Repertoire Selection and Programming for Your Orchestra
Dr. Michael Hopkins
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Why is it important to select appropriate repertoire?

Every musician, no matter the age or experience, wants to sound good – that is the primary goal.

Selecting repertoire that matches your ensemble's experience level and needs will help you deliver pubic performances that showcase your ensemble at its very best.

Great public performances will create positive feelings towards you and your program from students, parents, teachers, administrators and community members.

Programming repertoire that is too difficult for your students will diminish student levels of motivation.

Common problems conductors have when selecting and rehearsing repertoire:

- Blinded by love for a piece of music, even though it is too difficult for students to make sound good
- Length of program - too many pieces of music for single performance
- Several short pieces which are all a little too difficult, and the cumulative effect is that none of them end up sounding good
- The masterwork illusion- the quality of a performance takes a back seat to the prestige of the works being played
- Rehearsals are completely "repertoire bound" - driven by the rehearsal of repertoire, which diminishes the time spent on the development of skills, actions, concepts and musical understanding away from the printed page.

Solutions:

- Learn what your students know and are able to do through auditions, skills checks, playing tests
- Familiarize yourself with the grading systems used by different publishers
- Create a folder with a selection of graded literature ranging from very, very easy to difficult, and have a sight reading day at beginning of year.
- Program using principles of the Zone of Proximal Development and Flow Theory
- Divide your rehearsals into Skills Development portion and Repertoire Rehearsal portion
- Establish and emphasize the aesthetic goals of music making with students
- Use the attached Repertoire Selection Rubric to assist you when evaluating scores for your ensemble

Handouts and Rubric: http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mhopkins/ASTA/

Repertoire Selection Rubric
Dr. Michael Hopkins
University of Michigan

Instructions: Complete page 1 for string orchestra repertoire, both pages for full orchestra repertoire

					Score
Rhythmic independence of the parts	All parts move together rhythmically **1 –2**	There are two or three different interlocking rhythms. Everyone plays on downbeats. **3 – 4 - 5**	Some parts move independently. Some parts frequently not playing on downbeat. **6 – 7 - 8**	There is considerable rhythmic independence (fugal style) **9 – 10**	
Key	D, G, C major or relative minors. **1 - 2**	3 flats to 3 sharps. One key change in middle of piece. Some accidentals. **3 –4 - 5**	4 flats to 4 sharps. Multiple key changes. Moderate use of accidentals. **6 –7 -8**	All key signatures. Heavy use of accidentals. **9 - 10**	
Tempo and Rhythmic complexity	4/4, 3/4, 2/4 time signatures. Regular and predictable phrase lengths. 1/8note to 1/2 notes. Tempos are moderate. **1 –2**	4/4, 3/4, 2/4, Cut time and 6/8 meters. 1/16 note to whole notes. Dotted rhythms. Considerable rhythmic repetition. Tempos are moderately slow to moderately fast (Andante to Allegro) **3 –4 - 5**	All simple and compound meters. Meter changes. Irregular phrase lengths. Very little rhythmic repetition. Some syncopation. 1/32 to tied breve. Tuplet rhythms. Tempos range from Adagio to Presto. **6-7-8**	Asymmetrical meters. Meter changes. Complex syncopations. Cross rhythms. All note duration values. Tempos range from Molto Adagio to Prestissimo. **9 -10**	
Editing of score	Score is well edited with printed bowings and fingerings in the score and parts. Dynamics and phrasing clearly marked **1 –2**	Score contains some bowings or fingerings but more editing is necessary. Dynamics and phrases clearly marked. **3 –4 - 5**	Score has only a few bowings, no fingerings. Score contains dynamics, but phrasing needs to be marked. **6-7-8**	No fingerings or bowings. Dynamics and phrasing sparse. All editing must be completed. **9 -10**	
Bowing Style	Separate bows. On the string detaché bowings only **1 –2**	Partial measure slurs. Bows move rhythmically. On the string bow strokes. Hooked bowings. **3 – 4 –5**	Precise use of on and off the string bow strokes. Use of long sustained bow strokes. Slurs last longer than full measure. **6 – 7 - 8**	Players must have control over all uses of the bow – on and off the string strokes, slurs of any length, all style of articulations, long sustained bow strokes. **9 -10**	
Complexity of the harmony	Only major and minor triads with roots in bass **1 –2**	Primarily major and minor triads , with chords in inversion. Occasional 7th chord or diminished harmony. **3 –4 - 5**	Frequent use of 7th chords, diminished chords, and/or augmented chords. Open quartal or quintal harmonies. **6- 7 - 8**	Harmony includes unusual vertical sonorities (bitonality, tone clusters, etc) **9 - 10**	
Density of the texture	The texture is simple(melody line, harmony line, bass line; or just melody and bass) **1 – 2**	The texture is moderately complex (melody, counter melody, 1 or 2 harmony parts, bass line) **3 –4 – 5**	The texture is complex and varied (some sections with multiple melodic lines , sections with polyphony) **6- 7 - 8**	The texture is highly complex (multiple melodic lines , extensive polyphony, divisi in multiple parts) **9 -10**	
Idiomatic writing	Writing for the strings move mostly by step and small leaps. Bass mostly doubling the cello part All parts playable in first position. **1-2**	Some large leaps. Some use of arpeggiation. Bass independent of the cello. Violin 1, Cello and Bass shift to intermediate positions. **3-4-5**	Very large leaps that require shifting and/or crossing multiple strings. Heavy use of arpeggiation. All parts require shifting to intermediate positions. Violin 1 and Cello shift to high positions, read tenor clef. **6-7-8**	Very large leaps that require shifting in some or all parts. All instruments must be able to access all areas of fingerboard. Considerable independence of inner voices. Violas may use treble clef. **9 - 10**	

Full orchestra considerations

Wind Doublings	Unison and octave doublings stay stable over long periods of time. Bass instruments (Bassoon, cello, bass, 3rd trombone, tuba) are frequently doubling. **1-2**	Unison, one and two octave doublings that stay stable over long periods of time. Some independent use of bass instruments. Bassoons sometimes playing independently. **3-4-5**	Infrequent use of doubling. Unison and octave doublings are frequently changing. Horn parts contain lots of 4-note voicings. Total independence in bass instruments. Solos for principal winds. **6-7-8**	Complete independence of woodwinds, brass and strings. Complex harmonies in all areas of the orchestra. Unusual doublings across multiple octaves. Frequent soli passages for all winds. **9 - 10**	
Range of Wind Parts	Woodwinds and brass kept in middle registers, and given frequent opportunities for rest. No sustained high playing. **1-2**	Principal woodwind and brass expanded to intermediate ranges. Frequent opportunities for rest. **3-4-5**	Considerable sustained high playing in the winds. 1st trumpet must play C or higher. 1st horn must play A or higher.1st bassoon play above G and read tenor clef. 1st trombone must play above F. **6-7-8**	All winds must be able to play in all registers and endure sustained high playing. All Trumpets must play C or higher. All horns must play A or higher. **9 - 10**	
Solos	No solos in the music. **1-2**	Some short solos for players in the ensemble. **3-4-5**	Several principal players have lengthy and/or exposed important solos. Low instruments may have lengthy exposed passages. **6-7-8**	Many lengthy exposed solos for individual players in the music. Long periods of time where most of the orchestra rests while just a few instruments are playing. **9 - 10**	
Length of Piece	Under 5 minutes **1-2**	6 to 15 minutes **3-4-5**	16 – 30 minutes **6-7-8**	More than 30 minutes **9 - 10**	

Score _____

Scoring Guide – This guide is a rough estimate. Everyone's scoring system and ensemble level will vary. If your score is higher than this, the piece you are selecting may be too difficult! Answer the questions below

	Total String Orchestra Score	Total Full Orchestra Score
First year	8 - 15	12 - 23
Second year	16 - 23	24 - 35
Third year	24 - 31	36 - 47
Fourth year	32 - 40	48 - 60
Fifth year	40 - 50	60 - 72
High School	51- 70	73 – 100

Reality check questions:

Will my orchestra be able to execute the fast passages at the tempo indicated in the score?
Are my string sections large enough to balance with the size of the winds?
Are my string sections too large to cleanly execute the style?
Are the musicians in my ensemble at a level of maturity to learn this music and have the patience to play it well?
Will the musicians in my ensemble have the stamina to play this piece? To play the entire program?
Do I have enough rehearsal time available to play this piece well (and still have enough rehearsal time for the other pieces on the program)?
Am I picking this piece because I am in love with the piece, or is it really a good piece for my orchestra?

Assessment after first rehearsal

Were they able to sight read through it at a reasonable tempo without too much difficulty?*

Was I stopping and introducing new techniques?*

*Inability to get through the piece reasonably well when sight reading is a sign the repertoire is too difficult. It is best to introduce new techniques outside the context of learning repertoire.

Assessment after performance

Listen to the recording of your concert two weeks after the performance and answer these questions (or rate your groups' performance on a standard ensemble performance rubric)

Did the orchestra play with high levels of pitch and rhythmic accuracy?

Characteristic tone quality?

Good intonation?

Clear articulation?

Was the tempo appropriate?

Did they play with expression?

Did we capture the essence of the musical style?

by Michael Hopkins

Programming in the Zone

Repertoire Selection for the Large Ensemble

Abstract: One of the great challenges ensemble directors face is selecting high-quality repertoire that matches the musical and technical levels of their ensembles. Thoughtful repertoire selection can lead to increased student motivation as well as greater enthusiasm for the music program from parents, administrators, teachers, and community members. Common problems that can lead to overprogramming are presented, along with a discussion of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory as frameworks for considering how directors' repertoire choices can affect students' motivation and continued participation.

Keywords: band, chorus, ensemble, flow theory, orchestra, middle school, high school, programming, repertoire, zone of proximal development

As music educators, we recognize the potential of our students and believe in their ability to achieve that potential. We need to have long-term goals as well as short-term objectives. Selecting high-quality repertoire for our students to perform is a central component of our curricular planning and goals and one of our primary responsibilities.[1] Choosing repertoire that is well matched to our ensembles requires considerable time and expertise,[2] and experts have written that it is one of the most difficult aspects of the entire profession.[3] This article describes the obstacles, issues, and problems that arise as we try to select repertoire for our large ensembles and how principles from two psychology theories—Lev S. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development[4] and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory[5]—can help guide us as we navigate the murky waters of repertoire selection and concert programming.

Repertoire selection is difficult because the learning goals we have for the students in our ensembles are complex, and they relate to what educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom referred to as the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains of learning.[6] When choosing repertoire for our ensemble to learn, we may select a piece because we believe it will help our students learn specific technical skills such as tone quality, articulation, intonation, phrasing and dynamics, or rhythmic precision. We may also program a piece of music to expand students' musical understanding about a composer, historical period, musical genre, style, or world culture. We may pick repertoire that provides opportunities for structured or free improvisation or challenges students to expand their thinking about the very nature of music.

Many directors strive to program a diverse selection of works that represents a balance of historical periods, differing tempos, and eclectic styles. Of great importance is selecting repertoire that will challenge our students in the varied domains of learning without

> *A director's repertoire selections determine more than what works students study and perform; these choices and their timing can greatly enhance a music program.*

Michael Hopkins is an associate professor of music education in the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre, and Dance, Ann Arbor. He can be contacted at mhopkins@umich.edu.

stretching them to the point where they become frustrated and lose interest. Robert Gillespie, a professor of music education at Ohio State University in Columbus, writes, "Programming music that is too easy does not help students develop as musicians. Programming pieces that are too difficult demoralizes students and does not contribute to their overall musical growth."[7] Selecting repertoire that permits our ensemble to deliver a high-quality performance will help develop positive feelings toward our program from students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members. Our own experience as musicians has taught us that the number one thing that musicians at any age want is to sound good—especially in public performance!

My own experience suggests that "overprogramming" is a much more common problem in our profession than "underprogramming." Overprogramming is the practice of performing repertoire that is well beyond the technical capabilities or musical maturity of the students in the ensemble, and can have serious consequences for the overall health of our programs.[8] Music education researchers Richard Colwell and Thomas Goolsby write, "many school groups play music so technically challenging that little time is left to devote to other aspects of musical learning."[9]

Challenges of Choice

Here are some common problems I have experienced or observed that my colleagues encounter when selecting repertoire:

Struck by the Muse: We fall in love with a piece of music, so much so that we talk ourselves into believing our students can learn it, even though it really is beyond their technical capabilities. When you sight-read a new piece, your group should be able to get from beginning to end without too much difficulty. As University of North Carolina associate professor of conducting Kevin M. Geraldi notes, "If your group cannot sight-read a piece

with reasonable success, it is probably too difficult. You will spend most of your time working on technical aspects of the piece and not focus on musical playing or singing."[10] Sometimes it is good to ask an experienced colleague who knows your group but is not as emotionally invested as you are if he or she thinks a piece is too difficult for your ensemble.

World's Longest Concert: A common problem that diminishes the quality of a performance is programming too many minutes of music. The hallmark of a good program is an emphasis on quality over quantity of programming.[11] For your audiences, twenty to thirty minutes of great sounding music always will be a better concert than forty-five to sixty minutes of unprepared music.

World's Hardest Concert: Programming several pieces that are all very technically demanding has a cumulative effect on the quality of the entire performance. Myron Welch states, "I think many high schools make a mistake of trying to do so many pieces that are difficult. Everything need not be technically difficult. Students need pieces that are very easy technically, where they can concentrate on tone, phrasing, and intonation."[12]

World's Most Prestigious Concert: Some conductors believe that having an original masterwork on the program adds prestige to the performance. In reality, as James Kjelland, an associate professor of music at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, writes, "No suit of clothes is better than it looks, no performance better than it sounds, no wine better than it tastes. The point of music education is missed entirely when the quality of a performance takes a back seat to the prestige of the works being played, the desire of the conductor to add such repertoire to his or her resume, or the misapplication of music appreciation."[13] There are large bodies of repertoire for choir, band, and orchestra that were written for adult, professionally trained musicians to perform. While there is a considerable body of repertoire that is accessible for a well-trained high school

ensemble, it is important to remember that challenging students to the point of frustration lowers their motivation and interest in participation. Fortunately, we can develop a framework for selecting appropriate repertoire for our ensembles by borrowing some ideas from educational psychology.

Flow and the Zone

A theory from psychology that can be valuable when thinking about repertoire selection is called "flow theory," which was developed by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (b. 1934).[14] Central to flow theory is that we all place value in the "optimal experience"—a feeling of being in control of our actions, leading to a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished. Flow is most likely to occur when there is a balance between skill and challenge. Students who are assigned achievement goals where the amount of challenge exceeds their skills will experience anxiety and diminished motivation for learning. Optimum motivation occurs when skills and goal difficulty are matched.[15]

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a concept developed by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934), and it can also be useful when considering repertoire selection. Vygotsky described the ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers."[16] He also described the ZPD by writing, "What the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow."[17]

The *zone of proximal development* is a term that appears in most development and educational psychology textbooks and has been interpreted in a number of different ways. Some describe the ZPD as occurring whenever there is an interaction with an adult (or more advanced children) that has a positive influence on

the developing child. Other psychologists describe the ZPD as learning situations in which students are in the process of developing mastery. A third group of psychologists has focused more on the learner, describing the ZPD as the place where the potential for new learning is strongest.[18]

As I read about flow theory and the varied interpretations of the ZPD, I reflected on how these ideas apply to the large-ensemble setting. When students are rehearsing in a large ensemble, they are solving problems under adult guidance and in collaboration with their peers. Our students are often capable of reaching higher levels of musical achievement as a result of this collaboration than they would be able to if they were working alone or in a small group with no feedback from an expert musician. If we lead rehearsals where students are focused on developing mastery of technical skills or musical concepts and we create an environment where the potential for new musical learning is strong, then we are successfully bringing our students into the ZPD.

In performance situations, however, the environment is very different from rehearsal. Clearly, we strive for our students to have an "optimal experience" during performances, but what happens if we enter a performance situation where our students are still relying on high levels of guidance, feedback, and support from conductor and peers; or are still in the process of developing technical mastery of the repertoire; or don't have a solid understanding of the musical style? Clearly, we do not want to be in the ZPD during a performance.

The challenge for us as ensemble directors is to choose repertoire that brings our students into the ZPD at the beginning of the rehearsal cycle, challenging them and providing them with strong opportunities for new musical growth. As we near the performance, our collaborative efforts have solved the musical challenges and our students have attained mastery of the repertoire. During the performance, there is a balance

FIGURE 1

Levels of Musical Difficulty
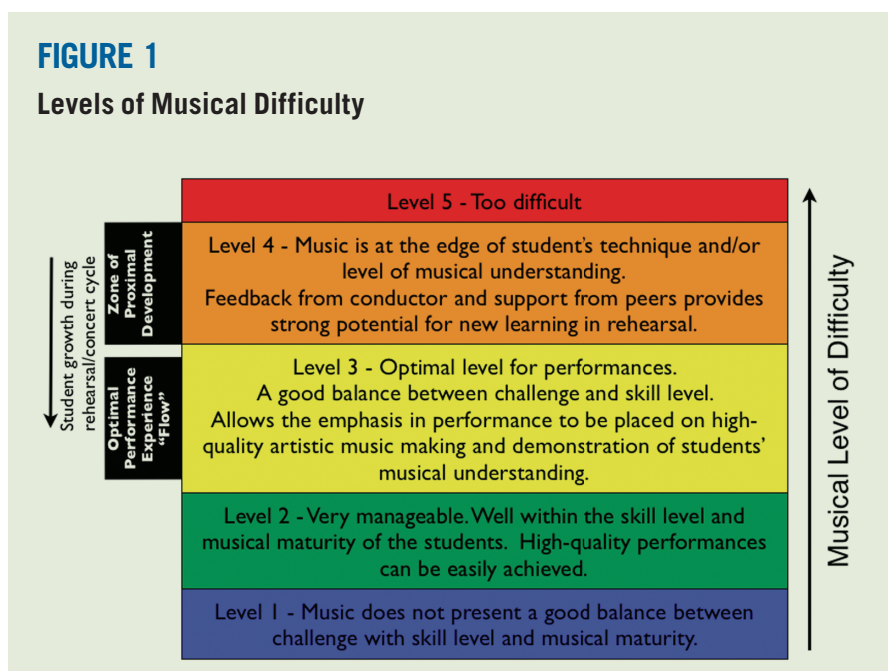
between skill and challenge. The ensemble performs the music at a level of high quality, leading to "flow"—an optimal experience for the students.

Figure 1 is a chart showing various levels of musical difficulty. Level 4 in this figure represents the ZPD for the large ensemble. This is the level to where we should be pushing our students during the first part of the rehearsal cycle. As student growth occurs over the course of the rehearsal/concert cycle, a piece that initially presented a difficult musical challenge will be mastered and the piece will move to the level where there is a good balance between skill and challenge. The majority of repertoire that is learned should reside in Level 3 by the time of the performance, one level below the ZPD, for optimal performance quality. To illustrate this point, here are a few scenarios.

Scenario 1: Imagine a piece of music that you pass out to your large ensemble to sight-read. You discover that your ensemble can't get through the first two measures without falling apart. Clearly,

this music is at Level 5—too difficult. Perhaps someday they will be able to perform the piece, but bringing it to Level 3 will require so much rehearsal that the students will probably give up in frustration before they can find any musical value in the piece.

Scenario 2: We select a piece that the students can sight-read in small chunks with frequent stopping. We believe that the piece provides tremendous opportunities for new musical growth so we commit to performing it. As the concert approaches, the chances for a high-quality performance seem increasingly out of reach. Clearly there is student growth taking place, but the rehearsal process feels like walking up a sand dune, with students and director often feeling frustrated. At the concert, the group gets through the piece and the audience applauds, but the students know there were a lot of problems and don't seem too excited about what they accomplished. This piece remained in Level 4—the ZPD—at the time of the performance. Directors who perform too much music at this level may

see student motivation diminish and participation levels decline.

Scenario 3: We select a piece that offers musical challenges that are at students' level of musical development. For the first few rehearsals, the piece remains at Level 4, but as we get closer to the performance it enters Level 3. Rehearsals are focused on musical concepts like phrasing, balance, blend, and intonation. The students have developed an increased awareness of how their part fits with the other parts in the ensemble. At the performance, everyone seems confident and relaxed. There is a feeling of excitement from the ensemble because the students are confident that they gave a great performance.

At Level 2, we find a piece of repertoire that your large ensemble can perform musically with relative ease and is unlikely to bring them into the ZPD. However, there can still be tremendous musical value in programming music at Level 2 because the focus can be exclusively on the musical aspects of the piece being performed throughout the rehearsal cycle.

Level 1 represents music that does not present a good balance between challenge and skill level for your ensemble. Students may experience diminished motivation if too much music is programmed at Level 1.

Why is it so challenging to perform repertoire that resides within our ensembles' ZPD? As experienced musicians, we all know that when we are performing a piece that is at the edge or beyond our technical capabilities, our intonation suffers, our tone suffers, and our ability to be musically expressive and perform with sensitive phrasing and dynamics suffers. Also, whenever we enter a performance situation, there is a certain amount of stress and anxiety that we experience and that tends to diminish what we are capable of musically. Even in a large-ensemble situation, our students do get nervous in performance. When a piece is beyond their technical capabilities it becomes obvious in performance situations. If we feel unprepared coming into a performance, it adds to the anxiety level.

If you are performing four pieces in your concert, open the concert with one that you and your students consider easy (Level 2) but are confident that you can perform at a very high artistic level. Follow with one piece that is musically or technically challenging but can be given a respectable performance (Level 4– or 3+), then finish with two that are at the optimal level of musical challenge for the ensemble (Level 3). Conductor H. Robert Reynolds writes, "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."[19]

Choosing the Right Pieces

Here are some other suggestions for selecting appropriate repertoire:

1. **Establish the musical achievement level of the individual students in your ensemble.** Establishing a baseline in the first days of the school year by using auditions, skill checks, or playing tests will help inform you when you are considering repertoire selection for your ensemble.

2. **Familiarize yourself with the grading systems used by different organizations.** Publishers, sheet music suppliers, and state festival lists use grading systems, but there are a variety of systems in place. Some organizations use a simple numbering system (Grades 1, 2, 3, etc.), and some use a mixture of numbers and symbols (3+, 2–, etc.) or include half levels (Grade 1, 1½, 2, 2½, etc.). Some use color levels (yellow, red, green, blue), and many use verbal descriptions such as very easy, easy, medium easy, and so on. The criteria are very different for band, choir, and orchestra and tend to be quite detailed, including criteria such as meter, key signature, tempo, note/rest value, rhythm, dynamics, articulation, ornaments,

scoring, length, instrument/vocal range, text, and so on. The people charged with assigning the grade level to a piece of music have legitimately varied opinions about what types of technical and musical challenges are acceptable to present at different grade levels, and not all organizations publish the specific criteria they use to assign pieces to grade levels.

It is rare for a technically easy piece to be assigned too high a grade level. It is much more common for a technically difficult piece to be assigned too low a grade level. It is also more common for pieces to be assigned to a grade level based on the technical versus the musical demands of a piece. One of the paradoxes of the printed score is that music that appears to be simple in notation is sometimes very challenging to perform. Study the score carefully and think about the musical demands of a piece of repertoire.

3. **Create a folder with a selection of graded literature ranging from very, very easy to difficult and have sight-reading days.** Your ensemble should be able to read through the music with a good sound. Inability to get through the piece reasonably well when sight-reading is a sign the repertoire is too difficult. When you find yourself stopping frequently, you know you have reached Level 5.

4. **Don't perform every piece that you sight-read.** It's okay to collect pieces after reading them. It is also okay to postpone a piece for later in the year. Both of these practices will help keep your concerts to a reasonable length.

5. **Divide rehearsal into skills development portion and a repertoire rehearsal portion.** Just as golfers need the driving range and the putting green to develop their skills outside the context of the game, students must be able to develop the techniques required to perform a piece of music outside the context of repertoire. This is the function of the

skills development portion of rehearsal. While you are learning a piece of repertoire and trying to focus on the aesthetic and expressive qualities that you want the students to understand about the music is not a good time to be introducing a brand new technical skill. Lay the groundwork in advance in the skills development portion of rehearsal. Use the learning of repertoire as a way to reinforce what has already been learned.

6. **Ask yourself these "reality check" questions.** Will my ensemble be able to perform the piece at the tempo indicated in the score? Are the musicians in my ensemble at a level of maturity where they will have the patience to learn it? Will the musicians in my ensemble have the stamina to perform this piece? Will they have the stamina to perform the entire program? Do I have enough rehearsal time available to perform this piece well (and still have enough rehearsal time for the other pieces on the program)? Am I picking this piece because I am in love with the piece, or is it really a good piece for my ensemble?

7. **Do an assessment and reflection after the performance.** Listen to the recording of your concert two weeks after the performance and answer these questions: Did my ensemble perform with high levels of pitch and rhythmic accuracy, characteristic tone quality, good intonation, clear articulation? Was the tempo appropriate? Were they expressive? Did we capture the essence of the musical style?

You may also want to rate your groups' performance on a standard ensemble performance rubric. If your state or district doesn't already have one, you can consider some of the many rubrics available on the Internet.

Play the recording of the performance for the students in your ensemble and give them the opportunity to critique the performance. Asking students to write a written critique that requires analysis and description of the criteria used to evaluate ensemble performance (tone quality,

intonation, rhythmic precision, etc.) will provide them with opportunities for critical thinking and musical growth.

If the quality of the performance did not meet your expectations, reflect on the causes. Was some or all of the repertoire too challenging? In what ways? Did the repertoire mesh with the strengths and weaknesses of the ensemble? Did you underestimate the amount of rehearsal time needed? Through the process of self-reflection we can engage in ongoing professional development to improve our repertoire selection and concert planning.

Finding Balance

One of the challenges we face when selecting repertoire and planning performances is finding a balance between the technical and aesthetic goals of music education. If we teach our students that every successive piece learned needs to be more technically difficult than the piece before, it can lead

to the mistaken belief that the reason we learn music is to be continually performing harder and harder music, as if performing technically difficult music is somehow a goal in and of itself, rather than a means to an end. It leads music educators to saying things like, "that piece is a ninth-grade piece," as if there is nothing aesthetically valuable about the music other than as some sort of technical steppingstone toward something harder.

If we place an emphasis on the quality of the sounds we are making when we learn repertoire, and what we are trying to communicate by making those sounds, then perhaps we can teach our students to avoid the illusory trap created by the artificial grading system. If we cannot perform a piece with great intonation, tone, rhythm, and with expression so that our audience is emotionally moved by our musical offering, then the piece must still reside deep inside the zone of proximal development for our ensemble and is not ready to be performed. The

relentless pursuit of pieces that are more and more technically difficult is not the primary goal of music-making and can interfere with the attainment of an optimal experience for students when performing. Our primary goal should be to produce musical sounds that are perceived as beautiful to both performer and listener and through those beautiful sounds generate a powerful emotional response. That is something we can do in our music ensembles that students can't get anywhere else in the school curriculum. Choosing repertoire that permits an emphasis in rehearsal and performance on the musical versus the technical aspects of a piece will ultimately lead to higher levels of musical growth, understanding, and motivation.

The perceived quality of a musical performance is inextricably connected to the repertoire being performed. For every musical ensemble there is a piece of repertoire that will make them sound like a million bucks. Take advantage of the many available resources to help generate repertoire ideas for your group. Your students, parents, administrators, colleagues, and community members will get very enthusiastic about student ensemble participation if you present exciting high-quality performances. Selecting repertoire that is well matched to the musical and technical level of the ensemble will help you better serve your students and generate great enthusiasm toward your program.

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