



Repertoire Is the Curriculum

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REPERTOIRE *IS* THE CURRICULUM

Repertoire selection has a major impact on what students will and will not learn, and it should help their musical understanding and appreciation.

BY H. ROBERT REYNOLDS

As music educators, our primary purpose is to help individual students receive a music education through experiences and information. In order to achieve this lofty goal, we must strive to select the finest repertoire, for only through immersion in music of lasting quality can we engage in aesthetic experiences of breadth and depth. While it may be an overstatement to say that repertoire is the curriculum, we can all agree that a well-planned repertoire creates the framework for an excellent music curriculum that fosters the musical growth of our students.

It might be assumed that the more experience one has, the easier the task of repertoire selection becomes. As one who has several decades of this experience, I am here to tell you that it gets no easier. It is one of the most difficult aspects of the entire profession. The difficulty occurs because you not only choose a particular piece or set of pieces, but, in making this decision, you determine that all other pieces will not be chosen.

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Photo courtesy of author

A well-planned repertoire creates the framework for an excellent music curriculum that fosters the musical growth of the students.

Beginning the Process

Each year, the same agonizing process begins. Questions arise such as: What compositions will you choose? Do you know enough newly published music? Do you know the best of it? How soon should you repeat a particular favorite? Will the students

take to the music? How much of the music will you select with the audience in mind? Is it too difficult? Will you have good enough oboes (or any at all), bassoons, horns, violas, and so forth? Will you have enough rehearsal time to prepare *all* this music? Do your selections represent a balance of

styles, aesthetics, depth, and the like? Will your students grow in musical breadth and depth from preparing the music selected? Will you grow for the same reason? You must answer all these questions and more before the selection process ends.

Keeping Lists

Lists can simplify the process of selecting repertoire. Create one list of the core repertoire selections for your ensemble level and another of the core repertoire works for your medium (band, orchestra, or choir). In addition to compiling your own list, excellent state repertoire lists are now available. The Michigan, Texas, and Virginia lists are especially good. If you are at the beginning of your career and do not know a wide variety of repertoire for your ensemble's level of difficulty, you might obtain a few of the state lists. Perhaps the best music state list is the one from Texas, which is available both from the Texas Music Educators Association and from music stores in that state. Other state music lists are available from the state music educator associations.

When looking at the state lists, you have before you a group of twenty-five or so pieces of similar difficulty. Find a piece or two from the difficulty ranking that you know your ensemble can technically handle.

Another source of repertoire lists is MENC's Web site, www.menc.org, which offers literature lists (including All-State repertoire) for band, orchestra, and chorus under "Network Communities."

You may find it helpful to keep a running list of music that you and your students perform each year. Not only will it answer questions such as, "When was the last time we played Holst's *Suite in E-flat*?" but it will also be a record of the balance of musical choices you make over the years.

The music you choose becomes, in large part, the curriculum that you and your students follow toward a sound music education. If you believe that a music education means much more than the improvement of technical skills, then the quality of the music played will be essential to the education of your students.

Concerts as Sharing Experiences

While audiences believe that concerts are performed for them, concerts actually provide a forum for students to share their musical preparation and education. The challenge lies in engaging the audience while presenting music that was selected to provide musical experiences for the students. Essentially, the concert is a sharing experience rather than just a listening experience for those attending the concert.



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While teaching at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, I had the pleasure of guest conducting the Oshkosh (Wisconsin) High School Band in the spring of 1969. The composition was Paul Hindemith's *Symphony in B-flat*. It certainly was not an easy piece for a high school band, and it was not an easy piece for the first-time listener in a largely blue-collar audience in the heart of paper-mill country.

Before the band began performing this complicated piece, the regular conductor, James Croft, talked to members of the audience about the piece and the band's dedicated preparation of it. He reminded parents that their children had grown considerably due to the concentrated time and energy it took to understand and master the musical and technical demands of this cornerstone composition of the wind repertoire. He concluded the interaction with the audience by ask-

ing them to share in the project by their attentive listening.

At the end of the symphony, the audience was on its feet. The performance of the Hindemith Symphony had deeply touched the moms, dads, and grandparents in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. That brilliant example of audience participation has stayed with me in vivid detail to this day, thirty years later.

Avoiding Traps

A public school ensemble has a very different purpose from that of a professional orchestra or military band. While Beethoven's Symphony no. 5 or the "Marines' Hymn" are oft-repeated selections at professional or military concerts, they are designed to affect the audience more than the performers. A public school ensemble has the opposite goal.

In order to focus the greatest amount of energy on the musical aspects of the repertoire, most selections should be well within the technical limits of the members of the ensemble. While some music should be selected that stretches the technical limits of the ensemble members, the musical aspects must be given the highest priority. Musical energy should be spent on matching styles, attacks, releases, pitch, timbre, volume, intensity, and tone quality, along with fostering a greater awareness of the deeper meaning of the music. Focusing primarily on technical skill will tend to defeat this greater purpose. Obviously, technical skill is needed to accomplish the aesthetic goals of the music, but the purpose is not to present a technical display. The purpose is to present the music.

Often music educators get confused (I know I did in my early years) and develop the quality of the ensemble and its standing in the community and in the profession at the expense of the music education of the students. In such cases, it becomes more important to have a fantastic ensemble than to educate the students. The conductor's desire for fame and glory all too often motivates the rehearsals, the choice of music, and outside activities. When this happens, the choice of music will be based on making the

ensemble sound good rather than on the musical value of the works.

This trap is closely allied with the issue of whether or not the students will like the music. While you should consider the students' enthusiasm for the music, the intrinsic merit of the music has a much higher level of priority. English literature classes do not select reading material based upon the desires of the students, but rather on the inherent value of the literature to be read. Music classes should be no different.

Another difficulty, "friendly enemies," exists in all aspects of the artistic world. These people *know* all about a band, choir, or orchestra and how, when, and what it should perform. They also *know* the purpose of your ensemble. In the educational world, they usually insist that your ensemble *needs* to perform at a function that has little (if any) direct educational value. Or, in another variation, these people insist that concerts are held merely to entertain members of the audience. It takes a diplomat of considerable skill to turn friendly enemies into allies of an educationally solid music program.

Networking

As we move through life, we develop more and more friends. Many are professional colleagues who are a great source of help, as well as friendship. Nearly all of my phone calls to friends over the years have contained questions of "What new compositions do you know?" or "What are you playing at your next concert?" Having a wide-ranging cadre of friends enables you to share a wide variety of performance tapes, music lists, and, above all, new compositions and ideas.

Aside from personal friends, contacts made with colleagues in music stores have proved invaluable. Even if you don't have a specific contact, the best music stores can be of enormous help because their personnel keep abreast of the profession and changes in repertoire. They always seem to be as much interested in knowledge and professional integrity as they are in the music business.

Continuing to Grow

A framed plaque on my office wall reads: "Change is inevitable; growth is

an option." It reminds me that the world is changing and I must change with it. One is either growing or dying; one is either a part of the past or of the future. While much can be gained from honoring the past, one must live for the future. Here are some suggestions to help you keep growing:

- The music education world continually has workshops, many of which are terrific. Attend these regularly. Workshops can help you be a better conductor, know more new music, and learn about better teaching techniques and how guidelines such as the National Standards for Music Education can support and enrich your teaching. In addition to the benefits of the workshop itself, you will meet other dedicated and interested musicians who will be with you for a lifetime of knowledge and friendship.



Musical aspects must be given the highest priority.



- Read the *New York Times* each Sunday. New York City is one of the world's great music centers; know what is happening there. You will learn about composers, performers, ensembles, trends, and repertoire and will generally be a more up-to-date musician and person.

- Attend high-quality concerts. If you are fortunate enough to be a part of a community that attracts high-quality concerts—go! If you have to travel to New York, Chicago, or San Francisco—even if you can only go once or twice a year—do it. These experiences will deepen your own music appreciation, which will enrich your life and the lives of your students.

- Investigate repertoire that directly affects your day-to-day teaching. Find new and better pieces each year. It will revitalize your teaching and music-making and have a stimulating effect on your students.

- Investigate repertoire that indirectly affects your day-to-day teaching. If you are a band conductor, listen to string quartets, opera, and so forth. Regularly enlarge your CD collection. Expand your listening experiences. Your growth and development depends upon what you invest in your own musical substance. Do you know the music of Gorecki, Gubaydulina, Perle, Pärt, and Crumb? Know as much about the music of the greatest living composers as you know about music for your specific ensemble.

- Read! Read books about music and musicians, as well as other books. Be like Thomas Jefferson, who said, "I cannot live without books."

- Learn more about the entire music profession. Who won a Pulitzer Prize this year? Who won the first Pulitzer Prize? Who conducts the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra? Be a person in touch with the music profession.

- Make art a part of your everyday life. Talk about it. Share it with your students and encourage them to share it with you.

Conclusion

We music educators can make no more important decision than the selection of the material with which we teach our students. There has never been a time when there has been so much excellent repertoire from which to choose. At the same time, an enormous amount of questionable music is being produced as well. Often the most superficial music is accompanied by the most sophisticated advertising and promotion. When you choose music of depth and substance, you will reward the publishers and composers who produce quality repertoire. More important, however, you will reward your students with the gift of a deepening appreciation for music. It is a great time to be teaching music. ■