

# KEEPING THEM IN THE SEATS: HOW TO PROGRAM SUCCESSFUL CONCERTS FOR YOUR STUDENTS AND FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

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*Dr. Jeffrey D. Gershman, Associate Director of Bands*

*Indiana University Jacobs School of Music*

*Manhattan Beach Music, Presentation Sponsor*

- I. Repertoire as Curriculum
  - A. As a young teacher, my repertoire selection was often driven by function, not art.
  - B. It was a chance, unexpected conversation with an English Department colleague early in my career that made me realize that the music I was selecting for my ensemble was not just what we played at concerts and contests, but the curriculum of my instrumental program.
  - C. Inspired by this conversation, I made it my goal to have my students aspire to the level of repertoire, instead of bringing the repertoire to their level.
  
- II. New Philosophy in Programming
  - A. That next summer, I adopted a new method of choosing my concert music based on the method employed by our English Department.
  - B. Just as my English colleagues had created a list of the authors that every student should read, I began a list of composers to which I thought every student should be exposed.
  
- III. Putting the Plan in Action
  - A. The next step was to find pieces written by the composers on my list that were actually available for instrumental ensembles.
  - B. Resources
    1. I looked for resources that had screened the music for quality.
      - a. *The Best Music for Beginning Band, Young Band, High School Band, and Chorus and Winds* series, published by Manhattan Beach
      - b. *The Teaching Music through Performance in Band* series, published by GIA Music
      - c. State music lists
      - d. Finally, I consulted music publisher and music retailer websites.
        - (1) I looked at these titles with more scrutiny because there was no quality control.
    2. From these resources, I created a list of all of the recommended titles and their grade levels.
    3. Finally, I created a four year rotation, with each year featuring several specific historical style periods.
      - a. This insured that my students would be exposed to the entire history of music by the time they graduated.
      - b. From a practical standpoint, I now had a range of titles in each style period which allowed me to choose the piece that best fit the strengths of my ensemble.

### C. Long-Term Effects

1. Consider the potential impact if an entire district music program adopted the English Department's philosophy.
  - a. What would happen if we systematically developed our students' skills beginning in Kindergarten through the work of the finest composers in music history?
2. The result would not only make our students better, more well-rounded people, but could potentially have a profound long-term effect on classical music as we know it.

## IV. Practical Considerations to Programming

### A. Introduction

1. While performing outstanding repertoire by accomplished composers is important, it isn't a guarantee of a quality concert experience.
2. The reality is that choosing this music is truly only the starting point for creating diverse and enjoyable concerts.
3. 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.
4. Because of this, there are several very important, practical considerations to programming that should be addressed in hopes of creating quality concerts.

### B. Flow

1. It is imperative that, when programming for your concerts, you not only consider your students, but you also remember your audience.
2. As band and orchestra directors, with *everything* that we're asked to do, we sometimes forget that the people filling the seats behind you come to your concert that night for one thing—to be entertained.
3. Because of this, there are few things more important in concert programming than creating that perfect flow of pieces that will sustain the audience's interest throughout the performance.

### C. Program Order

1. Three rules for creating an effective concert flow:
  - a. Get Them on Their Feet
  - b. Always Start Strong
  - c. Change it Up

### D. Historical Contrast

1. In addition to creating contrast through musical differences, another effective way of creating good concert flow is by programming works of various historical styles.
2. 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?

### E. Multi-Movement Works

1. If possible, it is highly recommended that you perform at least one multi-movement work a year because they present unique challenges different than those inherent in single-movement works.
2. Multi-movement pieces are integral for building the mental and physical maturity of our ensembles.

- F. Difficulty
    - 1. Don't be afraid to use repertoire that is slightly easier than the difficulty level to which your ensemble is accustomed.
      - a. This is particularly effective when it comes to programming slower, lyric music.
  - G. Endurance
    - 1. A very important, often neglected, consideration when choosing a program is taking into account the physical endurance of your musicians, particularly your high brass players.
  - H. Concert Length
    - 1. It's imperative to remember that, just as your players have physical thresholds that need to be considered, your audiences have aural thresholds that need to be addressed as well.
    - 2. 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.
  - I. Concert Preview
    - 1. Finally, 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.
      - a. This will give you a chance to be an audience member at your own concert.
    - 2. This concert preview gives you an objective perspective that is easy to lose along the way because of the myriad things you have to consider.
- V. Breaking Down the Walls
- A. 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.
  - B. But the fact is, that not true. Often, the composers of your pieces wrote their music for a *reason*.
  - C. Our students deserve to be let in on that secret. The more they know about their music, the more invested they will become.
  - D. More than that, however, because our education system tends to categorize learning, so often, things our students learn in their various subjects were often all occurring at the same time.
  - E. Use your music to break down these artificial barriers.
  - F. *Everything* is interrelated. A little bit of research on your part can not only provide your students with deeper understanding of their music; it can give them a better appreciation of our world.
- VI. Conclusion
- A. What we do is a privilege; but one that comes with great responsibility.
    - 1. 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.
    - 2. By skillfully blending the past and present, by carefully crafting an enjoyable concert flow, and by infusing our music with its history and with our history, I have no doubt you will enjoy great success keeping your students and your audience in the seats.