Conceptual Analysis

**Broad Description:** It is a lyrical work for wind band composed by Eric Whitacre commissioned by the Nebraska Wind Consortium and Brian Anderson depicting Whitacre’s favorite month, October.

**Type/Genre Label:** contemporary lyrical work for wind band

**Background Information:** *October* is a commission that erupted out of a chance meeting in Chicago for the 1996 Midwest Clinic between Eric Whitacre and Brian Anderson. In 1998, the contract was signed for a seven-minute, grade three or four piece that would be completed by January of 2000 and was premiered on May 14th, 2000. It was inspired by English Romantic composers like Vaughan Williams and Elgar as put by Whitacre himself to “capture the natural and pastoral soul of the season”.

**Elements of Music:**

- **Form:** The piece does not have much of a large scale form. There is a recurring theme but the general form goes as such: ABACDE
- **Rhythm:** The smallest note value throughout the piece is the eighth note. The eighth note is a constant throughout but there are varying tempos. The time signature begins with 5/4 and changes between 6/4, 5/4, 4/4, 3/4 and 2/4 in various places throughout the piece.
- **Melody:** The theme has a general upward and then downward shape. The tonality of the piece shifts between major and minor mostly stepwise. There are 4 distinct sections where the melodic motives are different. The main theme (theme A) is at first played by the woodwinds and has a counter melody underneath played by bassoon and euphonium which serves as a slight call and response. The counter melody that appears usually happens toward the end of phrases making the phrases overlap rather than having a distinct beginning and end.
- **Harmony:** The keys change in 3 main places. It begins in b minor and changes at D during the euphonium solo to have one less flat in the key signature. Then, at E the key changes again to have two flats. From F to the end, the piece is in G major. Whitacre uses tension and release through suspensions and sigh motives. He chooses to include harmonic seconds throughout the work for color while depicting light with open fifths and major triads.
- **Timbre:** The color is primarily bright with Whitacre trying to depict light. The piece begins with chimes and the clarinets on a concert Bb before the oboe solo comes in. This builds up to have the woodwinds carry the melody and slowly the brasses come in to create a tutti climax. After the climax people slowly drop out to dynamically decrescendo to nothing.
- **Texture:** The piece is for the most part homophonic but the phrases overlap each other at some points creating a more complex texture. The cadence points end very simply and cleanly.
• **Heart of the Piece:** Whitacre’s depictions of wind and light are the heart of the piece. The running eighth notes (like in mm. 8) create a flurry of wind, that sounds like blowing leaves, builds up to the beautiful first theme at rehearsal A. The themes throughout end on open fifths and major triads and that is what depicts light. For color he uses the harmonic seconds which represents leaves on the trees changing colors in the fall.
CMP Unit Plan: Eric Whitacre’s *October*

**Day 1:**

**Introduction (Powerpoint Presentation)**

During this presentation students will be shown a plethora of information pertaining to Eric Whitacre’s compositional life and more specifically his work, *October*. The lesson will begin however with a recording of *October* being played and the students will be instructed to write what sorts of imagery comes to mind while they listen. They will not know the name of the piece until after the activity. Then, I will reveal the title of the work and go into more depth on how the piece was commissioned and who Eric Whitacre is as a composer. At the end of the presentation we will play through the piece!
Day 2:

Skill Outcome: Students will be able to comfortably play in the key of Bb minor as the relative key of Db major.

Strategies:

- Warm Up:
  - Play a Db Major scale (previously this unit they would have worked on a Db Major scale).
  - Once they have played the Db Major scale, they will play within the same key signature but playing from Bb to Bb. They will then learn that the relationship between the keys is that they are relative keys.
  - Students will play a Bach Chorale in the key of Bb minor. I will have transposed a chorale they are familiar with to Bb minor so that they can work with a melody they already know but learn how to settle into the new tonality.

Assessment: (Formal) Scale test of both Db Major and Bb minor on an individual basis one week after this lesson was introduced. It will be either individually in my office or via recording devices in practice rooms to make the process go more quickly.
Day 3:

Knowledge Outcome: Students will be able to identify themes

Strategies:

- Ask the question aloud to the students “what is a theme?” This will launch us into a discussion about themes and how to identify them
  - In this case, the themes they will be identifying are the melodic themes
- We will go through each rehearsal letter identifying the themes and who is playing the theme.
- As we go along students will interpret whether themes return or whether different themes occur throughout

Assessment: (Informal) As we reach each rehearsal letter, I will ask everyone to close their eyes and raise their hands if they think they have the melody/theme there. Then, the students will play their respective melody for the ensemble to hear. We will do this for each rehearsal letter and since their eyes will be closed, the students will not be able to necessarily just look around and copy someone else who raises their hand.
Day 4:

**Affective Outcome:** Students will develop a rich sense of vocabulary to describe their musical tastes

**Strategies:**

- On the fourth lesson I am going to stop referring to the piece by its title or composer. Instead I am going to be referring to it in a different sense each day (I would be doing this with all of their pieces for the concert by this point).
  - examples: “contemporary”, “lyrical”, “that begins in Bb minor” or I will sing some of the melody.
  - This is going to ingrain vocabulary into their minds words listed above and associate those words with the style of work they are playing

**Assessment:** (Formal) Students will be given a writing assignment for homework where they will need to describe a piece of music using vocabulary they have learned throughout the concert cycle thus far. They will only need to write 3-4 sentences and then write the title at the top; all on a 3 x 5 index card. They will be collected and every Friday and the first few minutes of class, a few index cards will be read aloud and based on the vocabulary used, the band will guess the genre of music and bonus points will be given if they can guess the title!
Day 5:

Skill Outcome: Students will be able to sing through their instrument/emulate the human voice

Strategies:

- Warm Up:
  - Play through our Bach chorale transposed in Bb minor.
  - Have each part SATB sing their line individually for the first couple bars
  - Sing the chorale as an ensemble
- The choir director will come in and work with them on phrasing and releases while singing.
- They will work on the Bach chorale at first but the lesson will end with everyone singing their part for October.

Assessment: (Informal) I will take the band through October telling them to apply what they learned about singing to the way they perform the piece on their instrument. I will be able to judge if they understand based on how well they try to implement what they have learned.
Day 6:

**Skill Outcome:** Students will connect phrases

**Strategies:**

- Warm Up:
  - “Pass around the F” exercise where the tuba begins with a concert F
  - We will pass the concert F around the ensemble trying to eliminate spaces between everyone’s individual sounds
  - Then, we will do the same thing by section
- After the warm up exercise, I will pass out one of the melodic themes to everyone transposed for their instrument
  - We will pass around bars of the melody between sections and then some individuals on a volunteer basis
- Then, we’ll play parts of the piece where they need to apply what we did at the beginning of rehearsal

**Assessment:** (Informal) I will know whether they understood when we begin rehearsing the piece and I hear how they apply what we talked about at the beginning of rehearsal
Day 7:

Knowledge Outcome: Students will understand texture

Strategies:

- I will go over texture as well as these terms:
  - homophony
  - polyphony
  - monophony
- I will play examples of all 3 accompanied by illustrations that look like these below

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Assessment: (Formal) Students will draw the illustration that goes with what I play for them and then there will be an added question where I would like them to identify the texture of *October* based on what we talked about in class. I will collect it right as we finish the activity.
CMP Unit Plan: Eric Whitacre’s *October*

**Day 8:**

**Affective Outcome:** Students will classify compositional techniques to create musical imagery and their descriptive effect

**Strategies:**

- Students will begin the lesson by listing all of the things that remind them of the month of October
- In groups, they will discuss what reminds them of October and then they will try to find at least one aural example of something on their list within the piece (I will provide them with ways to listen to the piece as well as some pages of the score)
- We will discuss as a class what they found
- After we have discussed, I will talk about the examples of wind and light which are recurring images

**Assessment:** (Formal) The class discussion will tell me if they can identify the techniques of musical imagery but they will be given a writing assignment where the students will write about the affect of Whitacre’s use of imagery has.
Day 9:

**Knowledge Outcome:** Students will analyze the concept of dissonance as expression

**Strategies:**

- In the previous lesson, I would have explained Whitacre’s use of dissonance (harmonic seconds) for color within his open fifths and major triads
- Warm Up
  - We will use a chordal exercise where certain sections of the band will play certain pitches to create a chord
  - I will manipulate the chord to create aural tension and resolution at varying lengths
  - While we go through that, we will discuss how it made everyone feel when we would hold out the dissonance longer, shorter etc...
- Rehearse *October* with the idea of tension and release in mind

**Assessment:** (Informal) I will be able to assess what the students got out of the lesson based on the way they approach the piece during rehearsal.
 CMP Unit Plan: Eric Whitacre’s *October*

**Day 10:**

**Affective Outcome:** Students will connect music to what is happening in their own lives

**Strategies:**

- Every time we rehearse the piece from this point forward, I will ask the band to think about an event in their lives that this piece pertains to.
- I will request that they perform the piece as if it were a soundtrack to said event
- We will perform the concert with that in mind

**Assessment:** (Informal) I will ask the students to think of a life event to connect to right before our performance of the piece. I will see if we end up creating something very musical with that. The day after the concert, we will discuss as a class what we thought about and the students will have the option to write it down if they do not want to share aloud.