

# Selecting Quality Literature for Your High School Band

## “When is it time to start playing the right stuff?”

Lawrence Silverman

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With the same regularity as the changing seasons, August rolls around and a new group of eager and naïve freshman anticipate the first day of band. First day of and in our High School includes sitting lesson, breathing lessons, and of course, singing through our initial warm-ups.

I pay close attention to the comments that are made by the new students. More than likely I'll hear things like, “we never did this in our other school,” or “I already know how to sit.” My personal favorite is, “this is band, I don't have to sing here.” Students never voice these opinions to me, but somehow I'm always aware, and empathetic to their concerns. None the less, I still persevere with these methods because I'm more concerned with what they need to do than what they want to do.

Everything seems to quiet down when we read through some pep band music. After a few choruses of “Louis, Louis” and the “Hey Song”, the freshmen seem to think that this is pretty cool and everything will be OK.

This basic knowledge of repertoire will take even the first year band director into November.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on your level of experience, when the marching band season is over, you will have to begin to select literature for your other performing ensembles. The first word of advice that I can pass along to you is, “don't wait until the end of the marching band season to select the rest of your literature!”

Unless you are lucky enough to teach in a district that employs specialists for every ensemble, you may find that you are not only the marching band director, but you are the Jazz expert, and you serve as the authority on Wind Ensemble and Concert Band literature. You may still have to find those bassoon trios, which will keep the board members happy. Where “Louis, Louis” does work with the pep band, I would not suggest it for a concert band, especially if you're planning to take your group to a music festival, or if you'd like to return to teach a second year.

What then do you do, and how do you start to teach your students quality literature? If you're a new teacher, or new at the high school level, you might start by checking the state music lists. Once you

have determined the level that your group plays, go through your music library and find music at the appropriate level. Try one or two grade levels below their performing level and make a point of sight-reading at least 3 times a week. The time that you spend teaching basic skills, such as sight-reading, will pay off in the end.

I always try to focus my warm-ups toward the music that will be rehearsed. The ten minutes that you spend warming up the group sets the tone for the rest of the rehearsal. I make sure that my principal players are in tune with each other, and they are then responsible for tuning the rest of the ensemble. This not only saves time, but also reinforces the student ownership of the groups.

I think that it's part of our job to go and listen to other performing groups. Try to go and listen to honor groups, or college groups. Keep the programs and write a review of each piece that you listened to. Try to get a copy of the score to study. Check to see what grade level the score is and see if it's on a state list.

Attending reading sessions is very helpful, particularly if you

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can have podium time. I have always found it helpful to attend workshops that focus on round table discussions concerning literature.

Be very careful when you purchase music that has been arranged by someone other than the composer. When you play music written for band by a specific composer, you can be certain that he or she is writing only for that medium. Don't try to play jazz in your concert band or vice versa.

When you introduce serious literature to your ensemble avoid asking their opinion. If you are enthusiastic, positive, and well prepared before you step on the podium, your chances of success will be much higher than if you try to "wing" it. Never ever try to "wing" a rehearsal, especially when you're performing quality literature. Above all, don't waste valuable podium time.

With our groups, we always save our pieces for our local concerts. When you are preparing for a festival, don't try to impress the adjudicators by the level of difficulty that you have attempted. Adjudicators are not interested in hearing an ensemble play music that is too hard for the group, and they don't give extra points for it either. Remember, don't confuse quality literature with difficult literature. There is plenty of appropriate literature at all levels.

Some key tips to playing quality literature:

1. Don't skip the warm-ups
2. Make them listen to each other
3. Make the ensemble responsible for tuning
4. Sight-read often
5. The director must come to rehearsal prepared and on time

6. Be enthusiastic about the literature
7. Expose your ensemble to other ensembles that play quality literature
8. Be consistent
9. Be patient
10. Be willing to take risks

Some suggested pieces in the Grade 4 to 5 range that most high school bands should experience:

- *Toccata for Band* – Frank Erikson
- *First Suite in Eb* – Gustav Holst
- *Second Suite in F* – Gustav Holst
- *Bach Prelude and Fugue in Bb Major*
- *Bach Prelude and Fugue in g minor*
- *Bach Little Fugue in g minor*
- *Dedicatory Overture* – Clifton Williams
- *Variations on a Korean Folk Song* – John Barnes
- *Chance*
- *Greensleeves* – Alfred Reed
- *The Music Makers* – Alfred Reed
- *Armenian Dances* – Alfred Reed
- *Any of the 6 Suites* – Alfred Reed
- *Emperata Overture* – Claude T. Smith
- *To Dance in the Secret Garden* – Robert Smith
- *English Folk Song Suite* – Ralph Vaughn Williams
- *Shenandoah* – Frank Tichelli
- *Amazing Grace* – Frank Tichelli
- *Cajun Folk Songs 1&2* – Frank Tichelli
- *Chorale and Shaker Dance*
- *A Christmas Festival* – Leroy Anderson
- any Percy Grainger Piece

This list is by no means complete, but it's a good start!

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Lawrence Silverman is the Director of Music at Leonia High School, New Jersey. He draws on his years of experience to offer pertinent suggestions to the beginning band director as well as the "vintage" director. His knowledge of quality literature and his reasons for performance of this music is quite evident.