

Selecting Music for Your Ensemble

by

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Selecting the appropriate music for your performing group is a huge responsibility for every director. It affects what your students learn, whether or not they have an enjoyable experience in your class, and ultimately, the sound of your group at their performance.

Here are a few things that I keep in mind when selecting music for my performing groups.

Difficulty Level Most young directors select music that is too difficult for their group. Just because you personally played a piece in high school or college doesn't mean it is right for the ensemble you are currently teaching. When selecting a piece, I ask myself if all of the students in the ensemble will be able to perform the piece with good posture, tone, rhythm and intonation. Will my last chair 2nd violinist be able to acquire the skills necessary to play the piece by concert time? Watch the "back row" of your ensemble. Is everyone playing with confidence, or are there some students "going along for the ride"?

Also, will the ensemble as a whole be able to play this piece *musically*? Will they be able to include dynamics and phrasing, watch the conductor, change tempos and play stylistically, or will they be struggling just to get the notes?

That being said, I always have a piece or two in the folder that “stretches” the group and challenges everyone. We may or may not end up performing this piece but we continue to rehearse it and learn from it. I’m happy to say that time and again my groups surprise me with their hard individual work on such a piece and we end up programming it.

Learning & Teaching Opportunities What will this piece provide for your students *educationally*? When programming a concert, I always look for variety in the following areas:

- *Key Signatures – Are students being exposed to a variety of key signatures? By the end of the year, a beginning band or string orchestra should be able to play pieces in at least 3 different key signatures.

- *Time Signatures – Every concert should include something in $\frac{3}{4}$. Are your students learning how to play in $\frac{6}{8}$? What about multi-metered pieces and “odd” metered pieces? ($\frac{5}{4}$, $\frac{7}{8}$, etc.)

- *Musical Style – Whether it’s a holiday concert, a pops concert, an adjudicated “festival”, or an all-district concert, I try to program a variety of styles. Each concert should include:
 1. A “classical” piece (hopefully by the end of the year my students have performed at least one piece from each time period- Baroque, Classic, Romantic and Contemporary)

 2. A slow, “lyrical” piece (too often neglected, but a must for every concert)

3. A “modern” piece by a living composer; something with more “angular” rhythms and modal, non-traditional harmonies
4. Either a novelty piece or a piece featuring a section or soloist (if appropriate to the type of concert)

Interesting Parts for Every Section Look for music in which every section “gets the tune” at one point. Look over each part, and ask yourself—“Would I enjoy playing this part?” How much variety is included in each part and what is the student going to learn as a result of practicing this part? Finally, is the overall piece interesting for you and your audience?

Consider Your Strengths and Weaknesses Choose music that features and “shows off” your strong sections or soloists. Avoid music that centers around the less experienced sections of your ensemble. For concert selections, consider rewriting parts so that they better fit your group’s instrumentation or ability level.

Grade Level Every publisher has their own idea of what makes a piece a Grade 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5. Some catalogs use terms like “Very Easy”, “Medium” etc. to describe the level of a piece. Beware of the inconsistency that exists in this area and look through score! You know best what your group can handle.

Music for Adjudicated Festivals When selecting music for Festival, follow the above guidelines very carefully. Choose music that everyone can play. If my group can’t sightread through a piece without stopping, the piece is too difficult to eventually be played with all the proper dynamics, rubatos and nuances necessary for a judged performance.

Select pieces with variety as to keys, time signatures, and styles. Include a slow, lyrical selection. For what it's worth, I begin working on music for Festival three to four weeks before the performance. If it takes more time than that, it's too difficult for the group.

Resources The best resource I have come across for selecting music is my colleagues. Every director has a short list of their favorite pieces—the ones that are the most *educationally sound* and that their students and audiences love. Ask around! Also, consult the SCSBOA Festival Required List and the Texas UIL Music List for good, solid *educationally-appropriate* selections.

Finally, a word about method books – If you are using only performance pieces in your teaching, your students are bound to have “holes” in their learning. A well-written method book is designed to teach a variety of fundamental skills to all of your students and should be one of the cornerstones of your curriculum. Don't rely on repertoire alone to teach your students what they need.