

Concert Programming For Music Educators

by Gregory X. Whitmore



"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." – Zoltan Kodály

As music educators, we recognize the inherent educational and artistic value in providing literature of only the highest artistic merit. As collaborators in the music making process with our students, the literature we select must be aesthetically edifying for ourselves, and those we conduct. Additionally, as arts educators, the literature we select to perform for our audience serves an additional role in allowing our local communities to have a transformative cultural experience through the patronage of our concerts. With the educational and artistic experiences of so many effected by the literature we select to perform, the act of programming for our ensembles is perhaps the most important act we will undertake as music educators. Yet, how do we undertake the process of programming in an effective way? I would like to offer the following suggestions for music educators of all levels and ensemble types.

Core Beliefs Pertaining To Programming

1 It is important to remember that programming

for our ensembles is more than just "picking music." I submit that our concerts are curated. This is a high-end, intensive, deliberate, artistically centered process with both artistic and educational outcomes.

2 Consider your connections to the titans in our profession. Your work in programming for a concert season is also undertaken by the great conductors of the world's great orchestras, choirs, and concert bands. We should come to the literature planning process with the same enthusiastic effort, creativity, and artistic energy as those at the vanguard of our art.

3 The act of programming for a concert season is akin to selecting ingredients for a meal. Be very careful about where you are sourcing your "produce."

4 Central Question: "Why am I forsaking all other pieces of wind/orchestral/choral literature to perform this work?"

5 All ensembles in our music programs deserve and require concerts that are well curated both educationally and artistically.

"For only through immersion in music of lasting quality can we engage in aesthetic experiences of breadth and depth." – H. Robert Reynolds

our concert season programming on a macro level?

5 By mid-spring, concert programming should begin to crystalize (yet there is still time for additions and subtractions). The conductor should formally list (type) the entire concert season, with concert and rehearsal dates, and sectionals listed. The conductor should study the completed programmatic "map" of the concert season. Also at this point, the conductor should critically question each concert against the criterion above. It may be prudent for conductors to invite suggestions from trusted colleagues.

6 By late spring, the entire concert season is complete, with all initial study and concert season forecasting complete. At this point, parts should be ordered and copied, along with all necessary scores required for each piece. If needed, dates can be set for concert session part reading, part distribution, etc.

7 By the last day of school: All music is copied and prepared for

distribution. The concert season is set and posted with all requisite information for ensemble comprehension. The conductor now has the entire summer (which is hopefully "down-time" for music educators) to complete in-depth score study of the coming season's literature.

In closing, the compositional quality of the literature selected, the literature's ability to assist in the individual and collective ensemble technical and artistic development, and the inherent artistic value of the literature selected speaks volumes about the educational and artistic intent of the music educator selecting said literature. It is my experience that the aforementioned suggestions allow for conductors of various ensembles at various levels to program concerts that are artistically and educationally invigorating for students, conductors, and audiences alike.

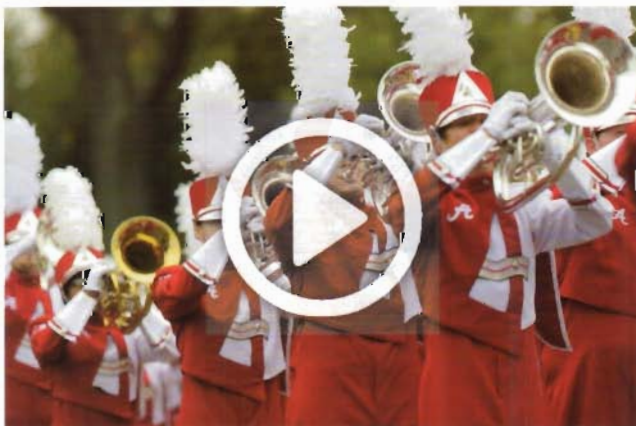
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Inspiration For Well-Informed Programming.

1 Join the mailing lists for the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Los Angeles Master Chorale, etc. Use the concert season brochures as inspiration for your own programming. For instance, if the Los Angeles Philharmonic is featuring a series of concerts based around the work of a singular composer, perhaps in your own program you can do the same thing for all of the ensembles in your charge.

2 Study any forthcoming domestic or international anniversaries, historical events, or dates of institutional significance, and allow these to inform your programming.

3 Consider compositional premiere anniversaries for works in the core repertoire; allow these dates to inform your programming.

4 Consider studying the concert programs from honor ensembles from across the United States (many times a simple Google search will find the concert programs online). This is often a great place to begin your investigation into works previously unknown to you.

Educational Criterion In Literature Programming

1 The work has clearly-evident artistic and compositional craftsmanship. The work has a formal structure, with textural mixture, and overall coherence. Motivic, rhythmic, and thematic development is proportional to the overall structure of the work.

2 The work possesses educational and artistic value. The work is appropriate to the overall ability of the ensemble, yet still allows for the ensemble to be "stretched" in as many ways as possible. The work is neither too difficult, nor too easy. The work possesses artistic depth, and the voice of the composer is clear throughout the composition.

3 The work challenges the ensemble in technical, and emotive aspects. The publisher's grade is not the final

determining factor in the selection to be programmed.

4 The conductor should consider the instrumentation needs of the ensemble, even if in some cases additional players or substitutions are required.

Thematic Programming Suggestions

1 I would submit that our concerts be thematically structured.

Programming thematically allows for a central idea to unify our concerts, and provide structure to the literature we consider for our ensembles. Also, programming in this way allows for our concerts to "open up" to collaboration within other academic or artistic programs on our campuses and in our communities (consider guest artists, student groups, guest ensembles).

2 Thematic programming allows for an increased audience experience, and allows for the audience and ensemble to be taken along a journey through the concert-going experience.

3 Concerts should feature works for large and small ensemble, as well as overall variety in compositional style, genre, and compositional period.

4 The conductor should establish and maintain a commitment to programming work from the core repertory.

Conductors should think "outside of the standard concert program," and look to provide their ensemble and audience with unique and "curious" concert going experiences. Perhaps unique pairings of works to perform, trying new ways to immerse an audience in a piece, or including innovative ideas to take the concert experience outside the norm.

Commitment To Score Study

1 Each conductor should establish a functioning repertoire that comprises his or her own central repertoire. Concert programming will be centered from this repertoire, and extended outward into new works and new composers.

2 "Someday Study:" Each conductor

should study literature that they would like to "someday" perform with their ensembles, even if their ensemble is not yet able to perform the work. Additionally, each conductor should make an effort to become as "well-versed" in as much of the literature and masterworks of their medium as possible.

3 Each conductor should find a "Big Five" list of cornerstone literature that can be performed on a rotational basis with his or her students.

The Act Of Programming

1 Programming for the next concert season should begin in earnest in the late winter of the current concert season, and follow a "macro – micro" approach. Conductors should begin the process simply by laying out a calendar, and brainstorming how and when concerts are planned (as well as all sectionals, dress rehearsals, and necessary extended rehearsals).

Once the date planning process is complete, conductors should begin to think in large terms of programmatic themes, as well as collect the scores of works they are generally interested in conducting.

2 Once thematic ideas are organized, the act of what to program becomes central. The conductor should spend time considering/studying each piece for each concert – considering the rehearsal experience for their students, ensemble ability level as it pertains to each piece, and consider the concert outcome for ensemble and audience.

3 Questions to consider: What is the trajectory of your concert season? Is there a "high point" to your concert season? If so, when? How does this affect the concerts before, or after this high point?

4 Consider what I call "The Programmatic Arc:" The relationship each concert has with each other. Are there works selected for one concert that will in some way prepare the ensemble and audience for the next concert? Is there an overall journey we can take our students and audience on through