Selecting the appropriate repertoire for an ensemble to support effective study and meaningful performance is one of the most important jobs of a music educator. We asked four music educators (middle school band, orchestra, and choir directors and an elementary music specialist) to offer their approach and method for evaluating repertoire. This article is the first installment in a series on teaching methods that will run throughout this school year. The topics featured were identified as important by members who responded to a recent magazine survey. We hope this series provides you practical information that you can implement immediately in your programs.

How do you approach selecting repertoire that will be effective for developing your students' musical skills?

Betty Pierce, Grisham MS Band (Round Rock ISD): For many years, I was very conservative in selecting music for my band. Many times, I did not want to stretch their limits fearing they would not be successful in performing more difficult pieces. As a young teacher, I was told to “always feature the weakest section in the band” to bring the level of that section up with the rest of the group. I have found this to be a very valuable lesson and I still adhere to it. As I have matured, I tend to put a greater emphasis on the value of the overall piece to see if it will help the students grow as musicians. I am fairly aggressive in music selection because I want music that will help students develop great technique and musicianship. There are so many pieces available that are effective teaching pieces for bands of all levels, and we are very fortunate that composers are writing good music for groups of varying levels.

Sue Ewing, Haggard MS Orchestra (Plano ISD): How I organize literature in our library has saved time and helps in appropriate music selection. I sort pieces by level and appropriate time of year (e.g., #1 is for first-year beginners, #2 is for midyear beginners, #3 is for end-of-year beginners, #4 is for first semester intermediate, etc.). I try to have the pieces reflect the new techniques being studied in the method book, new finger patterns, time signatures, bow styles, shifting, vibrato. I think about the strengths and weaknesses of each particular group and consider what will bring them success and enjoyment, how to keep the strong sections motivated or highlighted, and how to support and strengthen weaker sections.

Margaret Jordan, Bondy Intermediate Choir (Pasadena ISD): Before selecting repertoire, you must know where your students are musically and where you would like for them to be after the performance. Avoid selecting songs simply because you like them; however, finding songs that appeal to the choir is important. Every song should broaden the choir’s musical skills and be interesting to the singers, the audience, and you. When perusing new repertoire, use the Henry Leck technique of marking important concepts, such as minor key and dotted-eighth patterns on the cover so that you can quickly identify songs that incorporate concepts you wish to teach. Keep a file of these marked single copies of the songs that are in your library and those you brought back from conventions.

Cyndie Lowry, Mitchell Elementary (Conroe ISD): I look for music that is appropriate in range for elementary choirs. For upper elementary, look for music that does not go higher than G above the staff and not lower than A below the staff. For lower elementary choirs, the range should be a little narrower. Look for melodic lines that do not have large leaps in intervals. Folksongs are great to use because they are music of the people designed to be sung easily. Begin with unison pieces that will help your choirs develop a beautiful, natural blend and then move to easier, two-part arrangements. Look for arrangements that have two strong melodic lines that can be taught easily; the two parts can then be sung together in a round. As their ears develop through singing in rounds, you can move on to two-part music with actual soprano and alto parts.

What do you look for when evaluating the quality of a composition relative to its musical and artistic merit, and how does this fit within your overall process?

BP: In my current position, I look for pieces that are more thinly scored so that the students have the opportunity for more exposed playing. I believe they progress faster in this situation. I also tend to avoid “formula pieces” and look for music by composers I respect, based on pieces that I have performed in the past. I also like to play a variety of music exposing my students
to the music from different countries and cultures. This is something I have found the students really enjoy and get excited about.

**SE:** For middle school students I try to have all instruments featured—I believe this is vital in building that pride and love for playing in each student. I will not use a piece with a “boring bass part.” I really try to keep that section engaged and push them to shift and build techniques they will need in high school literature. If I have a weak section, I look at music that has doubling (e.g., if the second violins are weak, choose music that doubles that part with violas). I also look at the overall program with these questions in mind: Is there a good flow between pieces? Are varied techniques and styles being taught? Does this music fit the personality of this group? I play through and edit every part with these questions in mind: Is there a good flow between pieces? Are varied techniques and styles being taught? Does this music fit the personality of this group? I play through and edit every part before giving it to the students.

**CL:** I look for well-known, established composers. I stay away from any kind of show tune or Broadway style songs. I believe children of elementary age should be introduced to music that is simple in form, but is also fun to sing. Folksongs that are tastefully arranged are great for developing correct vocal production, teaching new intervals, inner hearing, and part singing. Music in round form will develop ear training that will lead to the ability to sing in two or three parts. Using simple arrangements of masterworks will open up a child’s world to classical music.

**How do you find new literature to evaluate?**

**BP:** For several years, I have encouraged my students to look at the PML, find recordings, and take an active part in exploring the literature we perform. This is a great way to get them to buy into the overall process and gain a certain amount of ownership in preparation. I spend countless hours listening to CDs and finding recordings online when deciding on music to perform. There are so many good recordings available that we can use in making decisions on repertoire. Attending concerts and listening to other bands across the state is also a great way to explore new music. We have many knowledgeable people in our field who we can use as resources in finding good music to play.

**SE:** TODA and TMEA conventions offer great opportunities for hearing and looking at new music. Go to the honor group concerts to hear great pieces and browse the music in the booths. As a cellist, I usually play violin at music reading clinics—this helps me get a broader view of the strong and weak points of a piece. Discuss pieces with your fellow teachers. This is where I hear about many new gems. I look and listen to mailings out and listen to music online for ideas. I have developed a large library over the years, and sometimes I find an “oldie but goodie” just going through my files.

**MJ:** Finding great repertoire is an ongoing task. Attending reading sessions helps build your single copy file. Visit stores and listen to publishers’ CDs and look at websites. Keep copies of concert programs to investigate interesting songs later. Ask experienced teachers what their favorite songs are. Don’t forget to take the time to play through every song in your library! Discovering some gems from the past will help stretch your sheet music budget, too.

**CL:** I typically look for new music for my choir by going to concerts, listening to children’s choir CDs, looking online, and reading through publishers’ magazines. By attending elementary invited choir concerts at the TMEA and TCDA conventions, I gain access to many exciting new pieces. I keep all the programs and highlight music with which I was especially impressed.

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*Thanks go to our contributors for taking time to offer their ideas and experience. If you have follow-up questions, you can email them at the following addresses:*

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