



REPERTOIRE CORNER

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The *Repertoire Corner* examines historic, analytic, and performance issues in the trumpet literature. Ideas, suggestions, and submissions should be directed to Bryan Proksch, Lamar University, PO Box 10044, Beaumont TX, 77710; or via email to repertoire@trumpetguild.org

ERNEST S. WILLIAMS AND THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY CORNET REPERTOIRE

BY PATRICIA BACKHAUS

Classic cornet solos, many of which are now over a century old, are still relevant material for recital repertoire. Some might consider them to be dated—and, in fact, they are—just like the majority of works from our trumpet/cornet repertoire. This is precisely the reason for giving cornet solos serious consideration. No study of the trumpet/cornet would be complete without the knowledge of a few of these solos and soloists.

The usual view of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century cornet repertoire in the United States is that of the flashy theme-and-variations solo based on polkas, popular songs, and dances. The major names associated with this approach have remained important over the longer term because of their importance to pedagogy. While remembered largely as virtuosos, Jean-Baptiste Arban and Herbert L. Clarke, for example, remain key figures to the present in no small part because of their method books. Compare them to Jules Levy, the “world’s greatest cornetist,” who wrote nothing on pedagogy and has been relegated to the domain of specialists and historians. These artists’ style of solo gradually faded together with the touring bands that popularized them, while the postwar era saw the rise of highly sophisticated approaches to harmony, expression, and virtuosity in a more traditional concert-hall environment.

Equally influenced by his experiences playing in major symphony orchestras and professional touring bands, Ernest S. Williams’s approach to soloistic writing for cornet and trumpet played a key role in helping the cornet (and trumpet) evolve from bandstand virtuosic displays to a more classically influenced mode of soloistic expression. His unique approaches to form, harmony, and melody reveal a transitional moment in the history of the instrument.

Born in a tightly knit Indiana Quaker community close to the Kentucky border, Ernest Williams studied under internationally renowned cornet soloist Herman Bellstedt at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music.¹ A stint in the US Army during the Spanish-American War eventually led to his becoming bandmaster of the 161st Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment.

His post-military professional life included tours with the Sousa Band, as well as those of Alessandro Liberati, Mace Gay, Frederick Neil Innes, and Patrick Conway.

The association with these fine concert bands, no doubt, informed Williams’s compositional style, especially given that soloists in these bands typically composed their own music for their featured selections, rather than vice versa. Williams’s capriccio *Onteora* (named after a scenic region in upstate New York) shares the light-hearted, concert-in-the-park feel of the classic theme-and-variations-style solo that was magnificently popular in 1900 *fin de siècle* America.²

Williams’s career as an orchestral musician took off after World War I, during which time he performed with various local symphonies and eventually became principal trumpet of the Philadelphia Orchestra (1917 – 1923) under Leopold Stokowski. At nearly the same time, Williams was cornet soloist with the Goldman Band in New York City. It was his association with both groups that inspired his unique stylistic development as a composer.

Stokowski was a progressive conductor who greatly influenced American concert life. For example, he managed, after

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hearing the premiere of Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, to convince Sousa to include jazz as a regular part of the Sousa Band’s tours.³ It was Stokowski, with Ernest Williams playing principal trumpet, who gave the American premiere of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. Stokowski also introduced Philadelphia to Mahler’s Symphony No. 8 and

programmed numerous recent works by the likes of Claude Debussy, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Jean Sibelius, and Alexander Glazunov. Williams clearly became accustomed to the exciting world of harmonic possibilities and progressive compositional forms and styles. These influences can be heard in his music as it developed away from the traditional cornet fare and toward something more modernist in style.

Williams eventually split his time between Philadelphia and New York City, where his involvement in music education can be seen in the creation of the Ernest Williams School of Music

in Brooklyn and the summertime Ernest Williams Band School in Saugerties, New York. They were essentially the same school—just set in two different locations. A 1922 brochure for the school likened it to the Kneller Hall School in Great Britain in that it gave “comprehensive training to instrumentalists, embracing the entire field of ensemble work, both theoretical and practical... emphasizing artistry as well as technical proficiency.”⁴ Notice his holistic approach to teaching. Indeed, the brochure points out how “the school equally stresses Band, Orchestral and Choral training, including a thorough musical background, correct interpretation of all concert symphonic and operatic literature and gives that which is most essential—thorough and intensive routine.”

In the 1930s, Williams taught trumpet at The Juilliard School and directed the band at New York University, all while commuting by train between New York City and Philadelphia. Upon the death of Patrick Conway, Williams became the dean of the Ithaca Military Band School, where the staff included Arthur Pryor, M.L. Lake, Erik Leidzen, Percy Grainger, Henry Cowell, and Morton Gould.⁵ The diverse faculty represents both strands of Williams’s musical existence, straddling the worlds of traditional bands and modernist classicism.

Williams’s Works

Williams’s compositions evolved from the classic, nineteenth-century American cornet style into a more harmonically daring body of works, including his five concertos for cornet. His compositions are some of the first to include asymmetrical meters, while his *Etudes de Concert* demonstrate the distinct influences of French Impressionist composers like Debussy and Ravel. The first of these etudes has multiphonics, produced by playing the higher of the two tones and singing the lower (see Example 1). The asterisk in the original refers to an annotation at the bottom of the trumpet part:

These three tone combinations are produced simultaneously by playing the upper tone and singing lower tone in perfect tune thereby forming the third

tone. They cannot be rendered loud enough for ensemble playing. The idea was first introduced by C.M. von Weber in a cadenza in his Horn Concertino [1815].

A similar passage with multiphonics is contained in the cadenza of Williams’s *Waikiki, Morceau Caracteristique* (1937).

Williams also used pedal tones at a time when few others were even thinking of these types of extended playing techniques. One such passage, a cadenza near the opening of his *Rondo Concertante* (1936), includes the annotation “These may be omitted,” a remark that now underscores how unusual the technique was at this early juncture.

Williams’s style includes many modernist elements beyond these most obvious uses of extended playing techniques. Gone is the more traditional modulation to the subdominant key, replaced by distant modulations and chromaticism undoubtedly derived from his experiences playing the works of Stravinsky, Debussy, and Mahler. The choices that Williams makes for his phrase structures show a similar avoidance of nineteenth-century practices, as his phrases and periods spin out into long, overlapping statements of odd measure lengths. In total, he explores the dramatic function of chromatic harmonies and pushes the tonal boundaries far beyond the nineteenth-century theme-and-variations or polka-style solos of Clarke, Bellstedt, and others.

One last example quite readily demonstrates the ways in which Williams’s experience as an orchestral musician intersected with his work as an educator and pedagogue. In an otherwise unremarkable exercise entitled “Charade” (solo 44 in his *Modern Method for Trumpet or Cornet* of 1936), he uses a time signature, notated as 4 over a dotted eighth note (see Example 3). As indicated above the staff, the expectation is for something resembling 12/16; he chose the unusual notation nevertheless.

Williams’s inspiration for this meter was a 1918 work he had played by Kôşçak Yamada (1886 – 1965). Yamada, a Japanese-

Example 1. Multiphonics in Williams’s *Etude de Concerto No. 1* (1937)

Example 2. Pedal tones in Williams’s *Rondo Concertante* (1936)



Example 3. An unusual time signature in a Williams etude, inspired by Kōsçak Yamada

born composer, was living in Manhattan as part of a two-year visit to study Western music. Williams does not mention it in text, but given that Yamada was active as a conductor—he temporarily worked with a composite of the New York Philharmonic and the New York Symphony just before they merged—and his *Choreographic Symphony* “*Maria Magdalena*” premiered in that same year, it seems very likely that Williams played that work under Yamada’s baton. The etude was directed at fairly low-level students—as can be seen in the lack of technical difficulty—and does not sound Japanese in the slightest. This is exactly what makes it so remarkable. Williams overtly encourages teachers to expose their students to new and unusual music from the beginning of their instruction as part of a broader effort to make them well-rounded musicians.

While it might be tempting to argue that Ernest Williams’s music has suffered in popularity because of these more modernist tendencies, he also wrote many pedagogical solos—short, attractive parlor pieces that have been equally ignored by posterity. One problem is that these are all difficult pieces to perform, requiring great stamina by the soloist. Further complicating performances are the demands placed on the pianist, with whom the soloist must perform in a truly collaborative manner. It seems likely that these difficulties have, unfortunately, limited their appeal to modern performers. Nevertheless, Williams’s unique and unlikely coupling of the vanguard of modernism and the nineteenth-century cornet virtuoso tradition is worthy of our renewed attention. In many ways, Williams was a musician ahead of his time, and even today his music has not come to be as fully appreciated as it should be.

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Endnotes

- 1 On Williams’s life in general, see Ian Pearson, “A Brief Biography of Ernest S. Williams and a Look at *The Catskills Polka*,” *ITG Journal* 32, no. 3 (March 2008): 28–33 and Keith Winking, “The Legacy of Ernest S. Williams,” *ITG Journal* 24, no. 2 (January 2000): 34–53.
- 2 Though first published in 1936, the musical language of this solo suggests that it was very likely one of his earlier

compositions. It was later published under the title *Hills of the Sky*.

- 3 See also Sousa, “Jazz, in its Present State, May Develop National Style,” in *A Sousa Reader*, ed. Bryan Proksch (Chicago: GIA, 2017), 170–173.
- 4 Quotations in this paragraph were taken from the liner notes to Clyde Crosswell, Vincent DiFiore, and the United States Military Academy Band, *The Heritage of the March*, Vol. 51, “Williams—Lampe” (Robert Hoe Foundation, 1979).
- 5 Erik Leidzen was known to have composed parts or whole sections of band pieces published under Ernest Williams’s name. At times Williams was a ghostwriter working from sketches. See also William H. Rehrig, *The Heritage Encyclopedia of Band Music*, ed. Paul Bierley (Westerville, OH: Integrity Press, 1991).



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