A Conductor's Interpretive Analysis of Michael Markowski's "Vigilante"

By Marc R. Dickey, Ph.D.
California State University, Fullerton School of Music

In his composer's note, Markowski talks about how one of the recordings he had when he was growing up was "Television's Greatest Hits, Vol. 1: From the 50s and 60s." Coincidentally, I had it too. In the cassette version, about a decade earlier than Michael came to it. I remember a road trip with friends in the '80s, playing these TV theme songs over and over in the car, and everyone singing along with so much joy, having the time of our lives!

These theme songs are full-on compositions, with luscious scores and performed by the greatest musicians of their time in Hollywood recording studios. Full of energy and style, and so fun to listen to. Now, many of these TV series from the '50s and '60s are appearing on the various platforms we have access to this century, and successive generations are discovering them. These "old" shows are being enjoyed and shared by grandparents, their children, and their children's children.

It's these shows and their theme songs that inspired Michael Markowski's *Vigilante*. In particular, the shows with brooding superheroes... and colorful villains! Think the *Green Hornet*, *Batman*, *Zorro*, and the like. *Vigilante* is full of superhero vs. supervillain fun.

To capture the excitement of this, Markowski has chosen a brisk tempo: quarter note = 152. Of course, you don't have to rehearse it at this tempo all the time; slow it down, and work it all out. But by concert time, you'll definitely want to have your students ready to play it at this "Bold and Daring!" tempo, as Markowski puts it.

Vigilante begins with a five-measure introduction in d minor that starts right off with the Bam! Bonk! Clank-Kapow! of a superhero doing his duty. A nifty little bass riff with trash cymbal and vibraslap leads us to a jazzy melody in the flutes, oboes, and trumpets at m. 6, in g minor and based on the blues scale. We might call this the *Vigilante* theme **[ex. 1, mm. 6-14]**.

There are a lot more articulation markings in this piece than in most Markowski works, because it's in a jazz style. Encourage your students to observe them, but more importantly to listen to each other to match attacks, releases, and lengths of notes.

One note about snare drum technique. If you look closely at m. 1, beat 4 in the Percussion 5 part, you'll see a quarter note with three slashes across the stem; this indicates a standard, two-handed buzz roll. On the other hand, if you look at m. 6, beat 4, you'll see a "z" across the quarter note's stem; here, Markowski is calling for a *single-stick* buzz roll. A quick internet search will land you a tutorial on these to share with your percussionists.

Ex. 1, mm. 6-14, the "*Vigilante* theme."

Ex. 2, mm. 14-20, "soulful sax soli w/tympani."

Measure 14 is marked ***ff***. This measure IS an exclamation point to what we've heard so far, for the full band minus saxophones—let's hear it!

Emerging from that ***ff*** texture, the saxophone section takes over at m. 15 in a soulful *soli*, while your tympanist channels the soul of Gene Krupa[1] (softly so as to not cover up the saxes) **[ex. 2, mm. 14-20, soulful sax soli w/tympani]**. The saxophone and trumpet have big *diminuendos* from ***sffz*** in mm. 16 and 20 that may feel counter-intuitive to your players at first. Work on this with them to give the sax *soli* an additional degree of "cool."

The clarinets (***ff*** in their *chalumeau* register, Far Out!), trombones, and euphoniums grab the melody in m. 21, in a back-and-forth chase scene. Camera 2 picks up the piccolo, flutes, and oboes with an expansion of m. 6's *Vigilante* melody at m. 27. Urge your brass players to take it easy and observe the dynamics here, to make sure they don't cover the melody.

Camera 1 finds the trombones and euphoniums again at m. 31, now joined by the bassoons and baritone saxophone. The 1st trumpet has a menacing countermelody, especially when the rest of the trumpets and the horns add in at m. 34. Markowski calls for optional *fluttertongue* in the trumpets. Even younger players can give this a try; is anyone really too young to learn to *fluttertongue?* You'll find a number of YouTubes that help teach how to flutter specifically on the trumpet. Dramatic *crescendos* and *decrescendos* are what will make this plenty menacing (Outta Sight!).

While we're on the subject, there are many, many hairpin *crescendos* and *decrescendos* throughout the piece. It is possible to overdo them, but it is much more likely your musicians will underplay them. These many brief *crescendos* and *decrescendos* are essential in creating the drama that this piece portrays!

---

[1] Gene Krupa (1909–1973) was an American jazz drummer, bandleader, and composer who was widely regarded as one of the most influential drummers in the history of jazz. His drum solo on Benny Goodman's 1937 recording of Louis Prima's "Sing, Sing, Sing (With a Swing)" is considered to be pivotal in elevating the role of the drummer in the modern big band.

Back to Camera 2, the flutes, this time with the xylophone at m. 35 on the *Vigilante* theme. Again, be sure the accompaniment has energy but not too much volume: Just ***mp***! until things heat up and build to a big change of scene at m. 42.

Markowski writes "warm, singingly" for the clarinets, saxophones, and horns who have the melody at m. 42. So this is very different than what we've played so far! Certainly a change of style in conducting gesture is appropriate, and at this tempo, you may even get to the point (after several rehearsals) to go into two here.

The musical materials are the same, but the jazzy feel is set aside for a bit, replaced by a more relaxed feel, with a hint of folk song. (One is reminded that Markowski's two most recent band works have been folk song based.) You can picture the Batman, home from a long, hard day of vigilante work. Taking a long, hot shower to wash off all the criminal crud, he emerges as Bruce Wayne, ready to sink down into his lounge chair to read the crime section of *The Gotham Times*.

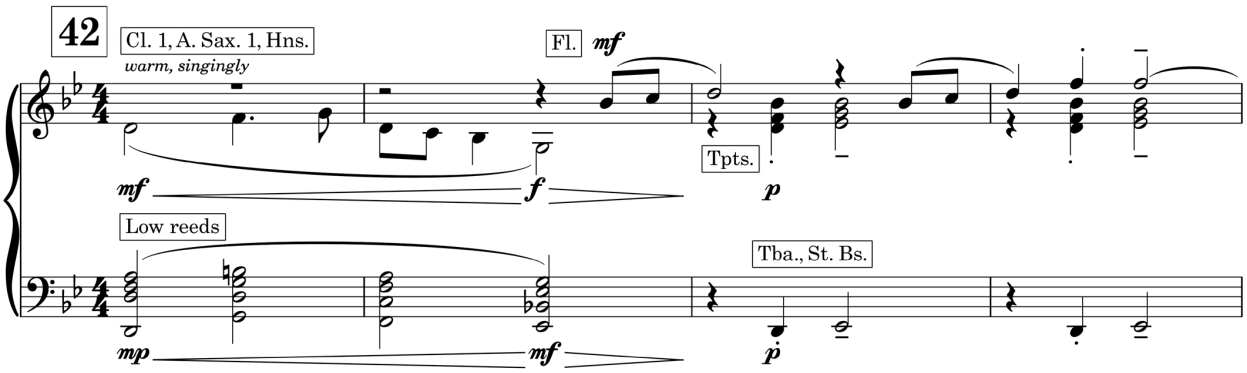
Led in by a little counterfigure in the flutes (using the same ascending, conjunct motion as in m. 1), the brass in mm. 44-45 provide a light *boom-chick-chick boom-boom-chick-chick* stylistic counterpoint to the beautiful clarinet, saxophone, and horn *soli* just heard in mm. 42-43 **[ex. 3, mm. 42-45 "warm, singingly" followed by light *boom-chick* and flute counterline]**. Once again, observe Markowski's style markings and the hairpin *crescendos* and *decrescendos*, and this will sound wonderful.

In mm. 46-49, the previous four measures are echoed with variation, including moving all of the parts around in the orchestration. Every instrument, every person in your band has an interesting, rewarding part to play in *Vigilante*. This is one especially good reason that this work is worth considering when programing your school or community band.

(Two other reasons that come to mind: if you are looking for a piece that will "keep your percussion section busy," *Vigilante* utilizes a colorful combination of percussion instruments with interesting parts and techniques to be played. Also, if you have a "developing" trombone section to which you've said "more air" more times than you can count, the trombone parts in *Vigilante* are not hard, but they call for some spice and a little swagger. This might be the piece that helps bring your trombone section out of its shell!)

Speaking of spice and swagger, the *Vigilante* melody style morphs again at m. 50 **[ex. 4, mm. 50-53, stoic *Vigilante* theme]**. Is this bluesy trumpet

Ex. 3, mm. 42-45, "'warm, singingly' followed by light *boom-chick* and flute counterline."



Ex. 4, mm. 50-54, "stoic *Vigilante* theme."

"...the trombone parts in Vigilante are not hard, but they call for some spice and a little swagger..."

melody jazzy, or more strait-laced? You decide, but note the lack of *staccato* markings through here; these notes deserve some weight and length, including the single bass drum strokes at mm. 50 and 52. Another clue: Markowski indicates "stoically." One might hear our Vigilante's earnestness and integrity here. Justice shall prevail!

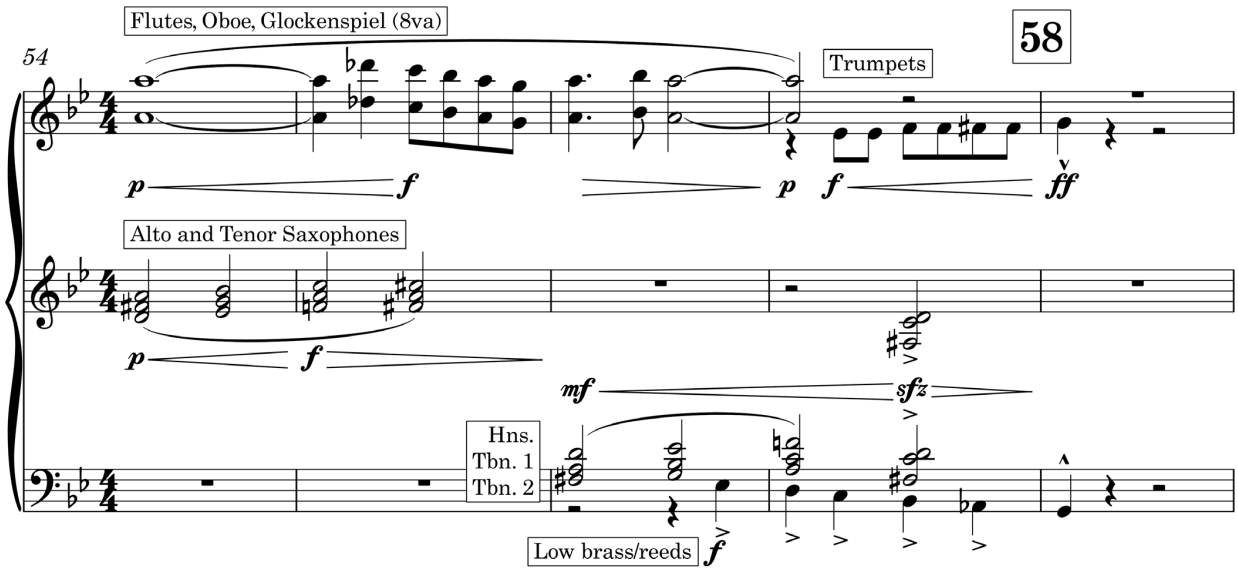
The stoic theme is echoed by the upper woodwinds at m. 54, but in a contrasting *legato* style, and with the D lowered to a bluer D♭. At m. 56, the situation begins to heat up through rhythmic acceleration, foreshadowing some action. The conjunct half notes in the horns and trombones ascend in m. 56, the low reeds and low brass pile on with descending conjunct quarter notes, and then the trumpets jump in with ascending eighth notes in m. 57. To say nothing of the thwackingly dissonant ***sfz*** on beat three of that measure as we *crescendo* to ***ff*** **[Ex. 5, mm. 54-58, stoic theme echo, rhythmic acceleration, with thwacking *sfz*]**.

Of course there is a fight scene in *Vigilante*, the piece couldn't be an homage to those shows of the 50s and 60s without one! At m. 57 there is an improvised trumpet solo to be based on the G (concert) blues scale. You'll want to rehearse the accompaniment without the solo a few times.

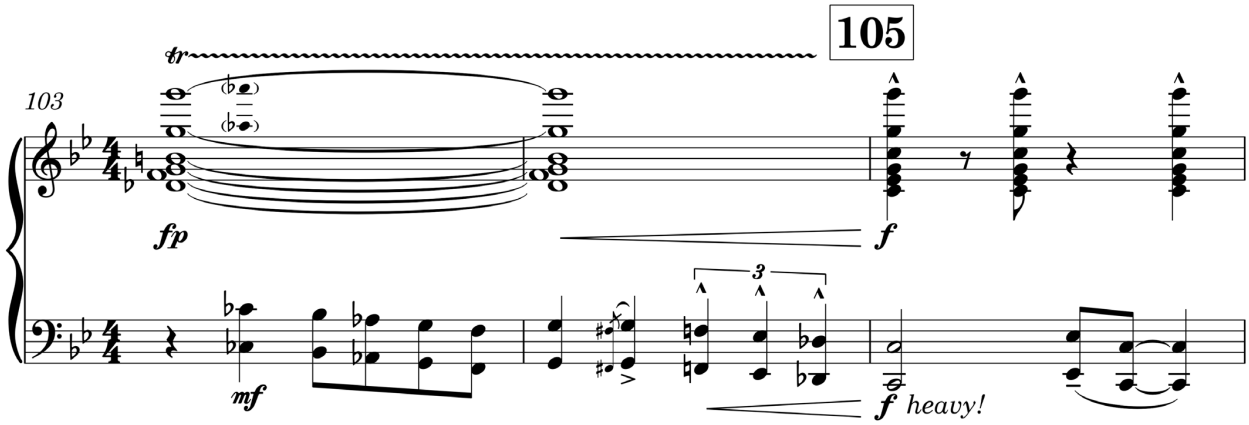
If you have an improviser, or if you want to develop one, the background is harmonically simple. And Markowski has provided a written version or model of the solo if needed. When asked about the solo, here is what Michael said: "Here we are *becoming* the vigilante, breaking away from the law of the written ink, taking the notes into our own hands!"

If you have a seasoned improvisor, all they'll need is the G blues scale. If your soloist is a newbie, you could suggest they start with the written solo, and then feel at liberty to vary and expand on it, to mess around with it and make it their own. Memorize the written solo, and then riff off of it.

Ex. 5, mm. 54-58, "stoic theme echo, rhythmic acceleration, with thwacking ***sfz***."



Ex. 6, mm. 103-105, "WW trill, and descending low reed and brass."



Markowski also calls for Rock Tambourine here at m. 58. That means the eighth notes are produced by *shaking* the tambourine. A quick web search will yield you one or more YouTubes that explain this technique. While shaking with one hand, the other hand *taps* where the accents are notated.

As the solo ends, a brief transition leads to the alto and tenor saxophones, horns, and trombones rocking out (m. 67) on the *Vigilante* theme. They rock on in a three-measure call, and the *tutti* band provides a one-measure response. This occurs again, and this time the gesture ends with a two-beat (half note) "long fall" or fall-off in m. 76, on a g minor chord. This fall-off should be more dramatic, more emphatic, than any of the previous ones.

During the fall-off, our Gene Krupa-style tympanist comes back in. And then the "warm, singingly" tune returns at m. 78, greatly expanded from its two-bar length. Once again evoking the quality of folk song, the melody is *legato* and *cantabile* at first, beginning in the clarinets, alto sax I, and horn for two measures, and quickly passed over to the flutes and trumpets for two more measures. The *legato* style morphs into two measures of lightly *marcato* contrast. The phrase structure here is interesting, keeping us and the listener on our toes:

m. 78	*legato* for 4 mm.	light *marcato* for 2 mm.
m. 84	*legato* for 3 mm.	light *marcato* for 1 m.
m. 88	*legato* for 2 mm.	light *marcato* for 2 mm.

One important point about all of these flowing sections before we leave them: they must not slow down! Markowski urges us to "...keep the tempo leaning forward! There's no moment to relax for these 'above-the-lawmen.'" Also, note the HUGE swells to ***sffz*** in m. 81, and to ***ff*** in m. 89.

A four-measure transition at m. 92 prepares us for a final fight scene. Measures 94-95 contain a few moments of repose with the longest note values in the piece thus far, as Gene Krupa comes back one more time, *piano*, similar to m. 15.

At m. 96, some kind of chaos is starting up again, as the trombones and euphoniums bring back melodic material from m. 23. (Just *forte*, we have a ways to go yet.) The woodwinds are the vigilantes at m. 100, with brass punching back, as at m. 27. At m. 103, the woodwinds engage in a furious "You're not going to get away with it!" trill. The trill *crescendos* as the low reeds and brass stir things up with a powerful descending line, capped off by quarter note triplets with *marcato* accents, busting us into c minor **[ex. 6, mm. 103-105, WW trill, and descending low reed and brass]**. Ooofff!

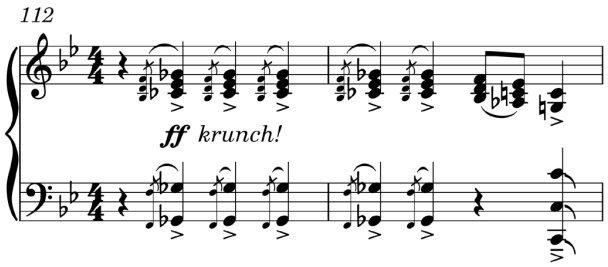
Whatever is up here, it's ON! At m. 105, the low reeds and brass lean into a version of the "stoically" melody from m. 50, and this isn't stoic anymore, it's down and dirty! (Markowski indicates "heavy.") The scene escalates at m. 109, as the tenor saxophone and 1st trombone expand up an octave.

Before we talk about the last twelve measures, what about all these scoops, trills, falls, and (optional) fluttertonging that your students may not have encountered before? If you've read this far, you've probably already started searching online for some of these mid-century TV theme songs for your own edification and enjoyment. And you've also already thought about playing some of them for your students. Expanding on that, you can easily find YouTubes of big

bands (Basie!) and film scores (Mancini?) that utilize these devices ingeniously and musically. As you and your students experiment with playing these musical devices, it's ok to go too far, and then pull it back. By listening, your students will begin to comprehend and appreciate what is tasteful, and even tasty!

Now, about those last twelve bars: Speaking of scoops, mm. 112-113 are nothing but **[Ex. 7, mm. 112-113, scoops]**. Let it rip, there's nothing to cover up or get in the way.

Ex. 7, mm. 112-113, "scoops."



The piece, of course, finishes off with a version of the *Vigilante* melody, in the saxophones, trumpets, and horns at m. 114. Meanwhile, the clarinets have a familiar descending chromatic line, while the flutes, oboes, and 1st trumpets (*divisi*) are hung up on eleven beats of pedal tonics and dominants **[Ex. 8, mm. 114-117, final *Vigilante* variant with pedal and descending chromatic line]**.

When a vigilante's job is done, it's done. No hanging around for accolades. The ending is just three measures long, the *tutti* ensemble brings back a bit of the *Vigilante* theme one last time, ending with one last fall in the upper voices.

There's a little bit of *Vigilante* heroism and goodness inside all of us. This may be the piece of music that brings it out!

❖

DR. MARC R. DICKEY has been a member of the faculty of the California State University, Fullerton School of Music since 1988, leading the instrumental music education teacher training program throughout his tenure. He served as Director of the School of Music from 2005-2017. Dr. Dickey also conducted the CSU Fullerton Symphonic Winds and University Band for many years. His research has been published in the *Journal of Research in Music Education* and the *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*. He has guest conducted and adjudicated bands and orchestras from 25 U.S. states, three Canadian provinces, and the nation of Vietnam. He is one of the youngest conductors to have been awarded the NBA's Citation of Excellence.

Ex. 8, mm. 114-117, "final *Vigilante* variant with pedal and descending chromatic line."