



Choosing Repertoire for Middle School Band

What important criteria should factor into the selection of your band literature?

TRAVIS WELLER is a middle-senior high school band director for Mercer Area Senior High School in Mercer, Pennsylvania.

In today's middle schools, it is important for directors to choose literature for their ensembles that will nurture the growth of student musicians. We must choose music that allows us to connect the academic music of the school ensemble with the outside world in which our students live. We should also recognize that the music selected for study must contribute to and enrich the school community.

Numerous lists have been generated in articles and books of best music for study and performance for high school ensembles. The value of these pieces is reinforced when they are included in festival programs and on state lists. There is often little question as to why those pieces were chosen—their reputation precedes them.

Middle school band literature does not necessarily have the same exposure level as do pieces for high school concert band or wind ensemble. Because middle-school ensemble music

is studied and performed by amateur musicians, it may create the perception that it is not serious literature. There are many artistic, educational, and entertaining pieces found in middle school/junior high band literature that can be considered for study, rehearsal and eventual performance.

Shelley Jagow of Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, asserts that while published lists are a place to begin this process, it is the responsibility of the music director to carefully study, assess, and select appropriate repertoire for his or her band program (*Teaching Instrumental Music: Developing the Complete Band Program*, Meredith Music, 2007, pg. 192). Part of that process must begin with directors taking the necessary time to develop a personal criteria list for evaluating music at this level. Once that has been established, directors can begin identifying important styles, cross-curricular and cross-cultural connections, forms, and aesthetic and emotional values imbedded in pieces so their repertoire choices educate, engage, and entertain.

Before selecting literature for a middle school or junior high ensemble, directors should establish a personal criteria list for judging quality in music. Bennett Reimer suggested in *Aesthetics and Arts Education* (University of Illinois Press, 1991, pgs. 330–38) that this list be constructed using the criteria of craftsmanship, sensitivity, imagination, and authenticity. In a study by researcher Richard Fiese in the *Journal of Research in Music Education* (Spring 1991, pgs. 239–47), nine musical criteria emerged from the responses given by directors regarding their standards for making qualitative judgments in music. The criteria identified by Fiese attend to more specific elements that directors can consider in their evaluation process, yet each of them could be placed into one of four “parent” criteria categories presented by Reimer. Shelley Jagow has developed a method for determining quality called the “Q Factor” that involves assigning a quantitative value to seven different qualitative factors in her book (*Teaching Instrumental Music: Developing the Complete Band Program*).



A WIDE VARIETY OF EDUCATIONAL AND ENTERTAINING LITERATURE IS AVAILABLE FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL BANDS.

While these criteria, aspects, and methods are not exhaustive, they provide an entry point for directors to consider using in the selection of repertoire for their younger ensembles.

There is a wealth of traditional repertoire that young musicians need to experience as it allows them to develop specific techniques. Ballads like “All the Pretty Little Horses” as arranged by Anne McGinty can be used to develop musical expression, legato tonguing, and phrasing. Marches like “Friends of Freedom” by Timothy Loest can be used to develop marcato style, contrasting dynamics and articulation, and understanding march form. Even at the middle school level, overtures like “Kentucky 1800” (Grundman) or “Carpathian Sketches” (Jager) offer opportunities for students to stretch and grow by rehearsing and presenting an age- and skill-level-appropriate “masterwork.”

There are also a number of writers expanding the sound canvas to provide excellent contemporary literature that presents opportunities to explore theoretical musical concepts (consider the use of suspensions in “Suspended Animation” by Patrick Burns). David Wilborn identified a number of different concepts that students might experience through the rehearsal and performance of music (*Teaching Music*, April 2001, pgs. 36–40), and the author has provided examples of just a few pieces that contain that concept. Music that includes aleatoric episodes (such as “Snake Charmer” by Randall Standridge), vocalization (“Unraveling” by Andrew Boysen, Jr.), different textures (“The Forge of Vulcan” by Michael Sweeney), elements of other music styles (“The Beatles Forever” arranged by Eric Osterling), and experimental timbres (“Whirlwind” by Jodie Blackshaw) are all potential concepts for

young groups to explore.

Directors can also consider the broad range of multicultural pieces that are available when selecting repertoire. Many multicultural pieces performed by ensembles are arrangements or compositions by a Western-trained musician and are typically set for a Western instrumental ensemble. In the December 2000 *Music Educators Journal*, (pgs. 23–25, 48), Mary Goetze states that stylistic practices of some cultures’ music cannot be adequately recreated using Western instruments or Western harmonic structure. Goetze doesn’t suggest that this music should be avoided, but says that thorough study of the culture and seeking out authentic performances (live ones work best) can help inform our choices and our instruction, and by doing so create a meaningful experience for the students.

Directors should also remember to select music that has important cultural

connections to our own country, as it can make connections to subjects like history (such as “The Pony Express” by Chris Bernotas and “Appomattox” by James Hosay). Five years ago, in my own teaching situation, the Senior High Concert Bands at Mercer High School worked on “The Trail of Tears” by James Barnes. At the same time, the Middle School Band (grades 7 and 8) rehearsed “Etowah” by Brian Balmages. Both pieces were used as an entry point so the students could learn about Cherokee culture through a website I had developed that provided examples of artwork, music, cultural history, and even food (mercerbands.wordpress.com/interdisciplinary-unit). As Joseph Alsbrook and Michael Worthy suggested in their presentation “Music Education in the 21st Century: New Rules” at the 2010 Midwest Clinic, in the age of standards-based accountability, music educators must be diligent in their efforts to enrich music performance with other modes of musical action like evaluating and responding to music.

Another aspect to consider in selecting literature is having a long-term vision for how the students can develop as musicians. There has been scholarly writing (e.g., *Teaching Music Through Performance in Band* edited by Richard Miles, or *Teaching Band and Orchestra: Methods and Materials* by Lynn G. Cooper) devoted to the high school ensemble curriculum devised so that students make progress over the course of several school years. Middle school and junior high programs can be unique situations in that some directors see their students for only one year, others for two or three years, and still others continue to see them through high school, as these directors are the only instrumental



“SELECTING LITERATURE OF DIVERSE STYLES AND ORIGINS PROVIDES MUCH-NEEDED VARIETY FOR THE DIRECTOR, STUDENTS, AND AUDIENCE.”

teachers for their schools in grades 7–12. In any situation, directors need to engage in discussions with colleagues of appropriate repertoire for students, in addition to carefully considering their students’ current ability levels.

Kevin Gerald, an associate professor of music at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, suggests that because repertoire can serve as the source for a long-term plan, it is very important that teachers at all levels have a repertoire list they believe all students should perform over a period of several years. Gerald (*Music Educators Journal*, 2008, Issue 2, pgs. 75–79) outlined several aspects for inclusion on a “core repertoire list” including formal, rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic creativity; convey the imagination of the composer; well-orchestrated; balance between tutti and thinner textures; and convey emotional depth. These criteria for building a repertoire list are akin to the criteria set forth by Reimer for judging quality, but they allow the director to consider more specific musical aspects.

Speaking to that last point made by

Gerald, there should be opportunities given to students so they might experience emotion in the music.

David Whitwell advocates a process of recognizing and exploring emotional moments in music to assist students in becoming aware of their own emotions (*NBA Journal*, 2009, pgs. 43–60). As Whitwell points out, music that is authentic will allow the students (and the eventual audience) to perceive the generalized form of the emotion. While there are many excellent choices available, “Air for Band” by Frank Erickson comes to mind as a piece with great emotional depth and expression that can enable students to make a deeper connection with their own personal emotions.

Composers, conductors, and educators alike discuss the need for variety in programming and repertoire selection. Selecting literature of diverse styles and origins provides much-needed variety for the director, students, and audience. Such simple concepts as balancing different textures, contrasting tempos, and identifying major, minor, and modal tonalities are ways in which variety in programming can be achieved. Other considerations for

educators include having the required instrumentation and equipment, and accounting for the instructional time to teach the work effectively and efficiently. As Mac Randall wrote in “Powerful Performances” (*Teaching Music*, February 2008, pgs. 32–36), directors who choose a different theme for each of their concerts have been able to achieve variety in their programming choices. With these diverse and sometimes complex perspectives in mind, here are some suggestions for concert themes for middle school/junior high band that include literature worthwhile for students to study. Let these ideas be a jumping-off point for your own creativity with your students and community! ■

THEME CONCERT IDEAS



A NIGHT AT THE OPERA

“William Tell Overture”
(G. Rossini/arr. Balent)

“Night at the Opera”
(arr. J. Taylor)

“The Phantom of the Opera”
(A. Webber/arr. Jennings)



AN EVENING OF COUNTRY AND WESTERN MUSIC

“Wagon Trail” (Julie Giroux)

“Pony Express”
(Chris M. Bernotas)

“Light Cavalry Overture”
(von Suppé/arr. Mark Williams)



ALL THINGS ENGLISH

“Marching Song” (Gustav Holst/arr. John Moss)

Chorale from “Jupiter” (Gustav Holst/arr. James Curnow)

“The Beatles Forever”
(arr. Eric Osterling)



AMERICAN ICONS

“American Salute”
(Roland Barrett)

“Salute to the Duke”
(arr. Michael Sweeney)

“Sounds of Sousa”
(arr. James Ployhar)



FRIGHT NIGHT

“Ghosts in the Graveyard”
(Scott Watson)

“Night Flight of the Gargoyles”
(Timothy Loest)

“Through Darkened Sleepy Hollow”
(Erik Morales)



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