lot of percussion players. And so I decided since Billings was trying to make this a hard sounding dissonant piece, that I would use ten separate percussion players, and have them align behind the wind players on the stage, and sort of use some of the *Studies in Motion* kind of techniques.⁸ Having the sound move around the stage... from left to right... right to left and so forth. So, the title, when it became published, ... the title incorporated this and then it was " [Jargon for] percussion ensemble and symphonic band." And it does require ten percussionists, which is kind of unusual.

A Y:

Uh hum. What gave you this great impetus to write such extensive percussion parts?

FT:

Well look; as a college teacher, I noticed back in the late '60's that a lot of our students we were getting were percussionists. One, they were some of our best musicians, and; Two, they were able to play many percussion instruments [each]. And this looked like, to me, a new fertile ground to explore. And ah, I became very interested in this, and I really considered the percussion section as the 'third choir' of the wind band.

A Y:

Yes

⁷William Billings (1746 - 1800) was an important composer in Colonial and Revolutionary America of choral music. Another American composer who borrowed his music was William Schuman (1910 - 1992), who used three of Billings' tunes in his *New England Triptych*.

⁸The *Studies in Motion* technique discussed here is one that exploits the spatial aspects of performance. The sounds are designed to move around the stage in very specific ways, and the musical content is subject to the plan of the traveling sound. Hence the movement titles—I. Stasis - The appearance of sound in a stationary position, II. Rotation - Sounds and textures in linear motion, III. Alternation - The grouping of sound cells, IV. Oscillation - The culmination of motion and fluctuating timbres. The percussionists' positioning on stage in *Jargon* is important to take advantage of this spatial movement of sound. This technique can be traced to Charles Ives (1874 - 1954) and others who have practiced similar concepts.

FT:

And I've always felt that they deserve the prominence since that time. Ah, my son⁹, as it turns out, is a professional percussionist, so I draw heavily upon his advise nowadays with all the rapid changes that are happening in percussion instruments and percussion notation, and so forth. But I really feel very strongly that that's a viable force in the symphonic band.

A Y:

I'm looking into the '80's now, and *Prelude and Double Fugue* is a pretty good piece!

FT:

Yeah... yeah, I like the piece.

A Y:

Oh yeah?

FT:

Very fond of it. It was probably the only piece that I wrote sort of simultaneously for band and for orchestra.

A Y:

Uh huh.

FT:

I think probably the band scoring version came first, and then at the same time, I was writing in notes to myself for the orchestral score. But, it turned out to be a commission for Kappa Kappa Psi and Tau Beta Sigma¹⁰, and was premiered by them at their national convention in Atlanta; which I got to conduct using Robert Shaw's¹¹ podium and music stand, and so forth. And it's [*Prelude and Double Fugue*] been done a number of times. I really rather like the piece, and I think it should be played more than it is.

A Y:

For future reference, let's talk about the *Concerto for Piano and Winds*.

⁹ Timothy Tull (1958 - 2015) was a percussionist with the Houston Grand Opera and Houston Ballet orchestras.

¹⁰ The Fraternity and Sorority that exist in service to college bands and band education.

¹¹ Robert Shaw (1916 - 1999) was music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus from 1967 to 1988. He was known as the "Dean" of choral conductors and had formed the Robert Shaw Chorale early in his career. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Shaw_\(conductor\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Shaw_(conductor))

FT:

Okay. Back, shortly after I received my Doctorate, I wrote a sonata for piano, which I dedicated to my wife Charlotte who is a pianist. And she helped me get through my Doctorate, which is on of those wonderful things. And so this is a regular three movement piano sonata, which she premiered and played a couple of times since. Nobody else seemed interested in playing the work. It was not published, and I sort of had it in the desk drawer. I got a call from the University of Puget Sound in Washington¹². [They] wanted to commission me to write a work, and they sort of left it open and said “what would you like to do.” So I said, “what if I take this piano sonata that nobody plays and transform it into a concerto for piano and winds.” And ah, I mentioned that to the people from Washington, and they thought that was a grand idea. And they had a new faculty pianist that they were eager to display. Anyway; and so I re-did the work; I mean it’s not just simply and orchestration of the sonata. There was a lot of revision and expansion of it. In fact, my wife Charlotte also contributed to it by composing the two cadenzas that we added to the piece. So it was kind of a team effort. And ah, I feel very good about the piece. And she has played it with our Sam Houston State wind ensemble.

A Y:

Neat!

FT:

And it’s beginning to get a little bit of acceptance in performances around the country at the collegiate level, if they have a very good faculty pianist. And sometimes in the medium size or smaller schools they have no orchestra.

A Y:

Uh huh.

FT;

But they might have a very good wind ensemble, and it’s a good vehicle for faculty performers.

[END]

¹²The University of Puget Sound, est. 1888 in Tacoma Washington, USA.