

## **Band Music Reviews (August 2011)**

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Having just completed four years as author of this column for NMEA, I am reasonably confident that this basic course of band literature has taken hold among readers. Now it's time to move on to more advanced work. The good news is: the tuition remains the same. The bad news is: I'll be assigning homework. Before we get to that, allow me to explain the inspiration for the new approach.

Writing literature reviews is a lost art, particularly in the band community. Most so-called reviews are in fact descriptions, or simply recommendations. Casual observation indicates that the last actual reviews of band music were written by the more vivid personalities of our profession – like John Paynter – back in the 1960s. At that time it was not only acceptable but essential to exchange well-informed professional criticism among colleagues. Scores were hard to come by, and recordings were rare. Composers didn't have websites, and conferences were smaller in scope. Professional societies like NMEA saw an opportunity to help. However, there was concern about offending the publishers upon whose financial support those same societies relied. There was also concern about offending the composers upon whose talents the band medium relied for its very existence. Some reviewers understood that to deliver the unvarnished truth was the only responsible path, and the most competent publishers and composers agreed. Sadly, fear of financial and artistic bankruptcy won the day.

Ironically, financial insecurity and cultural irrelevancy remain at the heart of our current situation even as the skill and practice of legitimate criticism and evaluation has atrophied. We've lost the vocabulary, analytical skills, and will to investigate beyond the most obvious features. The elements we do consider have to do with whether our band can play a piece, rather than whether the piece is worth playing. When faced with this reality, it struck me as irresponsible – or at least insufficient – to simply continue offering literature recommendations four times a year. I'll continue to toss in a few for good measure, but I'm going to up the ante. We need to spend some time investigating what the most reliable indicators of quality are in music in order to ensure that our state's music education curriculum is founded

on artistic bedrock. More importantly, we need to inspire a revolution of thought and deed among band directors so that our actions align with commonly espoused philosophies. In other words: we need to get our talk and our walk in sync. The Roman philosopher Seneca is reputed to have said, “We live not according to reason, but according to fashion.” The sentiment is as apt today as it was two thousand years ago. Reason tells us that in order for music education to flourish it must be deeply rooted in the most fertile literature available, and yet our actions override common sense every day. What we do bears little resemblance to what we say we’re doing, or what we believe we should be doing.

I recently had the opportunity to hear about fifty newly published band compositions in the span of just a few hours. It was like watching time-lapse photography, but not in a happy “let’s watch this dandelion bloom” sort of way. It was more like a scene from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. What might have seemed charming, or at least tolerable in one piece rapidly became amplified and appalling as it reappeared in chart after chart. Like purse dogs and Justin Bieber’s hairdo, the fashion inflicted on school bands today includes:

- Single word imperative titles (exclamation point optional)
- Excessive and often ambiguous or redundant articulation marks
- ABA form, with abbreviated B sections (and I mean *brief* – twelve to sixteen bars isn’t unusual)
- Cautious, uninspired instrumentation and failsafe scoring
- Vivid and often overblown programs/back stories that are more compelling than the music

In the condensed format of a reading session, it was embarrassing to be confronted with what we’ve done to ourselves in the name of fashion. It was George Bernard Shaw who said, “Fashions, after all, are only induced epidemics.” There is no vaccine to cure what ails educational band music other than musicianship and good sense. As Louis Brandeis said, “Sunlight is the best disinfectant.” In our case, sunlight is simply to notice what’s right in front of us. That’s not as easy as it might seem. “Fashion is the science of appearances, and it inspires one with the desire to seem rather than to be.” This quotation from Michel de Montaigne could be the motto of many contemporary composers, publishers, and bandmasters.

The strongest ray of sunlight in this morass at the moment is Stephen Budiansky. Rather than reiterate what he conveys so well in his ongoing diatribe about the state of music education in America (see "My talk at the College Band Directors National Association" <http://budiansky.com/MUSIC.html>), I'll simply assign the article as required reading.

Finally, consider those five bullet points as you search for literature this autumn, and consider whether your goal is simply to sound good in a generic sense, or to strive to produce sounds that are worth hearing. Is it better to succeed at seeming, or to risk failing to achieve something deeper? What is your responsibility as an educator? When you come across compositions that are fashionable, are you confident enough to buck the trend?