

Programming for Honor Bands

by Dr. Travis J. Weller



The idea of bringing students together from multiple schools to build a unique community of musicians is an important component to demonstrate the value of instrumental music education. Students come to honor band festivals from different programs, each with different expectations and experiences. As the guest conductor begins the process of planning for the festival, there is no more important task than the repertoire that is selected. Selection of the right repertoire is vital to the success of the ensemble and festival.

Communication & Collaboration

The first step in this process is the communication between the host and the guest conductor. The host should have a strong sense of the honor band's traditional strengths, access to past programs and if possible recordings from the past two to three years. This information is balanced against ideas from the guest conductor who may have significant experience with festivals of similar length or age level. It is important to communicate upfront to a guest conductor the time line of the festival so they get a sense for how long the students will have to work on the music prior to the festival.

Some festivals have music selected by a directors group. While this can provide a sense of ease to the directors based upon knowledge of their students, it can limit how students might grow or gain new musical insights from the guest clinician. If the guest clinician is not familiar with particular pieces, they may feel restricted in what they can communicate and teach an honor group if the music is pre-selected. If it is important enough to have a guest conductor for the event, then afford that person the opportunity to bring their ideas for a program that allows them to teach and communicate musical perspectives to

the students. My experience as a guest clinician in this regard for festivals has been one of enjoyable collaboration and trust with host directors, and the same as a host working with colleagues like Scott Watson, Shelly Jagow, Tad Greig, and Brad Townsend.

Finding the Sweet Spot

Honor bands typically bring together the best players from a geographic region. These groups are usually able to perform an entire program of repertoire that would be a daunting task for one school to perform on a single concert. In considering the possibilities for repertoire for one of these groups, a guest conductor must balance the time allotted for rehearsal, the overall size of the honor group, the information provided by the host including past programs, traditional areas of strength, and recordings, and their own familiarity with developmental level appropriate repertoire. For some band programs, sending students to an honor band is a highlight of their year. In some cases, those students get the opportunity to perform in an ensemble with complete and relatively balanced instrumentation. Finding the "sweet spot" of challenging and engaging, but not overwhelming, repertoire allows every participating student the opportunity to contribute at satisfying musical level.

Balance

As a guest clinician, I consider the totality of program balance from a musical perspective. Tempi, tonality, time signatures, expression of emotions, melodic material, and orchestration each are considered carefully individually, and as a group. Too much in any one area can cause confusion in the students keeping information straight, and it can also dull

the senses of the audience as to them many pieces will sound the same. On the other end, avoiding one of those aspects completely in a program prevents both performers and the audience from experience the full power of music. Clare Grundman's *Kentucky 1800* provides satisfying contrast in each of the areas named above and works very well with honor bands. The light, joyful, buoyant innocence of Andrew Boysen's *Tricycle* pairs wonderfully with the haunting, mystical and open sounds of Jodie Blackshaw's *Whirlwind*. I find the best honor band programs (as a conductor, composer, educator, advocate and parent) have a healthy respect for the balance of musical aspects and the style and genres of music that are selected.

Styles and Genres

The expanse of repertoire over the last 40 years is exciting, yet daunting. With so many pieces to choose from, where does a guest clinician/conductor start? How can a host possibly advise them? Here again, I always consider the balance of the entire program of music in selecting repertoire for an honor band. Consider the following types of works that can be utilized within a honor band setting:

- Fanfares/openers
- Core/Essential Classic Repertoire
- Emerging Repertoire
- Lyrical works
- Folk Song Settings (representing multiple cultures and traditions)
- Marches
- Transcriptions (including classical, popular, jazz idioms)

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- Innovative works (unique aspects that can be engaging, humorous, or exciting)
- Stretch work (piece that requires development of new technical, aural or cognitive insight)

The above list is certainly not exhaustive, and not every work can neatly fit into one of the categories named above. There are of course pieces available that can answer more than one category and serve multiple purposes in programming for an honor band. Consider the following sample program for a mid-level honor band:

The Lion of Ireland—Scott Watson
(opener/emerging work/folk song)

Variation Overture—Clifton Williams
(essential repertoire)

Out of Darkness—Quincy Hilliard
(innovative work)

I'll Be Home Afore Ye—Julie Giroux
(lyrical work/folk song)

Suspended Animation—Patrick Burns
(emerging work/stretch work)

Friends of Freedom—Timothy Loest
(march, and also a patriotic number!)

Many composers today demonstrate excellent versatility in their writing and have multiple works that fall into any one of the categories above. Each composer has a unique voice that can contribute to the totality of the program. It is imperative that the choice of composers utilized is as diverse as the styles and musical aspects explored. I would highly question the educational and artistic merit of a honors band repertoire list that included the names of only one or two different composers. This would be akin to going to a restaurant and insisting that each course of your meal be served with ketchup for dipping. With so many great voices writing for bands today, it is important to make use of them to provide the students with

variety and balance.

New Opportunity for a Musical Journey

Honor Bands are unique communities of student musicians, directors and clinicians that provide a great insight into the potential of music and instrumental music education to be a positive force in society. The music that is selected for these events plays a major role in shaping attitudes and inspiring all who were involved into their next musical encounter. The repertoire allows the guest conductor to communicate their musicianship, philosophy, and take the students on a journey with strong lessons in the art of music and in life. The music selection for honor bands can also provide the participating directors and host director the opportunity to reacquaint themselves with older works perhaps forgotten, and gain perspective on new works that they find compelling. The right selection of repertoire from a guest conductor can prove to be a powerful motivating moment in the life of a young musician reinforcing a life-long relationship with music. ■

DR. TRAVIS J. WELLER is an active arranger, composer, educator and advocate of music education. He is currently serving as the Director of Music Education at Messiah College in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. His duties at Messiah as an Assistant Professor of Music include supervising instrumental music education students, teaching methods courses, working with graduate conducting students and conducting the Symphonic Winds. Prior to his appointment at Messiah, he served as the Director of Bands at Mercer Area Middle-Senior High School, and previously taught at Kent State University as an adjunct faculty member.

Weller holds a Bachelor in Music Education from Grove City College, a Master of Music Education from Duquesne University, and a Ph.D. in Music Education from Kent State University. He is also a member of Phi Beta Mu (Nu Chapter), ASCAP, and the National Band Association. He is currently serving as the Public Relations Chairperson for Phi Beta Mu's International Board of Directors, and assists with their social media outreach.

Weller has presented on instrumental music education at the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic, PMEA and OMEA State Conferences, professional development sessions for music education, and secondary music methods classes at area colleges and universities. He is a contributing author for the *Teaching Music in Band* series, *The Instrumentalist*, *The PMEA Journal*, *Phi Beta Mu International Newsletter*, *National Band Association Journal*, and *Learning and Leading with Technology*. He is in frequent demand as a guest conductor for honor bands and composer-in-residence sessions with school bands across Pennsylvania, New York and Ohio, and in November of 2016 was one of the guest conductors for the All New England Band Festival at Plymouth State University.

As a composer, Weller has published works available from Bandworks Publications, The FJH Music Company, Grand Mesa Music, C.L. Barnhouse Music Publishers, Wingert-Jones Publishers, and Manhattan Beach Music. His piece "Journey to the Prairie" received 3rd place in the 2nd Annual Frank Ticheli Composition Contest. In addition to commissioned works from school groups and community bands, he has received several J.W. Pepper Editor's Choice nominations, several Bandworld Top 100 nominations, four ASCAP Plus Awards, and has received a number of reviews of his works by *The Instrumentalist*. His works for band have been performed by groups ranging from elementary to the collegiate level. Notable performances have been given by the North Hills Senior High School Wind Ensemble, the Grove City College Wind Ensemble, Westminster College Wind Ensemble, the River City Youth Brass Band (Pittsburgh), the Marks Concert Band (Hermitage, PA), The PMEA All-State Concert Band, The Florida State Summer Wind Ensemble, Youngstown State University Band, The Florida State University Concert Band, and The VanderCook College Symphonic Band. Weller resides in Grove City with his wife, their three daughters and a son.

