

Suggestions for Selecting Music

by Matthew D. Talbert & Scott C. Tobias



One of the most important, yet often overlooked, duties of band directors is the task of selecting appropriate music for their ensembles. Although this is one of the more critical aspects of our jobs, we often struggle with selecting music that meets the needs and goals of our students. The purpose of this article is to provide a few suggestions that will hopefully aid in making the music selection process more enjoyable for you and, ultimately, will increase the quality of performances from your ensembles.

Educational Goals

Outstanding teachers identify the goals they want their students to meet before selecting the music, rather than justifying the music after the fact. The teachers that see continuous improvement in their bands are usually the ones who select music with the end result in mind. As you select your music, try to ask yourself the following questions to help guide you as you work through the selection process.

- 1) What do you want your students to know (musical knowledge)?
- 2) What do you want your students to be able to do (musical skills)?

For example, a musical knowledge goal may be for students to learn the form of a standard American march. In this case, the programming of a march by John Philip Sousa would be an appropriate selection to help achieve this goal. A goal related to musical skills may be for students to be able to play with dynamic contrast. Again, a march by John Phillip Sousa will allow for instruction and practice in this area. By creating a list of goals for students to accomplish during their time in the band program, directors are in essence providing themselves with an outline that greatly assists with literature selection.

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Understanding the Ensemble

The next step in selecting music for your ensemble is being keenly aware of where students are on the path toward the goals you have set. This involves assessing the strengths and weaknesses of your students. This concept is perhaps more difficult with newer teachers, but is a concept that must be grasped in order to effectively select music. What do the students currently know? What are they able to do at the present time? This knowledge and these abilities are fluid and will change over the course of time.

Directors should continually assess these areas and make adjustments as necessary to the instruction being provided. What was once a strength or a weakness may likely change as the semester and year unfolds. Continual assessment of your students, formally and informally, will ensure you are aware of what capabilities and knowledge your ensemble possesses. Over time, this will help you make informed decisions on which music to select.

While it is advisable to select music that highlights your strengths in order to achieve a successful performance, weaknesses should not be ignored or covered up. The music chosen for the students to study should provide an opportunity for all band members to grow and improve regardless of their current abilities. Students tend to be more motivated to excel when presented with a new goal or challenge. To this end, directors are encouraged to select those works that are just beyond the ensemble's current abilities, but are still attainable within a reasonable period of time. While challenging the ensemble is encouraged, programming works that are too far beyond the ensemble's current abilities should be avoided. Providing an attainable challenge can be a useful motivational tool. Presenting an unachievable one can hurt morale.

Additional Considerations

While educational goals should be of utmost importance when selecting music for your ensemble, there are additional factors also worth noting. These factors can be divided into three categories—ensemble considerations, performance considerations, and conductor considerations.

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With regards to ensemble considerations, look at scores as often as possible when selecting music; an audio file might not tell you the entire story! For example, it might be best to avoid programming a piece that has three separate and distinct clarinet parts when you only have four clarinet players in your band. You might not be able hear this when listening to the recording. Pay attention to thinly scored sections that may expose weaknesses or a lack of instrumentation within the ensemble.

Give special consideration to the involvement of the percussion section. A program consisting of a march, a lyrical ballad, and an orchestral transcription may sound like a fine program, but may not offer much for the percussionists to do. Since several weeks of class time will be spent studying, rehearsing, and preparing this literature, it can be less beneficial to the percussionists to spend that much time simply counting rests. Inactivity can lead to students disengaging from the rehearsal. This not only affects the quality of education received, but also may lead to behavior problems due to boredom.

This same concept should also be applied throughout the ensemble. Consider the involvement of all sections. In young band literature, look for those pieces that provide melodic material or other interesting lines for low brass. These sections are often faced with a page of whole notes while the upper brass and woodwinds are developing technical skills.

As mentioned earlier, consider the difficulty of the composition relative to the abilities of the ensemble. In doing so, examine the following: ranges for each instrument, the key(s) in which the piece is written, articulation and style demands, rhythmic complexity, and the overall form. Directors should also strive to present their students with a variety of genres, composers, tempos, styles, old and new compositions. In rehearsals it is often easy to forget that we start and stop countless times, meaning we never really get a true sense of the students' endurance. As a result, consideration should also be given to the length of the work as it relates to the endurance of the players, especially with

younger bands.

A second area of consideration concerns various aspects of the performance itself. It is important to realize who the audience members are when selecting music. Will the audience members understand and appreciate what the ensemble is playing? Literature should be accessible and enjoyable to those in attendance while still educating them about quality in music. The nature of the performance event may also dictate literature selection. The program presented for a feature performance at a music educator convention may not be as suitable for a community performance in the town square. The *First Suite in E-flat* by Gustav Holst is quality literature, but not the best selection to be played at a baseball game. On the other hand, *Take Me Out to the Ballgame* may not be of the same artistic quality as the Holst, but is much more appropriate for that venue.

Additionally, it is important to consider the length of your concert. Depending on your situation, there are some factors to consider: Are you combining your concert with choir and expecting the audience to remain for the duration of the concert? Do you have chamber groups performing with your bands? Does your concert align with a PTA meeting? Is there a set change that takes a significant amount of time? If so, take these factors into consideration when planning the length of your concert. We want our audiences to be attentive and receptive as we perform; however, both the overall length and the internal pacing of the concert can affect this attentiveness if not well thought out.

While giving thought to the students and audience, directors should not forget about their own growth and development. Directors should continue to challenge themselves as teachers, conductors, and artists. Do what is necessary to remain engaged as a lifelong learner. Avoid falling victim to repeating the same music every few years. Venture out into new works. Explore music and composers that are less known as opposed to only those that are familiar.

Resources

Veteran teachers who have had success can be a valuable resource in helping you determine what is quality literature. These teachers are also more likely to be able to help you determine possible pitfalls within compositions. Do not be afraid to ask for help, especially if you are new to the profession.

A number of other resources are available for directors seeking literature to perform with their ensembles. Programs gathered from state festivals, conventions, and honor band clinics can be valuable tools when making literature decisions. These programs not only provide titles and composers, but also ideas on ways to combine these works in an overall concert. Be attentive at these events and look for opportunities to continue to expose yourself to quality literature. Whether it be your state conference or a concert festival, attend as many performances as possible and make notes on programs that you can review once you return home. In some cases, the selections performed may be more challenging than appropriate for your ensemble at the present time, but you may be introduced to a new composer whose other works may be more approachable.

Online resources also exist giving directors access to a wealth of information. Professional organizations such as the National Band Association (www.nationalbandassociation.org) and the College Band Directors National Association (www.cbdna.org) have websites that list programs being performed around the country and offer Selective Music Lists for reference. Whether you use these resources or others, make an effort to expand your knowledge of the materials currently available for use with bands.

Summary

Literature selection is one of the most important decisions made by band directors. The compositions placed in front of our students serve as textbooks through which music is taught. An

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effective director will select those works that meet a number of criteria including quality in craftsmanship, appropriateness for the ensemble, accessibility by the audience, and achievement of educational goals. Of utmost importance is also finding those works that will inspire both performers and audience members alike, and will ignite a passion for music not only in the moment, but for a lifetime. ■

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Tobias currently serves as the Second Vice-President of the National Band Association.

NBA Georgia Chapter Awards Scholarship

Michael Oubre, Georgia State Chair

Using funds remaining from the NBA Reception we host at the GMEA In-Service Conference in January, the Georgia NBA provided a \$250 scholarship for a senior intending to major in Music Education. The student, Amanda Foster of Fannin County High School (Scott Barnstead, Director) was awarded this scholarship. We are grateful and fortunate to be able to do this and hope to expand it in the future. The picture to the right features Mr. Barnstead and Amanda Foster.



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