



No More Limitations! Composing and Choosing Band Music for All Levels

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“Emotions are like the gold embedded in mountains. No matter how much you dig out, there’s always more, somewhere. And, of course, there’s fool’s gold and real gold, like with emotions. To be able to tell the difference between superficial music that may excite your taste like sugar, and great music that nourishes you forever, requires a lot of digging. But what an adventurous dig it is!” – Michael Colgrass.

What is Educational Music?

The term has come to be almost synonymous with commercial music and a generic characterization of the majority of music written for school ensembles. Truly educational pieces teach musicians about *musicality*. Any piece with significant musical value is educational. A piece that only teaches technical things such as rhythms, dynamics, etc, may be educational, but it is not music. – remember, the term is *educational music*.

What defines an artistic piece?

- Musically engaging and not overly predictable
- Stimulates the imagination (not necessarily programmatic, but inspiring)
- Provides an artistic experience: the ensemble emotionally identifies with the piece
- Students (and conductors) become better musicians as a result of working on the piece

NOTE: There *is* a place for novelty, light concert music, and “crowd pleasers.” However, a diet based solely on candy is not a healthy one and must be balanced with music that is more nourishing. **This is also true for composers!** Even when writing this type of music, it is important to consider the following elements.

Breaking Down the Compositional Process (applies to ALL levels)

Melody

- Strive for melodic development – do not just transcribe melody in bass voices for the sake of having it there.
- Consider phrasing and write what is musically achievable for younger players

Musical Example: *Colliding Visions*

Harmony

- Interesting harmonies (not just I, IV, V) when musically appropriate
- Many people think that music cannot have interesting harmonies when using fewer notes
It is also important to expose younger students to dissonant music
- Harmonic development

Musical Example: *Midnight Sky*

Rhythm

- A rhythmic cell that is overused can make a piece sound very repetitive and predictable. There are many exceptions (i.e. Minimalism) but they need to be justifiable from a composition standpoint

Musical Example: *Reverberations*

Texture/Orchestration

- Sparseness (not full band all the time)
- Interesting scoring (saxes DO NOT always have to double horns!)
- Use of interesting sounds

Musical Example: *Nevermore*

“Small to All” (or “All to Small?”)

- The way a piece is conceived can have a huge impact on its sound
- Composers must rethink the term “restrictions” and “limitations”
A young band has no more restrictions than a professional brass quintet

Musical Example: *Jungle Dance*

Form

- ABA overtures should not be written if the point is to finish the piece more quickly
ABA form is not always bad, but repetition of sections solely to make a piece easier to learn is unacceptable. A great piece of music often doesn't sound good the first time through.
- Avoiding predictability
- Does the pacing and structure of the work make sense?

Composition as a Vehicle for Teaching / Conducting

- If there is nothing to teach in a piece, why use it?
 - Remember: a piece that has musical worth has significant teaching value
- If the piece does not challenge/inspire the conductor, how can he/she inspire the ensemble?
- Get to know composers – find out what inspires them to write