**Instrumentation**

2 Flutes  
Oboe(s)  
Bassoon(s)  

3 Clarinets in Bb  
Bass Clarinet in Bb  
Optional:  
  Eb Contra-alto Clarinet (part identical to double bass, transposed and octave-shifted as needed)  
  Bb Contrabass Clarinet (part identical to double bass, transposed and octave-shifted as needed)  

2 Alto Saxes  
Tenor Sax  
Baritone Sax  

3 Trumpets in Bb  
French Horns  
3 Trombones  
Euphonium  
Tuba  

Double Bass  

Percussion:  
  Marimba (one instrument, two players)  
  Vibraphone  
  Suspended cymbal  
  Bass drum
The wind band medium has, in the twenty-first century, a host of disparate styles that dominate its texture. At the core of its contemporary development exist a group of composers who dazzle with scintillating and frightening virtuosity. As such, at first listening one might experience John Mackey’s *Sheltering Sky* as a striking departure. Its serene and simple presentation is a throwback of sorts - a nostalgic portrait of time suspended.

The work itself has a folksong-like quality - intended by the composer - and through this an immediate sense of familiarity emerges. Certainly the repertoire has a long and proud tradition of weaving folk songs into its identity, from the days of Holst and Vaughan Williams to modern treatments by such figures as Donald Grantham and Frank Ticheli. Whereas these composers incorporated extant melodies into their works, however, Mackey takes a play from Percy Grainger. Grainger’s *Colonial Song* seemingly sets a beautiful folksong melody in an enchanting way (so enchanting, in fact, that he reworked the tune into two other pieces: *Australian Up-Country Tune* and *The Gum-Suckers March*). In reality, however, Grainger’s melody was entirely original - his own concoction to express how he felt about his native Australia. Likewise, although the melodies of *Sheltering Sky* have a recognizable quality (hints of the contours and colors of *Danny Boy* and *Shenandoah* are perceptible), the tunes themselves are original to the work, imparting a sense of hazy distance as though they were from a half-remembered dream.

The work unfolds in a sweeping arch structure, with cascading phrases that elide effortlessly. The introduction presents softly articulated harmonies stacking through a surrounding placidity. From there emerge statements of each of the two folksong-like melodies - the call as a sighing descent in solo oboe, and its answer as a hopeful rising line in trumpet. Though the composer’s trademark virtuosity is absent, his harmonic language remains. Mackey avoids traditional triadic sonorities almost exclusively, instead choosing more indistinct chords with diatonic extensions (particularly seventh and ninth chords) that facilitate the hazy sonic world that the piece inhabits. Near cadences, chromatic dissonances fill the narrow spaces in these harmonies, creating an even greater pull toward wistful nostalgia. Each new phrase begins over the resolution of the previous one, creating a sense of motion that never completely stops. The melodies themselves unfold and eventually dissipate until at last the serene introductory material returns - the opening chords finally coming to rest.

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a tempo, but very freely