First Things First
Selecting Repertoire

Finding quality, teachable repertoire appropriate to the context, compatible with the National Standards, and interesting to play is an achievable goal.

BY HILARY APFELSTADT

The selection of repertoire is the single most important task that music educators face before entering the classroom or rehearsal room. Through the repertoire we choose, we not only teach curricular content to our students, but we also convey our philosophy in terms of what we believe students need to learn to achieve musical growth. Lofty goals are not met through second-rate repertoire. Students are not challenged by vapid musical selections, and while the audience may enjoy being entertained on occasion, we know that they and our students deserve more than mere entertainment.

Given curricular goals and standards, we as teachers must select the means through which those goals are met. Even when the selection process is narrowed down—as in general music, where we may have a textbook series provided by the school district, or in performance-based ensembles, where the state contest list can determine at least some of our choices—it is ultimately our responsibility to select the music through which we teach musical elements, help students develop understandings or concepts, and enable them to grow in sensitivity.

A number of guiding principles are relevant to the choice of repertoire. In addition to enumerating these, I will discuss ways in which these principles and repertoire selection in general relate to the National Standards. (See also the Resources for Repertoire Selection and Choral Teaching sidebar.)

Principles of Music Selection

Over the years, I have come to rely on three principle criteria for choosing repertoire. The principles discussed here are commonplace in Western music teaching contexts but also have applications to other music.

Select music of good quality.

While this statement might seem to be subjective, it can be applied objectively if one accepts Charles Leonhard and Robert House’s definition of high-quality or “good” music as that which possesses craftsmanship and expressivity. Well-written music finds the balance of tension and release, structural symmetry and asymmetry, and anticipation and surprise that makes listening and performing it a worthwhile experience. Expressivity means that the music expresses in its form and content something of depth, something that draws human beings to its artistic qualities. Whether it has text or not is beside the point. Much good vocal and choral music could stand on its own without text as “pure” music, just as instrumental music does.

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Resources for Repertoire Selection and Choral Teaching


Curtright, Carolee. “Choosing Literature to Develop the Young Instrument.” Oregon ACDA Choral Focus XVI, no. 3 (June 1991): 1, 4.


In terms of deciding whether ethnic musics are of authentic quality, we may need to rely on the knowledge of colleagues whose familiarity with a particular type of music surpasses our own. An ethnomusicologist is one possibility, but for those who teach in areas where ready access to such an expert is not possible, it is wise to rely on publishers whose reputation is stellar. There are several in that category.

Select music that is teachable. Generally speaking, good music will meet the standard of teachability because its content and expressive qualities will be sufficient to provide a basis for teaching material. Provided that teaching strategies are appropriate, teachable music holds learners’ attention because it has substance. Whether learning musical elements of duration, pitch, form, dynamics, and texture or exploring how phrase shape can heighten expression in a performance, students need adequate musical content to accomplish these things.

If we spent time on television jingles, for example, we would likely find little content to teach, whereas music with substance lends itself to in-depth study. The key question is whether or not our students will learn something significant from the music and whether they will be better musicians for having learned it. Teachable aspects include not only musical elements, but technical skills as well. Will the students acquire greater instrumental or vocal proficiency by studying this music? If not, perhaps we can find something that will facilitate their growth elsewhere.

If the music eludes our own technical understanding and we choose to teach it, then we must find a technical expert to help us. Often we do this with foreign languages, consulting with a native speaker, for example. In terms of vocal aspects, however, we may need to rely on the skills of someone who understands the particular musical effects, timbre, or vocalism required to perform the music authentically. If we cannot do that, then perhaps we need to set that selection aside.

Having recently heard some remarkably fine Eastern European choirs perform at the World Choral Congress in Rotterdam, I am convinced that much of what we do in the name of multiculturalism is merely a weak attempt to pay lip service to music that we do not understand and do not have the technique to perform appropriately. In listening to the rich timbre of a women’s choir from Ukraine, I was challenged to think about how I would elicit that kind of sound from my singers here in the United States and whether, in fact, I could do so in a healthy way. Yet for the Ukrainian women, it was a natural, unforced tone growing out of their native language. Would I do the music justice by having my singers perform it in their natural timbre, or should I try to find someone in my community to help us at least approximate the color of the music? The latter solution is probably more appropriate. The plethora of multicultural music currently available both enriches and complicates our repertoire selection process, but if we keep integrity at the forefront of our decisions, we will act responsibly.

Select music that is appropriate to the context. It is quite possible that the first two criteria (quality and teachability) might be met, but the third one would not. If, for example, we teach in a region that has explicit policies regarding the use of sacred music in the schools, we should be sensitive to those policies. (Information on ways to assure that sacred music is performed because of its music and educational value, rather than its religious content, can be found in MENC’s Music with a Sacred Text.) Other considerations for determining the appropriateness of repertoire include the following:

Text. If the piece under consideration is choral music, is the text appropriate to the cultural setting, to the age of the group, and to the audience who will be listening to it? Is it set well so that the music and words are well integrated?
Range and tessitura. Are the ranges appropriate for the age and level of the musicians, whether singers or players? The beginning string player is not ready to tackle ledger lines in fifth position. The young singer should not be challenged to work extreme ranges of the voice, and a tessitura that is too low may be as harmful as one that is too high. If it will be sung by changing voices, will it make impossible demands because it is too melismatic to maneuver, for example?

Difficulty level. Are the challenges in the music reasonable for the experience level of the group? Music that is too easy may bore students; music that is too hard may frustrate them.

Cultural context. Can the music be performed with integrity for an appreciative audience? Do we have access to the experts who can help us understand its notation, timbre, technical demands, stylistic aspects, and dialect, if appropriate?

Programming considerations. Does the music balance the overall program? Does it provide variety in style, or is it similar to other pieces already being learned? Will it fit into the scheme of things technically, musically, and dramatically, or does it simply fill time? Sometimes we are expected to provide programs for a specific purpose such as graduation or the dedication of a new arts wing, and the music selected for those occasions will necessarily differ from that selected for others.

Finally, and this must undergird the three principles above, the teacher must believe in the music, be committed to teaching it well, and feel that students will be able, with time and effort, to learn it. While we may not love everything that we teach, we must have enough enthusiasm to present it in an open, positive way to students. As Bruce Mayhall says, “In-depth score study, enthusiasm for rehearsal, and sustained interest are difficult to accomplish ... unless a powerful attraction is present in the music.”

Repetoire Selection and the National Standards

Since the development of the National Standards for Music Education in 1994, music educators have had a clear-cut set of standards, and these standards should be accounted for in the selection of repertoire. If the standards give us a conceptual framework, the repertoire that we select is the means to teach those concepts. The nine content standards can be related to repertoire selection.4

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Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music (Standard 1) and Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music (Standard 2). Two implications exist in these parallel standards: we must select solo as well as ensemble music, and we must provide variety in musical styles. Often, state solo and ensemble lists are helpful in this process, but we must still judge the appropriateness of the music for our own students. Repertoire choices must accommodate the students’ technical readiness, maturity, and expressive capabilities. Stylistic variety is essential to provide a well-balanced musical diet. Just as we would not want to eat the same foods all the time, we should not want to teach the same kind of music exclusively. Introducing students to music of the Renaissance or the Romantic period, in addition to contemporary examples from both their own heritage and those of others, is vital in order to help them achieve a sense of music history and development. A conscious decision to program chronologically may motivate exploration of programs titled “A Choral Tapestry from Five Centuries,” for example, or “A History of American Band Music,” which would take the students back to the beginnings of the band movement. Keeping historical and stylistic balance across the span of a school year is important in meeting this standard.

Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments (Standard 3). This standard may be more challenging to meet in a performance class than in a general music class. A good starting point might be to have the students become more aware of melodic characteristics in both warm-ups and repertoire simply by drawing attention to them. How often do we have the students think specifically about warm-up patterns, whether stepwise or skipping and major or minor? Focusing on the characteristics of the music studied can give the students an aural experience upon which to build their own improvisational skills. Focusing on the role of various voices and instruments in relation to melodic material can help the students become more sensitive to the differences between melody and harmony. One effective way of doing this is to sing or play two settings of the same tune and compare their instrumentaton or voicing, their texture, and the use and treatment of solo versus accompaniment. Once the students have a sense of these characteristics in music, they may begin to experiment with confidence. The teacher may need to devote considerable time to selecting music that will lend itself to meeting this standard and to design specific strategies that enable students to do more than work to achieve technical mastery.

Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines (Standard 4). Again, this is a standard that needs adequate preparation through examination of already composed works in the students’ repertoire. Ideally, contemporary music by living composers allows the students to communicate with artists who understand the compositional process and can clarify it for prospective creators or performers. In these days of rapid communication...
and easy access to people all around the globe, students can often get information about and from composers directly. Studying the works of the masters to balance contemporary examples is a way of learning about compositional traditions to supplement current techniques. Here, then, is another reason for choosing both old and new repertoire.

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Reading and notating music (Standard 5). Learning notation, both standard and unconventional, can be accomplished by the study of music that uses either type. Much of what we present to our students is in standard notation, but music from other cultures and some contemporary music from North America and other areas can provide opportunities to learn unusual forms of notating sound. The music of Canadian composer Murray Schafer, for example, once thought to be quite experimental, provides ready access to the world of graphic notation. Schafer’s “Epitaph for Moonlight” (Berandol; SATB, percussion) or “Snowforms” (Arcana Editions; treble voices) provides challenging exploration of visual imagery to represent sound. The thick and thin rising and falling lines show pitch, duration, and dynamics in concrete ways. Unconventional notation is also a springboard for composition for the students (see Standard 4), who may want to use icons or visual markings to show the sound images that they create.

Listening to, analyzing, and describing music (Standard 6). To do this fully requires a wide variety of repertoire, not all necessarily at a level of performance attainable by the students. At times, it may be helpful for them to hear a piece of music that they won’t perform in order to understand the language of a composer or the style. The choir that is preparing Beethoven’s “Hallelujah” from The Mount of Olives might not be ready to sing Beethoven’s “Choral Fantasy,” but they can learn about stylistic characteristics by listening to it. Similarly, a string orchestra playing a movement from Britten’s “Simple Symphony” can benefit from listening to and discussing the rest of the piece as time permits.

Evaluating music and music performances (Standard 7). It is intriguing that conductors often select repertoire that musicians perform with the unspoken assumption that it is a good choice. By justifying our choices on musical grounds and sharing with the students why we have chosen particular repertoire, we can enable them to become more discriminating about music. All music is not equally “good,” profound, or appropriate, and communicating that to the musicians performing it can be a valuable lesson. For example, we could compare two choral settings of one text, such as two Mass movements. One might be more effectively set than the other, express the text more clearly, and be more technically approachable. When we choose repertoire, we might think in terms of what is accessible to our students and select something similar for listening purposes as a basis for evaluation. Likewise, when we listen to recordings of other choirs or instrumental ensembles performing the same works, we can learn a great deal about the music and appropriate performance practice.

Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts (Standard 8) and Understanding music in relation to history and culture (Standard 9). Both of these standards expand the boundaries of music beyond itself into related areas and a broader context. If we are to teach students about the other arts, we must select repertoire that is rich in possibilities for correlations with visual arts, drama, and dance. American composer Randall Thompson wrote much music accessible to high school choirs. One example is “Frostiana,” the set of seven pieces he composed for SATB chorus, separate men’s and women’s choirs, and instrumental ensemble or piano accompaniment. In order to understand the music well, students should read the poetry of Robert Frost—not only the seven poems that Thompson used, but others, too, that give insights into the mind of this highly regarded American poet. Armed with a greater appreciation of Frost’s writing style and subjects, students can then better understand the craftsmanship that Thompson shows in his musical settings.

Knowing the cultural and historical context of the music enables students to experience it more deeply.

Knowing the cultural and historical context of the music enables students to experience it more deeply than if we simply emphasize learning the notes and working out the technical details. Isolated learning is less likely to produce residual knowledge than is learning that connects to many facets of living and to the world around us. Nowhere is this more crucial than in understanding literature from different cultures. Even the way in which the sound is produced can vary greatly from our North American expectations. Understanding the context of continued on page 46
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the music—for whom it is intended, how it is used, and what performance practices are appropriate—is essential to authentic performance. Elsewhere in this issue, Mary Goetze addresses some of these ideas in depth. It is enough to say here that because music exists as a part of a greater whole, the less isolation we engender, the better the understanding we foster. Music has always served as an expression of people's drive to convey feelings, to maintain traditions, and to enrich living, just as do all the arts. Music has existed in tandem with other arts and in the midst of cultures where many nonartistic elements endure. It does not stand alone. Therefore, to teach music in isolation is to deny its very nature.

Fundamental principles of music selection, together with the National Standards, require that we select repertoire that goes beyond the safe, local boundaries of what students are likely to hear around them constantly. We must challenge our students and ourselves to learn musics that embrace a wide span of time, a range of cultures and traditions, and a variety of styles. It is a tall order, perhaps, but one essential to musical growth and understanding.

Notes


2. See "Music with a Sacred Text" (Reston, VA: MENC, 1996). This brochure was also published in the November 1996 Music Educators Journal. It is available for purchase from MENC.


4. For the complete listing of the National Standards for Music Education, see National Standards for Arts Education (Reston, VA: MENC, 1994).