

# The Repertoire is the Curriculum

by John Thomson

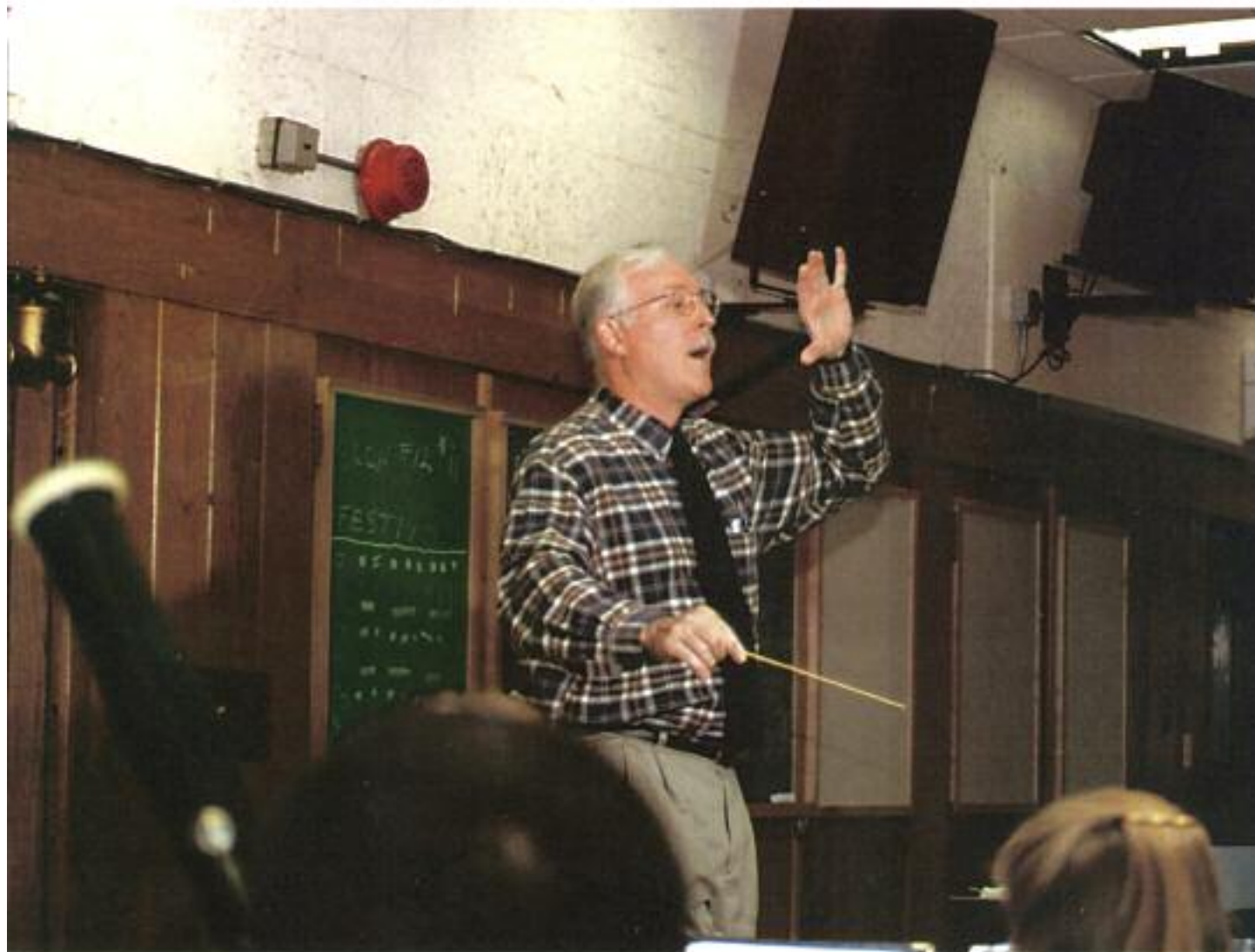
**R**epertoire selection is far more complex than people might think. A director should not simply enter a music store and look for the latest piece by a particular composer; the process has to be more in depth than that. The most obvious consideration is that the music should suit the age and musical and technical sophistication of the ensemble.

The first item to consider when reviewing a new score is how fast, technical, and complex the rhythms are in each of the parts. Next come the ranges, which may stretch far beyond the middle register into challenging territory. The score transparency is the next concern. Advanced music tends to feature individual parts and transparent scoring, while music for young bands consists of more tutti and doubled parts. Transparent parts and single

sonorities with varied sounds can be handled by mature players.

Beyond these are the expressive demands on the ensemble. The music may consist of simple folk songs or intricate melodies that require advanced interpretive skills. All of these aspects should influence the evaluation of whether a composition is suitable for an ensemble.

Music lists generally include difficulty levels that give directors an indication of what to expect technically. For example, in terms of range a grade 1 piece will seldom put the clarinets above the break while a grade 2 piece probably will. In a grade 3 work the clarinet might play some altissimo. Beyond level 3 composers will explore the altissimo range and begin to stretch the skills of players. The repertoire lists provided by A.S.B.D.A. or N.B.A.





can help, but even selected lists are limited to giving only titles and a few details such as composer, publisher, and degree of difficulty. Publishers now send out recordings of new music, and this is one of the best ways to evaluate new pieces. I tend to listen to these recordings in the car. When someone comments favorably on a new work, try to find a recording or attend a performance of that piece. A combination of sharing ideas with other directors and listening to new pieces is the most effective method I have found to identify good repertoire.

While it is important to challenge an ensemble, it is never wise for a director to choose only music that is at the edge of its technical frontier. If a group always performs works at the limits of its ability, the students will in essence be note-chasing all the time. That an ensemble is capable of playing some grade 5 or 6 repertoire doesn't mean it should do so all the time. A grade 4 piece that the group can handle readily from a technical standpoint may give students the opportunity to grow by focusing on aspects of the music other than just getting the notes. This is how mature players develop.

Although it is commonly said that students today are more technically prepared than ever before, the corollary may be that they are less prepared musically. My advice for young conductors is to choose only a few pieces at an ensemble's upper technical limit, a number of pieces that are playable with a little bit of practice, and one or two pieces that are playable almost immediately. My view on this is that technique is simply a means to musical expression, not an end in itself. Music that can be grasped quickly offers the opportunity to play expressively with good phrasing, intonation, balance, and blend. The misconception in the business is that all an ensemble has to do to earn a top rating at a festival is get everything locked in and rhythmically tight, but there is more to making music than lining everything up vertically.

Directors should never forget the obvious goal of selecting pieces that feature the strengths of the ensemble. In one year *La Fiesta Mexicana* by H. Owen Reed might be a good choice because the horn section is strong, but another year the horns might not be capable of playing the demanding opening fanfare. This is not something that directors should consider only when selecting music for contest but an ongoing standard to enhance the sound of the ensemble. The trouble with pushing technical frontiers too much is that students inevitably end up frustrated because they barely manage to play the notes by the concert date or know in their hearts

## Music For Teaching

### Music for Advanced Ensembles

*Fanfare and Flourishes (For a Festive Occasion)* by James Curnow is based on Marc-Antoine Charpentier's *Te Deum* and was originally a brass band arrangement performed at the 1991 European brass band championship in Rotterdam, Holland. Intelligently scored, the band version challenges each instrument. This majestic work has a distinctive melody, and its varied textures avoid the tutti-band sound. (grade 4, Curnow Music Press)

*La Belle Helene Overture* by Jacques Offenbach, arranged by Lawrence Odom. Written as a spoof on the Greek myth of Helen of Troy, the music introduces students to the opera overture form and one of the better-known opera composers. It will take students to the technical frontier with challenges for all instruments, especially clarinets. (grade 5, Kjos)

*As Summer Was Just Beginning* by Larry Daehn is a tribute to American actor James Dean, who made three movies and died in an automobile accident. The title comes from the Greek inscription on a statue in Griffith Park in Los Angeles that honors those who died too soon. The composer reflected Dean's English, Scottish, and Irish heritage. It incorporates the British folk song "The Winter it is past, and the Summer's here at last" in a setting that teaches students to play subtle phrases. The piece is easy to read through but takes effort to develop the proper *legato cantabile* style. Every phrase goes somewhere as notes fit together in beautiful lines. There are transparent sections with short solos for alto saxophone, trumpet, and horn as well as full-ensemble tutti. (grade 3, Daehn Music)

A standard in the band repertoire, *Second Suite in F Major* by Gustav Holst has four contrasting movements, each with a distinctive character that takes players through a variety of styles, keys, and meters. Composed in 1911, this structurally interesting masterwork for band uses folk songs and folk dance tunes throughout. (grade 4, Boosey & Hawkes)

*Variations On a Korean Folk Song* by John Barnes Chance is another war-horse of the band repertoire that introduces students to a form other than the typical ABA. With this piece directors can teach students about the theme and variations form, pentatonic scales, and the relationship of music to historical events. Students will find technical challenges within the varied textures and several solo passages. The percussion scoring is excellent. (grade 5, Boosey & Hawkes)

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that they never reached the musical and expressive goals.

Aside from the issues of difficulty and complexity, music should be selected to span the broadest historical base possible. Each year the music program should cover a wide range of music. Obviously, most of the repertoire written for band comes from the 20th century, but there are wonderful transcriptions of 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century music. I try to include a Baroque, contrapuntal piece every year. The Bach Prelude and Fugues arranged by R.L. Moehlmann and others work well for band and introduce students to the Baroque era. Many works that were written for keyboard or organ during that period will transpose beautifully for a wind instrument. All of my ensembles will play a work from the other end of that spectrum as well, a modern or experimental piece that stretches players' knowledge of contemporary forms. There are pieces like this at almost every level.

Another goal is to play literature with as many varied structures and textures as possible. Too many pieces follow an ABA structure that begins with a fast section followed by a contrasting slow section and ends with a repeat of the fast section. I have attended many concerts where three or four pieces written in the same ABA structure were performed. The challenge for directors is to find music that doesn't fit the cookie-cutter formula, perhaps something that starts slowly and ends slowly with a fast section in the middle or a theme and variations that unfolds in a different way.

There is more to music than the tutti textures that are used in much of today's educational music: a single melody with a harmonic accompaniment. Look for more creative and interesting scoring ideas that sound fresh and innovative. A Baroque work, for example, will expose students to both a different historical period and style. Also, choose a variety of key signatures to avoid playing three out of four pieces in B<sup>b</sup>.

I also try to select introspective pieces that include cantabile playing such as *The Salvation is Created* by Pavel Tschesnokoff, arranged by Bruce

Houseknecht; *When the Stars Began to Fall* arranged by Fred Allen; *On a Hymnsong of Phillip Bliss* by David Holsinger; and *As Summer Was Just Beginning* by Larry Daehn. Students should learn to play cantabile, which will be a refreshing change of pace at a concert from the rhythmic, percussive playing in many pieces.

The time of year influences repertoire choices as well. In the fall I tend to select works that are not too difficult technically. Some directors begin the year by emphasizing technique, but I adhere to the philosophy that musical concepts should be learned from the start, not as a secondary concern to technique. As the year unfolds and students improve, I emphasize technique a bit more and choose more challenging pieces.

I believe it is important to return to certain pieces periodically because a director knows more about how to conduct and interpret a work each time he returns to it. Every time I conduct *Lincolnshire Posy* it is like visiting an old friend. I never come back to it without feeling that I have discovered something new and I have more to offer students. Some directors are critical of repeating

pieces, but the educational benefits make it justifiable. Professional orchestras repeat masterworks and so should teachers provided that they do not teach the same music to the same students. If music is repeated on a strict four-year cycle, though, a director will become bored to tears over a 30-year career. I have developed a mix-and-match rotation that is divided according to types of pieces. For example, I use a four-year rotation of folk song suites with one of my ensembles. The rotation includes the *First Suite in E<sup>b</sup>* by Gustav Holst; *Second Suite in F* by Holst; *English Folk Song Suite* by Ralph Vaughan Williams; and *Lincolnshire Posy* by Percy Grainger.

Because the band repertoire used to be more limited, most directors tend to think primarily in terms of what is new, but there are masterworks of the band repertoire that have withstood the test of time. It is the responsibility of conductors to perform these masterworks regularly. Certainly we





should continue to commission new works and listen eagerly to the latest David Gillingham or Timothy Mahr piece, but a primary responsibility is to look back and decide what the best music in the repertoire is, the works students should learn as a part of becoming musically literate. This year may be my ninth or tenth time conducting *Lincolnshire Posy*, but it is the first experience with this music for my current students. This is why I lobby for repeating repertoire.

I also select certain pieces as a means to teaching musical concepts, what some teachers refer to as the unit-study approach to curriculum. *Variations on a Korean Folk Song* by John Barnes Chance, for example, offers a contrast to the overused ABA structure. It is also an opportunity to teach students about such devices as the pentatonic scale, canon, and theme and variations form. A set of lesson plans can be centered around these types of compositions as a way for students to learn more about the music than just their part.

With the unit-study approach, it may be a good idea to focus intensely on only one piece at a time. Homework assignments can be generated out of the study, and a director can offer short presentations in class with handouts that include a little historical context, biographical information about the composer, a brief explanation of the form and devices in the piece, as well as appropriate vocabulary. In this cyclical approach to curriculum you begin with simple ideas and become increasingly more complex. The concept of an interval, for example, will evolve over time to include perfect, minor, major, and augmented intervals that lead into the concept of triads. A discussion of seventh or ninth chords is simply a return to the basic concept of intervals. The cyclical approach to teaching gives students building blocks of understanding, and this is the essence of a music curriculum. Not every piece has to be studied intensely, but all should stand up to the tests of having significant form, an

important historical perspective, and a fresh approach in some way. Although such criteria make it a difficult task to find a mix of good repertoire, directors should remember that the compositions selected will constitute the curriculum for students, the music from which they will develop technique and learn about musical elements.

Some directors develop a set of concepts and select music that fits these concepts, but this is the opposite of what I do. My approach is to find an exciting piece of music and then determine which concepts to teach. This philosophical

point of view reflects my belief that bands, orchestras, and jazz ensembles should be performance groups first although some educators would have us believe otherwise. Students walk in the rehearsal room door to play music, not to hear a lecture on music history or theory. Although students learn musical concepts and develop an historical perspective in the process of rehearsing pieces, the focus of my classes is performance, and I will not apologize for that.

I believe all concepts should relate back to the ear and to performing. The ultimate goal is to go beyond just teaching the notes and to help players understand how their part fits within the full ensemble. In the end musicians play better when they understand more about the music they rehearse and perform. The knowledge students gain from each new piece 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. □

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*John Thomson is director of bands at New Trier High School in Winnetka, Illinois and a consulting editor to The Instrumentalist. He received bachelor's and master's degrees from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Thomson is active as a clinician and adjudicator.*



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## Addendum to College Listing

California, California State University (Fullerton), David Grimes, (714) 278-3598, fax 714.278.5956, deadline 11/30, tuition \$2,000 res., \$8,000 non-res., degrees 1-6 (c, j, v, ch, op, th), 290 students, 52 faculty.

New York, Brooklyn College of CUNY Conservatory (Brooklyn), Bruce MacIntyre, (718)951-5954, fax 718.951.4502, deadline 10/15 and 1/15, tuition \$3,200 res., \$6,800 non-res., degrees 1, 2, 4, graduate deadline 10/1 and 2/1, tuition \$4,350 res., \$7,600 non-res., degrees 1, 2, 4, 5 (c, j, v, ch, op, th), 180 students, 45 faculty.

New York, Syracuse University School of Music (Syracuse), Daniel Godfrey, (315)443-5892, fax 315.443.5892, deadline 1/15, degrees 1-4, 11, graduate deadline 2/1, (c, j, v, ch, op), 190 students, 60 faculty.

Types of Degrees	Performing Organizations
1 performance	c concert band
2 music education	j jazz band
3 theory	o orchestra
4 composition	v vocal/choir
5 history/musicology	ch chamber music
6 conducting	op opera
7 church music	th musical theater
8 music therapy	
9 jazz studies	
10 arts administration	
11 music industry	
12 music theater	
13 recording technology	

## New Remo Drums

Designed for young drummers and amateur players, the new Bravo 2 Drums from Remo are available in five drumset configurations with snare drums, tom-toms, and bass drums in a choice of colors. The drums feature coated batter and hazy snare-side heads on the snare drums, clear heads on the tops and bottoms of tom-toms, and Remo's PowerStroke 3™ system on bass drums. Individual add-on drums are also available for custom setups. (Remo, Inc., 28101 Industry Dr., Valencia, California; 805-294-5600, fax 805.294.5700)

During the preceding twelve months, *The Instrumentalist* was distributed as follows: The average net price per copy was 18,451 (19,351 copies were printed for September 1998); Paul Grollman: The average number of newstand sales was 235 (165 copies distributed to newstands for September 1998). The average number of copies sent out by mail to paid subscribers was 17,461 (17,290 were mailed out for September 1998). Free distribution averaged 43 (no copies for September 1998 yet). Total paid circulation averaged 17,699 (17,925 for September 1998). Total distribution averaged 18,026 (18,944 for September 1998). Copies not distributed (including returns from news agents) averaged 455 (607 for the September 1998 issue). *The Instrumentalist* is published twelve times a year, monthly by The Instrumentalist Company at the annual subscription price of \$24.00. The editor is Catherine Sell Lerner, the managing editor is William M. Folmer, and the publisher is James T. Robner, all at the magazine offices at 200 Northfield Road, Northfield, Illinois.

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## Music for Intermediate Ensembles

*Heroic Fanfare* by Michael Story is a short fanfare with contrasting textures, interesting harmonies, and a fresh sound. (grade 3, Belwin)

*Overture for Winds* by Charles Carter is a grade 3 masterwork in the familiar three-part form. (Bourne)

*Prelude and Fugue in G Minor* by Johann Sebastian Bach, arranged by Roland R. Moehlmann teaches students how to play in a sostenuto style with an organ-like blend and balance. Arranged from *Eight Little Preludes and Fugues*, this work introduces students to one of the masters of the Baroque era and polyphonic texture. The woodwinds face technical challenges in the Prelude. (grade 3, Warner Bros.)

*Three Ayres from Gloucester* by Hugh Stuart calls for an emphasis on style and phrasing. Written in a homophonic texture, the work is not technically challenging. Based on three contrasting folk songs, "The Jolly Earl of Cholmondeley," "Ayre for Eventide," and "The Fiefs of Wembley," this work will take students through a variety of meters and key signatures. The lyrical middle movement features varied scoring, including a horn section soli. (grade 3, Shawnee Press)

An exciting closer, *Encanto* by Robert Smith begins with a brass choir. Students will be challenged by the syncopated melody and interesting counterpoint. (grade 3, Jensen) □

## Recent Recordings, continued from page 8

Purcell, Holst, Hovhaness, and others. (Elf Recordings, 557 East 140th Street, Cleveland, Ohio)

Patrick Sheridan, tuba soloist and member of The Brass Band of Battle Creek, and pianist Rich Ridenour perform favorites from classical and popular repertoire on *Lollipops*. The selection of short, familiar tunes includes "Ol' Man River," "The Swan" from *Carnival of the Animals*, "Danny Boy," *The Flight of the Bumble Bee*, and others. (Summit Records Inc., P.O. Box 26850, Tempe, Arizona)

Rachel Barton's latest C.D., *Instrument of the Devil*, is a collection of works that associate the violin with the devil. The unusual, virtuosic program includes pieces by Saint-Saëns, Tartini, Liszt, Berlioz, De Falla, Paganini, and Stravinsky. Pianist Patrick Sinozich accompanies Barton. (Cedille Records, 5255 N. Lakewood Avenue, Chicago, Illinois; 773-989-2515)