



ORCHESTRA

Repertoire Selection... It's Time to Think Outside of the Box! (Part 2)

by Chris Jannings

In the last issue of *String Notes*, I spent much of my article focused on the process of repertoire selection. To recap, here are the five critical factors I have identified in selecting repertoire for your ensemble:

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

In this article, I would like to more specifically focus on finding ways for the orchestra educator to include more variety and adventurous programming in their repertoire selection.

To begin, it must be stated that I am certainly not the *most* adventurous orchestra educator when it comes to selecting music for my ensembles. While I think it is fair to say that I “practice what I preach” in these articles, I still program a healthy dose of music from the standard repertoire or European canon. As I write this, the Roseville Area High School Symphony Orchestra is in the thick of the rehearsal process preparing for a performance at the Minnesota Music Educators Association Midwinter Clinic. Our repertoire is chocked full of works by Grieg, Rossini, Schubert and Tchaikovsky. The core of most of my concert programs is (and likely always will be) works from the standard repertoire. There is one simple reason for this; it's great music! In no way is this article suggesting that students shouldn't have the experience of playing music of the “great” composers of the European canon. Rather, I'm simply suggesting that we owe it to our students to present them more variety. I've found that there is a wealth of repertoire from our own musical landscape and other parts of the world that have the pedagogical and artistic value to stand alongside the works of the standard repertoire.

Before I lay out some suggestions for including more variety and adventurous

selections in your programming, let us first talk a bit more about the so called “European canon.” What is it? Why are the works so often heard? The European canon for symphonic orchestra is primarily comprised of material from the Classic and Romantic periods, though the occasional Baroque and Modern works may be included. While the canon certainly spans the entire continent of Europe, much of the focus is on the Austro/German tradition. To answer the question of *why* this music is programmed so often is a bit more involved. As I stated above, the main reason this repertoire remains so popular and frequently programmed is the fact that it is great music. Another reason that this repertoire has such a strong foothold in the programming of professional, amateur, and educational ensembles in the United States goes back to the sacralization of European music in the 18th and 19th centuries. Many people (critics, musicians, and thus the general public) looked down on composers and performers native to the United States because of euro-centric bias. While American composers like Ives, Copland, and Barber made some inroads in the first half of the 20th century, many American composers didn't get (and continue not to get) the attention they deserve.

I believe one of the biggest reasons we as educators struggle with more adventurous programming and default to the more “familiar” works of the canon is, quite simply, we program what we know. What did most of us play in orchestra when we were growing up? What works did we hear our local professional orchestras play? What did we hear on the legendary recordings of Karajan, Toscanini, and Bernstein? For me, it was a challenge to break out of the mold and program some unfamiliar works, but I have found it to be incredibly gratifying for both my students and myself. With that in mind, here are a few suggestions I have for you to include more variety in your concert programming. While some of this information will be most applicable and germane to

my colleagues at the secondary level, I hope that much of the information can be useful to my fellow educators from the elementary to collegiate level.

Think Local:

As I mentioned in my last article, my Masters thesis was centered around repertoire selection for high school orchestras with a specific emphasis on the music of The Second New England School of composition. This largely forgotten group of composers that includes John Knowles Paine, George Whitefield Chadwick, Arthur Foote, Amy Beach, Horatio Parker and Edward MacDowell were paramount in fostering an early American musical identity. Composers like Ives and Copland would not have thrived if not for the road being paved by this group of composers.

As part of my thesis work, I programmed a fair amount of selections by these composers with my top orchestra three years ago to measure the musical and pedagogical qualities for high school orchestras. I was pleased to find that not only are the works of high quality, students had some great things to say about the music (even though it was unfamiliar to them). If you have an advanced high school ensemble, consider: Beach – *“Gaelic” Symphony in E minor*; Chadwick – *Serenade for Strings in F Major*; Foote – *Suite for Strings in E Major* (Op. 63)

More broadly, consider programming more original works by *any* American composer. This serves as a great jumping off point when looking at programming new and interesting works. You may be surprised to a) find more accessible works than you thought existed and b) realize that the educational and artistic value of these works can rival that of works from the standard repertoire. Here are a few additional suggestions of American works that have been a good fit for my orchestras:

Middle Level: Berger – *Diversion for String Orchestra*; Berger – *Short Overture for String Orchestra*; Dello Joio – *Choreography*

for String Orchestra; Feese – Contrasts in E minor

Advanced High School: Barber – *Serenade for Strings Op. 1*; Bloch – *Concerto Grosso No. 1 for Strings and Piano Obligato*; Still – *Danzas de Panama*

Go Global:

Another idea for mixing up your programming is to include more diverse music from around the globe. Long a staple of our choral colleagues, school bands and orchestras have typically lagged behind a bit in their exploration of world music. While part of that is undoubtedly the fact that different types of music “translate” easier to vocal music, I believe part of the issue is that we, as orchestra educators, are traditionally too stuck on the aforementioned European canon. World music for orchestras exists in two main forms.

First, there are pieces that are influenced or inspired by another musical culture and arranged for strings or full orchestra. These compositions and arrangements often include the use of extended techniques to mimic the sounds of native instruments. My favorite example of this is Richard Meyer’s *Fantasia on a Theme from Thailand*. This middle level work is a theme and variations on the *Pong Lang Dance* (one of Thailand’s most popular melodies). The Pong Lang is a suspended, vertical wooden xylophone. To evoke the mallet percussion sound, Meyer effectively uses pizzicato and “slapping” techniques. In performance, I have taken it a step further and added some col legno bowings in spots to elicit a more percussive and authentic sound.

The other “form” of world music for orchestra that I’ll identify are works that are specifically written for orchestra or traditional orchestral instruments. These pieces can range from the very traditional and familiar to the very exotic. My Symphony Orchestra is currently working on a traditional, yet unique piece entitled *Directions North* by Canadian composer Donald Coakley. A triptych of Canadian folk tunes, it is familiar in style and substance to

European works, but has its own character that you won’t find anywhere else. On the more exotic side of the spectrum, there are a wealth of options to explore. Many of these works are Latin American. There are both string arrangements and original scores by composers like Alberto Ginastera, Heitor Villa Lobos, Alberto Williams, Carlos Chavez, and more. The rhythmic and motivic character of these pieces not only makes them a nice change of pace from most of the music you will program, it will also give your students a counting work out! Suffice to say, if they can count and play Ginastera correctly, rhythm will be a breeze when playing Mozart or Beethoven.

Commission works:

One of the most interesting and gratifying ways to include more adventurous programming is to be a part of the creation of a new work. I’ve had the good fortune of being a part of a new commission twice as an educator with my orchestras and twice as a performer in the Roseville String Ensemble (community orchestra). The process can be very fun and inspirational for students, as the composer or arranger becomes less of an abstract thought and more of a tangible reality. Students also tend to enjoy being a part of a “world premiere” or doing something that no other orchestra has ever done. That said, commissioning works can be difficult both logistically and financially. You have to put a lot of faith in the composer or arranger (particularly difficult if you don’t have a personal relationship with him or her). Time tables, instrumentation, level of difficulty and the like need to be very explicitly stated and understood by both parties. Perhaps the biggest hindrance is the fact that, typically, commissioning a new work is expensive. Couple that with the fact that many music educators see increasingly smaller budgets each year. There are, however, many local and statewide grants that you can apply for to offset the cost of commissioning a new work. In my experience, many of the organizations that give out grant money look favorably upon any

project that creates new art and gives students a unique experience.

In Summary:

There are many ways to give your repertoire selection a refresh. Think about a healthy balance of the “standard repertoire” (whatever that means to your ensemble’s age/ability level) and some new works that will stretch your students as performers and you as a conductor and educator. Think about performing more works by American composers. There is a treasure trove of material out there written by Americans that you might not have heard of. Think about exploring some musical styles outside of Europe or the United States. As many of our schools become more culturally diverse, it becomes more important to find music with a global influence to celebrate the diversity of our students. Lastly, consider commissioning a new work or arrangement. While it can present some challenges, it is a really cool experience for the students and a great way to promote your program.

To close, I’d like to encourage you all to spread the word amongst your colleagues when you find some new and exciting repertoire. Word of mouth is probably still the most effective way to share ideas amongst music educators. It would be great if we had hours and hours to pour over music history books, catalogs, recordings, and scores, but that’s not the world we live in.

Thanks for reading—have a great spring and good luck with the rest of the school year!

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