

KEEP THEM COMING BACK FOR MORE

HOW TO PROGRAM SUCCESSFUL CONCERTS FOR YOUR STUDENTS AND YOUR AUDIENCE

by Dr. Jeffrey D. Gershman

“I adopted a new method of choosing my concert music based on the method employed by our English Department. Just as they had created a list of the authors which every student should read, I began with a list of composers to which I thought every student should be exposed.”

“It’s a privilege, really.”

It’s amazing how so few words can change everything about your teaching. I was in my second year as a high school teacher and I was hanging out in the Teachers Lounge reviewing a score before my rehearsal the next period. One of the English teachers at the school, whom I had met in passing, walked up to me, checked out what I was doing, and said simply, “I envy you.” I looked up and must have given him a confused look. He repeated again, “I envy you.” I laughed. “Why on earth would you envy me? Is it because you wish you could spend 70 hours a week up at school, too?” He smiled. What I thought was going to come out of his mouth was that he was jealous that the band directors only worked with the “smart” kids or the classes in which he had to try to teach I’ll never forget. “I envy you, because of didn’t understand. “Look,” he continued,



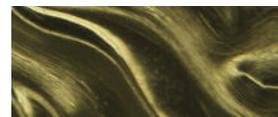
kids who wanted to be there, unlike his the general population. What he said next the freedom that you have.” I told him I “I have taught freshman English here for ten

years and I have used the same district-assigned text book every single year. It's always the same authors, the same stories, the same characters, and the same questions at the end of every chapter. But you—you have freedom—you get to choose and perform different music on every single concert. Do you know how lucky you are to have that kind of freedom? I envy you because so few of us get the luxury of variety. It's a privilege, really." And with that, he turned and walked away, back to his classroom and back to his textbook. I sat dumbfounded. Until that moment, I don't think I had realized how lucky I was to do what I do and I had, for sure, never made the connection that our concert music was the same as his textbook. It was a one sentence epiphany that gave me a new perspective on repertoire selection that, frankly, I had never considered and that demanded further examination. With his analogy resonating deeply in my mind, I went to our English Department head to get more insight into how the district created the curriculum of its academic subjects. He told me that the district's teachers first compiled a list of authors that they felt that each student needed to know before they graduated. From there, they agreed on the skills and techniques that needed to be taught and then simply chose literature from their list of authors that would allow their students acquire these skills and techniques. I then asked if I could see their literature lists for each grade level. It was absolutely remarkable. Each year in high school, the students read only the best authors from the past seven hundred years, all the while exploring the different styles, genres, and trends that shaped literary history. It was a curriculum driven by the art and an uncompromising standard of quality that pushed the students to elevate their thinking to the level of the literature. As I left his office, I felt humbled. My curriculum was driven by function, not art: "OK, I have strong clarinets, saxophones, and low brass, but very weak trumpets. What pieces can I play that fit my band and will allow me to be successful at contest?" My curriculum was driven by music that appealed to the students on a superficial level, assuming that they wouldn't comprehend or enjoy history's greatest composers. Worst of all, my curriculum blatantly and irresponsibly ignored the fact that, for the vast majority of my students, their experience in my band might be the last, or only, exposure to classical music they would have in their entire lives. Quite simply, my lack of vision and integrity to this point in my career had compromised the quality of my students' education.

"It's a privilege, really." It's amazing how so few words can change everything about your teaching.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO PROGRAMMING

My experience with my English-teaching colleagues significantly changed the way I looked at choosing concert repertoire. That summer, before my third year of teaching, I adopted a new method of choosing my concert music based on the method employed by our English Department. Just as they had created a list of the authors which every student should read, I began with a list of composers to which I thought every student should be exposed. Before starting this list, I forced myself to widen my scope and imposed two rules: 1) All composers were fair game, not just band composers and 2) The difficulty of the composers' music was not allowed to be considered.



Armed with a tablet and my two rules, I began the list—composers that I had loved as a kid, composers that I had studied in music history, composers that I had played as a student in band, and on and on. When I finished, the list was long and diverse—ranging from Beethoven to Holst to Gershwin to Adams. I checked my work against the English Department's list of authors just as a point of comparison. What I found was that my list of composers was heavily slanted towards my own personal preferences—a few 17th and 18th Century composers, significantly more from the 19th Century, and lots and lots of contemporary works. Not a single work before 1700. Now, truth be told, I never did very well in my early Music History classes. I just never connected as strongly with Medieval and Renaissance music as I did with the music that followed, but it was extremely important that my preferences not bias this list. My responsibility was to expose my students to the entire history of classical music, so I welcomed Tielman Susato, Orlando di Lasso, Henry Purcell, and a host of others to the list. When I was finally done, what I had in front of me was truly the history of music, from its simple beginnings to the very present. With this list in hand, I moved onto Step 2 of this new method—find pieces written or arranged for band by these composers. This was actually easier than I thought it was going to be, largely because the recent proliferation of band repertoire books and the myriad online resources available. The first thing I did was consult sources that screened repertoire for quality. I checked through the Best Music for Beginning Band, Young Band, High School Band, and Chorus and Winds series, all of the volumes of Teaching Music through Performance in Band, and as many state music lists as I could find, all the while continuing to match up pieces of all grade levels to my composers. Finally, I consulted music publisher and music retailer websites. These titles I took with a grain of salt, because there

was no quality control. While it was important for my students to be exposed to these composers, it was counterproductive for them to perform their music if it was poorly arranged or pitifully watered down.

With these final titles added, my project was now complete. While, admittedly, it took a significant investment of time to initially compile this list, what I quickly discovered was that this was a powerful new resource that would actually end up saving me immense amounts of time in the future. The summer before my first year of teaching, I had spent hours upon hours surrounded by promotional recordings and repertoire books, blindly searching for the pieces that I liked and best matched my band. The following summer featured the same unfocused, time-consuming approach. With this new resource, for the first time in my career, I could set up a long-term plan for my students. For me, I created a four year rotation, with each year featuring several specific



historical style periods, insuring that my students would be exposed to the entire history of music by the time they graduated. Selecting specific repertoire for each year then became incredibly simple and focused: List the pedagogical techniques and skills that my students should acquire and then choose from the list of composers and their pieces from within these style periods that best fit my band.

What I found most rewarding about this method was that this music challenged my students to elevate their musical tastes and perform styles outside of their experience while still allowing me the practical flexibility of choosing pieces that best fit my band. I still continue to use this method and, every summer, I just add the year's worthy new pieces and arrangements to my original list.

SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMMING

Now, with all of this being said, playing outstanding repertoire by accomplished composers isn't a guarantee of a quality concert experience. The reality is that choosing this music is truly only the starting point for creating diverse and enjoyable concerts. There are several very important, very practical considerations to programming that should be addressed in hopes of

creating quality and enjoyable concerts.

FLOW

With all of the work you've put into developing your list of composers and with all of the time you've invested finding their repertoire written or arranged for band—with all of the dedication you've devoted to your students to create a superior curriculum, it's ironic then that the first thing you need to do when putting together a concert program is to consider the audience. As band directors, with everything that we're asked to do, we

sometimes forget that those people filling the seats behind you—the parents, siblings, friends, spouses, colleagues, and administrators—came to your concert that night for one thing—to be entertained. Sure, everyone has other reasons why they're there: to see their kids on stage, to cheer on their friends, or to support fellow colleagues. But for whatever reason that got them through the door, as the lights go down, the camcorders fire up, and they settle into their seats, all they really want is to be entertained. And the thing is, we owe them that. This is the culmination of their sacrifice—for all of the hours of transportation, for all of the money spent, for all of the patience shown—we owe them this reward. And all rewarding concerts begin with one thing: flow. To me, there is nothing more important in concert programming than creating that perfect flow of pieces that will sustain the audience's interest throughout the performance. I have attended many concerts in which ensembles

have given strong performances of very good repertoire, only to leave the audience bored out of their minds. The reasons for their indifference vary. Some performances featured music that was too stylistically similar. Some ensembles played repertoire in which all of the music just hovered around the same tempo and dynamics. Some concerts were simply just too long. It's imperative to remember that, while creating a quality concert is built on a foundation of worthy repertoire, creating an *enjoyable* concert is all about how the pieces fit together.

PROGRAM ORDER

Creating good concert flow starts at the very beginning of the programming process.

The first step in choosing repertoire is to consult your long-term programming plan. This will provide you the framework for what historical

“While it was important for my students to be exposed to these composers, it was counterproductive for them to perform their music if it was poorly arranged or pitifully watered down.”



“To me, there is nothing more important in concert programming than creating that perfect flow of pieces that will sustain the audience’s interest throughout the performance. I have attended many concerts in which ensembles have given strong performances of very good repertoire, only to leave the audience bored out of their minds.”

styles you would like to feature on your concert. The second step is to go to your composer resource and begin to make a list of all of the pieces within your selected historical styles that interest you and are achievable by your band. With this list, creating an effective concert flow is as easy as following just a few basic rules.

RULE NO. 1: GET THEM ON THEIR FEET

The first thing I always select for the program is what piece will close the concert. This piece of program prime real estate has but one criterion: by its conclusion, is it exciting enough or moving enough that it will elicit a sincere, immediate standing ovation from the audience? All audiences want to leave the auditorium on a visceral high and nothing reinforces that feeling more than an effective closer. Look through your list of pieces and find that one piece that will get them on their feet. When you’re considering closer options, if you only think that the audience will buy into it, don’t do it. With closers, you just have to know.

RULE NO. 2: ALWAYS START STRONG

The next part of the programming puzzle is finding a piece to open the concert. There is an innate sense of anticipation to the beginning of any concert and you can play on that expectation by programming something that will quickly catch the attention of the audience. Be it fast and loud or strong and stately, within the first 30 seconds of your concert, the music needs to emotionally connect with your audience. This opener sets the tone for the entire concert and with a weak opener; you may never get your audience back.

RULE NO. 3: CHANGE IT UP

With the bookends to your concert in place, now you can begin to fill in the remainder of your program. To keep your audience engaged, the second piece on your concert needs to serve as a complete contrast to the opener. For instance, if your opening selection was fast and loud, then a simple, lyric selection would be an apt foil because it’s so musically different from the

opener. If you opened the concert with a strong, stately work, then you could select a short piece with a light and playful character, again highlighting the musical differences between the two pieces. In either case, the important thing is that there is a noticeable contrast between the first two pieces. If your ensemble is capable of performing four pieces on the concert, then the third and final slots need to contrast with the second work. If the second selection was lyrical, then move on to a light and playful piece. If you just performed something light and fun, go with a lyrical work. If you have an advanced ensemble that will perform more than four pieces, the remainder of the concert should continue to follow this formula of contrast. By constantly giving the audience changes in tempo, dynamics, and texture, you have a better chance of keeping them engaged throughout the entire performance.

HISTORICAL CONTRAST

In addition to creating contrast through musical differences, another effective way of creating good concert flow is by programming works of various historical styles. Even if you don’t subscribe to creating a long-term rotation of the music of different historical periods, effective contrast can be achieved by utilizing works of the past. Check your recent programs. How many pieces have been written within the last 25 years? While these pieces may have differing styles, there’s a good chance that their melodic shape and harmonic language are very similar. This steady diet of late 20th century/early 21st Century pieces will quickly grow stale to your audience. More importantly, this lack of variety isn’t fair to your students. There are hundreds of years of classical music lying untapped and if the introduction to this music doesn’t come from you, then from whom will it come?

MULTI-MOVEMENT WORKS

If possible, I highly recommend that you perform at least one multi-movement work a year. To me, multi-movement pieces present some unique challenges that are different than those inherent in single-movement works. For both you and your

“These people are happy to be at your concert but they will be equally as happy to go home and go to bed. Keep your concert length in check—just because your band can perform a three hour concert doesn’t mean it should.”

players, multi-movement pieces require a different sort of mentality to perform. Because a large amount of our repertoire is comprised of single-movement works, we’ve gotten very conditioned to finishing a piece, hearing applause, and mentally relaxing before the next selection begins. Because of its structure, multi-movement pieces force us to extend our mental concentration over the span of several movements. More than that, though, they create an unfamiliar anxiety for those on stage because it doesn’t allow us the brief mental letdown between the pieces, since there is still more to come. This anxiety is only compounded by the uncomfortable silence that lingers between the movements. It’s exactly because of all of these challenges that I think multi-movement pieces are integral for building the mental and physical maturity of our ensembles.

Multi-movement pieces also bring with them some inherent challenges when it comes to programming. What’s important to realize when selecting one is that, while it may look like one piece of your printed program, to your audience, it’s just a series of many small pieces. For instance, band directors look at Lincolnshire Posy as a single work; audiences listen to it as six independent pieces. Because of this, multi-movement works are much more mentally taxing on the audience. With this in mind, program accordingly by making sure that the multi-movement piece is surrounded by single-movement works of some length. If the multi-movement piece is bordered by works that are the approximate length of its movements, then the concert becomes an exhausting progression of miniatures which will ultimately feel unfulfilling because there’s nothing truly independently substantial on the program. Of course, if the multi-movement work is itself quite long then the single-movement works surrounding it should offer contrast in every way.

DIFFICULTY

As you put together your programs, don’t be afraid to use repertoire that is slightly easier than the difficulty level to which your band is accustomed. This is particularly effective when it comes to programming slower, lyric music. Think of the reasons we choose slow music. We rehearse it to develop the musicality of our ensembles, to develop the maturity in their ensemble

sounds, and to improve their intonation. Wouldn’t it make sense not to complicate these issues with the additional range concerns and technical issues that come with harder slow music? Choosing this music at a slightly less advanced level will allow your ensemble to truly focus on what matters. Besides, the time you will save in rehearsal on your slow pieces will be put to good use when working on the other pieces on your program.

ENDURANCE

One very important, often neglected, consideration when choosing a program is taking into account the physical endurance of your musicians, particularly your high brass players. There is nothing more squirmingly heart-wrenching than the end of a successful concert being fatally marred by players who ruin the performance because they simply don’t have the embouchure strength left to play the correct pitches or make good sounds. Because of this, physical endurance must be a factor in the programming process. If you decide to program works that are going to be physically demanding on your brass, you must surround those pieces with music that is less taxing, which will allow them time to rest.

CONCERT LENGTH

This particular concern is directed at those advanced ensembles that are capable of performing a concert with an hour or more of music. It’s imperative to remember that, just as your players have physical thresholds that need to be considered, audiences have aural thresholds that need to be addressed as well. Given that most school concerts happen on a weekday night, it needs to be remembered that most your audience has already been through an entire day of work or school before they arrive at your auditorium. These people are happy to be at your concert but they will be equally as happy to go home and go to bed. Keep your concert length in check—just because your band can perform a three hour concert doesn’t mean it should. It’s been my experience that a forty-five minute event is about all that most school-based audiences can take without a break. If you have more music than this, insert a brief intermission. If you go this route, stick with a first half which contains approx-

imately two-thirds of the music with the second half rounding out the final third. You and your students have invested a lot of hard work and effort in creating this concert program. Make sure to structure the concert in a way that maximizes your audience's attention so that they are fresh enough at the end to express their sincere appreciation in that ovation that your ensemble deserves.

CONCERT PREVIEW

The last step before you finalize your program is a simple, but essential one. It's time to treat yourself to a concert preview. Sit down with full length recordings of the pieces you've chosen and listen all the way through your concert, in order, in one sitting. If you can't find recordings, sing through your scores. I prefer listening to recordings because I want to recreate the concert experience from the audience's perspective. Singing your scores is an active experience, while the experience your audience will have is a passive one. Regardless of whichever method you employ, the important thing is that you're giving yourself a chance to be an audience member at your own concert. Mentally put yourself in that auditorium and listen through your concert. Do the pieces have a natural progression? Are you immediately engaged from the outset of the concert? Is there a nice variety of styles and tempos that would keep you engaged? Are the brass going to be able to finish strong? Are you immediately on your feet at the end? This final step of the process has been indispensable to me in the past because, quite a bit of the time, the perfect concert I had envisioned in my head reveals itself to have some fundamental flaws. This concert preview gives you the objective perspective that otherwise is easy to lose along the way because of the myriad things you have to consider.

TEAR DOWN THOSE WALLS!

After all that you done. After the pages upon pages of lists, after all the hours of reviewing composers and titles, and after all of the unsuccessful program drafts, you have finally done it—you have created the perfect program for your students. And yet, for me, there is still one more step. It's time for you to breathe perspective into this music you're about to put on the stands. So often, the music in front of our students is nothing more than a progression of black and white on a page—a concert of independent pieces with no connection to the world around them. But the fact is, that not true. Often, the composers of your pieces wrote their music for a reason. There are histories and stories behind these pieces and their composers that profoundly shaped how and why they were written. Our students

deserve to be let in on the secret. The more they know about their music, the more invested they will become. What you'll find is that their music will cease being a progression of black and white on a page and start becoming their contribution to the story. It doesn't stop there, though. Our education system, as a whole, breeds compartmentalized learning. We learn English in English class. We learn history in Social Studies. We learn music in Band. We're somehow taught that everything we learn in these classes occurs independently. Use your music to break down these artificial barriers. Playing a Mozart transcription? Your students might be interested to know that Mozart was composing as we fought the Revolutionary War. Knowing that George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were alive at the same time as Mozart and Beethoven will help give your students perspective. Working on a Grainger piece? Those students of yours that are reading Steinbeck or Hemingway might be interested to know that Grainger was reading them too. Your history students might be interested to know that all three of them would have been living in an America that was facing the Great Depression, all the while keeping a close eye on Germany and the rise of the Nazi party. Everything is interrelated. A little bit of research on your part can not only provide your students with a deeper understanding of their music; it can give them a better appreciation of our world.

One last thing. This sort of education doesn't need to be reserved just for your students. I think our job includes educating the audience. Write program notes. Talk to your audience and briefly tell them about your music and its stories. Better yet, have your students talk to the audience so that everyone can see that the music they play is so much more than notes on a page and sounds in a darkened hall.

"It's a privilege, really."

My English-teaching colleague was right. Ours is a privilege; but one that comes with great responsibility. This luxury of variety in programming that we are afforded is time-consuming, maddeningly inexact, often times frustrating, and ultimately, if we approach it the right way, rewarding. By skillfully blending the past and present, by carefully crafting an enjoyable concert flow for the audience, and by infusing your students' music with its history and with our history, I have no doubt you are destined to create a tradition of concert success that will keep them coming back for more. ✨

