

Planned Programming Pays Dividends

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Article:

Selecting the music that our ensembles perform throughout the course of a school year is one of the most important and difficult things that we do as ensemble conductors. Programming is not only the act of assembling a set of pieces to perform at a concert but also (and even more important) the establishment of a long-range vision for what our students will accomplish. These two aspects are inseparable, because successful concert programs are a result of a conductor's programming philosophy and pedagogical vision. Thus, the task of choosing repertoire forces a conductor to make decisions based on the current situation while looking ahead to the future. While we each work in unique situations and our students have different needs, a basic rule still applies: The quality of the programs performed by our ensembles depends heavily on the sequencing of the repertoire we select.

My grandmother, who immigrated to the United States from Sicily, was a phenomenal cook. I never saw a cookbook in her home, so it seemed that every dish was based on her preferred proportions of the best ingredients she could find. She taught my mother, my aunts, and me how to prepare certain dishes, but they never came out tasting exactly the same as her own. Because everything was based on individual tastes, we created dishes that reflected our own preferences within the parameters she established. I believe that concert programming can be approached the same way: assembling high-quality ingredients (selecting the best possible repertoire) in proportions that allow for variety and interest (tailoring to our individual musical tastes) in line with a broad philosophy (designing a curriculum for our students' development).

Setting a Vision

Before beginning to create concert programs, it is important to first develop a long-term curricular plan to which each individual program will contribute. I know many band, choir, and orchestra conductors who would say that they are lucky to have enough time to pull some pieces out of the ensemble library and study them for rehearsals, let alone the necessary time it takes to plan a cohesive sequence so that one program will successfully lead to the next. There are so many demands placed on our time that it's often difficult to see how we can ever be able to step back and create a new system for our work. When it is time to begin preparing new music, we often get the frustrating feeling of reinventing the wheel. We must discover a new point of view to break this cycle.

Robert Quinn, author of several books on corporate leadership and professor in the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business in Ann Arbor, investigated how corporate chief executive officers (CEOs) lead their companies. In his book *Deep Change*,¹ Quinn relates his discovery that CEOs must divide their time across four personas:

- The taskmaster, who attends to performance and focuses on results.
- The analyzer, who attends to and evaluates how systems are operating.
- The motivator, who attends to commit-

FIGURE 1

The creation, implementation, and evaluation of a vision

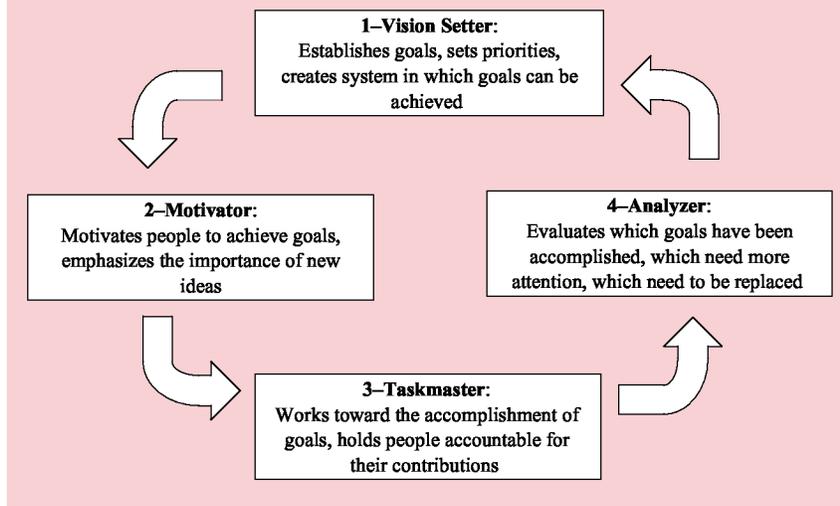


FIGURE 2

“Spiral Curriculum” model

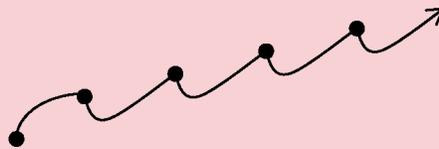


FIGURE 3

Interrupted flow of an unsequenced curriculum



- ment, emphasizes values, challenges people, and creates excitement.
- The vision setter, who attends to the future and communicates a sense of direction.

Quinn found that most CEOs focus on being the taskmaster for a variety of reasons; conductors often fall into similar patterns. We strive to meet external expectations for achievement that are placed on us, and we define success by what we accomplish. It may seem easier to focus on the demands of the present than the possibilities of the future. We end up “chasing tasks,” and as soon as one is caught, we start chasing the next. In his study, Quinn discovered that the most successful CEOs consistently attend to all four leadership areas. So how can our time be divided in order to be successful?

If we wait until all of our tasks are “caught,” believing that there will then be enough time to think about setting a vision for the future, that time will never come. By resisting the temptation to be drawn to individual tasks and refocusing our attention on becoming vision setters, we can work so that the other leadership areas serve our goals. Through this process, a self-sustaining cycle is created—one that allows for consistency, flexibility, and innovation.

As shown in Figure 1, each leadership area serves a crucial function in the organizational process. Any break in this chain will result in ineffectiveness due to overemphasis on tasks without a sense for their context. The materials and concepts used in our teaching must be connected so that everything we do contributes to our students' progress. Goals must be projected, and the path to achievement must be planned. People want to follow the person who knows the way.

If an ensemble curriculum is devised so that students make progress over the long term, dynamic growth can take place over the course of a school year (or several years, depending on how long a student participates and how far into the future you choose to plan). As concepts accumulate, what is learned at each step carries over to what comes next in the learning sequence. In the early 1960s, Jerome Bruner developed a learning theory in which learners develop new ideas or concepts based on existing knowledge. Bruner's "spiral curriculum" introduces a set of ideas in a straightforward manner that are then mastered and connected with other knowledge, which is in turn mastered and carried to increasingly higher levels of understanding. Figure 2 illustrates this model, where each dot represents a concert and the lines describe the preparation process.

This is analogous to the efficiency of taking a direct flight to your final destination. An airplane burns most of its fuel getting off the ground, but once it reaches a cruising altitude, energy is conserved. When we teach from a conceptual sequence, we are able to maintain our "cruising altitude." Appropriately sequenced repertoire selection leads directly to student carryover, mastery of concepts, and the natural progression of learning that accelerates an ensemble's growth. All that is required is taking the time to think through and outline where the students are now and where we would like them to be. Too often, people take off in new directions at every opportunity, wasting considerable energy in the process. Figure 3 illustrates the interrupted flow created when one journey is not linked to the next.

This inefficient system takes hold when awareness of long-term goals takes a back seat to managing day-to-day tasks. We end up selecting music for our ensembles at the last possible moment, choosing music based on what is fleetingly popular instead of what our students need to experience next and not allowing ourselves adequate time for personal preparation. Taking a sequential, repertoire-centered approach to curriculum is only one of many possible strategies for successfully developing our students' awareness and understanding of all aspects of music. One might also develop a curriculum based on a progression of musical concepts, instructional approaches, or experiential activities.

Core Repertoire

Because repertoire can serve as the fuel for a long-term plan, it is very important that teachers at all levels have a clear idea of which works comprise their core repertoire. These core pieces are not entire state contest lists but instead are a few selected works that you and your colleagues in the broader profession believe are of the highest quality. Each individual teacher should have a short list of fifteen or twenty pieces he or she believes that all students should play or sing over a period of several years.

What qualifies a piece for a core repertoire list? These works should be formally, rhythmically, harmonically, and melodically creative. Look for pieces that are structured but not predictable and that demonstrate the composer's imagination. In instrumental works, look for evidence that the piece is well orchestrated. Does it give students an opportunity to hear themselves and others? Is there a balance between tutti playing and textures that use reduced instrumentation? For vocal works, consider the work's voice leading and register issues as well as the relationship between music and text. If elements such as these are present in a work, there is usually great potential for developing students' musicianship and expressivity. Emotional or expressive depth is extremely hard to quantify, but opportunities for communicating feelings through music are extremely important. Chamber works should not be excluded from this list, as they often provide unique teaching opportunities and contrast during a concert. Remember that the core list does not have to consist exclusively of the most difficult works that your ensemble is capable of performing.

Groups of different ability levels will need to have different lists, but great music now exists at all levels. For me, high-quality music meets the criteria outlined above. High-quality music always provides substantial material for teaching technical concepts, but too often, many published compositions offer little content for developing expression and musicality. Approaching repertoire selection with a critical mind and a discerning point of view is essential so that we avoid programming lesser quality music. My grandmother's approach to cooking applies again here—high-quality ingredients are healthful, whereas fast-food-quality ingredients are unhealthful for our students and for us as teachers. If you need ideas for pieces that might qualify for your core list, ask your local college music education professor or ensemble conductor, or a respected public school colleague. Even if you don't know these people personally, just about every music professional I know would answer an e-mail or a phone call from a colleague asking for repertoire ideas. This is also a great way to build a network of reliable resources. There are also many publications that can be of great help in discovering appropriate repertoire. Thomas Dvorak's *Best Music For High School Band* and *Best Music for Young Band* or GIA's *Teaching Music Through Performance* series, now available for band, orchestra, and choir, are just a few of the dozens of helpful books.

Program Sequencing

Once your core repertoire list is developed, it can be used to craft a long-term vision of what your students will accomplish in terms of developing their technique and their musicianship. Ask some questions, and look to your list for the answers:

- Which pieces can be started right now, and which will need to be prepared through a sequence of other works? This requires an inventory of an ensemble's current strengths and weaknesses, both musically and technically.
- Which of the pieces needing preparation would be best to target first, and what is the conceptual content of that work?
- What other works might feed the
- development of those concepts and prepare students to perform this core work?

I have devised a worksheet (see the *Sequential Programming Worksheet* sidebar) to help me answer these questions as I work through my programming sequence. The worksheet allows me to brainstorm, think through the conceptual areas where my ensemble is strong or weak, and project into the future to the point that a particular core work might be performable.

For example, imagine that I am the conductor of a hypothetical high school band that has been moderately successful (you can substitute "orchestra" or "choir" for "band" throughout; just consider different repertoire choices). This imaginary ensemble has typically performed grade 4 music, and although the instrumentation is fairly complete, we don't have auxiliary instruments such as the English horn or the soprano saxophone. If my goal were to perform selected movements of Percy Grainger's *Lincolnshire Posy* with this ensemble, a plan would need to be developed to allow this to happen successfully. Some logistical items would require attention, such as raising money to purchase an English horn, but to ensure students' musical success, it would be most important for them to experience the content of Grainger's work in progressively more difficult pieces. Students would be well served by performing a sequence of works that develop the conceptual content found in *Lincolnshire Posy*'s folk tune sources, metric structures, instrumentation, stylistic demands, and so on. A sequence of possible pieces might be as follows:

1. A set of two easier Grainger pieces: Themes from "Green Bushes," arr. Daehn, and "Early One Morning" from *Two Grainger Melodies*, arr. Kreines
2. *Second Suite in F*—Holst
3. Another set of Grainger pieces, possibly "Country Gardens," "Ye Banks and Braes o' Bonnie Doon," and "Spoon River"
4. *Suite Française*—Milhaud

5. Lincolnshire Posy, Movements 1, 2, 4, and 6—Grainger.

The starting point for this sequence depends on where a specific group might need to begin, and the sequence can be distributed over as much or as little time as is necessary to prepare the target work while giving the students a varied experience. Thus, if an orchestra were almost ready to work on Mozart's Symphony no. 25, they might need only to work on *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* as a preparatory experience. If a group needed more time to grow, other works, such as an earlier classical example of the symphonic form or an additional serenade or divertimento of Mozart, could be added to aid in their development. It is most important that any plan be flexible. If an ensemble presents unexpectedly rapid or slow progress, we must alter our plans to accommodate the students' changing needs. Furthermore, in the overall scheme of planning, several such sequences should be running simultaneously to prepare various core repertoire pieces that will be performed on different programs over the years.

Successful Programming

When developing a system for structuring your curriculum around the long-term preparation for the performance of the best possible literature, several additional aspects of programming an individual concert are critical for achieving success. The following suggestions can help address some of these issues:

- If your group cannot sight-read a piece with reasonable success, it is probably too difficult. You will spend most of your time working on technical aspects of the piece and not focus on musical playing or singing. Identify the concepts that your group might be struggling with and find another work that will develop their skills.
- Choose works from all historical periods and composers from various nationalities over the course of a year. Representative works are available at all levels, either in transcriptions (usually for band) or in slight rescorings that accommodate modern instrumentations. Consider the breadth of experience that the students will receive over time. Selecting works from throughout history and from around the world ensures that our students will play or sing a wide range of musical styles. Include some works by female composers. Try to provide your students with opportunities to perform in nonstandard scorings (such as nonSATB choral voicings and chamber ensemble works).
- Try programming short character pieces and marches in sets of two or three. This gives students more opportunities to apply what they are learning in varied contexts. An example for band, playing off of William Schuman's original idea, might be as follows:
A "New" New England Triptych
 - Ives—"March Intercollegiate"
 - Copland—"Down a Country Lane"
 - Schuman—"Chester" (from a tune by William Billings)
- Duration matters. It is more important that you have time to rehearse all the music than that you achieve the expected length for a concert. New teachers often overprogram in either difficulty or length. Perform only as much music as can be refined through the rehearsal process. We all sight-read or touch on many other pieces, but that doesn't mean that they all should appear on a concert program.
- Variety keeps everyone interested—the audience, the ensemble, and the conductor. Balance difficult with easy, dissonant with consonant, rhythmic with melodic, long with short, and descriptive with concrete.
- For a sequence of repertoire to work most effectively, program for an entire year (or even better, several years) at once, rather than on a concert-by-concert basis. Figure out where target works from your core repertoire list can be plugged in and how other preparatory pieces will inevitably flow to that outcome. Finally, fill out each program with some contrasting or complementary pieces. Once this difficult and time-consuming task is accomplished, step back and see if the music connects and flows well. Slight adjustments can and should be made as circumstances present themselves, but this planning actually

saves huge amounts of time. It is much easier to realize that you need to move in a new direction when you are already headed somewhere.

- Programming is personal. Choose pieces that resonate with you, but constantly work to broaden your horizons and deepen the way you look at music.

Reaping the Rewards

As ensemble conductors, we are entrusted with a great responsibility. We must provide our students with the best possible musical resources as we provide them with opportunities to become better musicians through their ensemble experiences. Planning a curriculum requires a considerable expenditure of our time as educators, but teaching through high-quality repertoire is an investment that pays considerable dividends in terms of our students' long-term growth. We want to stimulate them intellectually, develop their expressive potential, and feed their awareness of art and culture so that they will reap the aesthetic rewards throughout their lives. Musical works of the highest quality are well within the reach of all levels of ensembles, as long as a conceptual sequence is established in which the technical and musical requirements of the repertoire accumulate to form a strong foundation for our students' future experiences.

Note

1. Robert Quinn, *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (San Francisco: JosseyBass, 1996); The text in the boxes of Figure 1 paraphrases and develops text on Quinn's p. 153.

Resources for Creative Concert Programming

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Sequential Programming Worksheet

Target Core Repertoire Work: _____

Musical concepts contained in this work:

(List the musical and technical demands of this piece.)

Potential pieces to be used in preparation for the target work:

(Brainstorm titles that will prepare students conceptually to perform the target work.)

Sequence of literature to the target work:

(Determine the sequence of literature you will use, starting from least difficult. You may need fewer or greater than two "follow-up" pieces.)

Starting point: _____

Follow-up work 1: _____

Follow-up work 2: _____

Target work: _____