

Art of Production (Programming Too)

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Vol 5, #3, p.12 (Jan-Feb 1990)

[Complete article from BANDWORLD Magazine]

Last time Art of Production covered considerations that dramatically affect programming effectiveness. In each case, these were broad categories: concert mix, concert order, variety, timing, program length, staging, lighting, attire, special entrances/exits, unique openers/closers, and singing.

Following that, it is certainly fair to ask, "So, where are the real-world examples? Give me some specifics."

In conversations with my ABA colleagues, the area most frequently discussed is selection of literature-for bands of all ages. Concerts (and ultimately programs) seem to sink or swim as a result of programming decisions. In most cases, we find that ineffective concerts (struggling programs) feature music which is too difficult.

More often than not, directors in those situations choose music which "really challenges the band to keep the students interested." While the statement might contain some truth, the results are often disastrous because so much effort goes into just getting the notes. Balance, blend, intonation, precision, and other considerations get little attention.

Picking the Program

With that in mind, it seems that the most important consideration in selecting a program is to be absolutely sure that each and every piece of music can be well prepared in the time available. If the reading level of the band is grade 3, then it is unlikely that the group will be able to do more than one or two compositions at grade 4 level. On the other hand, a couple of worthy grade 2 pieces will help fill out the program and will not require inordinate amounts of rehearsal time.

Another important consideration is the sheer volume of music selected as compared to available rehearsal time. A reasonable ratio is about 20 to 1: Twenty hours of rehearsal for a one hour concert. (Obviously this ratio will be much less when a very experienced group is preparing easy music. The opposite is true with difficult music.)

Keeping those ideas foremost in the planning process, many successful directors make the first priority to choose one composition that will serve as the keystone for that concert. At that moment, they also decide where in the concert order that piece must go:

- Last because it is a great closer.
- First because it is a great opener.
- Near the beginning because of chops.

This then provides a wealth of information about selecting the rest of the concert program. If the choice is last, then the next composition to choose is usually the one that will open the program. If the choice were first, the closer needs to be determined. If placed near the beginning, then it is important to (1) decide the proper contrast piece as an opener and to (2) come up with the closer.

With inexperienced groups, it is very helpful to put something easy and solid with full band at the beginning of the concert. This helps young, inexperienced players feel confident right off the top when nerves play such an important role. This is the reason that marches or tutti scored patriotic openings are so often used in developing programs.

To fill in the rest of the program order, a lot of consideration for variety is important: Variety of style, variety of tempo, variety of scoring. Featuring a strong soloist in a key spot not only breaks up the full band sound, but it leaves the audience with the feeling that the entire program is far better than it really is. All truly successful directors have taken advantage of featuring an outstanding student soloist or a visiting guest artist as a means of electrifying the audience.

Certainly much of the music selection process should revolve around knowledge of strengths and weaknesses within the band. It makes no sense, for example, to play a composition containing a difficult trumpet solo when no one in that section is ready to be showcased.

Some Proven Choices

Over the years each of us discovers a group of compositions that both the audience and members of the band really like. These are also pieces which allow us to teach important concepts. Here are few of my personal favorites which work with all ages.

Chester arr. Tolmage Grade II+ This is an exceptional setting for young band of the traditional folk song. It includes excellent chorale-like sections, special problems in phrasing, and an exciting conclusion. A great choice for contest.

Home on the Range arr. James Barnes Grade II "You've got to be kidding: Home on the Range!" That's what my college students said before the first reading. It was one of their favorites on the concert. Great for tone and phrase development with bandmen of any age.

Yorkshire Ballad James Barnes-Grade II Here's another one by Jim Barnes that really works. An Irish Tune from County Derry type but approachable by any group.

Northwest Suite John O'Reilly Grade II+ This three-movement work (Space Needle, Victoria, Mount Hood) is perfect for well developed younger bands. The second movement is classic in its British setting; one of the best ever written to develop courtly

style.

Mazama Jay Chattaway Grade III Originally written for young band, this has some rather difficult sections for percussion. Because of its program (Indian culture around Crater Lake in Oregon), the singing by the band, and the unique use of ocarinas, bands of all ages love this composition, and it can bring down the house!

Next time: Grade III, IV, and V possibilities.

Source: 5-3-12