

Abstract

This study compares the repertoire evaluation and selection processes of ensemble directors who engage in online forums versus those who participate in professional development conferences. The survey results highlight significant differences in organizational habits, piece-type preferences, and the role of repertoire in meeting curricular goals. Online forum directors tend to favor original works and emerging repertoire, indicating a progressive approach, while conference directors prefer classical/core repertoire works, reflecting a more traditional stance. The study also reveals that online forum directors place higher importance on non-musical concepts such as societal relevance and relationships, whereas conference directors emphasize emotional growth. These findings suggest that the mode of survey engagement may reveal insight into directors' choices and habits, with implications for professional development and repertoire selection strategies. The study underscores the need for continuous professional development to enhance repertoire selection practices.

Keywords: Repertoire Evaluation and Selection, Ensemble Directors

Comparing the Repertoire Evaluation and Selection Processes of Ensemble Directors

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Review of Relevant Literature

Repertoire evaluation and selection for the school concert band is an essential task for any director at any developmental level. Within instrumental music education, numerous research studies, texts, and scholarly articles addressed the evaluation and selection of repertoire for the school ensembles (Booth, L. et al, 2022; Cooper 2004; Doherty, 2023; Feldman and Contzius, 2011; Hopkins, 2013; Jagow, 2007; Menghini, 1999; Miles, 1996; Ostling, 1978; Reynolds, 2010; Towner, 2011; Weller, 2014). The thoughts within this body of writing reflected consideration of both musical and non-musical perspectives. Many music educators engage in the discussion and evaluation of repertoire at their own place of employment, through the use of digital and online resources, in person with their colleagues, attending clinics and concerts at conferences, and within on-line forums. Regardless of when and how, repertoire evaluation and selection continues to be an important topic for ensemble directors.

At its core, the music chosen for student ensembles serves as the primary curriculum, shaping the entire educational experience. Menghini (1999) underscores this point, arguing that carefully selected pieces provide opportunities for teaching fundamental musical concepts while nurturing artistic expression. He highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to repertoire selection, where technical exercises are balanced with expressive, historically rich works that resonate deeply with students. This perspective is echoed by Reynolds (2010), who advises educators to avoid choosing pieces solely for their technical demands, instead encouraging selections that inspire and enrich, providing a meaningful foundation for students' musical journeys.

Hopkins (2013) adds another layer, cautioning against the temptation to view musical progress as merely a path toward more technically challenging pieces. He warns that this approach can overshadow the artistic purpose of performance, reducing music to a series of mechanical exercises rather than an expressive, emotional experience. Instead, he advocates for selecting works that align with an ensemble's strengths, allowing students to perform with authenticity and confidence, ultimately enhancing both their musical growth and their broader educational experience.

Beyond technical considerations, some scholars emphasize the social and emotional dimensions of music education. Booth et al. (2022) discuss integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into the ensemble setting, suggesting that activities like improvisation and creative collaboration can help students connect more deeply with the music and each other. This approach reflects a growing awareness that music education is not just about technical skill but also about fostering empathy, connection, and personal growth.

Doherty (2023) extends this conversation by focusing on the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in repertoire selection. She argues that the pieces chosen for student ensembles should reflect a broad array of cultural, racial, and gender perspectives, providing students with both mirrors to see themselves and windows into the lives of others. This intentional approach to programming can help students develop a more nuanced understanding of the world and their

place within it, reinforcing the idea that music is a powerful medium for cultural expression and connection.

However, meaningful repertoire selection also requires continuous professional development, as Millican (2017) and West (2023) have noted. These studies highlight challenges within the field, including limited opportunities for professional growth and the risk of relying too heavily on unverified online advice. They stress the importance of structured, in-person training and the exchange of ideas among colleagues, which can deepen educators' understanding of repertoire selection and help them make more informed, impactful choices for their students.

Purpose and Description of the Survey

The purpose of the present survey was to gather data and perspectives from music ensemble directors on their evaluation and selection of repertoire, including their organizational habits, overall programming choices, the role of repertoire in meeting curricular goals, piece-type preferences, and non-musical reasons that influence repertoire selection. The survey results included data and perspectives gathered in an online forum in October of 2024, and data and perspectives gathered at a state music conference session in April of 2025. Participants in both groups were posed the same questions as it applies to repertoire selection.

For the online forum, participation was voluntary and the data generated from the survey was reported in aggregate form to preserve anonymity. Participant directors were recruited via an open invitation posted to several different social media platforms and online communities. The survey was open for four weeks and information was collected through a Google Form. For the state music conference, participants were invited to participate at the opening of the professional development session. Participants were advised that all data would be reported in aggregate form to preserve their anonymity.

Participants in both surveys were asked to provide their years of experience, their content area, and grade level. In addition to this information, they were also asked if they keep a repertoire list, the extent to which repertoire helps students reach annual goals and objectives, and to identify their two favorite piece types. Data was coded and analyzed with appropriate statistical tests. Several of the findings warrant additional discussion and several areas for future research were identified through the results of these surveys.

Results & Discussion of the Survey

The majority of participants in both survey groups, On-Line Forum (*OF*) ($n=156$) and Conference (*C*) ($n=79$), reported they taught band at a variety of levels (*OF* – 89%, *C* – 67%). Participants who taught orchestra as their primary/sole area or in addition to teaching band were the next highest represented group (*OF* – 25%, *C* – 15%). Other teaching assignments reported by participants (*C*) from the conference survey included choir (10%), Modern Band (10%), and Other (including those in higher education and community ensemble directors) (10%).

The average years of experience among the *OF* Participants was 17.15 years. Comparatively, the average years of experience among the *C* Participants was 14.85 years. A chi-square test was

performed to determine if the difference in years of experience between the two groups was statistically significant. The test yielded a p-value of 0.1983. While there was a numerical difference in the average years of experience between the *OF* Participants and the *C* Participants, this difference was not statistically significant.

Comparison of grade levels between participant groups

The survey asked participants to identify the grade levels which they taught. Many participants reported teaching at multiple grade levels as part of their assigned duties, with those at the high school level the most frequently mentioned. The data indicated frequent combinations of those participants teaching MS-HS, followed by those teaching E-MS-HS.

Level	<i>OF</i> Participants (n=156)	% <i>OF</i> Participants	<i>C</i> Participants (n=79)	% <i>C</i> Participants
Elementary (E)	41	26.3%	28	35.40%
Middle School (MS)	87	55.8%	42	53.20%
High School (HS)	116	74.4%	61	77.20%
University (UNIV)	14	9.0%	4	5.10%
Community (Comm)	13	8.3%	1	1.30%

The chi-square test revealed no statistically significant differences in the distribution of grade levels taught by *OF* Participants and *C* Participants.

Comparison of repertoire list-keeping habits between groups

The survey asked participants in both groups regarding whether they keep a repertoire list for their ensembles. Among *OF* Participants, 74.4% of respondents said they kept a list. In contrast only 59.5% of *C* Participants reported keeping a list of repertoire for their ensembles. A chi-square test was performed to determine if the difference in the percentage of directors who keep a repertoire list between the two groups was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The test yielded a value of $p = 0.029$.

While there are differences in the percentages of participants who keep a list across different grade levels in both groups, these differences were not statistically significant. This suggests that the grade level taught does not significantly influence the habit of keeping a repertoire list in either the *OF* Participants and *C* Participants.

Comparison of the role of repertoire in helping ensemble members meet objectives

Another aspect of repertoire selection asked of both groups was its role in helping members of their ensemble reach annual goals and objectives. Participants were presented with choices to the following statement of “All”, “the Majority”, “Some”, or “None”:

Through the study and performance of ensemble repertoire, the students/ensemble should meet _____ of the objectives/annual goals.

Within the *OF* Group there were a small number of participants teaching community ensembles that declined to answer this question as it did not apply in the traditional manner akin to curricular objectives that directors of school ensemble directors would consider. The results from each participant group were relatively similar.

Response to question	<i>OF</i> Participants (n=156)	<i>C</i> Participants (n=79)
All	13.5%	19%
Majority	70.5%	73%
Some	14.1%	8%
None	0%	0%
Prefer Not to Answer	1.9%	0%

A chi-square test was performed to compare the distributions of the ratings between the two groups and the results indicated that the difference between the two groups is not statistically significant ($p = 0.2725$). The *OF* Participants and the *C* Participants had similar distributions of ratings for the extent to which repertoire in helps students meet annual goals and objectives.

Comparison of the importance of piece-types between groups

The survey also asked participants the extent to which exposure of certain piece types for their ensemble a factor in repertoire selection.

Importance of Piece Types	<i>OF</i> Participants (n=156)	<i>OF</i> %	<i>C</i> Participants (n=79)	<i>C</i> %
Extremely Important	97	62.2%	29	36.7%
Somewhat Important	47	30.1%	45	57.0%
Somewhat Unimportant	9	5.8%	5	6.3%
Not Important	3	1.9%	0	0.0%

A chi-square test was performed to compare the ratings between the two groups and determine if the differences between groups were statistically significant. The chi-square test results indicated a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($p = 0.00055$). The *OF* Participants had a higher percentage of participants rating the importance of piece types as "Extremely Important" (62.2%) compared to the *C* Participants (36.7%). Conversely, the *C* Participants had a

higher percentage of participants rating the importance of piece types as "Somewhat Important" (57.0%) compared to the *OF* Participants (30.1%).

Comparison of favorite piece-types between groups

From a list of various piece types (e.g., Classical/Core Repertoire Works, Fanfare, Overtures, Marches, Original Works/Emerging Repertoire), all participants were asked to select their two favorite piece-types to teach and/or conduct.

Top three favorite piece types – Online Group (n=156)		
Piece Type	Responses	Percentage
Original Works/Emerging Repertoire	79	25.3%
Classical/Core Repertoire Works	62	19.9%
Ballads/Chorales/Lyric Works	38	12.2%

Top three favorite piece types – Conference Group (n=79)		
Piece Type	Responses	Percentage
Classical/Core Repertoire Works	26	32.9%
Original Works/Emerging Repertoire	22	27.8%
Ballads/Chorales/Lyric Works	22	27.8%

The chi-square test results indicated a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($p = 0.00055$). The *OF* Participants favored "Original Works/Emerging Repertoire" more (25.3%) compared to the *C* Participants (27.8%). Conversely, the *C* Participants favored "Classical/Core Repertoire Works" more (32.9%) compared to the *OF* Participants (19.9%). Both groups selected "Ballads/Chorales/Lyric Works" as their third favorite piece type.

Both groups show a strong preference for Classical/Core Repertoire Works, Original Works/Emerging Repertoire and Ballads/Chorales/Lyric Works. Additionally, both groups demonstrated preference for Classical/Core Repertoire Works and Folk Song Settings among participants who work with groups across multiple grade levels. The *OF* Participants preferred Overtures and Folk Song Settings (4th and 5th respectively among this group) while the *C* Participants favored Popular Transcriptions and Folk Song Settings (4th and 5th respectively among this group).

Elementary, Middle School, and High School Directors among the *OF* Participants demonstrated consistent preferences across all grade levels, with a strong preference for Classical/Core Repertoire Works and Original Works/Emerging Repertoire. Overall, *OF* Participants preferred Classical/Core Repertoire Works, Ballads/Chorales/Lyric Works, and Overtures. A key difference in this group was that those who kept a repertoire list preferred Marches, while those who did not demonstrated a preference for Popular Transcriptions and Folk Song Settings.

The *C* Participants demonstrated a notable preference for Popular Style Transcriptions and Marches among educators teaching multiple grade levels (E, MS, HS), while the *OF* Participants showed diverse range of preferences including Fanfares and Novelty Works. Middle School Directors among *C* Participants demonstrated a more diverse preference including Novelty Works.

Comparison of programming pieces for non-musical reasons

Each participant group was asked about the frequency with which they programmed music for non-musical reasons. The *OF* Group had a slightly higher percentage of participants indicate they were programming pieces ever year for non-music reasons, the remaining frequency of responses were relatively close in distribution and percentage. The chi-square test results indicated no statistically significant difference in the distribution of responses between the Online Forum (*OF*) group and the Conference (*C*) group (p -value = 0.4937).

Frequency	<i>OF</i> Participants (n=156)	<i>OF</i> %	<i>C</i> Participants (n=79)	<i>C</i> %
Every Year	25	16.0%	9	11.4%
Often	53	34.0%	31	39.2%
Occasional	72	46.2%	38	48.1%
Never	6	3.8%	1	1.3%

Comparison of Non-Musical Concepts/Topics Explored through Studying Repertoire

The final question in the survey asked participants if the repertoire they selected afforded them an opportunity to discuss six different musical concepts as it applied to life both inside and outside the music rehearsal hall/room. The *OF* Participants were noticeably higher on their response rate for the concepts/topics *Connecting to Society*, *Current Events*, and *Connecting with Others*. The *C* Participants were markedly higher in their responses for *Emotional Growth*.

Concept/Topic	<i>OF</i> Participants (n=156)	<i>OF</i> %	<i>C</i> Participants (n=79)	<i>C</i> %
<i>Connecting to Society - Relevance</i>	137	87.8%	57	72.2%
<i>Current Events - Recency</i>	101	64.7%	44	55.7%
<i>Equality & Representation</i>	87	55.8%	43	54.4%
<i>Connecting with others - Relationships</i>	130	83.3%	55	69.6%
<i>Formation of personal identity - Reciprocity & Resilience</i>	85	54.5%	41	51.9%
<i>Emotional Growth - Regulation & Reflective</i>	48	30.8%	53	67.1%

A chi-square test was conducted on the responses for each of the concepts/topics. There was a significant difference between the responses of the two groups on three of the concepts/topics including *Connecting to Society – Relevance*, *Connecting with Others – Relationships*, and *Emotional Growth – Regulation and Reflection*. In regard to *Connecting to Society* and *Connecting with Others*, the data suggests *OF* participants found those concepts relevant

compared to C participants. In contrast, C Participants found the concept of *Emotional Growth* more valuable than the OF Participants.

Chi-Square Test Results by Concept/Topic	Chi Square Statistic	p-value
<i>Connecting to Society - Relevance</i>	7.884	0.00499*
<i>Current Events - Recency</i>	1.454	0.2279
<i>Equality & Representation</i>	0.003	0.9552
<i>Connecting with others - Relationships</i>	5.097	0.02396*
<i>Formation of personal identity - Reciprocity & Resilience</i>	0.056	0.8123
<i>Emotional Growth - Regulation & Reflective</i>	26.765	2.30×10^{-7} *

* Significant at the 0.05 level

Discussion

The comparison of these two groups of participants suggest that the mode of survey engagement (online forum vs. professional development concert) may in part speak to some of the choices and habits of music ensemble directors. Given the differences in teaching context not accounted for in the survey questions (e.g., size of the school, size of the ensemble(s), school setting), the suggestions and ideas in the discussion that follow have their limits and might not apply to all situations. The differences between the grade levels taught by each of the participants in their respective groups draw attention to the importance of context and demographics that influence instruction . This could impact their teaching methods, curriculum choices, and professional development needs.

As acknowledged earlier, teaching context makes it challenging to estimate how differences in organizational and planning habits might have influenced the difference between the two groups of participants. The higher percentage of list-keeping among the *OF* Participants could be attributed to various factors such as the accessibility of digital tools and resources, which facilitate the maintenance of repertoire lists. It is also possible that the higher percentage of *OF* Participants in the Repertoire Survey have a keen interest in reviewing, evaluating, and selecting repertoire and were more inclined to provide their perspective anonymously in an online community. Their participation might suggest prioritization of online surveys as a form of professional development, finding the questions posed as thoughtful reflection upon their own process of repertoire evaluation and selection.

The higher percentage of *C* Participants who reported *not* keeping a list could in part explain their attendance at a professional development concert to listen to repertoire being performed by ensembles, or to attend clinics to learn of new pieces that might be valuable to explore for their ensemble. These participants may approach attendance at these kinds of clinics at a professional development conference as a valuable experience to learn about new pieces, or to learn, reflect and incorporate new strategies that aid in repertoire selection for their ensemble. Participation in content-specific professional development has been documented as important to music educators (West, 2023).

The significant difference in ratings suggests that the context in which directors provide their responses (online vs. conference) may be connected to their perceptions on the value of exposing their ensemble to different piece types. The percentage of *OF* participants rating that the exposure to certain piece types ("Extremely Important") was considerably higher than the *C* participants. Indicated by the percentage who selected "Somewhat Important", *C* participants may have a moderated perspective on the value of piece types reflecting a cautious approach in this survey setting. There may be other factors that influence the views participants in each group on piece types, including the learning environment, and prior experience with piece types, recommendations of colleagues.

Given the observation about the *OF* participants interest in keeping and maintaining a repertoire list, their preference for "Original Works/Emerging Repertoire" might reinforce a more progressive or innovative approach their organizational habits. Conversely, the higher preference for "Classical/Core Repertoire Works" in the *C* participants in part reflect a more traditional or conservative approach repertoire selection and evaluation. This group might continue to utilize established pieces in their selections for their pedagogical and artistic value until they have sufficiently reviewed newer original works that are emerging in the repertoire.

The preference for *Classical/Core Repertoire Works* and *Folk Song Settings* seen in all participants who work with groups across multiple grade levels could in part be explained by familiarity they have with established pieces. Such pieces hold pedagogical and artistic value that affords directors the opportunity to teach multiple musical concepts within the scope of the rehearsal and reinforce those concepts as they group makes progress on the work. Similar to Folk Song Settings, the preference of *C* Participants for *Popular Transcriptions* could also be explained by the relatively amount of familiarity for the style or artist that is trending within cultural norms.

An interesting aspect of the preferences of the *OF* Participants was those who kept a list demonstrated a preference for *Marches*, and those who did not preferred *Popular Transcriptions* and *Folk Song Settings*. While marches and settings of folk songs have long been a staple within the American wind band repertoire, some transcriptions of popular music pieces and styles are not met with the same reception. Exposure to piece types was of high importance to this group, and their favorite piece type was *Original Works/Emerging Repertoire*. It is possible that this participant group is more progressive in nature in considering all music styles as valid, and seek appropriate opportunities in which they can introduce music of popular origins provided that it maintains the integrity of both the source and the medium through which it will be performed.

It was also interesting to observe that *C* Participants teaching multiple grade levels have a preference for *Popular Style Transcriptions* and *Marches*. As alluded to earlier, the historical popularity of marches among concert bands and the familiarity of popular music within culture is evident. Programming these piece types might be an effective way for this group of participants to demonstrate respect for the overarching tradition while providing players and audience members an entertaining work to enjoy. It is not necessarily to see that *C* Participants who teach middle school have a preference including *Novelty Works*. There are many works valuable artistic and pedagogical components to these pieces, and this participant group may view it as a valuable way to maintain student engagement in the rehearsal process. While it was outside the

scope of these questions to ask for specific examples, a prior list of essential repertoire compiled by Weller (2024) does contain several pieces that would be regarded as such (e.g., “The Great Locomotive Chase” by Smith).

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

Within the current study, gathering information on the size of the school as well as the size of the ensemble was not requested. That information would add an additional lens to focus the discussion. In addition knowing the setting of the school (e.g., urban, rural, suburban) might also influence and shape the choices directors make for their ensemble. Depending upon the context in which a school ensemble is situated, the director may have additional limitations in evaluating and selecting repertoire because of the available instrumentation, budget constraints, and in some cases community expectations on concert programming.

Future research could examine some of the deeper metrics associated with the importance of piece-types, the importance of repertoire to ensembles in reaching curricular goals, or solicit a list of works selected for non-musical reasons. While the *C* Participants were given the opportunity to share works selected for non-musical reasons the context of the professional development session, the *OF* Participants were not. Another area that could be explored in future research is the intersection between piece-types and music selected for non-musical reasons. Do certain piece-types created from inspiration that is non-musical in nature? While there a number of works that take inspiration from sources outside of music, how are those elements imbued into the music by composers?

Applications and Implications for Ensemble Directors

Directors should consider both technical and expressive qualities of pieces, maintaining a reverence for essential works in the repertoire balanced against emerging works that might resonate with students. Both groups of ensemble directors in this survey hold similar views regarding the role of repertoire in helping students meet annual goals and objectives. By integrating principles of SEL into repertoire evaluation and selection, directors can enrich the connection for students with the music and each other, and thereby foster empathy and personal growth. Selecting pieces that reflect a broad array of cultural, racial, and gender perspectives can aide students in developing a nuanced view of the world.

It is important that ensemble directors should maintain their engagement in structured, in-person training and exchange ideas with colleagues to deepen their understanding of repertoire selection. Within this survey, directors who keep a repertoire list may have a more organized approach to selection, potentially leading to more thoughtful choices. While online advice can be helpful for ensemble directors at any level, it is important to verify the ideas offered in these formats and use existing online tools and professional development opportunities to validate programming choices.

There was a slight tendency among *OF* participants to favor original works and emerging repertoire as compared to the *C* participants. The *OF* participants also rated the exposure to different piece types as extremely important, suggesting they may make broad and diverse

selections. Although both groups demonstrated programming music for non-musical reasons, this group also placed a higher emphasis on connecting repertoire to society, current events, and relationships, reflecting a holistic approach to music education. *OF* Participants were more likely to keep a repertoire list, which may indicate a more organized and reflective approach to selection and their comfortability in discussing it in an online forum. It might also be a product of having better access to digital tools and resources, which can aide in the maintenance of repertoire lists. While the continuous stream of new ideas and exchange of thoughts on repertoire can be beneficial, directors who prefer to use online formats to discuss repertoire should do so with caution as unverified advice on selecting repertoire could be detrimental to their students.

Conversely, *C* participants demonstrated a preference for classical/core repertoire works. *C* Participants did not rate piece types as high as their colleagues, perhaps suggesting more caution in their repertoire deliberations. This group did place higher importance on emotional growth through repertoire, emphasizing the reflective and regulatory aspects of music education. This group of directors might rely more on live performances and clinics as a component of their repertoire evaluation and selection process. The opportunity to prioritize experiential learning and networking at a conference might be more personally reaffirming for their repertoire choices, although it might limit them from seeking out new ideas.

Results of the data provides perspective for the benefit of music education profession, music publishing companies, and teacher educators in higher education. Within the comparison of these two groups, the mode of engagement (online vs. conference) may be an indicator of the organizational habits, preferences, and perceptions of music ensemble directors. It is important to note that regardless of the mode of engagement, the discussion of repertoire and strategies for examining and evaluating repertoire is a necessary part of being a successful ensemble director.

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