

‘We’ve Got Trouble’

Choosing Appropriate Literature for Your Large Instrumental Ensembles

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*Teaching Musical Concepts Through Quality Music – Even if it’s good music, it may not be appropriate and/or suitable for your ensemble.*

*Honesty, Integrity, Selflessness.*

### **GUIDING QUESTIONS WHEN SELECTING REPERTOIRE**

1. What is instrumental repertoire? (commitment, exposure, and risk)
2. What reasons do we have for choosing the music that we play with our students?
3. What process do you go through when selecting music to play?
4. Where do you go to find this music? Where are music lists? (Talk, Listen, Ask)
5. What makes music, good music? What is your conception of quality music?
6. What do you choose, and why do you choose it?

### **CONSIDERED FACTORS WHEN EVALUATING REPERTOIRE**

1. Form – is there proper balance between contrast and repetition?
2. Shape and Design – does the piece reflect a conscious choice and judicious arrangement regarding its architecture and pacing?
3. Orchestration – is there proper balance/variety between tutti and transparent scoring?
4. Style – is there a consistency in style with clearly conceived ideas? Is the music stagnant?
5. Development – is there evidence of imaginative, creative development of material and independence of lines (melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, etc...)?
6. Idiom – is it genuine and consistent? What makes this piece stand out?
7. Musical Validity – does the piece transcend factors of historical and pedagogical importance? Does all the piece offer the idea of teaching triplets?
8. Attention – will the ensemble enjoy the piece more as time progresses? Or inverse? Do we need instant gratification?

### **WHAT IS QUALITY MUSIC?**

(Panel Discussion at the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic by James Neilson)

1. Rhythmic vitality.
2. Genuine originality. (Formula pieces)
3. Melody that has the qualities of economy, logic, and inspiration.
4. Harmony that is consistent with and suitable to the style.
5. Craftsmanship.
6. A sense of values (meaning that everything is in balance and proportion, and there is a sense of continuity).

7. Emotion justified ('...good music ennobles the soul and enlightens both mind and spirit').
8. Quality and personal taste ('...it is okay to let your personal taste be art of the selection process).
9. The test of time.

### **MATCHING MUSIC TO YOUR ENSEMBLE**

1. Choose music that *features strengths* and *develops weaknesses*.
2. Evaluate honestly the strengths and weaknesses of your ensembles.
3. Be realistic and choose music with your head, not your heart.

### **REPERTOIRE SELECTION CHECKLIST**

A few questions to ask yourself when selecting music for your ensembles.

1. Does the piece have musical integrity?
2. Will the ensemble grow musically from learning this piece? (only you know what's appropriate for your ensemble)
3. How will you as a conductor grow from the piece?
4. Are there opportunities for expressive playing?
5. Is there a variety of melodic, harmonic, and textural content?
6. Are there a variety of keys, styles, meters, and technical complexity?
7. Does this piece fit my group and do I have the minimum instrumentation needed?
8. Is there a full score available?
9. Do I have enough percussion to perform the piece?
10. Are the demands developmentally appropriate for the ensemble?
11. How does the piece fit into a comprehensive program?
12. What will the ensemble members receive and benefit from playing this piece? (What am I teaching?)
13. What will the conductor gain from studying, rehearsing, and conducting the piece?
14. Is there adequate time to learn the piece?
15. How does this composition fit into the overall theme of my concert projection?

### **THOUGHTS ON PROGRAMMING**

How do we program a concert/assessment set for our ensembles?

1. Repertoire Variety and Balance
  - a. Long vs. Short
  - b. Slow vs. Fast
  - c. Difficult vs. Easy
  - d. Contemporary vs. Classical
2. Concert pacing and how we build a program. Thematic flow. Order.
3. Serving the musical needs of the ensemble as well as the audience.
4. Rotation of core repertoire, YES or NO?
5. Assessment and adjudication festivals.

## **CONVERSATION REGARDING REPERTOIRE SELECTION**

*The following is a transcript or personal thoughts and of conversations with various colleagues, teachers, friends, and conductors regarding the selection of appropriate repertoire for your ensembles.*

“Select music that is **interesting**, that is, music that is **imaginative in development** of some or all of its musical elements – melody, harmony, texture, rhythm, form, etc. The music should provide opportunities for teaching **musical concepts** about form and construction.”

“The individual parts **should be as interesting** as possible. Students like to play pieces that allow everyone to be “part of the action.” Tubas like to play melodies as well as bass lines; French horns like to play more than off-beats. Choose music that will help each student grow technically.”

“Select music that **fits the instrumentation** of the ensemble. However, if a conductor wants to perform an excellent work with students and a required instrument (or two) is lacking, substitute a reasonable alternate instrument and perform the piece. Make sure that this is done in a manner that preserves the musical integrity of the piece.”

“The technical and musical demands of the music selected should be **compatible with the skills of the ensemble**. Music that demands months of excessive drill should be avoided. Students need to play literature that allows them to approach the expressive character and nature of the music. Literature which makes excessive technical demands of the students denies them the opportunity to reach this expressive plateau of music making.”

“Music selected should encompass a **variety of styles** – contemporary, avant-garde, Renaissance, Baroque, Romantic, jazz, popular, etc. This makes possible the teaching of history, various musical styles and performance practices. Music with a **variety of textures** offers students opportunities to perform music ranging from delicately scored passages (solo and small group instrumentation) to fully scored tutti sections (employing the entire instrumentation of the ensemble.)”

“Another important consideration when selecting music is **appropriateness**. A piece that would be appropriate for one occasion and environment might be totally inappropriate for another.”

## **THOUGHTS ON CHOSING REPERTOIRE**

Study major or cornerstone composition to keep yourself around and immersed in the highest quality repertoire and to develop musical values. Know the best our art form has offer. Cleanse your pallet. Attend rehearsals and concerts. Make this a priority.

Conductors select very difficult music, train students to play the notes, and perform the piece as a certain kind of ‘circus trick.’ There is no musicality here as there is no understanding of the music.

FEAR – Its too hard (no time to teach it). Do not let fear dictate the music that you pick. Maslanka heard from a band director, ‘... I do not have the trumpets to play *In Memoriam*’ His response was (to the director while looking at the trumpets), well who are those kids sitting over there?’

The grade level of music that you are playing and rating at festival does not define you as a director and a musician. Why does playing grade 6 music make us feel more empowered as directors?

Selecting the appropriate repertoire for an ensemble to support effective study and meaningful performance (of both the director and the student) is one of the most important jobs of a music educator.

Support the Art of Composition and Commissioning. Commission new and upcoming local composers to write meaningful music for your band, thereby enhancing and adding to the current repertoire for your medium.

### Benson’s Three Essential Beliefs on Repertoire

1. The process of teaching and exploring music is more important than producing concerts or participating in contests and festivals.
2. The educational outcomes for our students must be emphasized over the residual entertainment value that is often a high priority of administrators and parents.
3. The long-term value of music education in the lives of our students is more important than the short-term rewards.

\*\*The quality of our students’ music education is directly related to the quality of the curriculum they study and perform.