

## REPERTOIRE BECOMES US:

### The Importance of Choosing Quality Repertoire

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#### LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

“Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.”

—Anthelme Brillat-Savarin<sup>1</sup>

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.”

—Will Durant (*not* Aristotle)<sup>2</sup>

“I have never acknowledged the difference between ‘serious’ music and ‘light’ music, there is only good music and bad music.”

—Kurt Weill

“There are simply two kinds of music, good music and the other kind... the only yardstick by which the result should be judged is simply that of how it sounds. If it sounds good it’s successful; if it doesn’t it has failed.”

—Duke Ellington<sup>3</sup>

“In my mind, there’s this one ‘super genre,’ which is the only genre that matters, and that’s the super genre of good music.”

—Chris Thile<sup>4</sup>

“Uh, what kind of music do you usually have here?”

“Oh, we got both kinds: we got country *and* western!”

—Elwood Blues and Claire from Bob’s Country Bunker<sup>5</sup>

#### REVEALING THE BACKGROUND: WHY IS QUALITY IMPORTANT?

“Children should be taught with only the most musically valuable materials. For the young, only the best is good enough. They should be led to masterpieces by means of masterpieces.”

—Zoltán Kodály<sup>6</sup>

“But the band today is at a crossroad with respect to repertoire; there is a widespread realization that the band, in a musical sense, must develop along new lines suited to its new function as an arm of education. It can no longer function as a poor man’s orchestra, or purely as a medium for very light entertainment, at least in schools and colleges. And since the future of band music will be determined almost entirely by the schools and colleges, the question of future repertoire becomes paramount.”

—Richard Franko Goldman<sup>7</sup>

“While it is important that the students be enthusiastic about the music and the musical experience, English Literature classes do not select reading material based upon the desires of the students but rather on the inherent value of the literature to be read. Music classes should be no different.”

—H. Robert Reynolds<sup>8</sup>

“We do not need to be entertained in the wind medium; we need substance, elevated discourse, craft, subtlety. Let us have adventuring into more rarer realms, where dense, complex, and profound musical thoughts may be expressed.”

—Charles Wuorinen<sup>9</sup>

“The biggest problems in music education have been caused by the music teachers [us!] themselves. Those problems have to do with too much ‘activity’ and no enough emphasis on the study of serious literature. As we all know, the strength of any academic discipline is in its subject matter. Obviously, our subject matter is the literature we teach and perform. The quality of our literature must be equal to, if not better than, the subject matter of math, science, and the language arts.”

—Bobby Adams<sup>10</sup>

“A student’s potential for developing high musical taste, values, and appreciation is much greater when he/she studies, performs, and consumes high quality music and not ‘junk food’ quality music. Teachers who teach English Literature have their students read novels written by the best authors in the English language (Shakespeare, Dickens, Faulkner, Twain, etc.). Likewise, school music teachers/band directors should have their students play pieces written by the best composers of music, such as Bach, Ives, Gershwin, Ellington, Copland, Sousa, Joplin, Piazzolla, Schuller, Williams, etc.”

—Frank Battisti<sup>11</sup>

### **The Perennial Repertoire Crisis**

For more than a century, the band community has experienced waves of crises related to the repertoire. At various points in time—and sometimes simultaneously—thought leaders have wrestled with:

- A dearth of quality music—old or new.
- A lack of an established and substantial repertoire.
- The need to create (or find) a repertoire.
- The desire to commission the great composers of today.
- The motivation to premiere and perform new music—i.e., to create a “living repertoire.”

### **The Ongoing Repertoire Paradox**

We have managed—through recognizing and addressing these crises—to trap ourselves in an endless paradox:

- In the effort to establish a repertoire of quality music, we must necessarily commission, premiere, and perform new music;

- In that search to create new music that builds a standard repertoire, we have emphasized new music to the detriment of older (and in our profession, ten years is old now!) music;
- In emphasizing new repertoire, we haven't repeated music enough to establish a standard repertoire.

Regardless of these concerns, our music—be it ancient, a few years old, or brand new—should be of the highest possible quality. If we conductors are teachers—and to be sure, *all conductors are teachers*—the repertoire we select is the curriculum. We should then approach our responsibility like our colleagues in literature arts—for we *conductors are teachers of literature*—and ensure our students are studying the best the art has to offer.

Who are our William Shakespeares? Our Emily Dickinsons? Our James Baldwins?  
Who are our Colson Whiteheads? Our Amanda Gormans? Our David Foster Wallaces?

## DEFINING QUALITY

“A repertoire is a collection of works that have earned the respect and appreciation of conductors, players, and audiences and are played over and over.”  
—Frank Battisti<sup>12</sup>

- Literature:     1a: writing in prose or verse, *especially*: writings having excellence of form or expression and expressing ideas of permanent or universal interest  
                  3: the aggregate of a usually specified type of musical compositions
- Repertoire:     1a: a list or supply of dramas, operas, pieces, or parts that a company or person is prepared to perform  
                  2a: the complete list or supply of dramas, operas, or musical works available for performance
- Quality:        2a: degree of excellence  
                  2b: superiority in kind<sup>13</sup>

### Serious Artistic Merit: One Way to Define Quality

“Quality” in art is difficult to define in objective ways. In what remains one of the most successful attempts—and especially in reference to band music—Acton Ostling, Jr. developed the idea of “Serious Artistic Merit”:

- Serious:        The word “serious” is used in its meaning as demanding earnest application, requiring considerable care and thought, sincerely motivated, important, and significant. *It is not used in a grave or somber context and can therefore include the cheerful and/or humorous vein which is not trivial.*
- Artistic:        The adjective “artistic” is used in its meaning as conformable to the standards of art, characterized by taste, discrimination, judgement, and skill in execution,

satisfying aesthetic requirement—modern dictionaries still giving the preferred definition of aesthetic or relating to a sense of the beautiful.

Merit: The noun “merit” is used in its meaning as a claim to commendation, excellence in quality, and deserving esteem.<sup>14</sup>

## DOING THE WORK: HOW TO SEEK AND DETERMINE QUALITY

“Only the educated are free.”  
—Epictetus<sup>15</sup>

“The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts: therefore, guard accordingly, and take care that you entertain no notions unsuitable to virtue and reasonable nature.”  
—Marcus Aurelius<sup>16</sup>

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.”  
—Will Durant (*not* Aristotle)<sup>17</sup>

“Music serves best when its integrity as an art is maintained. Music of all periods, styles, forms, and cultures belongs in the curriculum. The musical repertory should be expanded to involve music of our time in its rich variety, including currently popular teenage music and avant-garde music, American folk music, and the music of other cultures.”  
— From the Tanglewood Symposium Declaration of 1968<sup>18</sup>

Conductors are artist-teachers. In selecting repertoire, our goal is twofold: we must choose art—*music*—that teaches.

It’s *possible* to choose music that teaches that *isn’t* art.

It’s *impossible* to choose music that is artful that *doesn’t* teach.

## Quality as Determined by Others: The Beginning but not the End

Acton Ostling, *Criteria of Serious Artistic Merit*

In his study—since replicated by Jay Gilbert in 1993 and Clifford Towner in 2011—Ostling set out to develop criteria for determining Serious Artistic Merit:

1. The composition has **form**—not “a form” but form—and reflects a proper balance between repetition and contrast.
2. The composition reflects **shape and design**, and creates the impression of conscious choice and judicious arrangement on the part of the composer.
3. The composition **reflects craft in orchestration**, demonstrating a proper balance between transparent and tutti scoring, and also between solo and group colors.
4. The composition is **sufficiently unpredictable** to preclude an immediate grasp of its musical meaning.

5. The route through which the composition travels in initiating its musical tendencies and probable musical goals is **not completely direct and obvious**.
6. The composition is **consistent in its quality** throughout its length and in its various sections.
7. The composition is **consistent in its style**, reflecting a complete grasp of technical details, clearly conceived ideas, and avoids lapses into trivial, futile, or unsuitable passages.
8. The composition **reflects ingenuity** in its development, given the stylistic context in which it exists.
9. The composition is **genuine in idiom**, and is not pretentious.
10. The composition **reflects a musical validity** which transcends factors of historical importance, or factors of pedagogical usefulness.<sup>19</sup>

Are there other possibilities?

Frank Battisti, *The New Winds of Change*

“A student’s potential for developing high musical taste, values, and appreciation is much greater when he/she studies, performs, and consumes high quality music and not ‘junk food’ music. Teachers who teach English Literature have their students read novels written by the best authors in the English language (Shakespeare, Dickens, Faulkner, Twain, etc.). Likewise, school music teachers/band directors should have their students play pieces written by the best composers of music, such as Bach, Ives, Gershwin, Ellington, Copland, Sousa, Joplin, Piazzolla, Schuller, Williams, etc. Below are some guidelines that can be used in the selection of music:

1. Select pieces that are interesting; that are **imaginative in development of some or all of their musical elements**—melody, harmony, texture, rhythm, form, etc. The pieces should provide opportunities for the teaching of musical concepts such as form/construction, style, etc.
2. As much as possible, select pieces that have **interesting individual parts**. Students like to play pieces that allow them to be “part of the action.” Tubas like to play melodies as well as bass lines; Horns like to play more than off-beats. Choose music that will help each student grow musically and technically (examine the individual parts). [Was this achievable with pandemic challenges?]
3. Select pieces that **fit the instrumentation of the ensemble**. However, if a conductor-teacher wants to perform an excellent work that requires an instrument (or two) that they do not have in their ensemble, they should consider performing it if a reasonable substitution can be made for the missing instrument(s) that doesn’t violate the musical integrity of the piece. (Note: Creating a fully instrumented ensemble should be a priority objective for all band directors since most of the medium’s important works require a fully instrumented ensemble.) [Again: was this achievable with pandemic challenges?]
4. Select pieces in which the **elements of music are integrated and developed creatively** and have the potential for **evocating feelings and conveying expressive meaning** to the students.
5. **Avoid** selecting pieces in which the **technical demands are excessive**. This creates the need to expend excessive amounts of time “drilling the notes” and hinders the truly “collaborative music-making” experiences students should have. Excessive technical demands also can prevent students from achieving a “high plateau of expressiveness” in their performances.
6. Select pieces that encompass a **variety of styles**—contemporary, avant-garde, Renaissance, Baroque, Romantic, Jazz, Popular, etc. This makes the teaching of history and musical styles possible. [And music of other cultures, too; and Pop/Rock, if approached artfully and idiomatically to the ensemble.]

7. Select pieces that have a **variety of textures** ranging from thinly scored passages (solo and small group instrumentation) to those scored for the full ensemble.

“The kinds and quality of music [that] students study, perform, and consume truly matters and influences what they grow up to like and consume. (‘We are what we eat/consume.’) If the goal of music education is to help students understand and appreciate music as an expressive art, band directors must select and use music of artistic merit in a variety of genres.”<sup>20</sup>

Ray Cramer, “Our GPS for Success: It’s All About the Literature!” from *Teaching Music through Performance in Band*, Volume 1 Revised Edition

“Does the music have:

1. A well-conceived formal structure?
2. Creative melodies and counter-lines?
3. Harmonic imagination?
4. Rhythmic vitality?
5. Contrast in all musical elements?
6. Scoring which best represents the full potential for beautiful tone and timbre?
7. An emotional impact?

“If we are going to teach *about music, through music* while *performing music*, then all of these elements need to be incorporated into our rehearsal planning as we prepare our students for performance.”<sup>21</sup>

Thomas Dvorak, Robert Grechesky, Gary Ciepluch, *Best Music for High School Band*  
Criteria for Music Selection

1. Compositions must exhibit a high degree of **compositional craft**.
2. Compositions must contain important musical constructs necessary for the **development of musicianship**.
3. Compositions must exhibit an **orchestration** that, within the restrictions associated with a particular grade level, **encourage musical independence** both of individuals and sections.<sup>22</sup>

*Teaching Music through Performance in Band*

First published in 1997 by GIA Publications, the purpose is to present in each volume the best the repertoire has to offer—twenty pieces per grade level for one hundred pieces total. Each of the one hundred pieces has a teacher’s resource guide that helps the conductor study the work and teach it to their students.

The project is unique in that it is published by a music publisher with no band music in their catalog—this is not an advertisement for their holdings. With Volume 12 (published March 2021), it brings the grand total to 1200 pieces—240 pieces per grade level (grades 2–6). Resource recordings (most by the North Texas Wind Symphony) exist for volumes 1–10, Beginning Band 1 & 2, Middle School Band, and Marches. Plans for a new video recording series are underway!

### State and Festival Lists

These can be helpful—and certainly always interesting—to see what music these organizations recognize as quality repertoire. Be sure to note criteria: who and what determined inclusion? Is it a selective list (limited number of pieces each year) or a massive list (no pieces are rotated off, just added to the list). Also note the grading system, which will reveal the subjective nature of grading in general, but also may suggest differences in expectations and values.

### Publisher and Store Catalogs: A Cautionary Tale

Publishing companies and music stores are businesses. Their existence depends on selling their music. This may be an unfair statement, but one that has been proven to me through experience: the number of exclamation points in the description may be inversely proportionate to the quality of the piece!!!

### Quality as Determined by You

“Choosing music is the single most important thing a band director can do, and is the only thing a band director can do alone, made more important because of the substandard repertoire continuously being published. So many publishers in the business today are printers who don't care about quality, but only about what will sell. We must not allow them to give the band a bad reputation nor to make our decisions for us, since the music we choose today can affect students forever.”

—Frederick Fennell<sup>23</sup>

“We are what we consume! If one wants to become an artist conductor/teacher—one must consume great art.”

—Frank Battisti<sup>24</sup>

### Growing the Quality of our Music and our Musicing

To remain vital and valid, conductors must always seek growth. One way to grow is to continue to cultivate taste. This will make our ability to identify quality—not to mention our teaching, conducting, and musicing—richer. We should extend this cultivation of quality to all aspects of art—painting, sculpture, film, literature, architecture, food, fashion—and life in general. The choice of great music can help cultivate this taste for quality in our students, too, as Frank Battisti writes:

“All music offers opportunities for growth in musical knowledge and the development of basic musicianship and technical skills, but only great music provides experiences in which students can discover and feel the expressive power of music. Study and performance of high-quality music effects an individual's development of musical values and “taste” in a very positive way.”<sup>25</sup>

Battisti also has some very concrete ideas about how a conductor can go about developing their own “personal repertoire”:

“Every conductor should identify a body of exceptional wind band/ensemble works that he/she feels needs to be played over and over (a personal repertoire). The number of pieces selected should not exceed twenty. Fifty percent of the music included on their concerts should be pieces from the conductor’s selected body of works (repertoire). The remaining fifty percent should be ‘new pieces’—new in the sense that they would be works receiving their first performance in that location. Thus, in a concert containing sixty minutes of music, thirty minutes would consist of works from the conductor’s personal repertoire and the other thirty, works receiving their first performance in that location.”<sup>26</sup>

### Be a Consumer in order to be a Curator: Some Suggestions for Consumption

Here are some ways to go about developing as a Consumer of Great Art, in order to become a Curator of Great Art to our students.

1. Listen to great music—*not only band music*—from our time and before. Listen to music beyond the Western classical tradition.
2. Experience great art, including other performance art and visual art.
3. Read great literature from our time and before. Read literature beyond American or English authors.
4. Listen to and watch great recordings. Choose only the best recordings, to build your ear and expectations.
5. Study great music—*not only band music, and not only music your ensemble can perform*—stretch your knowledge and musicality.
6. Apply others’—Ostling’s, Battisti’s Cramer’s, Dvorak’s, and others’—criteria for quality.
7. Develop your own criteria for quality.

Internalize the criteria—develop a “taste for quality”—and it becomes more instinctual.

## QUESTIONING CRITERIA

The following questions and ideas emerged while researching and considering this topic.

### **Quality = Difficulty = Quality?**

Does something of quality have to be difficult?

Does something of difficulty mean it is quality?

### **“I Just Like It...Is That Enough?”**

Maybe...you owe it to yourself to measure your intuition against criteria, to reinforce your instincts, and to find out *why* you sense quality.

### **Does every piece have to meet all the criteria?**

Not necessarily—it may be possible for a piece to exhibit many of the criteria but not all, and still be considered to have Serious Artistic Merit. Are there other possibilities for criteria?

**A New Criterion: Diversity of Repertoire & Programming**

“I believe the call for ‘quality’ repertoire should be reframed as a call for ‘colourFULL’ repertoire. And I’m not specifically talking about female composers, LGBTQIA+ composers, or composers of colour. I’m talking about compositions that step away from the Formulaic approach. THIS is where true diversity and repertoire growth lives. Well-written, original repertoire categorised as Exploratory, Cultivated, and works that allow for Process-Orientated, Student-Focused learning opportunities will all further the repertoire and bring relevancy to 21<sup>st</sup>-century audiences and students.”

—Jodie Blackshaw<sup>27</sup>

Even if Diversity is not a criterion of Quality Repertoire, Diversity is a criterion of Quality Programming.

**Other Criteria for Music Selection**

Of course, sometimes we select music for reasons other than to perform music of Serious Artistic Merit. Sometimes there is an extra-musical function that the performance serves: think of an Independence Day or Veteran’s Day concert, or a memorial concert, or a concert with a planned visitation by the Administrator of NASA. I can attest from personal experience that, when trying to find music that honored Gen. Charles Bolden—a US Marine pilot, Vietnam veteran, astronaut (including four shuttle missions as pilot and commander), and the head administrator—sometimes it was not possible to check all the boxes for Serious Artistic Merit! Regardless if the music is functional or entertainment, continue to strive for the highest quality while fulfilling these other criteria.

**The COVID Challenge**

Is it possible to meet the challenges of quality while also meeting the challenges of the pandemic?

**Some Final Thoughts**

We are what we eat : We are what we play  
 Physical health is the result of diet (nutrition) and exercise.  
 Musical health is the result of repertoire and pedagogy.

Quality is determined by *who*? Quality is determined by *you*!

**CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION**

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ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *Physiologie du Gout, ou Meditations de Gastronomie Transcendante* (1826). The original French is “Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es.”
- <sup>2</sup> Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (1926). This is often attributed to Aristotle (all over the internet), but is not quite that old!
- <sup>3</sup> Duke Ellington, “Where is Jazz Going?” *Music Journal* (1962).
- <sup>4</sup> “Chris Thile on Tricky Task of Hosting ‘Prairie Home Companion,’” *Rolling Stone* (October 14, 2016).
- <sup>5</sup> *The Blues Brothers* (1980). Sorry: I couldn’t help myself, but I’m always reminded of this scene whenever I think of the Ellington quote.
- <sup>6</sup> Zoltan Kodaly, “Children’s Choirs,” *Selected Writings of Zoltan Kodaly*, 76.
- <sup>7</sup> Richard Franko Goldman, *The Wind Band: Its Literature and Technique* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1961), 193.
- <sup>8</sup> H. Robert Reynolds, “Repertoire IS the Curriculum,” *Music Educators Journal* 87 (July 2000): 33.
- <sup>9</sup> Charles Wuorinen, “An Elevated Wind Music,” *Journal of the World Association of Symphonic Bands and Ensembles*, Vol. 7 (2000): 18.
- <sup>10</sup> Bobby Adams, “How Should Band Directors Deal with School Reform?” *Book of Proceedings, 61<sup>st</sup> American Bandmasters Association Convention* (March 22–27, 1994): 39.
- <sup>11</sup> Frank Battisti, *The New Winds of Change: The Evolution of the Contemporary American Wind Band/Ensemble and Its Music* (Delray Beach, FL: Meredith Music, 2018), 402.
- <sup>12</sup> Battisti, *New Winds of Change*, 407.
- <sup>13</sup> Merriam-Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary.
- <sup>14</sup> Acton Ostling, Jr., *An Evaluation of Compositions for Wind Band According to Specific Criteria of Serious Artistic Merit* (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1978). Replicated by Jay Gilbert at Northwestern University in 1993 and Clifford Towner at University of Nebraska in 2011.
- <sup>15</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses*. This is also on the back of the entry sign for the University of North Texas.
- <sup>16</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* Book V, 16 (AD 167).
- <sup>17</sup> Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*. Even though I used this earlier, it’s so good I just had to use it again.
- <sup>18</sup> *Tanglewood Symposium: Music in American Society* (Music Educators National Conference, 1968), 57–58.
- <sup>19</sup> Ostling, *An Evaluation of Compositions for Wind Band*.
- <sup>20</sup> Battisti, *New Winds of Change*, 402–403.
- <sup>21</sup> Ray Cramer, “Our GPS for Success: It’s all about the Literature!” *Teaching Music through Performance in Band* Vol. 1, Rev. ed. Richard Miles (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2010).
- <sup>22</sup> Thomas L. Dvorak, Robert Grechesky, Gary M. Ciepluch, ed. Bob Margolis, *Best Music for High School Band: A Selective Repertoire Guide for High School Bands & Wind Ensembles* (Manhattan Beach Music, 1993).
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.
- <sup>24</sup> Battisti, “A ‘Taste’ for Quality: The Quest for Good Music: The Intersection of Personal Taste and Aesthetic Criteria,” *The Winds of Change: The Evolution of the Contemporary American Wind Band/Ensemble and its Conductor* (Galesville, MD: Meredith Music, 2002), 242.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.
- <sup>26</sup> Battisti, *New Winds of Change*, 408–409.
- <sup>27</sup> Jodie Blackshaw, “This word, quality...” [jodieblackshaw.com](http://jodieblackshaw.com).