

Band Music Reviews (February 2008)

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Since the groundhog has declared another six weeks of winter, it seems less depressing to hearken back to the cold, yet festive days of December to offer this Midwest Wrap-Up. If you've never been to The Midwest Clinic, go – in spite of what I'm about to write. It's one stop shopping for all things band, and if it's happening anywhere in the world it will be in Chicago for the clinic. Midwest is about repertoire, programming, rehearsal techniques, recruiting strategies, administrative issues, equipment concerns, and the chance to hear the state of our art in performances by ensembles young and old, educational and professional, foreign and domestic. Midwest is also about marketing.

According to the Midwest program, there were 909 new band publications released between September 15, 2006 and September 15, 2007. The list runs the gamut from the sublime to the ridiculous, as it has done every year for more than half a century. Some things never change; the sky is not falling. However, there is vastly more of the ridiculous to wade through to get to the sublime. When the list includes new editions of *The Best of Elvis Costello*, or ...*Green Day*, or ...*Kiss* (there's an oxymoron in there somewhere), plus three new versions of *Good King Wenceslas* (800 years and we still haven't gotten that one right?), plus seven new "dish ups" of *Pirates of the Caribbean* (honestly...seven?), who can blame you if you miss the reissue of oldies but goodies like *Be Glad Then America* by William Schuman (Presser, gr. 4), and *A Little Night and Day Music* by Samuel Adler (Carl Fischer, gr. 4), and *Sandpaper Ballet* by Leroy Anderson (Belwin, gr. 3), and *Sinfonia XVIII* by Timothy Broege (Maestro & Fox, gr. 6).

Alas, we are in a strange new era when the Robert W. Smith version of Anderson's *A Christmas Festival*, the Jay Bocook version of Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, and the James Swearingen version of Leemans' *March of the Belgian Paratroopers* are programmed in lieu of the originals, all of which are in danger of achieving the

dreaded POP status (Permanently Out of Print). Ladies and gentlemen: put down the demo CD and browse through the library of music you already have. You don't need yet another version of *Be Thou My Vision*; one is more than enough. You don't need Barrie Hingley's version of Elgar's *Nimrod*, unless you truly believe Alfred Reed didn't know what he was doing the first time around. You don't need Loras Schissel's version of Fillmore's *The Circus Bee*, or Erik Mast's version of Grieg's *Funeral March* – both of which are the same grade level as the originals, by the way – unless you feel these gentlemen have a better sense of the work than the composers themselves. And you don't need Robert Longfield's grade 3 version of Holst's *Second Suite in F*. Either take a chance and put in the effort to learn the grade 4 original, or wait until your ensemble is ready. Shaving off one grade level for the sake of accessibility is like taking half an inch off a good haircut – it's flattering neither to the barber nor the client. And to paraphrase conductor Larry Rachleff: good music is worth doing poorly, but poor music is not worth doing well.

Of the 909 new publications, three caught my attention for positive reasons (in addition to the four reissues mentioned above). First is the release of Nebraska's own Nolan Schmit's *Encomium for the Courageous* (Kjos, gr. 4). If you'd like a laugh, ask Nolan about the recent Japanese review of the work. Translation difficulties aside, it's good to know our home-grown products are attracting attention that far away. Another item of note is *The Little Factory* by Thomas Duffy (Ludwig, gr. 1). Tom has a gift for finding compelling programs and composing charming tone poems for ensembles of all abilities. Also of note is Larry Daehn's version of Henry Purcell's *Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary* (Daehn, gr. 2). It can be hard to find authentic solemn music for young bands, and Larry handles the challenges of grades 1-3 deftly.

Seven out of 909 – that's less than one percent. No wonder choosing literature is so time consuming, so frustrating, and often so poorly done. Who has time to find the needle in the haystack? Take courage. You already have a much more manageable haystack right where you are: your own ensemble library. Chances are you'll find better than one percent quality in there. New is not better – often it's not even good. Then again, old is not necessarily better either. You need to acquaint yourself with the benchmarks of the literature for band. If this wasn't a part of your training, don't be shy about backfilling. Seek out recommended literature lists (both the

NSBA and NBA have good ones), and there are numerous publications to help. Top of the list are Tom Dvorak's *Best Music...* books for beginning, young, and high school band, and the *Teaching Music...* series.

Bottom line: each time a publisher's catalogue or demo CD comes across your desk, remember: one percent.