

I Played That in College: Using Post-Secondary Band Experiences to Shape Repertoire Decisions for High School Bands

by Dan Gilanyi



In the current landscape of instrumental music education, there are divergent mindsets at the secondary and university levels regarding the purpose and curricular goals of our performing ensembles. This divergence is not new and, in my opinion, not the main issue we need to be concerned with “fixing”. University ensembles are often on the cutting edge of advancing artistry and legitimizing the medium while at the secondary level, directors often take a more comprehensive and growth-centered focus. One side effect of these diverging mindsets is that the shared repertoire pool for secondary and university performing ensembles is actively getting smaller. As directors, we need to be aware of this issue when programming for our younger ensembles so we can keep the most educationally valuable concepts at the forefront of our curriculum choices.

Every teacher and program will have different goals based on a wide range of circumstances, but the musical mindset of our students is essential. A student’s musical mindset affects their musical decision making, their critical thinking, and their ability to continue loving music after they leave our classrooms. Without a strong foundation in musical thinking, students leave our program without the basis for the lifelong love for music that we as educators value so highly. Regardless of program-specific goals, repertoire choice is a primary decision with immediate impact on musical mindset development.

The music we select for our program serves as both curriculum as well as concert material and, as such, we need to be actively and continuously reflecting to avoid complacency in our decision-making process. We can’t just program the music we played at some point without thinking about the impact it may have on our current students, or else we run the risk of losing out on the opportunity to make real musical connection with them.

As we move forward in pursuit of this principle, let’s start by looking back. Briefly looking at the history of the wind band as described by Frank Battisti in his work *The New Winds of Change*, we can see some patterns emerge that we as directors can apply to our current teaching landscape. In the 1950s, Fred Fennell established the Eastman Wind Ensemble and began the process of legitimizing the wind band medium and advancing the artistic vision of university ensembles across the nation (Battisti, 2018). This bold choice helped teachers seeking to evolve from the Sousa and Goldman bands, but also helped inspire others to commission large amounts of new band works in the following decades (Battisti, 2018). As the medium evolved, so too did the technical and musical demands of new compositions. If we as directors saw a high school band performing Husa’s *Music for Prague, 1963* or Joseph Schwantner’s *...and the mountains rising nowhere...* would we praise or question that repertoire choice’s appropriateness?

When we look at the historical periods of greatest growth in the medium, there is the common theme of original music of excellent quality. Even though the technical demands of some compositions exceeded the level of the average high school band, those commissioning and programming music never allowed their goals to negatively impact the quality of repertoire being performed. Cynthia Johnston Turner, current Dean at Wilfrid Laurier University and former Director of Bands at the University of Georgia, offers some insight we can apply to all levels of instruction. “...I think the institutions have different missions. But they all should be focusing on QUALITY music and teaching a love for music...” (Battisti, 2018). In teaching students how to love music, we do not need to be concerned with the hardest, newest, or edgiest music at the high school level; rather, we should focus on identifying quality music that allows us to have a broad pool of concepts to teach. If we lose sight of comprehensive musicianship at the core of what we do and instead shift our focus solely towards technical proficiency or performance, we miss out on opportunities with our younger students to teach them that there is more to music than just performing. Being aware of the differences and potential pitfalls between university and secondary pedagogy is critical. Brendan Caldwell, Director of Bands

at Baldwin-Wallace Conservatory addresses this when he says, “As high school band directors tend to mimic their collegiate mentors, so too does the process of performance driven pedagogy tend to under-nurture a more comprehensive approach to music education that seeks to develop ‘music-lovers.’” (Battisti, 2018).

So, now we ask ourselves: what does all this mean, and what can I do about it? First, it means that we need to learn from our colleagues at the university level and seek out the finest repertoire appropriate to our ensembles as we seek the highest level of artistry possible. Second, we need to develop processes and criteria for our own program that help us in evaluating music for its educational and performance value, lest we fall into a state of unintended complacency. Here is where we can use previously researched and implemented methodologies alongside ones of our own creation. The three main studies/methodologies of note are the Ostling, Cramer, and Dvorak methods used in different publications. The Ostling criteria was developed by Acton Ostling as part of his dissertation work and is meant to provide a rubric and unbiased methods for evaluating if a piece of music is “of serious artistic merit” (Ostling, 1979). This study is of the highest quality and is meticulous; however, I avoid using a handful of its criteria for two reasons: first, that most of the criteria can be found and covered in simpler terms through Ray Cramer (who I’ll address shortly) but more importantly, one of the Ostling criteria specifically eliminates pedagogical value from assessment, defeating the entire point of selecting music for a younger band. As such, we must consider the methods that are focused on pedagogical value and how best to use music to teach. Ray Cramer lays out seven questions we can ask about a piece of music to help determine its quality in *Teaching Music through Performance in Band, Volume 1* (Miles, 2010).

Does the music have:

1. a well-conceived formal structure?
2. creative melodies and counterlines?
3. harmonic imagination?
4. rhythmic vitality?
5. contrast in all musical elements?
6. scoring which best represents the full potential of the wind ensemble?
7. an emotional impact?

In addition to these seven questions from Cramer, Thomas Dvorak lays out three additional criteria to help guide his evaluations for his book *Best Music for High School Band* (Dvorak, 1993)

Compositions must:

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

I mention these criteria and questions to help us understand how we must be consistent and repeatable in our evaluations of music. Using my own experience in teaching paired with the wisdom of others like Cramer and Dvorak, I offer up my own criteria that is a hybrid of these previous lists. This is not a method I ask everyone to use since it was developed for my program, but I hope it spurs teachers to think about their selection process in a way that adds consistency and quality.

1. The piece must exhibit a high degree of compositional craft. (Dvorak)

This point speaks to the actual writing of the piece. Is it a well-composed piece with form, melody, counterpoint, harmonic ingenuity? All the things that help us elevate artistry should be present here.

1. The piece must have scoring which best represents the full potential of the wind ensemble. (Cramer)

Compositional quality aside, this point helps us address whether a piece of music is taking

advantage of the wonderful color spectrum available to us as band directors. Also, does every member of the ensemble feel as though they are a contributing member of the performance and not just a musical bystander? I love finding music that sheds light on inner voices of a section and gives 3rd clarinets or 2nd trumpets a chance to break out of their monotony.

3. The piece should induce an emotional response. (Cramer)

Everything we do as music teachers needs to come from a place of emotional vulnerability and expression. We must seek out music that provides space for grief, joy, pain, anger, and love. Teaching our students how to communicate and connect with music on a deeper level provides the foothold for a lifelong love of music.

4. The piece must contain elements of high educational value. (Gilanyi)

Unlike the previous three criteria, this is of my own creation rather than borrowed. I make sure to include this here so I never forget that music that is written to teach a concept or skill is still of high value. This list does not require every criterion to be satisfied to program music and this point highlights that well. We sometimes need a piece of music to teach contextual skills that we otherwise would miss, although perhaps that piece may lack emotional connection, for example. Knowing what your program needs is just as important as having a set of criteria against which you can assess music to meet those needs.

5. The piece should highlight the diversity of the band medium and our students. (Gilanyi)

Last, but certainly not least in my assessment criteria is the idea of choosing music from underrepresented groups of composers. Choosing music that not only highlights the diversity of our profession but also represents students in our ensembles is more important now than ever. I think everyone has heard or even said at some point in their career some variation of “I just play the best music and don’t focus on the composer”, suggesting that if we choose music solely on musical quality, how can we possibly be problematic? I will address this again later, but the main crux of this argument is that we are assigning value to something based on our own subconscious and cultural bias, hence the need for a more intentional approach.

My own programming experience highlights a lot of what I stated already, but also includes some valuable opportunities for reflection upon my previous programming in an attempt to do better in the future. I want to draw attention to two points in my programming that I believe were lynchpin moments in my career as an intentional and thoughtful programmer of music. First, my Spring of 2017 Concert featured, amongst other great music, Frank Ticheli’s *Angels in the Architecture*, a piece I played in college and fell in love with and that I was certain would ignite my student’s passion early in my career (because why wouldn’t it?). Well, I discovered too late in the rehearsal process and after some painful reflection that this concert was programmed with my ego at the center. I realized I chose *Angels* not because it was the best piece for my students, but because I wanted to conduct it. This moment led to poor rehearsals where students didn’t feel empowered by music and were disconnected because of their director. Never again have I made that mistake and it has made me a far better teacher. The second moment I want to highlight is the Spring of 2018 concert. One year removed from my learning moment concert, I was a new teacher who cared deeply for my students love and commitment to music. This concert would seem like a potential miss given that I needed to cut a piece (Morton Gould’s *Ballad for Band*) from the concert, but that decision was, in fact, the highlight. My students made the decision to remove the Gould from the concert because they wanted to elevate the other music instead of spreading themselves too thin. It spoke to their critical thinking and musical intentionality. That was the concert that convinced me that my program was ready for an additional concert each year to give my students more opportunities to be musically intentional and connect on deeper levels with the musical world around them.

The last point I want to speak on with my programming is how much I continue to learn about diverse programming and the hurdles to implementing it that are present in our community. My programs fell short of what I aim for with regards to diverse composers, and it has made a significant impact on my current music selections. This is where I think we as directors of young students can learn from our university colleagues in programming diverse music from emerging composers. In the world of music purchasing, J.W. Pepper and Stanton’s are two of the largest retailers and even have their own recommendations that

many directors use to help guide their programming. However, from 2020 to 2022, Stanton’s 5-Star Feature List contained 114 compositions and of those, only 9 were from a composer from an underrepresented group. On J.W. Pepper’s “New” List of music from their “Editors’ Choice” recommendations, only 25 pieces out of 145 were from an underrepresented composer. If we aim to be more diverse in our programming, we must avoid lists that only have 13% of its pieces from a diverse composer pool. We must seek out and invest our time in discovering new music and emerging composers. Some resources include:

- Institute for Composer Diversity (<https://www.composerdiversity.com/>)
- Major Orchestra Librarians Association Resources (<https://mola-inc.org/p/education>)
- And We Were Heard Recording Database (works of underrepresented composers) (<https://www.andwewereheard.org/recordings>)
- ColourFULL Intentional Program Samples (<https://www.colourfullmusic.com/find-a-program>)
- Female Band Composers (Grades 1-4) (<https://www.jodieblackshaw.com/female-band-composers>)
- American Indian Band Music (<https://www.americanindianbandmusic.com/>)
- Wind Repertory Project (http://www.windrep.org/Main_Page)
- Women Composers of Wind Band Music (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1eyVYaU50lhNDCK9zob7ZwphFqIWfm5VFdo4-ha7yuHk/edit?usp=sharing>)
- Diverse Composers of Wind Band Music (<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1i4mcvDo3j6P9MiXKDbgyZ6enIGPcDhY2NTG278ReOal/edit?usp=sharing>)

In a return to the historical perspective, I challenge us all to follow in the footsteps of Fred Fennell and the other educators who helped forge a new path forward for wind band. Just as those educators elevated and pushed the technical boundaries of the wind ensemble as a medium, we need to be bold in our music choices and intentionality to ensure that our students are introduced to the absolute highest quality pieces, which can foster a love of music while being accessible and appropriate. I want my students to leave my program and be able to be a participant in the musical conversation of the world around them for the rest of their lives. I can’t say for certain that my musical selections will all be exemplary, but I do know that I will have thoughtfully considered each piece and know why it is a piece from which I can teach. That is a lesson I learned from my university experience, and I will continue to lead with love from the podium and share my passion for music just as my university director did. In closing, I offer many thanks to those at the university level who taught me how to learn (and occasionally steal) from people who are smarter than me to benefit the next generation of music lovers. My hope is that we all can take a similar lesson and apply it to our current programs and student populations.

Battisti, F. L., & Duffy, T. P. (2018). *The New Winds of Change: The Evolution of the contemporary American Wind Band/Ensemble and its Music*. Meredith Music Publications.

Dvorak, T. L., Grechesky, R. N., Ciepluch, G. M., & Margolis, B. (1993). *Best music for high school band: A selective repertoire guide for high school bands & wind ensembles*. Manhattan Beach Music.

Miles, R. B., & Blocher, L. (2010). *Teaching music through performance in band. Volume 1*. Gia Publications.

Ostling, A. E. (1979). *An evaluation of compositions for wind band according to specific criteria of serious artistic merit (dissertation)*. University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, MI.

Biography

Dan Gilanyi is the current band director at West De Pere High School in De Pere, Wisconsin. Dan graduated from UWSP in 2012 after studying instrumental music education and trumpet and is currently pursuing his Masters of Music Education with a conducting emphasis from UWSP. Under his leadership, the band program at West De Pere High School has seen an increase in enrollment, creation of new ensembles, a new focus on meaningful and real student leadership. These growth points all stem from the focus and attention on a culture of love and respect centered around the students in the program and what will serve them and their musical journeys in the most positive way possible.