



ORCHESTRA

Repertoire Selection... It's Time to Think Outside of the Box!

by Chris Jannings

Greetings! It is with much excitement that I become the new contributor for the School Orchestra column of String Notes. Many thanks to Faith Farr for giving me the opportunity to share some thoughts with you.

I'd like to start with a brief introduction. I've been in my current position as the Director of Orchestras at Roseville Area High School for the past ten years. My orchestral studies began in 6th grade in Owatonna, under the tutelage of some very fine educators. (I owe much of what I know and teach to my mentor turned colleague Mark Gitch.) After undergraduate studies at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, I was fortunate to land the position in Roseville. Though it was a program in flux (I was the third teacher in as many years), it was immediately clear that I was surrounded by a music staff and administration that held the music program in very high esteem. Like many surrounding districts, Roseville Area Schools has gone through a number of demographic changes in the past decade. I'm proud to say that not only does the string program in the district appear to be more popular than ever, but we have also expanded our course offerings at the secondary level to include both Guitar Methods and World Drumming courses. Being a guitarist myself for many years, it was a natural fit for me, in addition to my orchestral responsibilities, to take over the guitar studies at Roseville Area High School. Much of my love for scholarly writing and, in part, the motivation for taking over this column was fostered by a handful of the professors and advisors in my graduate studies at the University of St. Thomas. Completed in 2010, I have been looking for an outlet to share some thoughts on my master's thesis that is centered on repertoire selection and the inclusion of more adventurous programming by school orchestras.

For my first foray into the world of *String Notes*, I am going to do a two-part article that is based upon my thesis research. While my thesis, entitled *Reconsidering Repertoire: The Second New England School and the Performance Possibilities for High School Orchestras*, is rather specific, I will use the information broadly so it is germane and

useful to the majority of *String Notes* readers.

To begin, I would like to discuss the process of repertoire selection. While on the surface it may seem obvious, there are a number of important factors that music educators need to consider when selecting the appropriate repertoire for their ensembles. Fact of the matter is...it is not an easy process! Even experienced directors (myself included), make mistakes from time to time. I have developed five critical factors to consider when selecting repertoire:

1. Evaluation of the ensemble's strengths and weaknesses
2. Concert program considerations
3. A work's historical and cultural value
4. A work's educational value
5. Publishing company offerings

Evaluating musical works with these factors ultimately leads to selecting appropriate repertoire that is of *high* quality.

Factor # 1 – Evaluation of the ensemble's strengths and weaknesses

One of the most difficult aspects of selecting repertoire is making an honest evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of your ensemble. Sounds simple, right? I couldn't tell you the number of times I have heard school ensembles (from elementary to collegiate ensembles) that are clearly playing music that is out of their reach. I know I've made this mistake and will likely do so again from time to time. The real trick is finding music that will reinforce an ensemble's strengths, but also stretch the performers in some way. Students won't learn much if they aren't challenged, but many students will simply give up if a piece is too far over their heads.

String educators must take the time and effort to make an honest assessment of the skills a piece demands for both the left and right hands. Can the students execute the majority of the bow strokes required?

What positions are the students comfortable in? How well does the ensemble play in tune? Which key signatures might be best to avoid?

Another item to consider is one that is more of a concern for orchestra educators than our band and choral colleagues: the widespread appeal and recognition of a piece of music. Put simply, the classical music canon includes a great deal of pieces that students recognize and want to play *and* audience members recognize and want to hear. This puts the director of an ensemble (the high school director in particular) in a place where they may feel the need to program works from the "standard repertoire" regardless of their orchestra's true ability level.

Lastly, when evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of an ensemble, a conductor must also look at his or her own abilities and limitations. The successful teaching and performance of high quality literature requires that the conductor has a firm understanding of the material.

Factor #2 – Concert program considerations

A large consideration in the repertoire selection process must be how well a particular work fits into an individual concert program as well as an entire year of repertoire as a whole. For a typical concert, the repertoire that is selected should be of varying length, style, time period, composer and origin. For ensembles that have the option of using a complement of winds and percussion, the director should also consider variety in instrumentation throughout the concert program and the year. This is not to say, however, that there is no place for a specific "theme" in a concert program. Provided the works have some of the aforementioned variety, programming a concert of, say, entirely Scandinavian music can be very informative for students and audiences alike.

Personally, with my Symphony Orchestra (auditioned group made up of mostly 11th and 12th graders), I sketch out a “season” program for the school year the previous spring. I try to include some sort of theme that ties all of our main concerts together. For example, each concert series we did in 2010/2011 included an Eastern European dance movement (Brahms *Hungarian Dances*, Dvorak *Slavonic Dances*, Borodin *Polovtsian Dances*, etc...). In 2011/2012, we had a piece of British string literature in our folders all year (Vaughn Williams *Rhapsody*, Holst *St. Paul's Suite*, Elgar *String Serenade*, etc...). With my younger students in the Concert Orchestra (mostly 9th and 10th graders), planning isn't able to happen so much in advance. This will generally be the case for any non-auditioned orchestra... especially when most of the musicians are coming in from your feeder programs or other districts. I'll come into the school year with an idea of some pieces I'd like to play (from a stable of my favorite “educational” works for strings with varying grade levels), but many of the decisions for repertoire are determined after I have a chance to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses through sight reading, individual check-ins, and “reports” of the incoming students from the feeder programs. Regardless of where they are at, I'll typically try to vary each concert program for them by including one or two arrangements of standard works (my favorites are the Sandra Dackow arrangements) and a couple of pieces by “new” composers.

Factor #3 – Historical and cultural value

A question that every music educator must

ask himself or herself is this: why program this work? What is significant about it? What historical and/or cultural values does it provide? Students are much more likely to become actively involved in learning materials that they value. So, what can you do as the director? Select works with varying musical styles. Select works that have an interesting or unique history. Pieces of music can be considered historically and culturally relevant for a number of reasons and can be very powerful for both the students and audience members. Not only is selecting music that is historically and culturally relevant a best practice in concert programming, it is also tied heavily to the National Standards in Music.

Factor #4 – Educational value

While collegiate, amateur, and professional ensemble directors can choose to factor the educational and pedagogical value of a work into their programming, it is virtually a requirement for K-12 music educators. Indeed, the key question in repertoire selection should be whether or not our students will learn something significant from the music and whether or not they will be better musicians for having learned it. As famed band director H. Robert Reynolds once wrote, “Repertoire *is* the curriculum.” While audiences may 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 provides significant musical experiences for the students.

Factor #5 – Publishing company offerings

Music educators of all stripes rely heavily on the offerings of the large publishing companies. Their organized and graded series, readily available audio files, and reasonable prices would seem to be a great resource. Caution must be exercised, however, when selecting music offered by these large companies. Selecting music of a certain grade can be a starting point, but it does not replace true score analysis and research into the factors laid out earlier in this article. Additionally, not all publishers use the same grading system and some pieces don't neatly fall within a stratified system. One publisher's Grade 3 may be another publisher's Grade 4.

Furthermore, the primary concern of the large publishing companies is to publish what will likely sell the most copies rather than what may be of the highest artistic and educational quality. While there are certainly a number of wonderful original compositions and arrangements being published today, there is also a great deal of schlock and poorly arranged works from the standard orchestral repertoire. What can you do? Take an active role in the repertoire selection of your ensembles. Trust your own eyes more than a description in a catalog! Trust your own evaluation and score study more than looking at a grade number!

With these factors in mind, my next installment will explore ways for orchestra educators to include more variety and adventurous programming in their repertoire selection. Thanks for reading!

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