The Life and Works of David R. Holsinger

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April 20, 2005
The Life and Music of David R. Holsinger

David R. Holsinger (b. December 26, 1945, Hardin, MO) is one of the most popular band composers of the twenty-first century. His musical career began at the age of five when he was encouraged to take piano lessons by his adopting parents. He later took jazz lessons and was improvising by the time he entered junior high school. Encouraged to become a music teacher, he entered Central Methodist College in Fayette, Missouri, as a music education major. Holsinger, however, eventually came to realize that teaching was not his calling. After meeting Vaclav Nehlybel in the spring of his junior year, he was inspired to pursue a career in composition. It was from this point that he would establish a whole new style of writing for band. David Holsinger’s original style of composition and strong presence in the music world justify an examination of his life, his works, and his contribution to music.

In 2002, Holsinger contributed a chapter to Composers on Composing for Band, a four-volume series edited by composer-conductor Mark Camphouse that delves into the minds of eleven band composers and allows them to talk about music in their own words. Holsinger’s chapter of this book, along with phone interviews with Holsinger himself and several articles from The Instrumentalist music journal, will serve as the primary sources for my research.

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March 9, 2005
David R. Holsinger (b. December 26, 1945, Hardin, Missouri) is an American contemporary band composer of both secular and sacred works. He is one of the most popular band composers at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As an avid leader in the band and composition communities, his musical career is comparable to the accomplished careers of such contemporary composers as Eric Whitacre, David Gillingham, and Frank Ticheli. His original style of composition and strong presence in the music world justify an examination of his life, his works, and his contribution to music.

Holsinger was born to two unwed high school students who gave him up for adoption to Marvin and Hannah Holsinger in 1946. The Holsingers raised him as an only child on a farm in Hardin, where he spent his entire childhood. In speaking of his childhood, Holsinger writes “As an only child, growing up on a farm...was not a bad life. I had my dogs, my .22 rifle, and one heck of a vivid imagination...I was alone and could be anything or anybody I could imagine.” Knowing that Holsinger had come from a family with a strong musical heritage, his parents started him taking piano lessons at the age of four with the local piano teacher. Music soon became a necessary part of his daily activities, often interrupting his chores and fieldwork. He would often leave the tractor for a half hour at a time several times a day to play the piano, referring to these as “music breaks.” He also took jazz lessons from the local organist, learning how to improvise. He started taking trumpet lessons in the third grade and started in band in the fourth

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1 Whitacre, Gillingham, and Ticheli are all internationally-known symphonic composers and conductors whose compositions have won several distinguished awards.
3 Ibid., p. 167.
grade. He attended Hardin-Central High School where he played trumpet all four years and participated in every music and drama group.

Holsinger knew long before his high school graduation in 1963 that he would pursue a career teaching music. His friends and teachers all told him he would make a fine music teacher, so with that encouragement and a combination piano/vocal scholarship, he went on to major in music education at Central Methodist College in Fayette, Missouri.

According to Holsinger, Central Methodist College was a “hotbed” for music educators in the 1950s and 1960s. The college was small with just under one thousand students, but there was a substantial output of successful instrumental and vocal educators for the state’s public schools. In fact, Holsinger knew of several of his own music teachers who had graduated from Central Methodist College. He felt that this was the school and the lifestyle for him.

After attending Central Methodist for a short time, Holsinger noticed the passion of the other students to become music teachers and began to question his own. Thinking back, Holsinger states, “I knew I was supposed to be [a music teacher] because I was expected to be one, but something was really missing.” He remained a music education major until his junior year, when he met the man who would change his life.

The band at Central Methodist College, like nearly all college bands in the Midwest, went on an annual spring tour when, for seven days, they would perform daily concerts at nearby schools and churches. The tour of 1965 was exceptional, however,

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4 Ibid., p. 167.
5 Ibid., p. 168.
because Wingert-Jones Music, a new music publishing company, decided to send a new composer on tour with the band to guest conduct two of his works. The band received his music the fall preceding the tour, and the composer came to meet the group three days before they were to leave for tour.

The guest composer was Vaclav Nelhybel. He was to conduct two of his latest works, the featured work being *Trittico* (1993). While the band had practiced the music all year long, Holsinger was not prepared for what would happen during the time Nelhybel would spend with them on tour. The first time Nelhybel conducted *Trittico* with the band, Holsinger realized that he had no idea what the music was all about until that moment. Holsinger recalls, "...I had been looking at music that was all black and white. It really didn’t have life to it, it was just music. Then I finally saw a real composer and the passion in him that had created all this music." "In that one electrifying instant," he says, "I saw brutality, beauty, angst, anguish, joy, triumph, sorrow, exhilaration, devastation, despair, hope, faith...all in the eyes of one man conducting his music."8

The band toured for seven days, performing four concerts each day. After the final concert was played on the last day, Holsinger found himself sitting on the empty stage weeping. "...I realized the reason I didn’t have the passion to teach was that that was not really my passion," Holsinger states. "My passion was to be a composer."10 He then changed his major to composition.

10 Mark Camphouse, *Composers on Composing for Band*, p. 169.
The following week was spring break. It was then that Holsinger made his first attempt at composing. He spent the entire week at the piano, experimenting with harmonies and rhythms. At the end of the week he had a finished product: a work for band entitled *Prelude and Rondo* (1966). The influence of Nelhybel’s style is evident in this work. Holsinger used many syncopated rhythms, extreme dynamic contrasts, strong brass and percussive attacks, and driving tempi, all of which are common characteristics of his modern music.11 The work was published five years later.

Holsinger graduated from Central Methodist College in 1967 and went on immediately to pursue a Master’s degree in composition at Central Missouri State University. There he studied with Donald Bohlen, a composer he describes as a “die hard serialist”.12 Although Holsinger says the two of them were at opposing ends in the ideals of musical composition, he also notes that Bohlen introduced him to a new world of twentieth century music, including new sounds and compositional techniques.13

Holsinger has completed some coursework towards a DMA in composition at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Missouri. There he has studied under Charles Hoag, another instructor he gives credit to for helping him develop his own compositional style.14 In 1984, Holsinger moved to Grand Prairie, Texas, where he served as the Composer in Residence to Shady Grove Church for fifteen years. He then moved to Cleveland, Tennessee, where he currently teaches composition, conducting, and is the Director of the Wind Ensemble at Lee University.

12 Mark Camphouse, Composers on Composing for Band, p. 173.
13 Ibid., p. 173.
14 Ibid., p. 173.
It is common to hear within the band community the phrase “Holsinger style”. Like many other composers, Holsinger’s music is very original. Not only is his instrumental writing distinctive, but his musical style is as well. Characteristics often associated with his musical style include fast tempi, numerous meter changes, strong brass lines, driving woodwind lines, and aggressive percussion. Holsinger describes his orchestrations as “very mid-voiced,” using a lot of the French horn and alto saxophone voices. It is for this reason, he says, that he tries to write for only one or two French horn parts as opposed to three or four.

In the case of Holsinger’s tempi, “fast” usually means between M.M.= c. 176 and 184. His tempi often get as fast as M.M.= c. 208. He often uses abrupt tempo changes, changing immediately from a fast tempo to one half that tempo or less. It must be noted that many of Holsinger’s works use tempi that are much slower than those mentioned. His use of fast tempi, however, is one of several characteristics that define the “Holsinger style”.

Another major characteristic of Holsinger’s musical style one learns through score-study is the tendency of the music to change meters. For example, in the first movement of The Easter Symphony (1997) there are over two hundred and fifty-two meter changes. One section in particular has a meter change every measure for sixty measures. This is common in almost every one of his works, beginning with his very first composition, Prelude and Rondo, and it is unique to his style. According to Holsinger, he was not influenced by any other composer to compose in this way. He says, “It’s just another facet of my rhythmic palette, both inside and outside the meter.”

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15 David Holsinger, e-mail message to author, 20 April 2005.
Example 1, measures 72 through 76 of *Liturgycal Dances* (1981), shows a typical situation in Holsinger’s music in which the meter changes every measure.

Holsinger’s brass parts are often bold and grandiose. They rarely provide an underlying support for the woodwind section. Often it is the opposite and the woodwinds will provide an ostinato for the brass’ theme or melody. While the trumpets carry the melody most often, it is not unusual for them to mimic the clarinets and flutes in syncopated lines. Example 2 illustrates the use of the brass section in measures 102 through 105 of *Liturgycal Dances*. The trumpets, French horns, and baritone carry the
melody while the cornet, trombones, and tubas provide an off-beat accented accompaniment.

Example 2

The woodwind parts in Holsinger's music are often very challenging, technically as well as musically. They are often in the higher ranges of the instruments, and have complex syncopated rhythms. The lines are often syncopated ostinati, creating a forward motion beneath the soaring lines of the French horns and trumpets. Example 3, measures
221 and 222 of *Liturgical Dances*, gives an example of the repetitive, forward motion in the entire woodwind section.

Example 3
Holsinger loves to compose for percussion. His percussion parts are necessary to the energy of his music. The mallets parts often mimic the woodwind parts. The timpani parts are usually written for more than four pitches, requiring constant use of the tuning pedals. The parts are often written for ten to twelve players and often require new, improvised instruments that must be made using parts from home improvement stores. Examples of these “improvised” instruments include “Spin chain on pipe”, “Nails on pipe”, and “Metal claves”. All of these examples are taken from Holsinger’s new work *Gears Pulleys Chains* (2005).

Exceptions to the described “Holsinger style” include the slower, more reverent works that Holsinger has composed, such as his Hymnsong Series. The Hymnsong Series consists of five grade-three works written for band and include *On a Hymnsong of Philip Bliss* (1989), *On a Hymnsong of Lowell Mason* (1990), *On a Hymnsong of Robert Lowry* (1992), *On a Southern Hymnsong* (1993), and *On an American Spiritual* (1991). Each of these is based on separate spiritual hymns: *On a Hymnsong of Philip Bliss* is based on the hymn tune “It is Well with my Soul”; *On a Hymnsong of Lowell Mason* is based on the 1812 Olivet (“My Faith Looks Up To Thee”); *On a Hymnsong of Robert Lowry* is based on the tune “Nothing But the Blood of Jesus”; and *On an American Spiritual* differs in that it is a “variation...dependent on extramusical events for inspiration and understanding”. The subject of this particular hymn is the Easter story and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

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16 Mark Camphouse, *Composers on Composing for Band*, p. 178.
17 David R. Holsinger, David R. Holsinger [Web site], “Errata/FAQs” Site address: http://www.davidrholsinger.com/errata.htm
18 TRN Music Publisher, Inc. [Web site], “David R. Holsinger,” Site address: http://www.trnmusic.com/holsinger.html
While Holsinger’s compositions are intended to be performed on a stage, they have made their way to a less formal venue—the football field. Several of Holsinger’s works are becoming standard music for marching band field shows; even drum and bugle corps are performing his music. Since 1987, thirty-three Division I Drum and Bugle Corps have used Holsinger’s music as the primary music for their field shows. The most popular music choices have been used no less than four times each and include *In the Spring*, *At the Time When Kings Go Off to War*, *To Tame the Perilous Skies*, *On a Hymnsong of Philip Bliss*, *Abrams’ Pursuit*, selected movements from *The Easter Symphony*, and *Liturical Dances*. *The Easter Symphony* and *Liturical Dances* were used most often, having been performed six and seven times, respectively. Renowned band composer and arranger Key Poulan has arranged all of the above-listed works for marching band. Poulan was the first person to introduce Holsinger’s music to drum corps. In the fall of 1986, after hearing the University of Houston Marching Band perform *Liturical Dances* as part of their field show, he arranged the work for the Cavaliers Drum and Bugle Corps to perform in their 1987 show.

According to Poulan, Holsinger’s style of composing is very compatible with marching band. He says that Holsinger “utilizes rhythm and sonorous harmonies that adapt really well to the field. His woodwind and French horn lines move well and create a lot of energy and forward motion. The tempos he chooses also adapt very well for the field.”

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19 Key Poulan, e-mail message to author, 17 March 2005.

20 Ibid.
Nearly every one of Holsinger’s works is programmatic. He chooses his titles very carefully and often long before he has any music written. Subjects of his works range from Biblical stories to depictions of the personality of each one of his three children. He composes music that is “experience motivated” and a “direct product of [his] lifestyle.” Holsinger’s most-used inspiration for subjects is the Bible, the Old Testament in particular. He has composed several works based on stories in the Bible, most notably those about David. *Til His Hand Grew Tired and Froze to the Sword* (2004), *At the Strongholds of En Gedi* (1996), and *In the Spring, At the Time When Kings Go Off to War* (1986) are all based on stories of King David.

One work that Holsinger is most proud of and perhaps is his personal favorite is *The Easter Symphony* (1997). Of the work, Holsinger says, “If there is one work I feel that I was meant to write, it is *The Easter Symphony.*” The *Easter Symphony* is a three movement work for winds, percussion, mass choir, and solo baritone voice. The work is based on the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The three movements are entitled *Kings, The Death Tree,* and *Symphonia Resurrectus* [sic]. *The Death Tree* was originally written as a work by itself before either of the other two movements was conceived.

While many of Holsinger’s works are extreme in terms of tempo and technical difficulty, *The Easter Symphony* is intense and is exceedingly demanding of the performers. Not only is the music difficult for the instrumentalists, but a demand on the

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21 Mark Camphouse, Composers on Composing for Band, p. 172.
22 Ibid., p. 171.
23 David Holsinger, phone interview with author, 7 March 2005.
24 Ibid.
25 Douglas Nimmo, Gustavus Adolphus College [Web site], “David Holsinger’s The Easter Symphony” (2 February 1997), Site address: http://www.gac.edu/oncampus/academics/music/gband/easter.html
26 Ibid.
vocalists exists as well. The tempi and rhythms in this work differ greatly from what vocalists are used to performing, especially when the addition of the text is taken into consideration. The extremely rapid tempi and off-beat rhythms make singing the text very difficult.

*The Easter Symphony* is just one of several choral works Holsinger has composed. *A Song of Moses* (1993) was composed for chorus, winds, and percussion. It is based on Old Testament scripture found in Deuteronomy 32. The work illustrates the prophetic last words of Moses spoken to the people of Israel before his death.27 Holsinger’s other choral works include *Sinfonia Voci* (1994) and *Canticles!* (2001).

In addition to composing several choral works, Holsinger has composed three ballets. Unlike his programmatic works, Holsinger’s ballets do not tell stories. The music of these ballets is based on liturgical themes, texts, and words from the Bible and church services, but they do not portray specific stories. His first, *Ballet Sacra* (1990), is a one-movement work for symphonic band and dance company. According to Holsinger, the music can be performed without the visual element of the dancers. *Ballet Sacra* is based on liturgical texts from the Roman Catholic Mass, the Anglican Mass, the Lutheran Service, and the Methodist Communion Service. The work has vocalists singing two lines of text from the Gloria of the Mass Ordinary, “Gloria in Excelsis Deo” and “Quoniam tu solus sanctus” (Glory to God in the Highest/ For You Alone are Holy).28

Holsinger’s second ballet, *Ballet Exaltare* (1999), is also a one-movement work for dance company and wind symphony. The work was composed independently of Ballet Sacra and is not its continuation. A recurrent theme in the music of the ballet,

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28 Ibid.
although not the main theme, contains familiar music from Louis Bourgeois’ Psalm 100 setting (Doxology). This theme becomes intertwined with fragments of other recurring themes throughout the movement. Holsinger’s third ballet, Praises, is a six-movement work based on the seven Hebrew words for “praise” found in the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament. The word “praise” can be translated into seven different words in Hebrew, all of which have unusual, individual definitions. Holsinger dedicated this work to his former pastor and friend, Rev. Olen Griffing.\textsuperscript{29}

Holsinger’s compositions have received national recognition and critical acclaim at several national competitions. In 1970 he won the National Federation of Music Clubs Band Composition Contest with a work entitled Fanfare. Fanfare is now the third movement of a trilogy entitled The War Trilogy. The War Trilogy was then awarded first prize in the Kent State University Band Composition Contest in 1970. Holsinger’s most recognizable achievements in composition, however, have been the coveted ABA-Ostwald prizes he received for his works The Armies of the Omnipresent Otserf and In the Spring, At the Time When Kings Go Off to War, received in 1982 and 1986, respectively.\textsuperscript{30}

Holsinger maintains an active career teaching composition and conducting the Lee University Wind Ensemble in Cleveland, Tennessee. In addition to his collegiate career at Lee University, Holsinger remains an avid member of the music community. He often spends four days a week traveling throughout the United States as a guest conductor, clinician, and composer, appearing at over sixty major colleges and universities in the past ten years. He has served as Visiting Conductor in Residence at

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.

eleven American colleges or universities. He has also conducted the All-State Bands in Tennessee, Kentucky, South Carolina, New York, Virginia, Alabama, Utah, Illinois, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Indiana, Georgia, Wyoming, South Dakota, Louisiana, Mississippi, California, and Missouri.

David Holsinger's compositions are versatile in that they serve dual purposes. First, they portray the original story of the composer and his intentions. Second, they serve as learning material for performers of all skill levels. His music demands technical proficiency on the instrument as well as accurate musical interpretation. To be able to portray the program of the music correctly, the intended style must be performed. Thus, perhaps without intending to do so, Holsinger has become to his own students what Vaclav Nelhybel was to him at Central Methodist College. His music is accepted by band students and directors alike: for the aesthetics of his music and its ability to appeal to performers and the audience, and for the challenges that are presented to the performers, requiring higher degrees of both artistic and intellectual effort.


Holsinger, David. E-mail message to author, 20 April 2005.

Holsinger, David. Phone interview with author, 7 March 2005.


Poulan, Key. E-mail message to author, 17 March 2005.
