

Where are the “New Classics”?

by Travis J. Weller

The evaluation and selection of repertoire is such an important task for a director at any level. This responsibility for band directors requires specific awareness in what areas their bands have developed strength, and where they will need to improve and mature. If repertoire is the curriculum for the concert band (and Bob Reynolds is right on this one), then the materials selected must be done so with great care for the well-being of the student musicians.

In this aspect of our profession in which I am a contributor and consumer, the research I conducted provided several important perceptions regarding the value of the “New Classics” and their place in high school instrumental settings (Weller, 2014). Many directors have strong convictions as to what constitutes core repertoire, and others hold pieces, including new and emergent works, to high standards in all aspects. My research also indicated that directors regard the longevity of new and emergent works, and the flexibility and variety they provide in programming as important as they evaluate potential repertoire choices.

First of all, by no means am I suggesting here to ignore the core and traditional repertoire that has previously been identified. The continual study of this literature and exposure to bands helps students realize their role in being a culture bearer of the American Wind Band. However, to ensure that culture continues to advance and evolve, directors must carefully and thoughtfully evaluate new contributions with both artistic and educational perspectives in mind. The value in new and emergent concert band works is realized in a number of different areas.

The artistry and aesthetic or emotional overtones of a work from the core and traditional repertoire has rarely been questioned by high school directors.

The technical merit of works from the core and traditional repertoire has been readily acknowledged for the challenge and rigor it presents to young musicians. However, not every high school may have developed the artistic and technical skills of their students, and a work from the core and traditional repertoire might not be ideally suitable (Carney, 2005) for that program. Directors in some situations need options for providing a quality musical experience through study of concert band music in the large instrumental ensemble. New and emergent concert band works—the “New Classics”—may provide that option for directors to find literature of artistic and educational quality. Through the study of that literature, the director, the ensemble, and the audience members have a quality experience through the eventual performance of the work.

Directors may have aspirations to perform the finest literature from the core repertoire, but the ensemble may not have developed the artistic and/or technical skills to effectively perform such a work. Music selected from new and emergent literature may provide a suitable option for directors to begin developing certain artistic and technical skills in a meaningful context. For example, in lieu of exposing students to the rich, sentimental feeling expressed within *Irish Tune from County Derry* by Percy Grainger, a director may find his ensemble is better suited to realize the same concept in *Loch Lomond* by Frank Ticheli. The technical demands of *Suite of Old American Dances* by Robert R. Bennett may be too advanced for some high school bands. Yet, the same group might find *Songs of Old Kentucky* by Brant Karrick an appropriate challenge that would serve the same programming purpose. Ensembles may find interest in comparing works of compositional style and texture, such as *Toccata* by Patrick Burns (new and emergent) and *Toccata* by Frescobaldi, arranged by Slocum (core).

Another area in which new and emergent works have demonstrated their worth to high school instrumental settings is the programmatic elements and cross-curricular connections that can be made. While there have been pieces written since 1950 with such elements (*Music for Prague* by Karel Husa, *Elegy for a Young American* by Ronald Lo Presti, or *The Trail of Tears* by James Barnes), there has been increased emphasis on making cross-curricular connections within public school settings to better serve and enrich the academic lives of students. There has been a wealth of new and emergent works for concert band that have explored important cultural and historical events (*Appomattox* by James Hosay, *Grant Them Eternal Rest* by Andrew Boysen, *A Movement for Rosa* by Mark Camphouse) written over the past twenty years.

There are tender emotional overtones within *Grace* by Brian Balmages that some directors and ensembles would find moving, not unlike the sentiments at times expressed for works like *Elegy* by John Barnes Chance, *Yorkshire Ballad* by James Barnes, or *Air for Band* by Frank Erickson. There are expressive aspects of *Lux Aurumque* by Whitacre that are reminiscent of the transcription of the Russian choral work *Salvation Is Created* by Bruce Houseknecht. There have been a number of symphonies written for the concert band and wind ensemble over the years by composers such as Paul Hindemith, Vincent Persichetti, and Chance. Though shorter in length than some of those works regarded as core repertoire, *Elements* by Balmages and *Symphony No. 4* by Andrew Boysen, Jr. offer a unique experience of the symphony form in a modern compositional style.

Is it possible for one of the “New Classics” to eventually supplant one of the

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aforementioned pieces considered to be among the core and traditional repertoire? The amount of exposure and study each work receives will be a contributing factor. While there are valuable aspects in each of the pieces identified above, it would be premature to designate any of these works as an instant classic to be included among other works considered to be core and traditional repertoire.

There is a wealth of core repertoire to which students deserve exposure over the course of their school career. These works provide a window in which our students can see how the American Wind Band started. New and emergent concert band works also deserve exposure, as well as they provide students a window in which they can visualize where the medium is headed. Furthermore, new and emergent pieces may provide an appropriate point of departure for directors to develop the artistic and technical abilities of their students so that they can one day perform a work from the core repertoire with clarity, conviction, and excellence.

Many directors attempt to balance styles, tonality, rhythms and meter, melodic content, and emotional overtones in the selection of a course of study for their ensembles each year. So too, a balance of new and emergent works alongside pieces from the core or traditional repertoire might be the most beneficial for students. Directors and students can delineate a great deal from the experience that new and emergent concert band works provide, and that experience may be as meaningful as the study of a work from the core repertoire. While working on *Folk Song Suite* by Vaughan Williams last January

with my own students, I could not help but think about *Three Folk Song Settings for Band* by Andrew Boysen (*Wayfarin' Stranger*, *All the Pretty Little Horses*, and *Scarborough Fair*) as a parallel work.

As directors, we should foster a deeper appreciation for quality wind literature, and for that reason we should be diligent in seeking out these "New Classics" and sharing these works with our own students and colleagues. I cannot envision a healthy learning atmosphere for young musicians that did not take into account the best materials from the entire span of the medium alongside the most current contributions. ■

REFERENCES

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