



From Selection to the Stage: An Introduction to Repertoire Selection for the New Director

BY SCOTT-LEE ATCHISON

Selecting repertoire is one of the most difficult and important tasks that we take on in the development of our students' musical educations. It serves as the backbone of our curriculum and students who play quality repertoire are more likely to continue on with music later in life. Much like English teachers rely on the writings of Shakespeare and Hemingway and science teachers utilize the periodic table of elements, we define our students' educational experience by the subject matter that we present to them. As Craig Kirchhoff, Director of Bands at the University of Minnesota, states:

Selecting repertoire is not about choosing pieces to play; selecting repertoire is about defining a curriculum and our beliefs about what music education should be for our students. Selecting repertoire is also about commitment, exposure, and risk: commitment, because the music that we rehearse and perform defines our values; exposure, because we share this repertoire with our students and eventually with an audience; and risk, because the music we select may not always resonate with what students, parents, and administrators believe to be the purpose of a music program in an academic setting.¹

Unfortunately, repertoire knowledge and selection is one of the least understood areas by new directors entering the profession. Typically, undergraduate music majors are playing in ensembles that are far more mature and experienced than what they will encounter when they enter public school teaching. Therefore, new teachers enter the work force with experience playing repertoire that is largely inaccessible to public school ensembles. In my own personal experience, I remember being terrified when it came time to pick repertoire, thinking to myself:

“What is good music?”

“Where do I start?”

“What can these students play?”

“Who can I ask for help?”

Over the years, I have come to realize that those same feelings were shared by many of my colleagues when they first started teaching. Fortunately, there are more resources now than ever to help new teachers on their quest. Selecting repertoire is like any other skill: you get better with practice.

WHERE TO START

The first piece of advice I would give to anyone who is starting his teaching career is to *find a mentor*. Make a list of people who you admire and do not be afraid to reach out to them. That list can be made from a variety of sources:

- Experienced music educators in the area.
- Successful directors at schools who are similar schools as yours (school size, band size, socio-economics, resources, etc.).
- Former teachers (they still want to help you after you graduate!).
- Your cooperating teacher from student teaching.

An experienced director in the area could be a great resource for you in many ways. They may not be the director of your band, but they probably know your band better than you do when you first get there, including what might be a good “fit” for your students. If one of your mentors is not familiar with your program then give them recordings and copies of past programs and ask their advice. The moral of the story is that you do not have to (and should not try to) do this alone. There are people who are more willing to help than you realize. All you have to do is ask!

Another great resource is state repertoire lists. Obviously, you will want to get the list of the state in which you are teaching; however, you should also consider consulting other state lists as well. Texas, Illinois, Florida, Georgia, and Virginia are all examples of useful state lists to reference. The Texas PML (Prescribed Music List)² is probably the most comprehensive and thorough state lists you will be able to find. In addition, the *Teaching Music Through Performance in Band* series is an excellent resource for students entering the teaching

profession. Each volume lists works by grade and has a short write up on each one with historical background, technical and stylistic considerations, along with suggested listening and many other resources. The accompanying CDs for each volume are wonderful resources as well.

Finally, make sure you go to a lot of concerts. Go to concerts of groups of all different genres and all different ability levels. Watching a professional orchestra may not provide you with much repertoire that would relate to a public school band, but it will train your ears to listen at a higher level and give you an appreciation of greater repertoire. Seeing a great university wind ensemble may not translate to you finding some new pieces that your high school band can play, but you might hear works that you like by composers whom have written grade 3 pieces too. Lastly, go to concerts of other public school bands, and save their programs. On the programs, take note of what you liked, what you did not like, what may be a good piece for your groups to play right now or what may be a great piece for you to aspire to play someday. You must develop an appreciation and taste for the repertoire, and there is no better way to do just that than going to concerts and listening to a lot of music. To develop a lifelong enjoyment in the field, you must become a connoisseur of music and develop taste by constantly experiencing new things. French composer, cellist, and teacher, Paul Tortelier providing the fitting quote:

Good taste is rare. Good taste is made of a thousand disgusts... If you don't feel that the fish has gone bad, or the beer has been opened before, you have no taste. The same in music.³

SELECTING, REHEARSING, AND PERFORMING THE PROGRAM

The primary goal when selecting repertoire should be to help students grow musically. With that being said, every band comes with different needs and circumstances. This leaves each director with a number of questions that they must ask themselves when making repertoire choices.

The first question you must ask yourself is whether or not each piece is of the proper quality. To a certain extent, that question is a matter of individual and personal taste, but consider the following from Fred J. Allen's *Criteria for Selecting Band Repertoire*:

Does the composer exhibit **CRAFTSMANSHIP** in the piece?

- Does it have logical form?

- Are ideas developed, or is it overly repetitive?
- Is the piece unpredictable enough to avoid being trite?
- Are there various orchestral techniques displayed throughout?

Is the composition a piece of **ART**?

- Does the piece allow for personal musical judgment:
 - By the players?
 - By the conductor?
 - By the audience?
- Is it evocative:
 - Programmatic or impressionistic?
 - Derivative of or related to another art form?
 - Abstract?
- Is it sincere?

From there, you will want to consider how each piece you select relates to one another (programmatic) and your student's education (pedagogical). Developing a concert program is more than just picking a few pieces that the band will sound good playing at festival. There should be variety, flow, and thoughtfulness to the program and you should consider your audience, yourself, and most importantly, your students. Here are some questions that hopefully will guide your decision-making:

Programmatic Considerations

- Are there a variety of musical styles?
- Is there a variety of tonal language?
- What is the purpose of program?
 - Festival program?
 - Thematic program? (patriotic concert, holiday concert, etc.)
- Is there a logical flow to the program?
 - Does the first piece engage the audience? (i.e. Opener)
 - Is there an opportunity for the group to play soft and beautifully? (i.e. Lyrical piece)
 - Is there a piece that you want to build the program around? (i.e. centerpiece)
 - How do you end the program?
- Are you featuring a soloist or certain section?
- Are there time constraints?

Pedagogical Considerations:

- Are there students getting a chance to experience a variety of musical styles?
- Are there a variety of keys across the whole program?
- Do the students have the endurance to play

- through the entire program?
- What are the technical needs? Will it stretch the players?
- Do you have the number of rehearsals to pull this off?
- Does it help you build to greater musical goals down the road?

Again, since there are so many stakeholders, don't hesitate to share your program ideas with your mentors. An experienced educator would be able to play devils advocate and help guide you along the way.

Once you begin the rehearsal process, please know that you are not necessarily committed to each piece you have selected. If you find that the music is not the right "fit" for the ensemble, you are free to change course—especially if it is in the first few rehearsals of a new concert set. As you gain more experience as a conductor, you will become increasingly comfortable finding repertoire that matches your group's ability level and your student's educational needs. Here are a few other suggestions:

- **Past Recordings:** Listen to past recordings of the group and ask yourself the following questions:
 - What grade / level was the music they played? Was it appropriate for them?
 - What keys and meters were they playing in?
 - What styles did they play?
 - What things did they struggle with?
 - Did specific sections of the ensemble stand out?
- **First Rehearsal:** On the first rehearsal of a new piece, a general "rule of thumb" is to see if the group can play through all of it in that first rehearsal. If they cannot, then it might be too difficult for the group. Conversely, if the piece is close to performance ready that first rehearsal, you may consider finding something that will challenge them more.
- **Average Difficulty:** If you think your band would be comfortable playing Grade 3 music (for example), then you should try to have the program average about a Grade 3 for the whole program. This means that you may want to consider playing one Grade 4 piece to stretch them musically and technically, along with a Grade 2 piece to allow them to focus on beauty with ease. An example of a program under these circumstances would be as follows:
 - Concert Opener—Grade 3

- Lyrical Selection—Grade 2
- Centerpiece—Grade 4
- Closing Selection—Grade 3
- **Reflection:** Keep your own list of works you have played, heard, and conducted in the past. This will allow you to keep track of things and prevent you and your students from experiencing the same composers and pieces too often. It will also help guide your selection in the future. Not every piece you select will be a success, so keeping track of past repertoire will help you not repeat past mistakes.

Finally, remember that the repertoire you select is your curriculum. Consider the following excerpt from H. Robert Reynolds' *Repertoire IS the Curriculum*:

Often music educators get confused (I know I did in my early years), and this confusion takes the form of developing the quality of the ensemble and its standing in the community and the profession at the expense of the musical education of the students. It becomes more and more important to have a fantastic ensemble than to educate the students. The desire for "fame and glory" by the conductor is all too often motivating the rehearsals, the choice of music, and outside activities. When this is in evidence, the choice of music will be made more for, "It will make my ensemble sound good" rather than the musical value. This "trap" is closely allied to the "my students will like this music" issue. While it is important that the students be enthusiastic about the music and the musical experience, English Literature classes do not select reading material based upon the desires of the students but rather on the inherent value of the literature to be read. Music classes should be no different.⁴

There is no more important decision that we make for our students than the music we put in front of them. If we seek validation for the importance of music and the artistic merit of wind bands, then we must take the selection of repertoire very seriously. Fortunately, there is more music and resources than ever before via print and digital media. It is a great time to be teaching music and an especially great time to be teaching wind bands.

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SUGGESTED READING / RESOURCES

- Miles, Richard B. *Teaching Music through Performance in Band*. Vol. 1-10. GIA Publications.
- Gilbert, Jay W. "Thinking About the Concert Performance Curriculum"
- H. Robert Reynolds, "Repertoire Is the Curriculum," *Music Educators Journal*, Vol. 87 (July 2000), p. 33.
- Kirchhoff, Craig. "Selecting Repertoire: A Matter of Conscience. A Personal Viewpoint." *Southwestern Musician*, October 2010, p. 21-24.
- Acton Ostling: *An Evaluation of Compositions for Wind-Band According to Specific Criteria of Serious Artistic Merit*. Diss., University of Iowa, 1974.
- Salzman, Timothy. *A Composer's Insight: Thoughts, Analysis, and Commentary on Contemporary Masterpieces for Wind Band*. Galesville, MD: Meredith Music Publications, 2003.
- Garofalo, Robert Joseph. *Blueprint for Band: A Guide to Teaching Comprehensive Musicianship through School Band Performance*. Rev. ed. Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.: Meredith Music, 1983.
- Battisti, Frank L. *On Becoming a Conductor: Lessons and Meditations on the Art of Conducting*. Galesville, MD: Meredith Music, 2007.
- "Prescribed Music List (PML)." — *Music — University Interscholastic League (UIL)*. <<http://www.uiltexas.org/music/pml>>.
- www.TimReynish.com

END NOTES

- 1 Kirchhoff, Craig. "Selecting Repertoire: A Matter of Conscience. A Personal Viewpoint." *Southwestern Musician*, October 2010, p. 21.
- 2 "Prescribed Music List (PML)." — *Music — University Interscholastic League (UIL)*. <<http://www.uiltexas.org/music/pml>>.
- 3 "Master Class Tortelier BBC 1987." *Master Class Tortelier BBC 1987*. N.d. Web. 18 Jan. 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IU4hd1MLL-Q>>.
- 4 H. Robert Reynolds, "Repertoire Is the Curriculum," *Music Educators Journal*, Vol. 87 (July 2000), p. 33.

Scott-Lee Atchison, scott.lee.atchison@uky.edu, serves as the Assistant Director of Bands and Director of Athletic Bands at the University of Kentucky.

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