[This article was written by Fisher Tull following the premiere of The Final Covenant and published in The School Musician in October, 1980.]

Some of my thoughts about ***The Final Covenant***, a work which holds a special meaning for me, are shared here with you, the conductors and performers of this work. Before perusing my comments, the reader should obtain a copy of the full score.

The Final Covenant was commissioned by the New Jersey Music Educators Association and was first performed by the New Jersey All-State Wind Ensemble, conducted by Richard Castiglione, at the Eastern MENC meeting in Atlantic City on February 11, 1979.

Character of the Composition

The work differs from most of my prior compositions for band in that it is in a single movement at a slow tempo with a duration of approximately eight minutes. It is equally suitable for a wind ensemble (minimum of 38 players) or a full symphonic band. The instrumentation includes obligatory parts for E-flat soprano clarinet, alto clarinet, english horn, and string bass; however, most of the essential material is cued for the more common instruments. Technical demands are modest with the exception of several soloistic passages for principal players; nevertheless, the work requires musical sensitivity and maturity of sound.

In order for the formal plan of the work to be successfully realized, the conductor must be cognizant of the overall design, especially the identification of themes and the location of climactic points. In a single-movement piece of this length, there should be one primary climax supported by several peaks of lesser intensity. These occur at measure 20 (semiclimax), measure 53 (abortive climax), measure 82 (semiclimax), and measure 105 (ultimate climax). The treatment of these sections is discussed below.

TheMeasure Analysis

Measure 1: Give careful consideration to mallet selection for the percussion instruments in order to achieve a soft, balanced effect at measure 4. Notice that all instruments should sustain the pitches without dampening. Crotales of any pitch may be used, but I prefer a pair on F and E struck simultaneously. An electric piano [synthesizer or sampler] may be substituted for the celesta. Note the intentional suppression of the metric pulse by the use of cross-rhythms.

Measure 4: If a large horn section is used, it is appropriate for two or three players to play the opening of the theme. I prefer no break in the line until measure 8 but a quick breath is admissible in measure 6 if needed.

Measure 9: Low woodwinds join with percussion in the cross-rhythm background. The smooth transfer of the melodic line from horn to trumpet can be enhanced by a slight diminuendo in the horn.

Measure 13: The gradual change of color should be marked by a soft entrance from the low brasses. The anacrusis in measure 14 (oboe, english horn, clarinet 1, and alto saxophone) requires considerable stress as does the first note of the triplet in measure 16 (flute, E-flat clarinet). Note that the solo trumpet should retire to the background in measures 15-18 prior to rejoining the theme for the semiclimax at measure 20.

Measure 21: A natural diminuendo occurs by a change of register and abandonment of the brass. I prefer a slight tenuto on the first beat of measure 24.

Measure 27: The plaintive subordinate theme is introduced by oboes in canon at the unison with only an eighth note time interval creating an echo effect. I ask the second oboe to play with a slight articulation to emphasize the syncope. When the flutes take over in measure 30, the canon is at the lower octave. Due to the difference in register, it is helpful to assign more players to the second flute part and again ask for some degree of articulation from them.

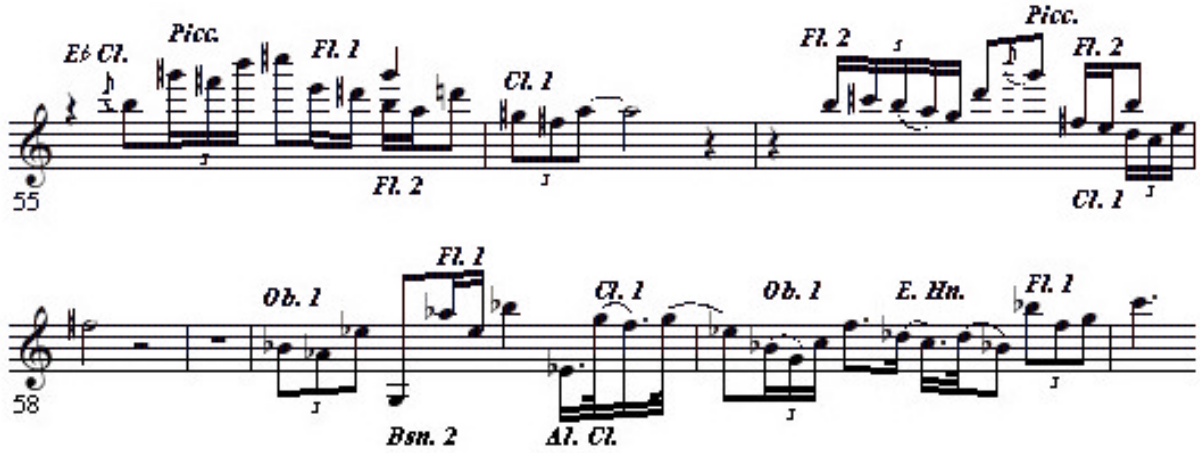
Measure 34: The alto and bass clarinets should be equal in weight. If necessary, add third clarinets to the alto part. If string bass is not used, assign this part to contrabass clarinet through measure 40. Incidentally, the parenthetical tempo changes on pp. 6–9 were added when I proofread the score. They do not appear in the parts.

Measure 40: Baritones and tubas reintroduce the first theme which should result in an unbroken transfer of the line through the other brass instruments with continuous building of intensity. The anacrusis into measure 45 should be played with full duration; likewise, the first trumpet note in measure 49 should not be slighted.

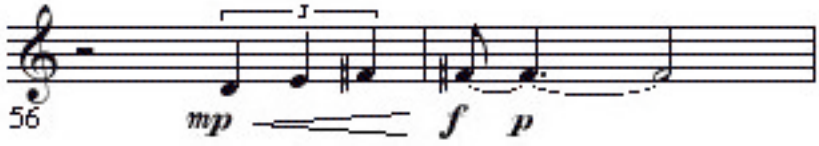
It is difficult to imagine too much stretching of the beats in measure 52, especially on the final quarter note which should be molto tenuto . I have found it helpful to delay the crescendo by timpani and suspended cymbal until the last two beats of this measure.

Measure 53: The first major climax of the piece could result in the apex of the entire work save for the abortive action of the subito piano in measure 54. I prefer to enhance this effect with a slight “lift” between measures 53 and 54 equivalent to about an eighth note of silence. This is my own interpretation which I would never foist onto another conductor; therefore, I chose not to notate it in the score but rather to mention the possibility in the Performance Notes at the beginning of the score.

Measure 55: In this fragmented soloistic passage for woodwinds, each player must enunciate his motif clearly, then retreat into the background to make way for subsequent entries. The effect should be a pointillistic rendering of the melody shown in Example 1.



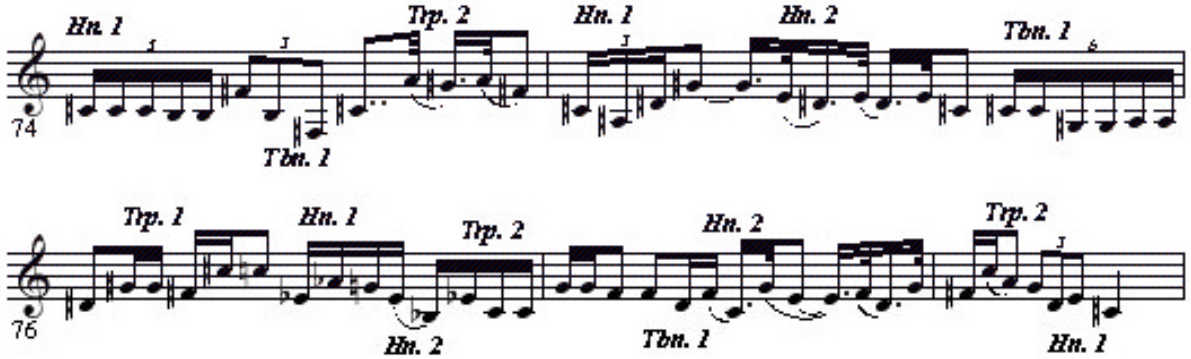
Measure 57: At this slow tempo, accuracy in executing the forte-piano often suffers so I ask the brasses to play the precise rhythm and nuance in Example 2.



Measure 66: This short canon at the triple octave between piccolo and bassoon serves as a relief from the thicker textures of the piece. Both soloists should play with a slight vibrato while rendering the passage simply, the only nuance being a slight stress on the upper C.

Measure 70: I like to delay the homophonic woodwind entrance by dwelling slightly on the first beat. The inversion of the three-note motive in measures 73–73 should not be broken; therefore, a breath after the half-note in measure 71 may be required by all except oboes and english horn.

Measure 74: This challenging section for solo brasses requires rehearsal techniques similar to those suggested with woodwinds at measure 55. Horns should strive for a brassy quality here. (Example 3)



Measure 82: The "ring off" effect at this semiclimax requires maximum sound from the woodwinds. Brasses should give ample length and weight to the accented eighth notes but at measure 84, a more legato and sonorous quality is desired. There should be no break between the antiphonal motives at measure 85. The silent third beat of measure 87 may be lengthened, especially if the hall is resonant, to allow the cessation of sound before the soft clarinet entrance at measure 88. I usually ask for fairly hard mallets for the suspended cymbal at measure 82–83 contrasted by a less pronounced attack at measure 84. The crescendo into measure 87 should rise only to mezzo forte .

Measure 91: In this preface to the recapitulation of the principal theme, flutes and clarinets should articulate clearly. At measure 94 it may be necessary to reduce the number of players to one on a part. The tuba, baritones, and horns should sustain the line for five measures without an audible break. Marking specific places for quick breaths on individual parts will ensure this continuity.

Ultimate Climax Reached

Measure 99: Again, there should be no perceptible break in the line as it gathers intensity. Since the preparation for the climax is shorter here than in measures 51–52, a more pronounced slowing and stretching of the anacrusis is essential.

Measure 105: The ultimate climax of the work will be heightened by careful attention to the inner parts, especially the soaring horns and the accented eighth notes. To distinguish this section from measure 53–54, I think of the beginning of measure 106 as the point of greatest intensity, calling for the accented eighth notes in horns and second trombone to thrust through the entire ensemble.

Measure 107: The slower tempo should be maintained as the tension gradually subsides through the contrapuntal entrances leading to the final cadence. The soft brass entrances in the final two measures are most effective if the sound is initiated by the breath alone without using the tongue. I normally plan the release of the final tutti chord so that the brass, saxophones, and oboes fade out first leaving the flutes, clarinets, and bassoons sounding for about one second as they die away. It is important that everyone, including the conductor, remain motionless for several seconds after the conclusion of sound.

The above remarks are based on my original conception of The Final Covenant plus my experience in conducting the work with a number of high school and collegiate groups. I hope these comments will be beneficial to future conductors who may find this insight helpful in arriving at their own personal interpretation of this music.

[N.B. The last piece of music on which Fisher Tull worked before his death was a re-orchestration of The Final Covenant for symphony orchestra. The notes above can apply equally well to performances of that version with obvious substituting of instruments in the comments.]