

**The Wonderful Complexities of Quality Repertoire** by John A. Thomson was an essay written for *The Music Director's Cookbook: Creative Recipes for a Successful Program*, edited by Whaley, Garwood. (Galesville, MD: Meredith Music Publications, 2005).

**Ingredients:** Repertoire selection for an ensemble is one of the most important choices a conductor makes during the year. The repertoire becomes the curriculum for that ensemble.

**Serves:** All instrumental students.

The most obvious consideration when selecting repertoire for an ensemble is the literature's suitability for the musical and technical sophistication of the ensemble. When reviewing a score for its appropriateness, consider the technical and rhythmic demands, instrumentation, ranges, scoring and solo expectations that are required for a successful performance. The conductor should compare these performance issues with the strengths and weaknesses of the ensemble.

While it is important to challenge an ensemble technically, it is not wise for a conductor to choose only music that is at the difficult edge of an ensemble's technical frontier. If a group always performs works at or beyond the limits of their ability, the students will only have time to think about technical production. A work that an ensemble can handle readily from a technical standpoint will give the students the opportunity to grow by focusing on aspects of music beyond just getting the notes. Choose some repertoire at the ensemble's upper technical limits and other selections that are playable with only a little bit of practice. Music that can be grasped more quickly offers the opportunity to play expressively with good tone, phrasing, intonation, balance, and blend. Remember, technique is a means to musical expression, not an end in itself.

Aside from the issues of difficulty and complexity, an ensemble's repertoire should include only the highest quality literature selected from the broadest historical base possible. Beginning with transcriptions, explore compositions from all historical periods up to and including contemporary and experimental works that stretch the ensemble's knowledge of modern styles.

Students should have the opportunity to learn and perform the masterworks of the medium that have stood the test of time. Certainly the profession should continue to encourage new works and listen eagerly to the latest compositions by our contemporary composers, but a primary expectation for each conductor should be to look back and decide what the best music in the repertoire is and to perform these masterworks on a regular or rotational basis. These are the works students should be exposed to as part of becoming musically literate.

Select literature with varied structures and textures. The challenge for conductors is to select quality literature with varied structures, forms, and textures, while avoiding those works that follow a cookie-cutter formula. Look for creative and interesting scoring ideas that sound fresh and innovative. By the way, don't neglect slower works that emphasize legato cantabile playing. The students will learn to play well-crafted musical lines and concerts will be refreshed with the change-of-pace programming.

Finally, select a few works each year as a means of teaching musical concepts, what some music educators call the unit-study approach to curriculum. A set of lesson plans can be centered on

these exemplar compositions as a way for students to learn more about the music than just their assigned parts. Include biographical information about the composer, a brief explanation of the form and compositional devices in the work, as well as appropriate vocabulary that is necessary to understand the work. Not every piece has to be studied this intensely, but all selected works should stand up to the tests of having significant form, an important historical perspective, and a fresh and unique approach. Although such criteria make it a difficult task to find and select quality repertoire, the knowledge student's gain from each new work will inevitably carry over to the next piece they study. Common strands of knowledge are present in each fine composition, and it is the process of introducing students to these wonderful complexities that makes teaching so exciting.