

Band Music Reviews (August 2008)

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A recent conversation gave me the idea for this issue's column. A friend was extolling the virtues of a particular piece of music while lamenting the fact that they had just programmed it and therefore, in the spirit of a balanced musical diet for their ensemble, couldn't call upon it again for several years. I often find myself in a similar situation and imagine it must be what Hollywood casting agents face all the time. "This character needs a Mel Gibson type, but not Mel. He's too _____. " (Insert one of the following: old, odd, expensive, or we just used him in a film last month). Thus, this column is dedicated to alternatives.

Since it's still fairly early in the academic year, let's start with new music lists. One of the most popular sites for one-stop-shopping is the annual *J.W. Pepper Editors' Choice* list (<http://www.jwpepper.com/catalog/ecb.jsp>). The 2008/2009 list features 235 titles, which leads one to believe that the editors really aren't working very hard when it comes to sorting the good from the bad. Any editors' choice list that includes "Spider Pig," "Twisted Night Before Christmas," and "Video Games Live – Part 2" should evoke a healthy degree of skepticism in the reader. My advice is to remember the 1% rule (i.e. of those 235, less than 3 will be worth your time), and consider the following alternatives.

C. Alan's *What's New* site (<http://www.c-alanpublications.com/whatsnew.html>) is small, but worth a quick peek – particularly for conductors of younger bands. Neil Kjos has a similar site, and a fairly reliable catalogue (<http://www.kjos.com/list.php?division=1&show=new>), as does Grand Mesa Music (<http://www.grandmesamusic.com/>). However, for true reviews – as opposed to advertisements – there are two sites that rise to the top. One I've mentioned in previous articles: it's Tim Reynish's website (<http://www.timreynish.com/>). Tim will give you the straight dope on everything he has heard, with emphasis on European works. In the U.S., the man with his finger on the pulse of band composition is Jim Cochrane of Shattering Music. To find out

what's on his radar screen, check out Jim's Gems

(http://www.shatteringmusic.com/Departments/Wind_Band).

While Pepper is featuring "Spider Pig," Reynish is highlighting concertos by Dana Wilson, David Maslanka, and Verne Reynolds while Cochrane is spreading the good word about Karel Husa's newly published "Cheetah." One hopes the distinction in quality and insight is glaringly apparent.

Our next stop will be alternatives to selected commonly programmed pieces. Frank Ticheli's "An American Elegy" (11:00, grade 4) gained widespread popularity after the Columbine tragedy. Elegiac works are relatively few and far between in concert band literature, but there are two notable alternatives to Ticheli. John Barnes Chance composed his "Elegy" (4:00, grade 4) shortly before his untimely death in 1972. Ronald Lo Presti composed his "Elegy for a Young American" (5:30, grade 4) in 1967 as a tribute to JFK. Both works exhibit a sensitivity to scoring and flow that resembles the Ticheli, but Chance and Lo Presti demonstrate a more restrained sense of proportion.

For younger ensembles seeking flowingly tuneful opportunities, Frank Erickson set the standard in 1956 with "Air for Band" (3:00, grade 2). Although technically unchallenging, the form of "Air" is intriguing and Erickson manages to make the most out of simple materials. As an alternative, he composed "Balladair" (3:00, grade 2) in 1958. It is built on a more straightforward frame than "Air," but is equally satisfying. Erickson's compositions are perhaps a notch more sophisticated than their programmatic cousins, such as McGinty's "The Red Balloon" (2:30, grade 1.5) or Ticheli's "Portrait of a Clown" (2:45, grade 2).

Theme and variations can be a very useful form in the process of band development. The great classic for school bands is John Barnes Chance's "Variations on a Korean Folk Song" (8:00, grade 4). For those seeking an alternative, I recommend highly Jeff Krauklis' "Reflections on Hmong Folk Music" (9:00, grade 4). Although unpublished, "Reflections" is available through the composer: jkrauklis@charter.net An added bonus is the opportunity to hear the recordings of the original Hmong folk singers and instrumentalists that inspired the work.

Younger bands seeking experience with variations can't beat Tim Broege's "Theme and Variations" (2:00, grade 1) – great variety in a tiny package. A creative alternative for any band

looking to explore variations form is improvisation. Using any tune that's handy, and preferably without notation, invite members of the ensemble to improvise rhythmic and melodic variations. Start small, with just a measure at a time, and you can gradually build a brand new piece. For more information on integrating improvisation into the concert band rehearsal, contact Jim Karas at Lefler Middle School in Lincoln: jkaras@lps.org

Last but not least, marches are a great way to celebrate the heritage of the band while teaching the elements of music. More mature bands have a wide variety of original compositions in this genre, with works by Sousa, King, and Fillmore topping the list of American contributions. Editors of particular skill include Frederick Fennell, and Keith Brion. For younger bands, the marches of Harold Bennett (Henry Fillmore's alter ego), arranged by Larry Clark, can't be beat. Carl Fischer has just made available the "New Bennett Band Book" that includes 12 marches in the easy to very easy category. For schools of limited means, it's a great way to get variety and quality in one fell swoop.