

SELECTING QUALITY CONCERT/CONTEST LITERATURE

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The selection of quality music for our bands is one of the most essential and difficult tasks facing us. The success of our students' musical education is dependent upon how well we meet the challenge of providing appropriate, quality repertoire, and is certainly reflective of our priorities as music educators.

Joseph Casey's book, *Teaching Techniques and Insights*, states the following in the section on literature: "If we believe that the primary purpose of music education is to entertain and present a positive image of the school to the community, then our decisions about the literature we place in the path of students will show the degree we have drifted toward that purpose. On the other hand, if the primary purpose of a music education is to impart the substance of pieces and to contribute to the development of the individual through music literature, we will look at the choice of literature in another way." It goes on to say, "How well and how wisely the music educator selects literature, will determine the content that will impact on students via their literature. The better the literature, the more profound the experience will be for students, and the longer the impact and effects will last."

Dick Floyd, head of the Texas University Interscholastic League, wrote an article in 1989 entitled *Quality Repertoire: The Essence of an Exemplary Music Program*. He began that article with the following quote from Zoltan Kodaly that sums up the issue of selecting quality literature very well. The quote goes something like this: "Children should be taught with only the most musically valuable material. For the young, only the best is good enough. They should be led to masterpieces by means of masterpieces." There really isn't any argument against this statement. However, the statement certainly lays a formidable challenge before us.

We must recognize that to meet the challenge of selecting quality music for our students, much care, time, and effort are involved. For the language arts teacher or the math teacher the choice of repertoire [or what to teach], is made for them through very specific curriculum and specified text books. Our luxury and our challenge is to select our 'subject matter' for each ensemble. It is a challenge that offers a great many options and even greater responsibilities since the musical growth of our students is dependent upon the decisions made by us as directors.

Floyd's article also states the goals we have for our ensembles certainly affect our choice of literature. "Making a I rating at contest" will dictate a certain kind of music. "Pleasing the parents" might require a different approach, or "keeping my students happy" might lead to another avenue. The rationale is endless and as varied as the individual directors who select the music. Quite honestly, under certain circumstances, most of these justifications can be held as valid if the musical growth of the students remains a high priority.

Listed below are criteria for choosing music taken from the band repertoire guide, *Best Music for the High School Band* and its companion volume, *Best Music for the Young Band*:

Compositions must exhibit a high degree of compositional craft. This will determine what students will learn from a piece, and more importantly, what level of aesthetic experience they might ultimately gain from it. *Only by playing the best music will students gain a knowledge of, feeling for, and appreciation of what is valuable in music.*

Compositions must contain important musical constructs necessary for the development of musicianship. Among these (not all of which need to be present in any given work, of course), are: a variety of keys—major, minor, modal; a variety of meters—duple, triple, combinations, and both proportional metric or graphic notation; a variety of harmonic styles, ranging from traditional to contemporary to avant garde; a variety of articulation styles—smooth, light, heavy, detached, legato, and so on. Compositions lacking in sensitivity, appropriateness, and perhaps variety in these areas are less likely to be of musical value and interest.

Compositions must exhibit an orchestration that, within the restrictions associated with a particular grade level, encourages musical independence both of individuals and sections. Too much repertoire emphasizes homophonic scoring, usually with large groupings within the ensemble playing all at once. When this is done too much and too often it will rob the individual of independent musical growth. Although this tendency to “safely score” may allow the ensemble to sound better initially, these pieces will over a period of time preclude the real issue at hand, that of developing functioning, independent musicians. Scoring that is “heavy-handed,” with thick doublings predominating, inhibits the musical clarity, texture, and color that are so integral to the sounds of the band and wind ensemble.

A past issue of the *National Federation NEWS* magazine had an excerpt from a letter written by the father of a prospective band student to the band director. The man wrote “you mention that being involved in the band will teach my son a sense of camaraderie, teach him to function as a member of a team, participate in evaluative and competitive festivals, and a number of other similar virtues. If those are the functions of the band, my son will not be a part of it. I want him to be a member of the band for one thing---the music. Where else can he learn to appreciate and perform great music, and develop a life-long appreciation of that music. If that is the main function of the band program, you will have my son as a member of your band and my total support.”

The important issue remains the quality of music and the experience it provides for our students. New educational music is written, published, and marketed on the basis of what directors are willing to buy. For financial reasons many publishers are not willing to take a chance on a new composition unless it fits the marketing formula they have determined will make a profit. Consequently, many significant new works are not being published, and many older quality works are ‘out of print.’ We, as music consumers, influence the decisions concerning the quality of music that is published. So, we, as directors, must place a higher priority on the music we perform at contest, concerts, and other venues.

As stated in Floyd’s article, we often get tired of folk music. However, is it not better to perform melodies that have stood the test of time and represent our musical heritage rather than some catchy pop tune that repeats endlessly and is supported by an equally endless ostinato? Are formula compositions really worth the little effort it takes to learn the initial fast section, the slower section, and a repeat of the fast section? Are not compositions that take study and reflection more meaningful than an easily forgotten melody accompanied by a repetitive chord progression? Will not the study and performance of quality music more likely bond our students to a lifetime pursuit of music appreciation?

Please consider this. Looking at cartoons does not create an appreciation of great paintings. Viewing molded figurines does not help one appreciate the beauty of a sculpture by Michelangelo. Reading comic books does not help a student appreciate the works of Shakespeare. We do not build an appreciation of great music and instill the joy of performing significant music with the study and performance of music of lesser quality and worth in our programs.

We should strive to use the best music possible. We should not yield to the temptation of always playing what will win, entertain, or be popular with students. When we select quality works, we must budget our time to be sure our student are aware of the importance of the compositions being prepared, and not just concerned with the notes on their parts. We must resist the temptation to play the latest clone of last year’s biggest seller. We must avoid confusing technical achievement with musical achievement. We must select music, whatever it is, that allows us to explore worthy musical objectives with our students.

With all of that said, how do we select quality music for our bands? What makes a piece worthy of the expenditure of funds to buy it, worthy of the time invested in rehearsing it, and, the impression it leaves after we’ve performed it? The answer is not clear, and, is probably as different as the directors involved. We draw from our

own musical tastes, our experiences, our needs, suggestions from others, and any number of tangible and intangible forces.

A source many of us use, at least to begin the process, is reading sessions. Our attendance at state and national conventions should help us hear a variety of quality music. We should attend concerts, and check state and national lists for quality music. We should read the new music reviews in *The Instrumentalist*, and review *Bandworld's* 'Top 100' band composition list. *Best Music for the High School Band*, *Best Music for the Young Band*, and the National Association for Music Education's *Instructional Literature for the Middle Level Band*, are publications filled with excellent compositions in a variety of styles and grade levels. The numerous recordings and books in the *Teaching Music through Performance in Band* series provide not only recordings of significant compositions at all levels, but invaluable stylistic, analytical, historical and stylistic information. *Band Music Notes* [Smith and Stoutamire] and *March Music Notes* [Smith] provide access to hundreds of compositions worthy of consideration. Online sources have also become quite useful. Talk to others, and ask what are the best pieces they've played recently. Finally, and probably the most obvious and overlooked source, check your own library. Just because the copyright date on the music is prior to 2015 doesn't mean it's bad!

Consider establishing a personal repertoire of quality music you feel every student in your band program should study and/or perform. Don't feel you must actually perform every piece you study. Expose your students to a variety of music: marches, transcriptions, folk music, original band music, movie and show tune medleys, contemporary music, and yes, even good, quality 'pop' music.

Realize we all make mistakes. No matter how hard we try, we all make some bad choices. Try to stay away from the latest formula piece by 'you know who' or one of his/her clones. Check out the marches of Sousa, Fillmore [*aka* Bennett, Beans, Hall, Hartley, Hays] and King; all three wrote marches every band can play. Where else but in band, can most of our students play the music of Beethoven, Mozart, Bach, Rossini, and any number of other 'classical' composers? Don't forget Claude T. Smith, Alfred Reed, or Frank Erickson. Check out the timeless arrangements of Robert Russell Bennett, Warren Barker, Mayhew Lake and others. Invest your budget and time in music that will be playable in the years to come.

A survey compiled several years ago of music performed by bands at the Missouri State High School Activities Association State Large Ensemble Festival revealed some interesting trends. With nine festival sites reporting, a total of 455 selections composed by approximately 130 different composers were performed. Interestingly, 22 composers were responsible for about 60% of those selections. Karl King, Claude T. Smith and Robert W. Smith were the most frequently performed composers among Missouri bands. Other composers whose music was frequently performed included: James Swearingen, John Philip Sousa, David Holsinger, Ed Hucceby, and Henry Fillmore. Some of the most frequently performed compositions were *Fairest of the Fair* [Sousa], *Hosts of Freedom* [King], *Emblem of Unity* [Richards], *On an American Spiritual* [Holsinger], *Declaration Overture* [Smith] and *Chorale and Shaker Dance* [Zdechlik].

The challenge of selecting quality concert and contest music is formidable for each director in each situation. Frank Battisti states in his July, 1997, article in *The Instrumentalist* that "musical values are developed in direct proportion to the quality of music students hear and create." We must remember our students' music education must remain at the forefront of our efforts, and meet that challenge by selecting for them the best literature available.