

Alexander Flourey  
High School Unit Plan  
*Undertow*  
John Mackey

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## Basic Information

*Undertow* was composed by John Mackey in 2008 and premiered May 13<sup>th</sup> at Bates Recital Hall at the University of Texas in Austin. Mackey was born on October 1<sup>st</sup> of 1973 in New Philadelphia, Ohio, and studied composition at the Cleveland Institute of Music and The Julliard School. He has received numerous awards for his compositions and has written for a variety of ensembles. He has received many commissions and currently lives in Austin, Texas, where he composes full-time, self-publishing his compositions through OstiMusic, the ASCAP publishing company he founded in 1994.

*Undertow* is a grade 3 piece of music and the performance time is approximately 5 minutes in duration. The work is in ABA form and is laced with alternating bars of 4/4 and 7/8 at a constant tempo of quarter note = 160 throughout. Though Mackey does not conform to traditional rules of key and chord progressions, the key is concert f minor. He focuses on chord clusters and pitch collections in *Undertow*. Stylistically, it propels itself through the use of ostinatos and extensive percussion writing. The range is manageable, with piccolo and flute rarely extending past written F3, trumpets seldom extending past top-line F, trombones rarely venturing past middle C, and Euphoniums topping out at F2. Straight mutes are called for in the trumpets and trombones are required to perform glisses that necessitate the use of alternate slide positions.

The work has a full transposed score that calls for:

|                |               |
|----------------|---------------|
| Piccolo        | Baritone Sax  |
| 2 Flutes       | 3 Bb Trumpets |
| 2 Oboes        | 2 Horns in F  |
| Bassoon        | 3 Trombones   |
| 3 Bb Clarinets | Euphonium     |
| Bass Clarinet  | Tuba          |
| 2 Alto Saxes   | Double Bass   |
| Tenor Sax      |               |

Timpani

Six Percussionists

Player 1: Xylophone and vibraphone  
Player 2: Marimba and 4 tom-toms  
Player 3: 3 cymbals (china, splash and suspended)  
Player 4: Tambourine and Crotales  
Player 5: Tam-Tam and 2 Maracas  
Player 6: Bass drum

(Mackey March 16, 2008)

## Program Notes

John Mackey, born in 1973, holds a Master of Music degree from The Julliard School and a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Cleveland Institute of Music. His works have been performed in the Sydney Opera House, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy center, Weill Recital Hall, Jacobs Pillow Dance Festival, Italy's Spoleto Festival, Alice Tully Hall, The Joyce Theatre, Dance Theatre Workshop, and throughout Italy, Germany, Chile, Japan, Norway, Spain, Colombia, Austria, Brazil, England, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Mackey has received numerous awards for his compositions. (Mackey 2014) *Undertow* has dissonances, frequent mixed meters, heavy percussion effects, an explosive conclusion, tension and release, growth and development, rhythmic vitality, soli writing, and it challenges students technically and lyrically.

“Though many of his pieces are extremely virtuosic, *Undertow* is the first of Mackey's works written specifically for intermediate band. It was commissioned by the Hill Country Middle School Band and premiered by that ensemble with its conductor, Cheryl Floyd, in May 2008. The work is significantly different than much of Mackey's output in terms of technical difficulty, but many characteristics of his writing are nonetheless present, including biting semitone dissonance within a tonal context, frequent use of mixed meter, heavy percussion effects and, perhaps most importantly to his work, a pervasive ostinato. The metric pattern for the piece is an alternation of 7/8 and 4/4 time, which provides an agitated “out-of-step” pulsation throughout. The energetic opening melody cycles through several repetitions before washing away into a gentle stream of percussive eighth notes. From here, a countermelody emerges that slowly ratchets the energy back up to its original level, where the initial melody returns to round out the explosive conclusion.”

(Wallace 2014)

-Jake Wallace

## Historical Information

### **The Work**

*Undertow* is the first actual Grade 2-3 piece that he had every composed in his career. Mackey is cautious to compose works easier than Grade 2-3 because it begins to lose his identifying stamps such as dissonances, rhythmic complexity, transparent scoring, and semi-unique doubling. Dissonances become too difficult to tune with younger groups, solos become risky, and there is no guarantee that a young band will have the combination of instrumentation Mackey is looking for. When composing *Undertow*, Mackey formulated material that happened to work for lower grade level from the start, rather than simplifying more complex music to force it into that level. Mackey's first original composition for winds was in 2005 and since that time he has focused his compositional energy almost exclusively on original music for winds. Since its world premiere at Bates Recital Hall at the University of Texas by the Hill Country Middle School Band, it has received many performances and is now listed on the prescribed and required basic music lists in many states.

### **The Composer**

John Mackey was born in New Philadelphia, Ohio in 1973 and holds a Master of Music degree from The Julliard School and a Bachelor of fine arts degree from the Cleveland Institute of music. He studied with John Corigliano and Donald Erb. Mackey particularly enjoys writing music for dance and for symphonic winds, and he has focused on those mediums for the past few years. His works have been performed in famous concert halls all across the world. Mackey has received many commissions from big names and has worked with a diverse range of artists. Mackey has been recognized with numerous grants and awards from organizations including ASCAP, the American Music Center, and the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust. *Undertow* was Mr. Mackey's first work for early wind ensembles. (Mackey 2014)

### **Related History**

As part of the twentieth-century period, *Undertow* uses rhythmic vitality and repeated ostinato to propel the work and infuses unorthodox dissonances that leave listeners in anticipation. The work is in ABA form, which is Binary form and can be a great teaching opportunity for formal structure, listening, and style periods.

## The Work

### **Formal Analysis**

| <u>ABA Form</u> | <u>Measures</u> |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Intro           | 1-9             |
| A section       | 10-45           |
| A1              | 10-23           |
| A2              | 28-45           |
| Transition      | 46-61           |
| B section       | 62-129          |
| B1              | 62-69           |
| B2              | 70-77           |
| B3              | 78-85           |
| B4              | 86-93           |
| B5              | 95-105          |
| B6              | 106-129         |
| Transition      | 130-181         |
| A section       | 182-201         |
| A1              | 182-189         |
| A2              | 190-201         |
| Coda            | 202-209         |

### **Errata**

The instrumentation page of the score indicates that there are two bassoons, but there is only one. In updated copies of the score the instrumentation page is correct, but on the first page of the music shows two bassoons. Which is still incorrect.

### **Performance Notes**

#### Technical Considerations

It is important to consider the alternating bars of 7/8 and 4/4, syncopated rhythms, precisely articulated patterns, quick-paced tempo, and extensive percussion writing. The ranges are manageable, with piccolo and flute rarely going past written F3, trumpets hardly ever extending past top-line F, trombones occasionally venturing past middle C, and Euphoniums topping out at F2. Straight mutes are called for in the trumpets and trombones are required to perform glisses that necessitate the use of alternate slide positions. Another very important consideration is that instruments that are not always very prevalent in younger ensembles such as string bass and bass clarinet are cued during important and thinly scored parts.

#### Stylistic Considerations

Because the ostinato parts and extensive aggressive percussion parts propel the piece, it is important to keep the percussion equal with the woodwind and brass, while not allowing them to overbalance. Mackey uses several different types of articulation that need to be interpreted with the highest degree of clarity. Mackey tweaks

articulations obsessively in all of his works and *Undertow* is no exception. Staccato should be shorter than staccato-tenuto should be shorter than tenuto. The dynamics shift suddenly and gradually in *Undertow* and that requires patience and control to produce. Lastly, pacing and tempo cannot ever lag otherwise justice will not be done to this work.

### Musical Elements

*Undertow* contains 4 main motives to which Mackey derives every melodic underpinning in the work. Typically, Mackey presents one or two lyrical melodies and repeats at least one melody several times throughout the work. At times, his melodies do not end with a resolution or elide with material following the melodic presentation. Structurally, his melodies typically contain an antecedent and consequent phrase, each with identifying motives. Mackey tends to use material from the melodies to develop and unify his works through a series of variations that include fragmentation, augmentation and diminution. (dissertation pg 32)

Mackey says, “My pieces have no harmony! They are not about harmony.” He states that expanding his harmonic language is one of his current compositional goals. (dissertation, pg 36) In *Undertow* harmony is of less importance than melodic ideas and rhythmic vitality. The work is primarily set in F minor, but the pitch collections of some motives suggest other tonalities. There are few instances of sustained chords in *Undertow*, as in the Fm(+9) chord in m. 42, the implied Cm7 chord at m. 52 and the chord clusters in mm. 154-169. (Blocher et al. 2011)

The constant drive and momentum of the ostinatos are the most important part of rhythmic clarity. There are 2 ostinatos; one with eighth-note runs in the upper woodwinds and one with quarter notes and dotted quarter notes in the low brass and low woodwinds. Both ostinatos are present at all time in the percussion.

### **Glossary of Terms**

*Teachable terms that the ensemble as a whole could benefit from:*

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| Biting               | A style indication that calls for aggressive articulation in the context of the work.  |
| Choke                | A percussion technique, which consists of striking a cymbal with a drumstick held in one hand and then immediately grabbing the cymbal with another hand, to abruptly silence the crash. |
| Con Sord. – straight | An abbreviation for Con Sordino, which means “with mute” and in this circumstance a straight mute.   |

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Div.                | An abbreviation for divisi, which is Italian for “division” and means that an instrumental section divides itself so that the section can play two musical lines that are generally written as double notes in a single part. |
| Gliss full duration | An abbreviation of glissando, which means that the trombones gradually move to the next slide position while playing for the entirety of the note length indicated.   |
| Jarring, nasty      | A stylistic and articulation indication to play aggressively.   |
| Poco a poco cresc   | An abbreviation for poco a poco crescendo, which means, “little by little getting stronger” and in the context of <i>Undertow</i> refers to the gradual increase of volume and intensity.                                     |
| Senza Sord          | An abbreviation for Senza Sordino, which means “without a mute” and this indicates where the trumpets will not be using the straight mutes any longer.  |
| Sub. p.             | An abbreviation for Subito Piano, which mean “suddenly soft”.   |
| Tutti               | An indication in the music for all instrumentalists within the section to play together.  |

### **Concepts for Success**

Rhythm will be tricky because of the mixed meters. The skill the students will need to learn is proper counting within the changing meters and then correct execution of the rhythms. This will be the greatest challenge that the ensemble faces. The full ensemble should be able to clap, sing, count and play a scale to constant eighth notes or quarter notes depending on the ostinato being conceptualized. If every member of the ensemble can be confident in his or her ability to count or sing/play a rhythm then the ensemble can work on being musical.

Articulation is key to successfully performing *Undertow*. The staccato needs to be so different from the staccato-tenuto as does the staccato-tenuto from the tenuto. Those three articulations should be sung, or played on a repeated note across the band



or section until everyone understands all articulations. Accents are heavily used throughout *Undertow* and this will need some working on. Having the skill to differentiate the style will make an ensemble go from good to great. Some indications in the music say jarring, nasty or biting. Those marking a significant in successfully performing *Undertow*

Tempo cannot lag. Students need to be subdividing or constantly listening for an audible ostinato line. No matter how tricky the part the ensemble must not slow down or *Undertow* loses intensity. Most of the tempo problems could be avoided by having a confident percussion section.

Dynamics are key to making *Undertow* musical. Without the dynamic contrasts within the piece there is no music. The dynamics contribute most of the intensity and definitely keep the listeners interest. Students should articulate subito piano, gradual and patience crescendos and just fortissimos with great balance and blend. The ability to go from fortissimo to piano is a valued one in *Undertow*.

Glissandos are an important concept for trombones to conquer. Sliding from one pitch to another together as a section can create cool musical color and effect but it must be done properly.

Trills in the upper woodwinds usually accompany the trombone glissandos and become important. It is a necessary skill for the students to learn to provide flourish and color with the work.

## Preparation Guide

### **Objectives for Students**

One big objective for students who need to perform *Undertow* is internalizing the pulse and being able to subdivide in 7/8 time. Students need to understand the articulation lengths and be able to perform them with precision. Students should be able to identify what instrument has the melody or most important part at all times. Flute and clarinet soloists need to play their parts with ease and musicality while still being intense stylistically at a soft volume. The percussion needs to establish good steady tempo that does not lag. Staccato needs to be shorter than staccato-tenuto needs to be shorter than tenuto and the accented notes all throughout the piece need emphasis. The rhythmic ostinatos need to be moving in tempo to propel the piece and stylistically accurate. The students should be able to make great contrast between dynamics all throughout the piece. The students will be able to use good listening skills during any musical experience. Students will develop better sight-reading skills. They will also understand their instruments role and function in the ensemble during any and all works.

### **Strategies and Activities**

In order to internalize the pulse the teacher should write the ostinato rhythms on the board on display for the class. Write out 2 quarter notes and a dotted quarter note in 7/8 time followed by 4 quarter notes in 4/4 time. Have the class clap the rhythm over and over as a whole, in sections, and as soloists. Do this not only with clapping but also with singing, playing sustained notes and scalar patterns in rhythm. Add the second ostinato rhythm of eighth notes only to the board and have the class repeat the same process. This will advance their comfort with the changing meter and help them feel the lilt that the constant meter change creates.

To further develop upon the exercise the teacher can add articulation markings to clarify the length of the notes in the ostinato. Speak the articulation and have the class repeat that articulation. Start with every note having the same articulation of staccato-tenuto then move on to add tenuto's in. Eventually the teacher should add staccatos into the mix as well as accented notes so that the ensemble as whole knows how all of the melodies and ostinato parts should sound like stylistically.

As long as the students understand that the ostinato is an accompaniment that propels the work then they can learn what the melodic content is that creates the tension and excitement in the piece. Teachers should have instruments with the 4 main motives play those motives separately for the rest of the ensemble singled out and then again within the context so that every musician knows what the important part should be at any given moment.

An activity for independent practice for soloists could be to practice the solos with proper style while maintaining a piano volume. This goes for full ensemble activities also. If the whole ensemble plays softly and supported they develop good listening skills as well as a skill that will be useful to them in the future.

Talk about sensitizing note morphology and the lifespan of a note. The morphology of making, sustaining and finishing a sound has to do with the way the sound begins, lives, and ends its life. The breath contains the imagined ideal where the student hears and feels the sound before it is made. The chi is the exact moment the sound begins its life and the sustain is the place where the sound lives its life. The respond is the interaction with sound that changes its life and the complete is the exact moment the sound ends its life. It is important to finish the sound and not just stop the note. Students should feel and anticipate the silence before you end the sound. This activity will help the flute and clarinet soloists to conceptualize the style and length of the melodic material of the 4<sup>th</sup> motive. When describing tenuto's and staccato-tenuto's the lifespan of a note can help in comprehending the connectedness.

A strategy for tackling listening skills and dynamic contrast is the warm-up Bach chorales. The music educator should warm-up every day with a chorale so that the students get in the mindset of listening so that they create a good balance and blend within the group. The chorales typically contain a wide range of dynamics so that the music educator can teach patience in dynamic contrast as well as abrupt changes in volume.

Sight-reading can be a fun activity for the students to partake in. If the teacher makes it a Friday thing to sight-read then not only will the students associate the best day of the week with a fun exercise but they will also become better musicians and prepare themselves for MSBOA festival without even acknowledging it.

### **Assignments for Students**

Practice slips should be handed out and logged weekly. Requiring a minimum of 25 minutes a week, or 5 minutes every weekday, of practice on challenging passages of music can make the difference in an ensemble. It is important that the students are on board with practicing to make the rehearsal experience better for this to work.

Playing tests should be administered on the music every other week to ensure that student are improving and reaching their true musical potential. With the use of Google Voice one can customize their phone account to ring certain phones based on who is calling or the time of day. This allows an educator to have a custom number that only students call and the students can submit a voicemail of them performing a test. Later on, an educator can look in their email, which is linked to their phone, and listen to the tests. This is a great approach for keeping the class time for rehearsal and not test taking.

Listening assignments could be useful for students who learn aurally. When there is sectionals, I would have students turn in a listening assignment on the piece we are working on in sectionals, of approximately one paragraph, regarding the parts of the piece that are difficult for the student, how they plan to become better at those parts to make it sound with ease, and why I would make them perform that specific piece. This will make the students tell the teacher what they are getting out of the music they are preparing.

## Practice Guide

*Techniques or concepts that will be helpful in learning parts and make use of practice time:*

The upper woodwinds that have flourishes of sixteenth notes and trills such as piccolo, flutes, clarinets and saxes need to work at a slow tempo first making sure that every note is centered and rhythmically accurate. The same instruments have syncopated rhythms in response to the first motive throughout the piece. They need to be accented and brought out of the texture. Eighth note ostinatos need to be rhythmically accurate and staccato. In the B section these parts should be legato and practice being as connected as possible. At rehearsal "P" the eighth note figures in flutes and saxes are passed back and forth and need to be more prevalent within the music. Above all style is key within these instruments.

Bass and Contrabass Clarinet, Baritone Sax, Tuba and Double Bass maintain the ostinato that drives the piece. It is imperative that the style be correct with full tone and a clear difference between staccato-tenuto and tenuto. Low brass at sections like rehearsal "M" need to bring out the sustained chords tones. It should be like a block of sound in the audience faces. Measure 194 the bass parts have sixteenth notes that should be practiced so that they sound with ease.

The brass section needs to work with techniques that will make Mackey's ideas come to life. Trombones will need to know how to glissando and have a way to practice them properly. Perfect practice makes perfect performance and therefore trombones should listen to recordings of *Undertow* and replicate the sound of the gliss. It should sound like the pitch is sliding into the next passage which creates a temporary feel of dragging that is followed by a slingshot of notes and melody. It should happen quickly and give a full duration to each note on either side of the gliss. Mackey requires the trombones to gliss the full duration of a note also. Trombones should work on unifying the full duration glissando during individual practice time. Low brass also has "jarring, nasty" dictated in their music as a reminder to be very aggressive. Students should practice playing in the style of the piece before and after those sections and work change dramatically. Trumpets need to know how to use straight mutes. Trumpeters should practice getting a good buzzy sound while muted and make sure that they stay tuned even with the mutes in their bells. This may mean sitting down with a tuner and finding out how much they have to adjust their tuning slides when they put the mute in. The trumpets have the melodic material most of the time so they need to work on style in their independent practice.

Percussion should work on rhythmic accuracy in tempo and trying to create a nuance of intense driving music. Percussion needs to focus on dynamic contrast. There is a percussion break in *Undertow* that calls for a "subito piano". This is crucial in successfully performing this work. All percussionist need to spend time perfecting the abrupt change in dynamics. Timpani needs to work on syncopated rhythm and soli writing. All percussion is featured soloistically throughout the work so they need to be confident in their playing ability to propel the piece. Cymbals need to be choked to capture the nuance Mackey wants. The tambourine and crotales player needs to above

all be steady with tempo with good style. If the ensemble slows down or drags in any way the tam-tam, maracas, crotales, and tambourine can keep steady tempo while using rhythmically complex passages to do so. The tom player needs to know their part because they have important solos that appear and disappear when the ensemble cuts in and out. Have the tom player practice the soloistic parts. All percussionist should listen to recordings and try and replicate the sounds present in them.

### **Evaluation of Students**

Homework assignments will be a big contributor to the evaluation of the students learning. The listening assignments are designed to get the students thinking about why I would have them play specific pieces and what they will be getting out of performing and learning them. Listening assignments also evaluate general literacy in the classroom and critical thinking about the works. Practice slips should be turned in weekly and are a good evaluation of the students' motivation to become a better player and perform well in rehearsals. Practice slips also evaluate student growth and work together with playing tests to administer musical development. Playing tests should be done on the students' own time and submitted via Google Voice to evaluate the effectiveness of the students' practice habits and the progress made on musical works being performed.

## Rehearsal Schedule

| Monday                             | Tuesday                            | Wednesday                              | Thursday                                 | Friday  |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Warm-up<br>Sight-read<br>Mackey    | Warm-up<br>Sight-read<br>Reed      | Warm-up<br>Sight-read<br>Sousa         | Warm-up<br>Mackey<br>Reed mvt. 1         | Warm-up<br>Reed mvt. 1&4<br>Sousa             |
| Warm-up<br>Reed mvt. 2-3<br>Sousa  | Warm-up<br>Mackey<br>Reed mvt. 3-4 | Warm-up<br>Sectionals on<br>the Mackey | Warm-up<br>Mackey<br>Reed mvt. 4         | Warm-up<br>Sight-reading<br>practice<br>Sousa |
| Warm-up<br>Sousa<br>Reed mvt. 1-2  | Warm-up<br>Mackey<br>Reed mvt. 3-4 | Warm-up<br>Sectionals on<br>the Reed   | Warm-up<br>Reed<br>Mackey                | Warm-up<br>Sight-reading<br>practice<br>Sousa |
| Warm-up<br>Sousa<br>Mackey         | Warm-up<br>Mackey<br>Reed          | Warm-up<br>Sectionals on<br>the Sousa  | Warm-up<br>Sousa<br>Mackey               | Warm-up<br>Reed                               |
| Warm-up<br>Reed<br>Mackey          | Warm-up<br>Mackey<br>Sousa         | Warm-up<br>Reed<br>Mackey              | Warm-up<br>Mackey<br>Sousa               | Warm-up<br>Sight-reading<br>practice<br>Reed  |
| Warm-up<br>Sousa<br>Reed<br>Mackey | Warm-up<br>Mackey<br>Reed          | Warm-up<br>Reed<br>Sousa               | Short Warm-up<br>Sousa<br>Reed<br>Mackey | Short Warm-up<br>Sousa<br>Reed<br>Mackey      |

## References and Resources

### Recordings

Official website for John Mackey: <http://www.ostimusic.com/Undertow-media.php>

- The premiere performance and a studio recording of *Undertow*
- The full score is available for viewing

J W Pepper sheet music:

<http://www.jwpepper.com/Undertow/10056743.item#ratereview>

- Audio available and score to follow along

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## Related Items

Suggested Listening by John Mackey

### *Foundry*

<http://www.ostimusic.com/Foundry.php>

### *Redline Tango*

<http://www.ostimusic.com/RedlineWinds.php>

### *Turbine*

<http://www.ostimusic.com/Turbine.php>

Suggested Listening by other composers

### *Wild Nights*

by Frank Ticheli

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVrVplqX7hk&list=RDIVrVplqX7hk#t=33>

### Tempered Steel

By Charles R. Young

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cc5mHwnSmHE>