



# A LOOK AT FRANK TICHELI'S

# Nitro

BY  
DR. KEITH KINDER

Nitro is one of the newest band works from the prolific pen of Frank Ticheli. This short, brilliant work was commissioned by the Northshore Concert Band and conductor Mallory Thompson. The score contains extensive, and highly revealing, performance notes that will be of considerable help to conductors preparing this composition for performance.

According to the notes included in the score, the composer was inspired by his contemplation of the enormous importance to the universe of the element of nitrogen (chemical symbol N<sub>2</sub>). Ticheli was fascinated by this element's "life-giving, energizing, healing, cleansing, explosive" characteristics, and in his composition makes reference to the natural world, the human world and perhaps to the nature of creation itself. The work opens with a 'sound cloud' of articulated triplets in the woodwinds (called "chattering" by the composer) that form the background to the primary theme played by horns and trombones. [See Example 1: Primary Theme, bars 3–6 (horns and trombones)]

Nitro, an energy-charged three-minute fanfare for band, was commissioned by the Northshore Concert Band, Mallory Thompson, music director, in celebration of their 50th anniversary season, and received its premiere performance by them on April 9th, 2006.

Nitrogen is the most abundant component of the Earth's atmosphere (78 per cent by volume), and is present in the tissues of every living thing. It is the fifth most abundant element in the universe, created by the fusion deep within stars; it has recently been detected in interstellar space. The sheer prevalence of nitrogen in all of nature, and the infinite range of compounds it is part of — life-giving, energizing, healing, cleansing, explosive — all appealed to me, and served as the inspiration for my music.

The main musical idea for Nitro is a powerful, angular theme, first announced by the trombones and horns, and then imitated in the trumpets. Trumpet fanfare calls and a busy and relentless chattering in the woodwinds enhance the bright, festive mood.

The middle section is based on a woodwind theme that is partly fanfare-like, partly dance-like. This contrasting theme is built from intervals occurring in the natural overtone series (octave and twelfth), giving it an expansive, open-air quality. The main theme reappears, growing in power and density all the while, building to a thunderous conclusion.

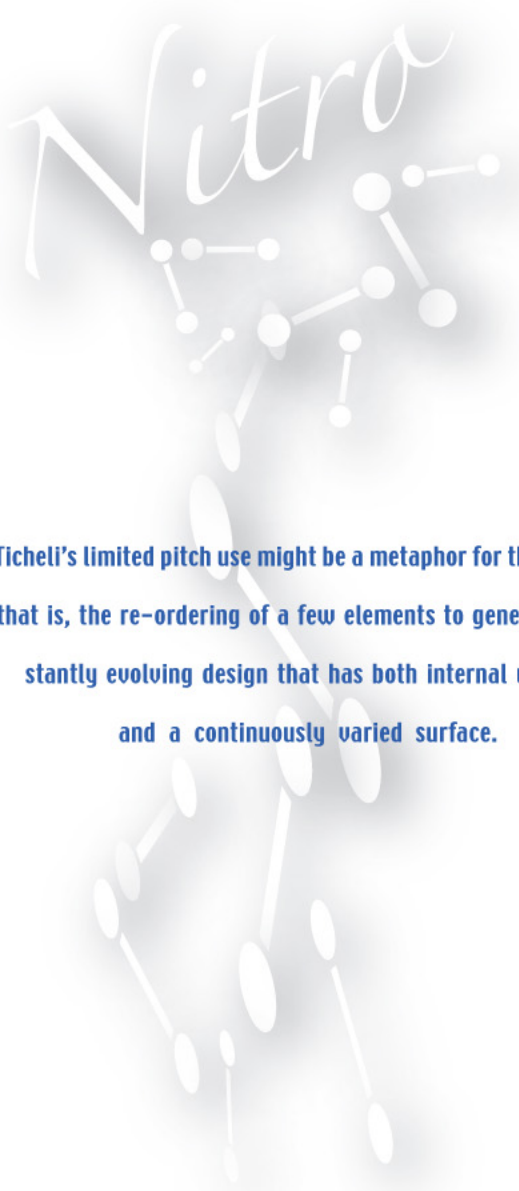
Frank Ticheli, preface to Nitro

Example 1, Nitro, Primary Theme



This theme includes only five pitches — B-flat, F, D, E-flat, A-flat — which are employed as a pitch set. Each phrase of the theme presents the same notes re-ordered, extended and set in canon, while the “chattering” accompaniment also is comprised mainly of these pitches. The opening section is extended to fifteen bars through these manipulations. A notable feature of these introductory bars occurs at bars 6–8. The trumpets insert a fanfare that initially employs the notes of the pitch set, but then presents parallel major chords including B-flat major, C major and D major. The woodwinds and mallet percussion echo the trumpet part in bar 8, and the composer asks that they “shout” this part out to ensure that the echo will be heard. The woodwind echo is restated at bar 10. Immense energy is projected by these opening bars, which immediately captures the listener’s interest. One wonders if Ticheli’s limited pitch use might be a metaphor for the creative process itself; that is, the re-ordering of a few elements to generate a constantly evolving design that has both internal unity and a continuously varied surface.

At bar 15 a new subsection (A<sup>1</sup>) begins. Another sound cloud emerges using a short slurred figure interwoven through the high woodwinds that Ticheli identifies as a “whirlwind,” clearly a reference to the natural world. Beneath this figure, the primary theme is again reiterated, this time in canon, initially between trumpets and trombones, later incorporating horns and



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euphonium as well. As this section progresses the rhythmic interval between entries of the canon is compressed, creating a complex contrapuntal texture that leads to a major arrival point at bar 30, and the beginning of another subsection. The primary theme during the A<sup>1</sup> section is altered in two ways. The composer adds C to the pitch set, and, more importantly, the E-flat becomes E-natural. This change of pitch adds a second tritone to the pitch set (D/A-flat was present from

the outset, B-flat/E is added here) generating considerably more astringency in the melodic content.

The A<sup>2</sup> section is ushered in at bar 30 by a rush of simultaneously rising and falling chromatic scales. The melody is again in canon in the brass instruments, but is an extended version of the primary theme incorporating additional notes that make it almost octatonic. [See Example 2: Primary Theme, Subsection A<sup>2</sup>, bars 33–36 (trumpets)]

Example 2, Nitro, Primary Theme, Subsection A<sup>2</sup>



Example 3, Nitro, Secondary Theme



The accompaniment is reduced to sustained notes in woodwinds and mallet percussion that are marked with accents and quick diminuendos, and emphasize important notes of the melody. This section ends quietly at bar 46 on a D-flat major-seventh chord.

The B section and the secondary theme appear at bar 47. Here the melodic activity is transferred from the brass to the woodwinds and the style becomes lighter and more spirited. The melody incorporates shifting meter and unusual note groupings to create a dance-like character. Ticheli has also noted that this melody is doubled at both the octave and the twelfth, drawing on the intervals of the overtone series. Such construction relates it to the natural world, while, at the same time, its dancing character suggests the human world. [See Example 3: Secondary Theme, bars 46–48 (alto saxes, oboes, first clarinet)]

Each phrase of the theme is interrupted by a flourish of sixteenth notes in low woodwinds. Ticheli describes this section as a battle between the high and the low woodwinds, which is “refereed” by a series of loud whacks on a large slapstick — an appealing touch of humor. The dancing theme wins out and initiates a substantial development wherein it is passed around the ensemble in the type of highly attractive scoring that is typical of Ticheli’s writing for band.

The episode beginning at bar 72 deserves special mention. An ascending near-chromatic figure rises quickly through the band, beginning in horns and saxophones and ultimately reaching piccolo. In an extraordinarily imaginative stroke, the bass instruments simultaneously present a transposed and rhythmically altered version of the primary theme. This episode culmi-

nates in the work’s major climax, an intense, highly syncopated, full-band outburst at bars 77–80.

At bar 81, the primary theme returns, again in canon and supported by rising parallel major chords in the low voices, a harmonic idea that appeared in the first bars of the piece. These measures sound like a recapitulation, and this sense is enhanced when the secondary theme reappears at bars 90–93. Ticheli, however, has a more inventive idea. After bar 93, the brass instruments construct a wedge through contrary motion that arrives at the unison pitch F, the first note of the entire work, at bar 96, which is the actual recapitulation. At this point the original “chattering” woodwind sound cloud is repeated, while the brass present a truncated and rhythmically altered version of the primary theme that drives the work to an exhilarating close.

The circumstances of the commission required a celebratory work, and Ticheli responded with a composition filled with verve and relentless forward momentum. Short and immensely energetic, this piece would serve equally well as a concert opener or closer. And, as might be expected from a composer of this stature, it also comprises inventive melodic construction, outstanding scoring and a fine marriage of form and content.



Dr. Keith W. Kinder is Associate Professor of Music at McMaster University in Ontario, Canada, where he conducts the concert band and the chamber orchestra, leads the Music Education program and teaches courses in conducting and music education. As a recognized expert in wind literature and performance, he presents regularly at conferences worldwide. He is the author of *Best Music for Chorus and Winds* (Manhattan Beach), *The Wind and Wind-Chorus Music of Anton Bruckner* (Greenwood), and *Prophetic Trumpets: Homage, Worship and Celebration in the Wind Band Music of Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt* (Pendragon).