

UNLOCKING THE MYSTERY: INSIGHTS FROM BAND COMPOSERS AND EDITORS ON DECODING DIFFICULTY LEVELS IN BAND COMPOSITION

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Midwest Band Clinic
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CLINIC SYNOPSIS

Panel Discussion Highlights:

- **Difficulty Levels:** Insights from renowned concert band composers and editors.
- **Assessment Criteria & Philosophies:** Methods for evaluating challenge and accessibility of ensemble repertoire.
- **Practical Strategies:** Selecting grade-appropriate music for varying ability levels.



DISTINGUISHED PANELISTS



Tyler Arcari

Excelcia/Kendor/RBC/Wingert-Jones Publications Editor and Composer



Brian Balmages

Director of MakeMusic Publications and Digital Education for Alfred Music and MakeMusic and Composer



Carol Brittin Chambers

Composer/Owner Aspenwood Music/Composer-in-Residence Texas Lutheran University



William Owens

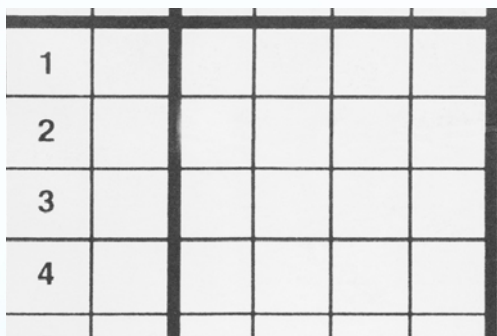
Composer, Conductor



Dr. Mark Lortz

Stevenson University Director of Music/RWS Music Editor/Composer-Session Moderator

DECODING THE DILEMMA



Lack of Standardized Grading System

Various global rating systems grade concert band repertoire difficulty.



Discrepancies between Publishers and Directors

Discrepancies exist between publisher difficulty ratings and band directors' perceptions of the actual challenge level of the music.



Inconsistencies in Graded Music Lists

Inconsistencies are found between publisher, national, state, and regional graded music lists, leading to confusion in repertoire selection.

Understanding the **complexities** and **inconsistencies** in concert band repertoire difficulty grading can help directors make **more informed** and **grade-appropriate repertoire choices** for their ensembles.

CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF DIFFICULTY LEVELS



Matching Music to Ensemble Skill

Selecting music that complements the ensemble's current ability level to foster growth and engagement is important.



Effect of Music Difficulty on Ensemble Growth

How the difficulty level of music significantly impacts an ensemble's development, performance quality, and overall success.



Historical Origins of Recommended/Required Music Lists

Exploring the historical context and rationale behind music lists published by major U.S. education organizations, which have influenced repertoire selection over time.

Understanding the factors that influence **band composition difficulty** enables music educators to **make informed repertoire choices** that boost **student engagement, skill development, and ensemble success.**

WHY GRADING LISTS AND DIFFICULTY LEVELS?

A HISTORY OF CONCERT BAND GRADING SYSTEMS

◦ Why?

- Improve school band repertoire and provide structured student preparation.
- Enhance educational preparation for contests.

1926: Selective Music List

1929: Expanded to three classifications

1946: Grading system expanded to six levels

1996: Band Music Guide published

1928: Classification system introduced

1939: Grading system changed to a five-level format.

1971: The National Band Association (NBA) began publishing Selective Music

GLOBAL CONCERT BAND GRADING RATING SYSTEM VARIATIONS: COMPARISON EXAMPLES

Comparison of difficulty rating scales (0-7 scale) across publishers

American Band College Band

5

Band Music Guide & NBA

6

J.W. Pepper, Inc.

7

Publisher Rating Levels
*(Number of Levels Varies
Between Publisher)*

4,5,6

MODERN CONCERT BAND LITERATURE GRADING SYSTEMS

Grading System	Description
Curriculum-based	Correlates to a method book's concepts and sections
Criterion-based	Pre-defined parameters of range, rhythm, key, tempi, and appropriate style for each difficulty level
Standards-based	Grew out of the 1994 National Standards for Music Education and is related more to method books

PANEL DISCUSSION: CRAFTING CHALLENGES: COMPOSER INSIGHTS ON DIFFICULTY



Harmonic Complexity

Composers navigate complex chord progressions, modulations, and dissonances to create rich harmonies that challenge the ensemble.



Melodic Challenges

Crafting memorable yet demanding melodies that challenge instruments' range and dexterity is a key compositional challenge.



Textural Density

Balancing dense textures with clarity requires careful orchestration and voicing decisions.



Rhythmic Intricacy

Composers must craft engaging rhythmic structures that captivate the ensemble, often using complex meters, polyrhythms, and intricate subdivisions.

By understanding the compositional challenges in concert band repertoire, music educators can make **informed choices** that **enhance student engagement** and **ensemble success**.

COMPOSER PERSPECTIVES: DEFINING DIFFICULTY

What factors do you consider when determining a composition's difficulty, and how do you adjust for different skill levels or ensemble capabilities?

- **Rhythm Complexity:** Rhythmic complexity is one of the most important factors directors consider when grading a composition's difficulty.
- **Tessitura** (range of notes for instruments): 98% of directors noted that tessitura plays a crucial role in determining difficulty, especially for instruments like the trumpet and clarinet.
- **Grade-Level Alignment:** Tailor tessitura and part independence to grade level.

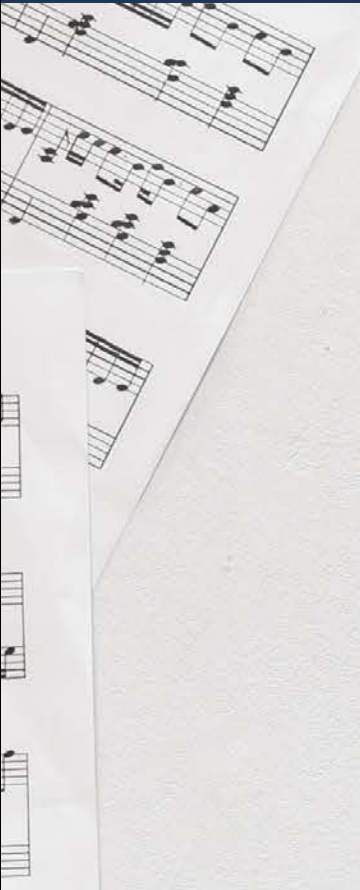
Selecting pieces based on difficulty requires estimating key elements such as **rhythm, pitch range, and technical challenges** and then adjusting them to fit the grade level.

COMPOSER PERSPECTIVES: CLARITY AND PEDAGOGY

What strategies do you use to present complex musical ideas clearly while maintaining pedagogical soundness for different skill levels?

- **Rhythmic Clarity:** Use simple rhythms to layer complex ideas, as clear rhythms are crucial in beginner compositions.
- **Curriculum Alignment:** How can I introduce concepts and scaffold learning for each level through my compositions?
- **Ability Alignment:** Ensure part independence aligns with students' abilities, as independent lines pose challenges for younger players.

Simplify complex ideas with **clear rhythms**, use **repetition** to teach independence, and ensure parts match students' skill levels, as independent lines are challenging for beginners.

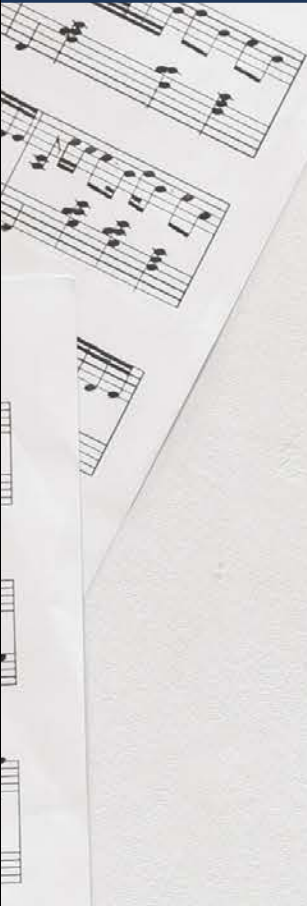
A background image of a musical score with staves and notes, partially visible on the left side of the slide.

COMPOSER PERSPECTIVES: BALANCING ACCESSIBILITY AND INTEREST

How do you create music that is both engaging and accessible for beginner-level ensembles while adhering to publisher guidelines (e.g., tessitura, rhythm, key)?

- **Simplicity:** Use simple, creative, memorable melodic motives and rhythms.
- **Harmony:** Include familiar tonal centers while expanding harmonic vocabulary, prioritizing rhythm and part independence over harmony and texture.
- **Variety:** Vary textures but maintain clear orchestration to engage beginner students.
- **Compliance:** Align with Publisher Guidelines

Creating engaging music for beginners requires balancing accessibility with artistic expression and following publisher guidelines.

A background image of a musical score with staves and notes, partially visible on the left side of the slide.

COMPOSER PERSPECTIVES: FEEDBACK AND CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT

How has feedback from directors or performers influenced your approach to difficulty, and how do you balance your creative vision with educational requirements such as publisher guidelines or curriculum standards?

- **Challenges:** Director feedback highlighted tessitura and rhythmic complexity as major challenges for younger ensembles.
- **Independence:** Performers often struggle with part independence, guiding future compositions.
- **Artistic Alignment:** Align artistic intent with ensemble limitations, addressing gaps between composers' intentions and directors' execution challenges.

Publisher grading systems and band directors' perceptions differ, particularly regarding grading and key selection criteria such as part independence, rhythmic complexity, and tessitura.

EDITOR INFLUENCE: SHAPING COMPOSITION DIFFICULTY



Refinement Process

Editors play a crucial role in refining compositions, significantly influencing difficulty ratings by shaping technical complexity, ensuring clarity, and enhancing accessibility.



Collaborative Efforts

Editors collaborate with composers to ensure accuracy, optimize difficulty, and align music with the target ensemble's skills, which is essential for grade-appropriate repertoire.



Accessibility Enhancement

Editors enhance accessibility by adjusting range, rhythmic complexity, and technical demands, promoting inclusivity and engagement among ensembles of varying skill levels.

By understanding the factors contributing to the difficulty of band compositions, music educators can make informed and effective repertoire choices that foster student engagement, skill development, and ensemble success.

EDITOR PERSPECTIVES: SHAPING AND ALIGNING DIFFICULTY

What role does the editor play in determining and aligning a composition's difficulty rating with ensemble proficiency levels?

- **Alignment:** Ensure the composition matches the grade level's proficiency. Studies show that perceived difficulty often differs from publisher ratings, highlighting the editor's important role.
- **Challenges:** Address part independence and rhythmic complexity, which directors rated as critical challenges.

The **editor** has a critical part to play in **guiding and standardizing a composition's rating** according to its **technical content** and the **feasibility of intended performers**.

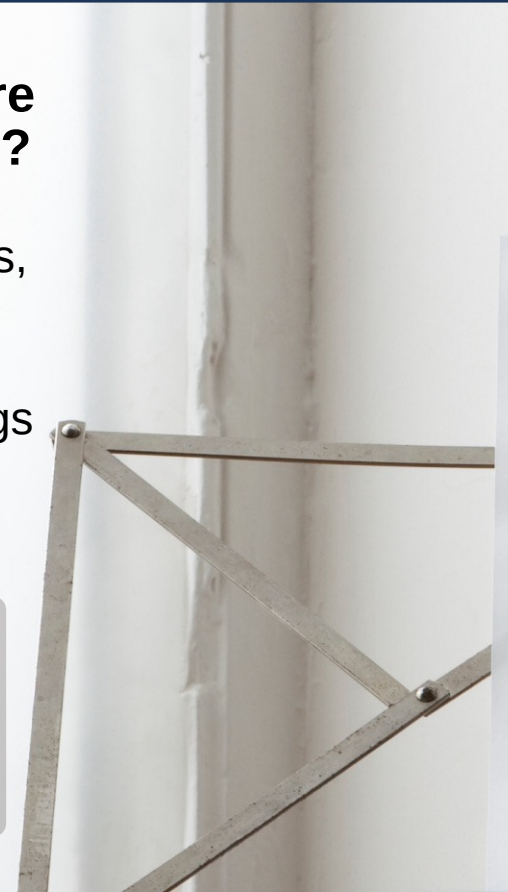


EDITOR PERSPECTIVES: COLLABORATION WITH COMPOSERS

How do editors collaborate with composers to ensure the music is clear and suitable for various skill levels?

- **Independence:** Collaborate to reduce part independence where necessary, especially for less experienced ensembles, as reflected in director feedback.
- **Ability Matching:** Ensure that rhythmic and tessitura demands match the ability level of the ensemble, key findings from directors' difficulty perceptions.

Collaboration with composers focuses on **refining their work** to **ensure clarity and suitability** for **various skill levels, facilitating adjustments** that enhance the music's educational value and **performance potential**.

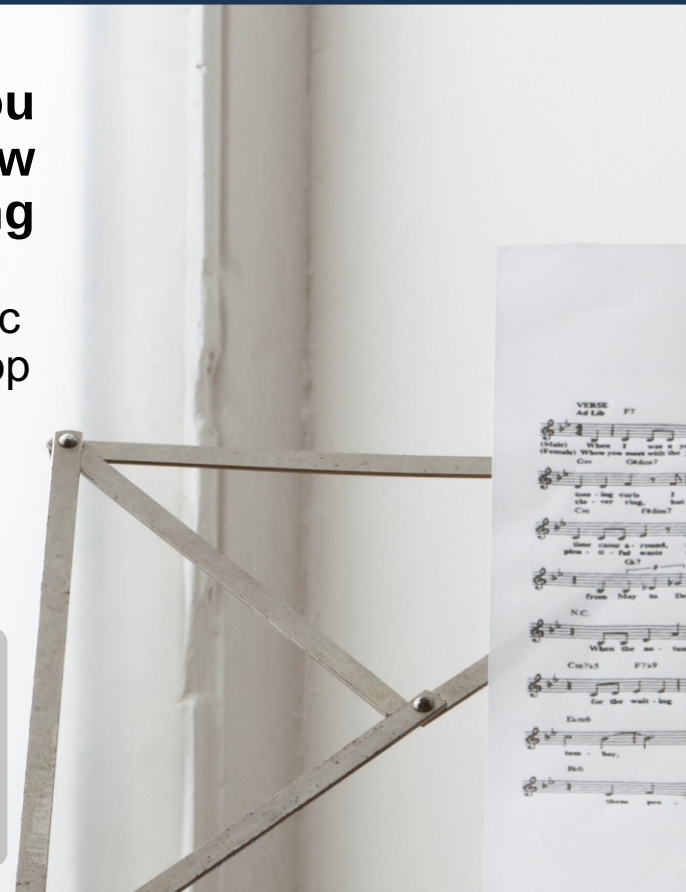


EDITOR PERSPECTIVES: EVALUATING COMPLEXITY AND GUIDELINES

What elements (harmony, melody, texture) do you consider when assessing complexity, and how closely do you follow publisher guidelines in rating difficulty?

- **Complexity:** When assessing complexity, focus on rhythmic complexity and tessitura, as directors rank these as the top criteria for determining difficulty.
- **Guidelines:** Align with publisher guidelines in terms of musical elements.

Reviewing the **complexity of harmony, melody, rhythm, and texture** while **conforming** to the publisher's set difficulty level for educators is challenging.



EDITOR PERSPECTIVES: HALF-STEP RATINGS AND COMPARISON

Why assign half-step (.5) difficulty levels, and how do publisher ratings compare to state lists regarding accuracy and correlation?

- **Precise Difficulty Assessment:** Half-step ratings offer a more detailed evaluation of difficulty, addressing discrepancies between publisher and state ratings.
- **Structured Progression:** This system enables a gradual increase in repertoire difficulty, fostering skill development and boosting student confidence.

Assigning half-step (.5) difficulty levels **provides more detailed assessments** of **repertoire difficulty**, and **enhances skill development**

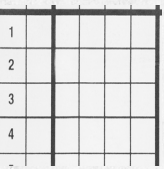


FINAL THOUGHTS/KEY TAKEAWAYS: NAVIGATING DIFFICULTY LEVELS



Technical Considerations

Examining elements like harmony, melody, texture, orchestration, and rhythmic complexity that contribute to the overall difficulty of a band composition.



Difficulty Benchmarks

Exploring the historical origins and rationale behind graded music lists published by major education organizations, which have significantly influenced repertoire selection over time.

Easy

Medium

Hard

Difficulty Level Understanding

Recognizing the critical impact that musical difficulty has on an ensemble's development, performance quality, and overall success, as well as the need to match music to the ensemble's current ability level.



Informed Repertoire Choices

Discussing strategies for selecting grade-appropriate repertoire that challenges students while supporting their growth, including the role of editors in refining compositions and enhancing accessibility.

Understanding the factors behind band composition difficulty helps educators select repertoire that fosters student engagement, skill growth, and ensemble success.



DISCUSSION AUDIENCE Q & A



THANK YOU!

FOR YOUR TIME AND ATTENTION!



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