

Angels with Red Tails - by Brian DuFord
Interview with the USAF Heritage of America Band's Raymond Landon:

USAF: Can you tell us what motivated you to write this piece? And why did you think to write this, for this particular group?

BD: What inspired me most was getting to know my wife's Uncle Lt. Col. Charles W. Dryden, reading his book "A Train: Memoirs of a Tuskegee Airman", learning about the history of the Tuskegee Airmen and then hearing and meeting the Langley Winds. I've had a long standing respect for my Uncle and the Tuskegee Airmen. I really wanted to pay tribute to their remarkable story and legend. There have been many books, films, documentaries and a theater piece written about their intrepid history. With this piece I wanted to create a more intimate portrait, to bring the music and emotion closer to the audience. Chamber music has that particular quality and the wind sextet instrumentation really appealed to me. Writing for the Langley Winds simply made sense. This work is about an important chapter in the history of the USAF. Writing for the Langley Winds, an Air-Force ensemble, ties it all together - bringing the past into the present. They are also a fantastic group of musicians whose engaging and dynamic musical personality gave me great impetus to see this project to completion.

USAF: Lt. Col. Dryden, your late Uncle, must have been an amazing person to have a conversation with - are there any particularly memorable stories from his history as a Tuskegee Airman that he shared with you?

BD: Yes, he was an amazing and extraordinary person. He never spoke much, at least not to me, about his experience as a Tuskegee Airman. He put it all into his book. But I will say this, he was full of great wisdom and would always offer profound insights regarding respect for others, living a mannered, dignified life and keeping one's self committed and determined when striving for goals and aspirations. He was truly inspiring and I often reflected upon him throughout the composing of this piece.

USAF: Are there any musical references to him directly in this composition?

BD: No, not directly. Although his book inspired the project the piece is really about all the Airmen and their collective experience. I wanted to make sure the music reflected that. But, now that I think about it, his presence is distinctly felt in the movement entitled "Press on Regardless". Here the music captures metaphorically how the men triumphed over discrimination and my Uncle was surely a strong willed man who possessed that particular strength not to fail or to be turned away.

USAF: What sort of challenges did you encounter while writing this work? Were there any surprises that delighted you in the process?

BD: The greatest challenge was creating a musical portrait that would tell their story without the aid of any visuals or spoken narrative. Before I wrote a single note I made sure I knew what events, emotions and experiences I wanted to explore. The work's timeline hits upon their dreams, training, combat, and frustrations then finally culminates in a celebration of their heroics and perseverance. It was also challenging to give the music a cinematic quality without it feeling like the visual was missing. The music needed to stand on its own two legs, so to speak. I wanted to make sure my ideas were clear, not only to the audience but to the musicians as well. What surprised me most was how quickly the piece came together. The whole work took about 17 days to compose. It flowed from my heart, giving me great pleasure throughout its creation. Most of the time I will work on a piece for two months, so this experience was truly exceptional. Incidentally, this piece was written in Denver over the Christmas holiday in the presence of my mother-in-law who is Charlie's sister. Perhaps that's why it flowed uninhibited.

USAF: What do you hope to inspire in the audiences who will hear this new piece?

BD: A sense of pride, patriotism, reverence and joy. I hope the audience will gain an emotional understanding of what these men had to overcome and be curious to learn more about this amazing chapter in American history. Before meeting my Uncle I had never heard of the Tuskegee Airmen, growing up it wasn't told in my history books. Now that I know their story, it has become a constant source of inspiration in my life and I wish for the audience to have that same experience.

February 2013