

*An Interview With Stephen Melillo by Dr. David Wilborn 23 December 1997*

Stephen Melillo was born in Port Chester, New York and spent most of his childhood in Greenwich, Connecticut. He attended the Boston Conservatory of Music where he studied with members of the Boston Symphony while majoring in music education. He completed his graduate studies at Columbia University. Melillo has served as a band director at several public schools in New York, Connecticut and New Jersey and currently guest conducts and lectures at universities and high schools throughout the country. Most notably, he is the creator and founder of **STORMWORKS**.

*David:* Most musicians identify the name **STORMWORKS** as the source for locating your band music. What led to the creation of **STORMWORKS** and why do you prefer it to not be recognized as a publishing firm?

*Steve:* I don't ever want to be thought of as a publisher. Whenever somebody uses words like company, firm, or business in conjunction with **STORMWORKS**, I recoil. My name is Stephen Melillo, I write music and then I make that music available. It's that simple. Conductors willing to rely upon their own judgments decide whether or not to play my works. Many of the band works are rendered by, what is now, over 1000 conductors around the world and these same pieces were rejected by publishers. I maintained a belief in what I had to offer. Having been a band director and having worked with thousands of kids, I knew what band directors wanted. Somehow I had to find the way to get my work out there and have people hear it. On January 27, 1993 the Air Force Band played **A Walk in Jurassic Park** at the Ohio Music Educators Convention and from that moment on, strictly by word-of-mouth, there has been at least 1270 band directors who have played at least one of my pieces. They are my Champions and I can't thank them enough.

*David:* Where did the name **STORMWORKS** Come from?

*Steve:* To me, the *storm* is a metaphor for life. Life is a storm! It is sometimes drenched in pain, it is often dark and brooding. It is marked by struggle, adversity, and hurt. But just like a storm, life has as its final victory, a triumph of Light! And, if indeed, life is a storm, I offer, in music, a belief, a hope, a truth. **HABET VERTUS FINE CORONUM**, my adopted motto from the piece, **DAVID**, means this: In the End, Truth Wears the Crown! That is what I believe.

Have you seen the graphic on the cover of the **STORMWORKS**... Chapter One CD? You see the picture of the earth. There's a storm. Out of the storm is a **STORMSwirl** pointing to the sun. Beyond the obvious outward imagery, the swirl is expanding in a geometric sequence called the Fibonacci series. Storm Music is phrased in this Fibonacci series. Take the piece **THE FOUNTAINHEAD**, for instance. The entire work is based on five notes. The number five is in the Fibonacci series, and the entire musical infrastructure ... all 26 minutes of Music... is phrased and designed, vertically, horizontally, and in real Time in the Fibonacci series.

*David:* I've always identified the word "Storm" with your music; however, I noticed that it is a prefix to other musical associations such as **STORMDirectors**. What is a **STORMDirector**?

*Steve:* A **STORMDirector** is someone who never looks at himself or herself as an “expert.” **STORMDirectors** are perpetual learners and never the “master”! They are on fire with purpose and are prepared to take the kids as well as themselves on a great journey. **STORMDirectors** love their kids, and they love music.

*David:* What does **STORMQuest** refer to?

*Steve:* **STORMQuest** is a suite of 15 interrelated works for “young” band. Though written within the parameters of the “young” band, these works, all accompanied by teaching strategies, are nevertheless real expressions of Music... with a capital “M”. This means that *all* Musical groups will want to play these pieces because every piece will sound big, powerful, introspective, poignant and exciting.

*David:* You mentioned something about the sound of your pieces. What makes them different and unique? Kids seem gravitated to them.

*Steve:* You ask because that is *your* view?

*David:* Yes.

*Steve:* The Music I compose is real. What I write, I write because I have honestly lived and felt each moment. That realness transposes itself into something many people can relate to. In addition to this obvious Romanticism, there is an intricate infrastructure in the “storm” works. For this reason, the works are “classical” and will stand.

One day, someone asked me if I made by living by composing music. I smiled. You see, Dave, I make my “dying” by writing music. The kids sense this! I know when I’ve written Music, because I can feel myself dying.

*David:* What about your vocabulary of harmonies? Do you find any sort of consistencies as you write?

*Steve:* Music, capital M music, is void of vocabulary. This is what the contest judges fail to understand. Play a major chord followed by a cluster at the piano. Now ask the class which one is better? Obviously, neither of them have any meaning at all. They’re just two sounds. The idea that dissonance has more value than consonance is silliness. It’s like trying to say that the sound itself carries the message of the music. (*He sings an excerpt of Ode to Joy*) Simple, isn’t it? How then, did Beethoven create something which will last for all Time. Was it a trick? Music has the same relationship to notes, as Architecture has to bricks. Music is *not* in the notes. It is in the engineering, the mathematical Heart, Mind and Soul... just as in Architecture. That is why it is rare and fleeting.

If I go to Rome, I’m going to speak Italian. If I go to Germany, I’m going to speak German. In both instances the message remains... what changes is the language employed. Likewise, when working with student musicians, I’m going to utilize an harmonic language, a musical syntax that they can relate to. The **MUSIC**, you see, will be the same in any instance. My symphonies are quite different from the band pieces. Though different in vocabulary, the *Music* is the same!

*David:* Would it be fair to say that all of your pieces are generally of a topic or subject?

*Steve:* As an educator, I will often write pieces which are connected to literary works or contemporary concepts in physics. Connections are important for bridging the world of experiences. Because there is always a focus, I would answer your question with a yes.

*David:* Every time I hear a piece of yours, especially the first piece - I guess the first piece was **A Walk in Jurassic Park**, it seems to me like I'm hearing something very refreshing, I'm hearing something that's totally new for band and I don't associate the sound of your music with any other particular band composer. Can you elaborate why this may be so?

*Steve:* Thank you. Some of it is due to the way I orchestrate. I have more experience with orchestra than with band. I studied each of the instruments with Boston Symphony players. This knowledge makes the orchestration more astute. I write transposed. When writing for the French horn, I finger along with the left hand and hear the part in its key. I'm not a piano player who orchestrates. Rather, I write directly to transposed score. My first symphony **S-Matrix**, was written directly from head to transposed score without ever checking the ideas with an instrument. In fact, the goal of that symphony was to write the entire piece *unheard* and then give it to a professional orchestra. It wasn't until I had composed *this* work, my 404th, that I called myself a composer.

Another factor has to do with the way "storm" pieces include instrumentation for what I call the *Band of the New Millennium*. This includes the use of electronics, but in a customary role.

*David:* What do you mean when you say customary?

*Steve:* The use of a synthesized harp, but as would be utilized in the orchestra. Another synthesizer is devoted to the role normally fulfilled by the basses in the orchestra. I call this function the PAD Bass in the storm scores.

*David:* Do you still write music directly from mind to paper?

*Steve:* Yes, I hear everything first. Then I write. The process I use now is somewhat difficult to explain, as I have learned over time to skip many steps.

*David:* Do you ever find yourself using a piano to write?

*Steve:* I find the piano limiting. You start thinking like a keyboardist about the nature of sound. A band is its own instrument.

*David:* What other mediums do you write for?

*Steve:* Most of the music I've written for solo instruments was done for my kids. I have written for every kind of unorthodox instrumentation and purpose you can imagine. It's sort of the Telemann approach. Remember how Telemann used to write different things for his kids? -same thing. But, my library of 844 works is quite eclectic, from interactive video scores, to film, to operas to symphonies. Many things.

*David:* What is the body of music you write referred to as “**Winds and Percussion in Motion**”?

*Steve:* These are essentially concert works designed to work on the field while maintaining musical integrity and audience appeal. They are designed with the kind of drama, impact, and timings that work better in field shows.

*David:* Do you have any mentors who may have inspired you to write music?

*Steve:* I finally found the mentor I had always hoped to meet, long after college, and long after I had left teaching. He is Ed Lisk. I set out to be a music educator. I never set out to be a composer. I always felt alone and isolated as a teacher. The camaraderie and sense of collegiality that many band directors take for granted, I never had. So after a while, that took its toll... you know when you feel like you're the lone voice in the wilderness? Finally, I met a guy named Ed Lisk and realized a great deal. Had I met him earlier, I would have stayed in the noble battle. Now I fight this effort from a different place, with different tools, but the mission remains. I respect and admire him.

### **13 July 1997... addendum to Interview of 23 December 1997**

Dear Dave... Here now, are the answers to the questions set forth by Instrumentalist. I am just coming off the completion of a large and perhaps “epic” piece.... so this will either be really good, or really not-good. I'll leave that to you!

It is important to me that my words are presented as I speak them. I do not believe that Instrumentalist should “edit” these words so as to possibly convey an incomplete or even different interpretation. CAPITALIZED words may either be emboldened or italicized as you, and they, see fit. You of course, may wish to elaborate your questions which I took from the faxed-letter of 26 June 1997.

At any rate, here goes...

*Dave:* What is it that you think Band Directors want?

*Steve:* Let me answer this question in two parts. Concerning the logistics of **GETTING** Music I believe that conductors want the following, which I would like to list:

- 1.** Immediate and welcomed access to the composer... should he/she still be alive, of course. In this way, there is a resource for a broader educational experience for those who will render the work.
- 2.** Expedient delivery. In my short time, over 1300 ...(now 2200)... directors who have dealt directly with me, have been serviced with Music that went to them either ON the day they ordered it, or the very NEXT day. The Music was/is shipped 2nd Day Priority.
- 3.** No copyright infringement from photocopying. If someone has 100 flute players in the band or orchestra, they should be able to photocopy easily-reproducible parts without further strain to their meager budgets. On my scores, I give the conductor permission to photocopy for adjudicated events. There are much better uses for money.

4. Works of Integrity which are created by the desired composer specifically for the field. In this way, we could simultaneously uplift the outdoor musical-visual experience without thwarting works designed for other media.

5. In the case of *STORMQUEST*, a body of 15 works for “young” band, I have still, yet a further listing! Here, conductors can purchase Music for less than \$9 per minute. The Music is accompanied by teaching scenarios with alternate fingerings, trill fingerings, side-to-side suggestions, slide positions, and more, all included in the Music. The Music can be purchased on **CD-ROM**, thus providing a 100-year, space-efficient access to over an hour of exciting Music. With small site-licensing fees, the Music can be shared from building to building in the school district, again without copyright infringement. With MIDI files included on the CD-ROM, conductors can affect small changes like creating an Alto Sax solo from the French Horn part, or changing it to a rare and fleeting English Horn solo! Let’s face it, educators must engage in rewriting. The Music is composed in such a way as to be entirely interesting to ALL age groups despite the fact that it is parameter driven to the expectations of “young” band directors. A 16th piece, a field version is included for the high school program! All bases have been covered for a vast variety of usefulness!

**Now to part two.** Concerning the process of **CHOOSING** Music, I believe that conductors want Music of SUBSTANCE, and the CHOICE to see and hear all that is available from the wealth of current talent. Since this is highly subjective, I must, unfortunately, leave it at that. Suffice it to say that there are those who think that doing a band arrangement of the recently released drum corps version of the severely-stripped transcription of a recent box-office hit film score is substantive.

Personally, I have never been afraid of the power *Real* Music has to reach and inspire and uplift. Subjective terms, yes... but I believe we can safely say that the ensemble will rise to the level of expectation, and therefore subsequent work ethic, which is set forth by the conductor. As Mahler said, “there are no bad orchestras, only bad conductors.”

*Dave:* What should directors look for in Music? What should a middle school director seek? What should a high school director seek?

*Steve:* Guided by their own personal sense of what Music is, in its fullest aspiration, conductors must set out to find works which satisfy both the logistics of their parameter-driven situation, while... **AT THE SAME TIME... PUSHING** those boundaries. The kids **AND** the conductor should challenge themselves. In other words, conductors should take their ensemble on a journey *towards* the necessities of a worthy piece. Not the other way around. Too often, we find examples of “pieces” which are defined ever-downward. Yes, the “dumbing-down of America” is in our field too. The answer to mediocrity is not to write for it! The hard-working, dedicated teacher’s answer is to find that which is worthy and reach for it! The worth or substance of a seriously conceived work then inspires the necessary effort and pushing of boundaries to uplift the ensemble. Finally, the piece must have something to say. Pieces which are “exercises” must clearly be labeled as such by the conductor. Music must always be preserved, held special, and offered as something to be earned and aspired to.

*Dave:* Because you’ve been a director and a composer, what recommendations do you have for score study? How should a director go about score study? Also, what common mistakes do you observe as

directors interpret a score?

*Steve:* Wow. You realize of course that a substantive answer would deplete the Instrumentalist of pages! There is a preponderance of good texts, and of course college courses which respond to this. I would highly recommend Ed Lisk's **INTANGIBLES OF MUSICAL EXPRESSION**. But let me focus on one specific aspect of score study which I think is lacking. I hope Instrumentalist will let me include a graphic! After an assimilation of the vocabulary and the orchestration, there is but one area that stands as the ultimate (ALL-TIME-ATE) union of conductor and composer, and that is in **TIME**. What flows **IN** Time is often not fully understood by the players or conductors. For instance, take the term **DYNAMIC**. Ask a high school or college student what "dynamic" means. Though they've supposedly played them since 4th grade, they cannot adequately respond. I think that the readers should research the word in Webster's Deluxe Unabridged Dictionary. Its relation to Music appears in the **third** definition... not the first or even the second. This is supremely important for educators to know. These "forces", these levels of colour and texture and energy and interplay all carry out their living dance in the flow of Time. Not Tempo, mind you, but Time.

Let me give a few examples. In my scores, you will see "real-Time" indications. These appear on the cover and within the body of the score at important, what I call "arrival points". The more global tempo marking will put the conductor into the right arena, but with the ebb and flow of forces, it is the Time indication which gives the conductor a better sense of the **WHEN**.

There is a moment in the Adagio of the 9th Symphony by Mahler, a single moment which I believe to be one of the most harrowing and completely powerful events in all of Music. This "moment" taken out of context means little. After all, it is merely sound. That "moment" is completely dependent upon **ALL** that has happened *before* it. We are led to that moment, nurtured, taught to love and feel that moment even before it arrives. Leonard Bernstein deeply understood this as he carefully recrafted the composition so that in real-Time, it would take on the dynamic as experienced and intended by the composer.

I shuttle back and forth over that moment 100 times and feel the Music as it evolves to it, and then passes heart-wrenchingly, from it. Now, I ask you. What would have been the experience had we arrived there a minute too early? What if we arrived just seconds too early? What if we arrived 11 seconds too late? Would the meaning, the experience, the message of the composer survive and reach and uplift and inspire as it was meant to?

It's like leaning over and for the first time whispering, "I Love You"... *before* the candle-lit dinner, *before* you've arrived at the restaurant, *before* you've met for the date, *before* you've even shook hands!

I enjoy it though, this period of discovery. It's just a question of getting to know the composer, and that's why I love to talk to so many fine educators over the phone or in person. This awareness of Time only makes sense in compositions that are charged with that sense of Integrity and purpose! And so, I must append my previous response to your question concerning **choice** of Music. Music must have a design, a plan... a reason.