

Festival Preparation

Part I - Selecting the Ensemble's Music

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The time when directors are deciding what selections to choose for their ensemble's performance at the District or State Concert Festival or their Spring Trip is a very critical step in the ensemble's development. The understanding that the group will be living with this music for the next six or eight weeks is very important!

During my 30 years of teaching high school band in public schools, I always scheduled my Holiday Concert in early December. This allowed for sightreading the last couple of weeks before the holidays, and an opportunity for me to make my selections before the break. Thus, I had the opportunity to mark my scores well during the break.

Here are several very important factors to consider in selecting festival or contest compositions:

YOUR BAND'S CAPABILITY

Are the works you have chosen a few of your favorite pieces that you have decided the group will play, regardless of whether the ensemble is technically and musically capable? A good friend of mine, the director of bands at a major university, used to discuss with me how he always wanted to write an article entitled, "Are You Playing Grade V Literature With a Grade III Band?" Just the title is tremendous food for thought! Maybe you are a first or second year teacher, and you have picked a few of your favorite compositions your university wind ensemble or high school band played. Once again, you have to know these works are suitable for your teaching situation. Are you the experienced teacher who has decided to perform couple of works you have done before so you will not have to do a lot of work studying something new? Be careful here as the second time around, one can either discover much more detail in the composition, or be careless and not!

EXPOSE YOUR STUDENTS TO A VARIETY OF MUSIC

Have you ever thought about what not to play? This is a common mistake we have all made as practicing educators at one time or another. I remember my first year teaching when I took my concert band to a major concert contest. Don McGinnis, from Ohio State, got all over me for playing two suites! Although the works were from two entirely different periods and in different musical styles, he did not understand why I was not teaching my students different musical forms. Thus when selecting music do not pick two overtures, suites, or transcriptions. And remember another thing to avoid is playing two compositions by the same composer! Expose your students to different composers, periods and styles. Also, in the area of what not to play, one also needs to consider carefully whether to perform famous works or not. Yes, every band should play Gustav Holst's *First Suite in E-flat*, Dello Joio's *Scenes From "The Louvre,"* and Wagner's *Elsa's Processional*. However, remember that every adjudicator has performed these great works, often several times,

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and has set ideas on how they should be performed! Let me also warn you about another pit fall inexperienced directors often run into. Performing an old unknown work or brand new work that has just been released. Just because the piece has been out of print for several years or just released, does not mean the work is not still in many old libraries or the new work has not been passed around in manuscript form between directors of fine high schools and universities. Although no one in your neighborhood may know the work, or have performed it, this does not mean that adjudicators are not familiar with the work, or have even performed it. So in choosing your literature, know you must study your scores and do everything you can to get your students to perform these works to the highest level possible, with the musical intent written!

SIGHTREAD THE ENTIRE PIECE STRAIGHT THROUGH TO THE END

Is your ensemble capable of performing a piece? This can be a tough area even for the experienced conductor. However, here are some suggestions that can help you determine their playability. MOST IMPORTANT, sight read through the work. By this I mean read straight through the work from beginning to end without stopping! It is acceptable to yell out rehearsal numbers or letters as you go by them, but the majority of the ensemble should be able to get through the composition. Maybe one or two stops is acceptable, but if you are stopping every few bars and starting over, maybe you should consider that the difficulty level and musical understanding is above your students. A good friend of mine, who taught at a neighboring high school, use to tell me that he always played through the work without the first chair players! What a great idea. You cannot

build your program around two or three excellent players. Take out those great leaders and you will hear a totally new ensemble.

WHAT IS THE RANGE OF EACH INSTRUMENT?

Consider the demand required for ranges on each instrument. What kind of tone quality and pitch are your clarinets going to produce on those high Fs above the staff? If you look at most adjudication score sheets, you will discover tone quality and pitch are the first two areas. This order is no mistake as no one really wants to listen to the categories below if you are not playing with a pleasant, in tune sound!

CONSIDER YOUR STRONG AND WEAK SECTIONS

Always consider your strong and weak sections of the ensemble. If you have two great flutes and one great clarinet player, trying to rip off the end of *Poet and Peasant Overture* up to tempo is not likely to come off as it should with everyone else struggling with all those black notes! However, if you have strong flutes and clarinets, why not perform this great transcription and show their great technique off! If you have strong sections, find works that will show them off. However, do not pick a work that requires a lot of low brass technique and extreme ranges if you do not have the players.

USE DAILY WARM-UP EXERCISES IN THE KEYS YOU PLAN ON PLAYING

Consider key signatures, but do not as a result avoid playing a piece your students are capable of performing. A composer friend of mine tells this story. He wrote a work that he felt was quite good, but the piece was not selling. At a convention he noticed several directors picking up the score, looking it over, then shaking their heads, and

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putting the piece back. When he inquired of a couple of directors why they did not like the work, they informed him that their group could not play in four flats! The following year he re-released the work in three flats, marked all the extra accidentals in the parts, and the music dealers couldn't get the piece fast enough to sell! Using warm-up exercises daily in the keys you plan on playing in will quickly develop student's skills in new keys. What is more educational than that to expand their skills!

DEVELOP YOUR SOLOISTS

Soloists should always be a major consideration in choosing works to perform. Often directors choose block band compositions for contests and festivals that do not expose young students in a soloistic roll. Part of every student's musical growth should be to performing soloistic lines in public performances. When choosing works with soloistic lines, the director should consider several factors. Know that your soloists will go home and learn them right away. If you do not have the soloist, do you have a student you can build into a soloist? If you need to build a soloist, know that the student is a hard worker, one who will go out and learn the notes and rhythms in the first week. A student who will do this will become comfortable with the solo through the many repetitions in class during the development of the composition. If the student knows the correct notes and rhythms, you will have time in class to help the

student develop their phrasing, proper style, and expressiveness. Let the student know that you would like him or her to perform this work with the ensemble, that you believe they are capable of doing it. Ask the student if they believe they can do it. Developing solo players can be done and it is one of the most rewarding experiences for both teacher and student.

Remember; know your teaching ability. If you think the work is a little above their capability, motivate your students, then go for it. Your students will only get better by being pushed a little beyond their ability level. They will only become better musicians by performing new and different works in many styles and periods that they may not be accustomed to. What ever you pick, know YOU will be growing and developing as a musician along with your students. The greatest thing about teaching music is constantly doing new works and continuing to grow and develop our own musical skills.

In Part II, Carl A. Bly will discuss preparing the works. Watch for it in the September 2004 issue of *Bandmasters Review*.

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