

What's the Score?

Gloria Ramirez, Alex Denton, Marshall Thomas

Do you pick music because it's a piece you've always wanted to perform? Do you choose hard music because you want to make your band stronger? Do you pick music because it's the new thing on the UIL List? After 37 years of teaching, here is a process that helps me when deciding music for my ensemble.

When selecting a piece for your ensemble the MOST important thing is to choose music that fits your group in terms of scoring, instrumentation, and skill-level. Why play a Sousa march if your flutes and clarinets can't match outside of their middle register? Why try to play *Hounds of Spring* with your eight alto saxophones trying to cover the French horn part? Why play *Nimrod* with your third band because it's a "grade three" on the UIL PML list? I've seen these mistakes happen, and have had to judge some of them before. The great thing about music today, is that there is so much great music that can be used for your group. Now, you can have multiple versions of arrangements and find the best one to fit your group. Here's what to consider when selecting music

First - The Band

During a break (Summer, Thanksgiving, or Winter), on a scale of 1-10 honestly rate:

- 1) Each section of your band. (This will help you see your stronger/weaker sections.)
- 2) Each student within each section. (This will help you see the depth of each section.)

3) Students you would consider soloists. (This will help eliminate some choices for you as well.)

It is important to be honest with your ratings and to do it when you are in a neutral mood. We've all had those rehearsals where a section surprises you one way or another, and you disproportionately think they are bad or good. Following these three steps will give you a clear idea of the kind of piece you are looking for. Are your color instruments (flute, oboe, bassoon, horn, and euphonium) strong? Then consider an orchestral transcription to feature them. Is your flute section weak? Then you know *Enigma Variations* wouldn't be a good fit. Do you have a good trumpet soloist, but you lack depth? Maybe *American Elegy* would be a good fit. These are all a great way to find out the type of piece you are looking for.

Second - How To Find Music

If you are not familiar with the UIL PML list, listen to recordings. Many online music retailers have the Texas UIL Contest list recordings and some with scores to follow along. If you can't find a recording there, look on YouTube, iTunes, or ask directors who have already performed it for a recording. Check with the recording engineers that typically record UIL performances in your area or throughout the state. You can also look up recordings at Mark Custom Records. Unless it is a VERY new piece, you should be able to find it. There are so many resources, you just

need to be diligent about trying to find them. All of us have heard the saying, "You pick your rating when you pick your music."

Also, be on the lookout for district In-services that are hosting an event where they perform "new" music on the UIL list. Attend those sessions, whether to perform or to listen. Some of these will occur at Summer Band Camps at different colleges and at the TBA Convention/Clinic. Host an event yourself by using your own ensemble if possible. It would take some planning, but I bet it would be a great service to directors both in and out of your district. You would probably want to try talking with music companies who would be willing to loan you music. Who knows, someone in attendance may want to purchase a piece during that session.

Another thing you might consider is looking on uilforms.com/results to see what selections have been successful for ensembles similar to yours. That doesn't mean it would necessarily fit your group, but looking at the directors or ensembles with consistent and successful track records is a great place to start. It is also a good idea to bounce ideas off of other directors and/or mentors. Remember, you are trying to pick a complete program not just your "big" piece. Once you think you have decided on a program, listen to recordings of them back-to-back to see if they complement each other. Is there enough contrast? Will it keep everyone involved? Will my percussion section benefit from this piece? With

What's the Score?

percussion, remember to ask yourself, “would I ask my wind players to do this?” You don’t want them to have very little involvement. At the same time, you don’t want to overstress a smaller section trying to cover multiple parts.

YOU are the person who can pick the best program for your group because no one else knows your kids as well as you do. However, if you know you want to feature a section or a soloist, ask friends or mentors for their input. What is more important to you—building a reputation for playing “legitimate” literature or giving your kids a quality education through a quality performance? Remember, these suggestions are for concert music; stand tunes at football games are a completely different subject.

Third - The Piece

When first looking at a score, it is important to know what you are **looking at** as well as what you are **looking for**. Here are some things to consider:

Key/Time Signatures – Is it something your students have been exposed to, or will you have to teach it?

Ranges – Will your students be able to play the ranges required with their most characteristic sound?

Scoring – Do you have to rescore a good deal of the piece? Is it an “old-school” piece where the voicing isn’t favorable?

Technique – Can your students actually play the notes, or will they be “faking” it?

Tempo – Is the tempo too slow for your band to sustain, or too fast to play well?

What's the Score?

Articulation – Will your woodwinds be able to articulate; will brass or flutes need to work on multiple tonguing?

Transparency – How exposed is the piece? Is the harmonic language too thick/foreign for your group to understand?

Length – Is it long enough that your students won't get bored? Is it short enough that they won't be out of chops by the end?

Movements – How many times do you need to start a piece from silence? This can be challenging for young groups and groups looking for that "perfect" recording.

Fingerings – Where does the music fall on the instruments? Do you have access to someone who can give you alternate fingerings?

Ornaments – How much time will you have to devote to learning new styles of grace notes?

Solos – Does it fit your list?

Quality – Is it a good vehicle to teach your students about music, or is it redundant? I said redundant.

New Piece? – Are you comfortable making stylistic choices on your own, or do you need a reference?

Logistics – Is there a time limit on your performance? How much equipment will percussionists have to move? Do you even have all the equipment necessary (synthesizers, exotic percussion – beware)?

This is the process we go through. Don't think that this means you can only play something you're good at. In fact, you have to know that line where you push your students just hard enough to flourish and learn. You need to know how many new skills you will need to teach because a new skill should be practiced every day. At the end of the day, it is important that you pick music you and your kids will enjoy learning through practice and performance. Why waste time beating away at a piece for months, when neither you nor your students enjoy the piece? It's your turn to give the kids the kinds of positive experiences you received from your time as a performer (which led you to become a music educator).

The last thing:

Your students should not be the only one learning from these experiences; we all must never stop learning.

Gloria Ramirez is in her 37th year of teaching, currently as the Director of Bands at Langham Creek High School in the Cypress Independent School District. Prior to coming to the Cy Fair District, Ms. Ramirez taught in the Humble and Spring Independent School Districts. Ms. Ramirez's concert ensembles are consistent UIL Sweepstakes recipients and have been recognized as "Best in Class" at various festivals. Her groups have advanced in the TMEA Honor Band competition numerous times at both the high school and middle school levels. In 2007 Ms. Ramirez received the Leadership and Achievement Award as Co-Director of the Class AAAAA TMEA State Honor Band. Her bands have been selected as a National Wind Band Winner as well as a Commended Winner on several occasions. Ms. Ramirez' ensembles have performed at The Midwest Clinic, Music for All National Festival, Carnegie Hall and Symphony Hall in Chicago, Illinois. The Lobo Marching Band was awarded the John Philip Sousa Sudler Shield award for excellence in marching in 2007 and the marching band recently earned its 28th consecutive 1st division rating at the UIL Marching Contest. Ms. Ramirez is listed in "Who's Who Among America's Teachers", Teacher of the Year, and Nominated for the 2016 Music Educator of the Year. She is an active clinician and adjudicator throughout the United States having presented several clinics at The Midwest Clinic, Texas Bandmasters Association Convention/Clinic and CODA in Norman, Oklahoma.

Alex Denton is in his 5th year of teaching at Langham Creek High School in Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District. He has consistently received straight 1s in UIL performances. Mr. Denton marched with the Cavaliers Drum and Bugle Corps from 2008-2010, serving as horn sergeant in his final year.

Marshall Thomas is in his 4th year as Assistant Director and Director of Percussion at Langham Creek. He is a graduate of the University of Houston. Under his direction the Langham Creek Symphonic band has earned consistent 1st divisions at UIL contest. The Langham Creek Percussion Ensemble has earned superior ratings at several local festivals and most recently performed at the Sandy Feldstein National Percussion Festival as part of the Music for All National Festival. Marshall is a proud educational endorser of Innovative Percussion sticks and mallets.