

Northwest Passages

Aldo Rafael Forte

- I. *Mount St. Helens' Fury***
- II. *Puget Sound***
- III. *Skiing Crystal Mountain***

Northwest Passages is a three movement work for concert band of about ten minutes in length. The piece is dedicated "To The Tacoma Concert Band of Tacoma Washington, Robert Musser, Director, on the occasion of their 25th Anniversary". The ensemble commissioned the work to celebrate their special anniversary. They had originally commissioned the esteemed composer Alfred Reed to write a work but with Reed's passing away on September 17, 2005, the Tacoma Concert Band turned to me as their commissioned composer for the momentous occasion. I am humbled by this honor and thus wish that this world premiere be done in memory of Alfred Reed. Furthermore, I am thrilled to finally be composing a work specially for Robert Musser who has for years been one of the great champions of my music with both his Tacoma Concert Band and the University of Puget Sound Wind Ensemble.

The title of the work is a play on the phrase "*northwest passage*" that the early European explorers were searching for during the first expeditions to what came to be called the Americas. The composition is loosely inspired by three places in Washington State.

Northwest Passages opens with the noisy **I. *Mount St. Helens' Fury***. This is the aggressive and most dissonant movement of the work. It is unsettled and continuously throws around different harmonic systems changing on a moment's notice from one to another. In the first six bars of the work tense dissonant music with a menacing bass line gives way to ominous minor chords and pseudo-polytonal strands. Afterward whole tone based music is immediately interrupted to set up the "*horrific groove*" (the rhythm of the eruption but with very tense harmonic overtones building in intensity). There is a recap of some material later in the movement before the music builds to THE ERUPTION. The movement ends harmonically settled on open 5ths but still with an air of the aggressive (whole ensemble playing at the forte level) symbolizing the destructive aftermath of the volcanic eruption.

The mostly peaceful and tranquil **II. *Puget Sound*** is not only about the body of water itself but about the beauty of this region as well. It opens with *dawn on Puget Sound* (solos for clarinet and alto sax) and the *rocking of the waters* (open 4ths and 5ths). Simple lyrical and pretty music represents the *beauty of area gardens and greenery*. Later *raindrops* appear as short notes in the upper woodwinds contrasted with triplets of *wavy waters*. The music eventually builds into majestic fanfare-like passages and bold musical gestures symbolizing *Big ships on the sound*. This gives way to pretty music again and the movement ends quietly as *Dusk sets on Puget Sound*.

The finale, **III. *Skiing Crystal Mountain***, is an exhilarating movement through and through. Most of the harmonies are bright as is the orchestration, symbolic of the reflection of the sun on the white snow of the slopes of Crystal Mountain, the premier ski resort of Washington State. The movement opens with a steady "climb up the mountain on the lift", progressing from the quiet lows to the ever increasing heights of the band's range. Once at the top, there is excitement (6/8 time contrasts with 2/4 time). There is often a "rise and fall" to the themes as well as occasional "bumps in the ski ride" (sudden hammering out of rhythms). There is even subtle and comical "sliding around" in the trombones as well as "quick falls". Some themes seem to smoothly "glide over the snow". All this is contrasted with the ponderous and heavy "Mount Ranier Massive Theme" featuring bold and positive music as this giant of mountains is visible in the horizon at the summit of Crystal Mountain. This joyous and sparkling finale is a fitting festive and celebrational tribute to the 25th Anniversary of the Tacoma Concert Band.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: To the Tacoma Concert Band for bring the work to life; to Robert Musser for his championing of my music; to the poet Carolyn Ruth Moser for "being there" during the creation of this work; and to the memory of Dr. Alfred Reed.