

Other Factors: How Choice of Music Directly Determines Your Assessment Outcome

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How our band sounds is how we are measured in our profession. The essential question truly is, does your band sound good? It is the band director's responsibility to select music that will place their band in the best possible position for success. It is essential that conductors choose repertoire that is a good fit for their type of ensemble whether it is a small concert band, large symphonic band, or wind ensemble.

The LMEA Large Ensemble Assessments (Festivals) serve as an important component of the band experience. If your band is going to participate, it stands to reason that the you should strive to make the event as positive and worthwhile as possible. It has been my experience both as a conductor and as an adjudicator that the quality of the assessment/festival experience for both the conductor and the performers is driven by the selection of the music performed. The right music selection will help to make for a more positive outcome for everyone and will ultimately lead to a better evaluation (rating).

Before making your decision on music selection, YOU MUST...

- Know the strengths and weaknesses of your INDIVIDUAL performers – what they CAN, and CANNOT do.
- Know your ENSEMBLE and its strengths and weaknesses, including instrumentation.
- Know if you have the enough rehearsal time available to prepare the music.
- Know your band's level of "buy in" and attitude regarding musical excellence.
- Know whether YOU have the ability, experience, and expertise to TEACH the music you choose.

Points to consider when selecting literature for your assessment/festival performance:

1. Select literature that plays away from the band's weaknesses but plays towards their strengths.
 - a. Instrumentation – Do you have the players required to ACCURATELY and AUTHENTICALLY perform the music?
 - b. Remember to consider the role and demand of the PERCUSSION as well as that of the WINDS.
 - c. Avoid works that feature solos or exposed passages for instruments that might not be strong. It is better to choose a piece that features strong players and sections rather than weaker ones. Showcase your BEST assets.
2. Some bands play music that is simply TOO HARD.
 - a. Too much rehearsal time must be devoted to learning the notes, rhythms, and technical aspects with little or no time available to develop the expressive elements of the music.
 - b. When there is excessive rote learning, the real process of music making is compromised.
 - c. It is not difficult to play difficult music poorly.

3. Picking something to challenge your band is honorable endeavor, but they **WON'T BE SUCCESSFUL** if the skills required of them are two, three, or more grade levels above their abilities.
 - a. Program one level above where they are at your Christmas concert, or select something in their comfort zone.
 - b. The Fall is the time to develop technical fundamentals along with characteristic sound. The festival preparation period (8 weeks or so) is where you refine musical expressions and finesse the technical passages, not the time to try to correct or reteach fundamentals in individuals or sections. This takes **MONTHS** to fix - not weeks.
 - c. Recognize when to "throw in the towel" if a piece is not making it and have a back-up selection that is in their comfort zone. Most district directors allow changes of selections all the way up to the performance date, but call it no less than 3 weeks (maybe sooner) if it is obvious that a selection is not going to present well on performance day.
4. Never pick a piece for assessment/festival that contains ranges you have not heard your students consistently perform with a good sound.
 - a. Assess the range of your students (high and low) by having them play full-range scales at least in two octaves (3 for clarinet). This will reveal your weak and strong players and sections. If students can't pass off their scales, it's going to be difficult for them to have the technique and range necessary for demanding repertoire.
5. Avoid music where the technical demands overshadow fundamentals your students are weak on.
 - a. If your students can only play their scales in quarter and eighth notes in one or maybe 2 octaves (if at all) at a moderately slow tempo, you should avoid technical work at a fast tempo such as busy woodwind or brass runs.
6. Do not pick music that you are **UNWILLING** to, or do not have the **TIME** to teach the fundamentals required to perform the piece at a high level.
 - a. This is applicable to both the musical and technical aspects.
 - b. If you (or your students) don't have the drive and motivation to find the time required to study and practice in and out of rehearsal to refine the ensemble technique of a specific piece, do not program it.
 - c. If you're still learning the how to create clarity in the ensemble, don't select music with those demands.
 - d. If you aren't willing to dissect it, refine it, polish it, and assess it – don't program it!
7. **NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE TIME NEEDED TO PREPARE A PIECE.**
 - a. Assume that you will only get 70-80 percent of real rehearsal time due to distractions, rehearsal inefficiency, student attendance problems, state testing, etc.
 - b. Do not count on many students practicing at home (they are not going to).
 - c. Not only is **DIFFICULTY** of music part of the time consideration. **LENGTH** of the program is important. Do not play more than you need to unless you have an accomplished ensemble and plenty of rehearsal time.

- d. In general, for the typical high school band, select a short standard march (2-2 ½ mins.) and two other contrasting pieces keeping these on average of 4-6 minutes each.
 - e. Avoid music with multiple movements unless you have an accomplished group and if you do select a multi-movement piece, make sure the movements are short. Each movement is likely a separate mini piece with different styles adding to the time needed to prepare and to the difficulty.
8. Never let your EGO or personal need to “CONDUCT” (show off) a certain piece or music by a certain composer drive your music selection decisions.
 - a. While great conducting on stage is important, you should not overshadow the student's performance by OVER-CONDUCTING.
 - b. Assessment/festival is about how your BAND SOUNDS and whether your performance captures the spirit and intent of the music or not.
 - c. Avoid any semblance of assessment being a contest or competition. You don't need to play a higher grade of music than your players can handle just to showboat or outdo another conductor or band.
 - d. Especially, do not try to “WOW” the judges with something beyond your band’s ability.
 9. Balance music your students SHOULD play with music your students WANT to play. Too much of one or the other will result in hidden consequences that reveal themselves down the road. It's okay to play an accessible piece your students like and pair it with another piece that will stretch their musicianship.
 - a. The LMEA Assessment sheets have specific indicators for musical expression, sensitivity to phrasing, style, and artistry. If you program three march-like selections, you will be unable to showcase your band’s ability to perform these elements.
 - b. DO NOT program show tunes, rock pieces, movie soundtracks, or anything that could be misconstrued as inappropriate for the dignity or seriousness of the assessment. Save these for your Spring Concert or Dinner Concert where your audience will appreciate it.
 - c. Avoid the most commonly over played, generic, cliché, functional pieces and composers.
 10. Look at the playing time for brass players in your selection process.
 - a. Unless you have accomplished sections with lots of endurance, make sure there's room within each piece for your brass to rest and regroup as they can't play continuously, or at least keep the range demands in mid-range and below.
 - b. If you over program or over tax your brass, they most likely will start to sound tired and drift out of tune before the performance is finished.
 11. Hear your students perform individually and do pass-offs throughout the fall and schedule auditions (complete these by mid-November or early December).
 - a. Evaluate all aspects of their playing to include tone, pitch center, range, technique, rhythm, articulation, pulse, time, and expressions.
 - b. This will let you know what is going on in each section and you can then select your music accordingly.

1. Listen to as much band literature as you possibly can.
 - a. Find your state list and listen to EVERY piece that you can find a recording of. Between YouTube, Spotify, the Teaching Music Through Performance recordings, and JW Pepper, you will likely find a good recording.
 - b. Attend festival/assessment in your district and in nearby districts. Hear what other bands like yours are playing and whether it may “work” in your situation. You will also find out what’s being over-played.
2. Keep a running list.
 - a. If you hear something you like, write it down immediately. Make notes about the style, grade level, and technical and musical demands.
 - b. Include links to recordings for future listening.
3. Start with your “List” piece.
 - a. Narrow your selections to 2 or 3 selections from the PML.
 - b. Gather scores and make notes about the technical demands, instrumentation, percussion needs, etc.
 - c. Decide the list piece’s place in the concert order (1st, 2nd, 3rd)
4. Build your program around the List piece.
 - a. Choose contrasting selections that have different keys, textures, styles, and tastes.
 - b. Have a backup for every selection.
5. Make a playlist.
 - a. After deciding on your program, make a playlist and listen to it over and over.
 - b. Does it “flow”?
 - c. Is it too much of the same?

FINAL THOUGHTS

- Ask yourself, “Would the judges LIKE to hear my program”?
- Program your music as if assessment is a mini-concert.
- Make sure your selections flow well from one to the other logically and that the first two and last two minutes of your performance are the best your band has to offer.
- BE CERTAIN the music is on the LMEA list and check to see if it is one of the better pieces from a musical and compositional view point.
- Most adjudicators like to hear pieces that are from the core bedrock of band repertoire as well as fresh new pieces.
- Exercise good judgement when programming such repertoire as Lincolnshire Posy, Irish Tune, the Holst Suites, English Folk Song Suite, and similar. Every band should perform this type literature if it’s in their range of ability — but maybe not at assessment/festival unless you have a VERY MATURE ensemble. Many adjudicators have very strong opinions on the interpretation of masterpieces such as these, and only the best performance is successful in their eyes. Bands will almost always fall short when playing this type of literature unless it is performed to the highest possible level of excellence.
- Listen to recordings, study the scores, look at the individual parts, research any articles available regarding the music you might be considering, and consult with colleagues.
- The time and effort put in to select the right music for your band is well worth the investment.