

## **Band Music Reviews (August 2010)**

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Continuing on the topic of anniversaries (NMEA's 75<sup>th</sup> is right around the corner), I'd like to borrow excerpts from the recent 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of *The Instrumentalist*. To celebrate, *The Instrumentalist's* staff reached into the archives to reprint notable articles on a wide variety of topics. As I read them, I was struck by how little has changed in our profession during the last 65 years. The frustrations and challenges we face aren't new. If we are to make meaningful progress toward solving them we need to pay attention to the clues that have been right in front of us for decades. Since this is a column that focuses on literature, here are some of the breadcrumbs I found along that particular path.

We'll begin with Morton Gould: "To my thinking, school music should not be concerned with note-perfect performances as such, but rather with a wide musical experience and exposure. The rich and varied totality of music is what is important, not individual notes nor any one particular style." I imagine everyone reading this article agrees with Gould's premise favoring variety in programming. However, I suspect most readers are not aware of the fact that educational band music *is* a style (like jeans), and each composer who specializes in this style of music is a brand (like Levi's). Sure, you might have seventeen different pairs of jeans in your closet, but to suggest that you have a varied wardrobe because one pair is Levi's and another is Lee is absurd. When Mr. Gould is talking about variety, he's thinking about an evening gown and a football jersey, or a lab coat with a tutu, or some pajamas and a snorkel. In musical terms, he's suggesting that conductors should delve into literature that wasn't written expressly for school bands to play – music that wasn't intended to be "educational." What would that be? Virtually any composition by any composer who is known to people who aren't band directors (such as Beethoven, or Wagner, or Sousa, or Irving Berlin, or Morton Gould).

Gould continues, "I am not denying the validity of public performance as part of the musical experience, but I do question undue stress on this factor. This stress obscures the objective and leads to choice of material on the basis of its mechanical simplicity and easy performability. It is geared to the

least developed capacities. Educationally, this procedure lacks the challenging ingredients that stimulate growth, and therefore restricts potential accomplishment and achievement.”<sup>1</sup> Educational band music tends to be written to sound good quickly and easily. That’s what sells. It’s the musical equivalent of jeans that don’t make your butt look big. However, the trend for ensembles endowed with the equivalent of an enlarged posterior continues to be to try to disguise the flaw rather than remedy it. How many of us have sincerely considered programming a piece simply because it would be good for the band (like diet and exercise), rather than because it will make the band sound good in short order (like Spanx)?

Let’s call up another blast from the past to give us some more clues. John Paynter said, “I think it is a moral issue that all conductors should acquaint themselves, even immerse themselves, in the style of the music they are going to perform. They must not conduct the Borodin symphony without studying the symphony, the life of the composer, the time it was written, and the background of it.”<sup>2</sup> Would you seriously consider immersing yourself in the life and works of Robert Sheldon? Educational band music is not designed for immersion. It’s a quick dip, often in a shallow pool and there’s nothing wrong with that if you also make a point of visiting the deep end once in a while. Paynter and Gould both knew that although we claim to be teaching our students to swim, if we never venture into water above our heads we can’t know if we have been successful.

In order for the band contingent of NMEA to make progress in the next 75 years, we have to reach backward to composers and compositions that have proven to be worthy of sustained, intense attention. We are fortunate that in our genre there is a long tradition of absorbing material from other media to make our own stronger. Skillful arrangers and transcribers continue to provide essential musical nutrition for bands at every stage of development. Here are some recommendations:

- *March from “Scipio”* by Handel, arr. Sparke (Grade 1, 3:00)
- *Die Meistersinger (Themes)* by Wagner, arr. Daehn (Grade 2, 2:00)
- *Symphony No. 5, Second Movement* by Beethoven, arr. Harnsberger (Grade 2, 3:28)
- *Hungarian Dance No. 5* by Brahms, arr. Kinyon (Grade 2, 2:30)

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<sup>1</sup> Morton Gould, “Considering Contemporary Music – How Difficult is Difficult?” *The Instrumentalist*, August 1959.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Favorito, “John Paynter on Conducting,” *The Instrumentalist*, March 1996.

- *Allerseelen, Op. 10, No. 8* by Strauss, transcr. Davis (Grade 3, 6:55)
- *Blessed Are They* from "A German Requiem" by Brahms, transcr. Beuhlman (Grade 3, 5:15)
- *Adagio Cantabile* from "Sonata Pathetique" by Beethoven, arr. Daehn (Grade 3, 4:30)
- *Finlandia* by Sibelius, transcr. Hindsley (Grade 4, 5:15)
- *The Promise of Living* from "The Tender Land" by Copland, arr. Duffy (Grade 4, 5:00)
- *Overture to "The Marriage of Figaro"* by Mozart, transcr. Slocum (Grade 5, 3:50)
- *Festive Overture* by Shostakovich, transcr. Hunsberger (Grade 5, 6:30)
- *Til Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* by Strauss, transcr. Hindsley (Grade 6, 15:00)