

What Are You Thinking?

Mike Brown

What are you going to play with your band at contest this year? How many times have we heard this question at the local music store, TBA, TMEA, MIDWEST or anywhere band directors are gathered? The program we select for our students is one of the most important decisions we make as music educators. The skills and knowledge that our students gain from preparing, rehearsing, and performing this music will serve as the basis for their music education.

When selecting music for our UIL contests, we are required to use the Prescribed Music List (PML). There has always been significant debate concerning the PML. There are no shortages of opinions on how the PML should be developed, who should serve on the committee, how the committee members should be selected, how many committee members should be utilized, should separate committees develop each grade-level list, how many grade levels (if any) are needed, what music should be added, what music should be removed, should music ever be removed, do we even need to use the PML? The questions seem endless.

Currently serving as a committee member of the PML, I have gained a new appreciation for the arduous

task of selecting quality literature for our bands. While developing the current PML, our committee worked tirelessly to create a list of repertoire that would be representative of the highest quality music available to us today. Are there compositions contained on the PML I would rarely, if ever, program for one of my ensembles? Absolutely. Are there selections that are not included on the PML that I think are of high musical quality and have significant artistic value? Most definitely. Have I found other or newly written compositions not listed on the PML

that I feel my students would benefit from by learning? Yes. Then I have two options—program the music on a different concert or request permission from the PML committee to allow it to be substituted for one of the selections that must be contained on the PML. During the last five years, I have programmed music for my bands that has represented all five grade levels of the PML. Many of the

programs were developed from the PML, and I had ample selections of the highest musical quality to choose from that met the criteria I use for selecting a program.

Our own philosophical views greatly impact our thought processes and ultimately the music

we program for our ensembles. We should carefully examine the goals we have for our individual students, our ensembles, our band program, and ourselves as educators and musicians as we select our music.

Is it our philosophy to:

- Develop the technical, musical and artistic skills of our individual players?
- Improve the ensemble skills of our band?
- Perform music that challenges the intellectual and artistic ability of our students as well as ourselves?
- Educate students about the historical and cultural events surrounding the composition?
- Select music that will enrich our

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students, even if we feel our parents and administrators may not understand or enjoy listening to the composition?

- Select music that will challenge us as teachers, both intellectually and musically?
- Program around our weaker players or sections?
- Enhance our belief that we need to be “successful” by receiving first division ratings to satisfy our parents and administrators?
- Teach music that we have taught before and will probably teach more efficiently since we know “the traps” of the music?
- Decide on a selection based on what we find in our music library that “will work” for our other piece?
- Win a contest or festival and select a program that can be a winning program?
- Program differently on an Honor Band year versus a non Honor Band year?

These are only some of the questions that we can ask ourselves in order to help us clarify our philosophy for selecting music for the ensembles in our band program.

We must learn to teach music—not band, not orchestra, not chorus, but music itself... Choosing music is the single most important thing a band director can do, and is the only thing a band director can do alone, made more important because of the substandard repertoire continuously being published. So many publishers in the business today are printers who don't care about quality, but only about what will sell. We must not allow them to give the band a bad reputation nor to make our decisions for us, since the music we choose today can affect students for ever.”

—Frederick Fennell

Selecting the highest quality literature for our students is one of our greatest responsibilities as a music educator. Only through the best music can we cultivate in our students an understanding and taste for music of the highest quality. The music we select serves as our curriculum. It is the musical nourishment that our students will consume during the year. We must explore the available repertoire to discover music that will allow our players to grow musically and entertain our audiences in an intellectual manner. We should program music for the development of our student musicians, not for the listening enjoyment of the audience. The performance should be a time that parents and administrators experience the results of the artistic efforts and talents of our students.

While working to select our contest music, we might want to ask some questions regarding the compositions we are considering to enable us to select the highest quality literature for our students. The questions below are some things I think about before selecting a composition.

- ☛ Is the music the appropriate difficulty for the ensemble? What sections have strong players, weaker players? Am I going to program around the weaker sections? If so, how do I plan to develop the weak section into a stronger section?
- ☛ Does the musical program allow for the development of numerous individual and ensemble skills? Will the students be better, well-rounded musicians after playing this music?
- ☛ Is the instrumentation of the ensemble capable of producing the composer's intention?
- ☛ Does the music provide interesting and challenging parts for all members of the ensemble?
- ☛ What musical skills and concepts can be taught with this music? What musical elements are introduced or reinforced?

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- ☛ Are the students being provided with musical literature that will expand their knowledge of various historical time periods and musical styles?
- ☛ Does the music have logical form and structure?
- ☛ Does the music have development? (Melodic, Harmonic, Rhythmic)
- ☛ Does the music allow for personal musical judgment for the players or the conductor?
- ☛ Is the program different than last year's program? Am I offering my students exposure to different composers, styles, etc. from year to year?

I like what David Whitwell writes in his book *The Art of Musical Conducting*, WINDS 1998:

“Because in English all music is included under one word, “Music”, some musicians make the mistaken conclusion that all music is therefore somehow equal.”

With the assistance of the vast technology available to us, researching music has become easier and less time consuming. Most major publishers have recordings available online as well as images of musical scores. Many composers have the same information on their web sites. Several universities are live streaming their concerts. This allows us to “attend” concerts that would be impossible to attend otherwise. This allows us to hear performances of familiar music as well as new compositions. Online music retailers usually have

MP3 files that can be downloaded for free or nominal charges. It is relatively easy to have the entire PML on a computer, external hard drive, or on an MP3 player. This makes becoming familiar with music that is on the PML much easier. With email and online chat forums, it is easy to communicate with others musicians with whom you feel philosophically aligned. Making use of these resources, it is easy to email a colleague or post a quick question about a specific composition or composer. Sharing opinions and experiences with other musicians assists me in contemplating the many issues I consider when selecting music.

This article is not to suggest that we cannot and should not program other types of works; for example, ones chosen specifically for audience appeal. Certainly these pieces have a place in our curriculum and are necessary. But, if we desire our students, parents, and administrators to take our programs seriously, we need to take the job of selecting our curriculum with the utmost care. The more thoroughly we examine our goals for the growth of our student musicians and ourselves, and we commit to meticulously investigating music that is unfamiliar to us, we are capable of making informed and educated decisions concerning the selection of music for our ensembles.

Mike Brown began his teaching career in 1993 in the Lewisville Independent School District. He is currently serving as the Director of Bands at Shadow Ridge Middle School. During his tenure in the Lewisville ISD, Mike has also held the positions of Director of Bands at Flower Mound High School and Chair of the Fine Arts Department, Associate Director of Bands at Marcus High School and Associate Director of Bands at Lewisville High School. Mr. Brown's ensembles have consistently earned the UIL Sweepstakes Award and have been named “Best in Class” at numerous festivals. While serving as the Director of Bands at Flower Mound High School, the Wind Symphony was invited to perform at The Midwest Clinic in Chicago and was a state Honor Band finalist. During Flower Mound High School's inaugural year, Mike was selected as the Teacher of the Year. In 2003, Mr. Brown was chosen as the Phi Beta Mu “Outstanding Young Bandmaster” and appeared as the October cover story of the School Band and Orchestra Magazine titled “Mike Brown: Keeping the Competitive Edge”. He has also been named to “Who's Who Among America's Teachers”.

Mike is currently serving as a committee member of the Prescribed Music List. He serves as an active clinician an adjudicator throughout the state of Texas. Professional affiliations include TMEA, TBA, Phi Beta Mu and Kappa Kappa Psi (a National Band Service Fraternity). He resides in Flower Mound, Texas with his wife Elizabeth and his two sons, Cameron and Weston.