

Some Great Music for Middle School Bands

By John Thomson

Every director of middle school and junior high school bands seeks to play the best repertoire available. But with so many new grade 3 works published each year, it can be difficult to keep up with what is new and of high quality.

Recently I asked a select group of middle school and junior high school directors from across the country to respond to a few questions concerning repertoire. The goal of these questions was to identify the most treasured grade 3 works and to reflect on what criteria should matter most in selecting repertoire. These directors on our panel offer a range of viewpoints, but there are common choices in the pieces and composers they favor and some common themes in their approaches to selecting repertoire. I hope the responses of these directors will offer some valuable insights to other directors as they approach the important task of choosing great music for their bands.

What are the best works composed in the last five to ten years that should become part of the standard repertoire for middle school and junior high school bands?

Travis J. Weller:

Appomattox by James Hosay (Curnow). This is a wonderful tone poem with noble themes that define General Grant and General Lee. Performing these lines will give students a wonderful opportunity to phrase and shape the melody. This piece also includes some interesting interplay between the different sections, which will help students to become more aware of other parts of the ensemble.

Wagon Trail by Julie Giroux (Musica Propria). This work beautifully captures the essence of the Old West, with its feelings of hope, innocence, and persistence. The front half of the piece requires consistent articulation and independent entrances across sections, while the back half offers some wonderful moments of expression and connected playing.

Unraveling by Andrew Boysen, Jr. (Kjos). It is a unique experience to perform music that has a sinister quality, and this piece has that feeling. An homage of a sort to Ravel's *Bolero*, this work contains a melody line that uses an octatonic scale and some vocalization, and it also includes some exciting moments with the use of different timbres and colors in the ensemble.

Suspended Animation by Patrick Burns (Daehn). Suspended chords are prevalent in every part of this work. Set in a steady tempo from the beginning, the piece continually lays suspension on top of suspension while retaining an engaging groove underneath. Students may not always enjoy discussions of music theory, but this work will allow directors to address some interesting aspects of music theory in a context that students will enjoy performing.

Friends of Freedom by Timothy Loest (FJH). This march can be used to help young musicians work on articulation and dynamic contrast in the large ensemble setting. Additionally, this piece will help students understand classic march form. The trio section evokes strains of America, which helps make this march an excellent choice for a patriotic concert.

Moscow, 1941 by Brian Balmages (FJH). Folk songs from any culture can offer not only an excellent musical challenge, but also an opportunity to discuss aspects of that culture in the rehearsal setting. The presentation of the folk songs here preserves a dark, rugged quality that develops into an exciting performance opportunity.

Jill Noerenberg:

The five pieces I would identify as potentially lasting repertoire are *Alligator Alley* by Michael Daugherty (Hal Leonard), *Sheltering Sky* by John Mackey (Osti), *The Machine Awakes* by Steven Bryant (Steven Bryant), *Abracadabra* by Frank Ticheli (Manhattan Beach), and *Lauda* by Tim Miles (Musik Fabrik). All of these pieces have interesting and innovative compositional, harmonic, and melodic structures. They are all well crafted, and my students have been challenged and rewarded by the experience of performing these works.

Michael Oare:

Moscow, 1941 by Brian Balmages (FJH). This programmatic work depicts the German invasion of the Soviet Union during World War II, and the Soviet army's struggle to repel the invaders. Although programmatic works are somewhat typical at this grade level, this piece delivers a powerful musical portrayal of the subject matter. It is well orchestrated and offers a variety textures and harmonies, including effective use of dissonance, and it also incorporates an active and musical percussion section. Additionally, much of the melodic material is derived from a well-known Russian folk song, which adds a further historical, cross-curricular component to the work.

Dance Episodes, James Curnow (Curnow Music). Although listed by the publisher as a grade 2, this masterfully constructed and orchestrated work is well-suited for grade 3 bands. Reminiscent of the folk dance settings of Rimsky-Korsakov, Shostakovich, and other composers, *Dance Episodes* contains entirely original melodic material. The tune cleverly moves throughout the ensemble with each variation, continuously changing styles and textures. This piece offers a great opportunity for younger players to experience the European folk dance style and tradition.

Through Darkened Sleepy Hollow by Erik Morales (FJH). Making an effective cross-curricular literary connection, this piece illustrates the harrowing experience of Ichabod Crane from the American classic, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Morales incorporates a number of compositional devices, an innovative harmonic language, and some creative percussion writing to portray the infamous night ride. The piece is particularly effective in its use of chromaticism, both as a compositional technique and sound effect and also as a key component in the harmonic content and language.

To Dream in Brushstrokes by Michael Oare (Boosey & Hawkes). At the risk of seeming egotistical, I would suggest including one of my own works on this list. I find it is often difficult to convince young musicians of the value of working on slow, lyrical, and expressive music. In today's age of instant gratification, young people often prefer fast and loud selections and sometimes resist slow and expressive music. However, if the piece has a story behind it, especially one with which they can relate, young musicians can learn to accept the work and approach it with an open mind. This work was commissioned in memory of two sisters who died tragically in a house fire. In a similar vein to Holsinger's *On a Hymnsong of Philip Bliss* (TRN), the piece is far from an elegy or requiem. The first section of the work depicts the anguish and tragedy of the actual event. A second, contrasting section follows and is more reminiscent of the beauty and innocence of youth. This is an emotional work, but one that should be within the reach of young musicians.

Wendy Higdon:

Identifying repertoire-worthy works for middle school or junior high school bands is difficult because much of the standard repertoire at the grade 3 level is really more appropriate for high school bands, since it requires greater musical sophistication. Often a piece may qualify as a grade 3 based on technical considerations but still may not be appropriate for developing musicians. For example, a piece like *Lux Aurumque* by Eric Whitacre (Walton

Editor's Note: This is not intended to be a comprehensive list but is merely the opinions of some of our contributors. If you would like to share your thoughts, email editor@theinstrumentalist.com

Music) is beautiful and not technically challenging, but it requires a level of sophistication that would challenge many high school bands. Similarly, *On a Hymnsong of Philip Bliss (TRN)*, which is technically a grade 3 piece, presents the same issue.

That said, I would encourage directors of young bands to look at some of the newer works by Brian Balmages (FJH) who is able to write quality music that is educationally sound and musically satisfying for bands at the middle school level. Also, the James Swearingen editions of the grade 3 Karl King marches (C.L. Barnhouse) are very good for this age group. Pierre LaPlante also has written some really nice pieces for middle level bands (Daehn and LudwigMasters). I am also really excited about Richard Saucedo's newest piece, *Of Gale Force Winds*, which our band premiered at the Midwest Clinic in December (Hal Leonard).

Jim Shaw:

Tudor Sketches by William Owens (FJH). This arrangement is very well orchestrated and based on material that is tried and true. The variety of styles and time signatures provide some great learning opportunities for band members, but this is also just really great music.

Foundry by John Mackey (Osti). This contemporary work is basically a percussion feature with band accompaniment, and it allows percussionists to explore different playing techniques and sounds through its use of "found percussion." Although the technical demands of the winds parts are moderate, unison parts pairing the upper woodwinds and trumpets on certain difficult notes can make this a real challenge for ensemble members.

Tonadillas Suite by Enrique Granados, arranged by Ralph Ford (Belwin Band/Alfred). This is another quality arrangement of proven material.

The Seal Lullaby by Eric Whitacre (Hal Leonard). This may be the lowest grade piece written by Whitacre, who is a major composer of choral, orchestral, and band works, but it is substantial nonetheless.

Krystle and Kyle Smith:

Unraveling by Andrew Boysen, Jr. (Kjos).
Divinum Mysterium, arranged by Tom Wallace (Arrangers').
Reverberations by Brian Balmages (FJH).

Dreamsong by Richard Saucedo (Hal Leonard).
A Walk in the Morning Sun by Pierre LaPlante (Daehn).

Identify one or two forgotten gems—high quality works that are underperformed and deserve wider programming.

Michael Oare:

Irish Rhapsody by Clare Grundman. I would also include Grundman's *Fantasy on American Sailing Songs* and all four of his *American Folk Rhapsodies* (all by Boosey & Hawkes). These works are masterfully written and orchestrated. While they are basically collections of folk songs, Grundman took great care to create a work that flows beautifully between songs and styles. The orchestration here may seem a bit dated, as few composers today use four part horns, three part trombones, and a full woodwind section at the grade 2-3 level. However, these works use ample doubling, and they can be successfully performed by smaller ensembles. For larger bands, the depth of sound Grundman achieves with his orchestration is wonderful and well worth the investment of rehearsal time.

Sonatina for Band, *Symphonette for Band* or (at a slightly more advanced level) *Toccata for Band* by Frank Erickson (all published by Bourne). I regard Erickson's compositions as landmark works in the evolution of American concert band literature. His harmonic language, sense of melody, and creative orchestration were unprecedented in band music of the 1960s. One aspect of Erickson's (as well as Grundman's) writing that I particularly enjoy is his treatment of the woodwind choir. Too often in today's compositions, the flutes and clarinets are relegated to playing simple ostinato patterns or 16th note flourishes to accentuate cadences. But Erickson makes use of the full ranges of these instruments (e.g. writing in the upper registers of both the flute and clarinet) and draws upon the entire woodwind choir to be a vibrant and vital component of the ensemble sonority.

Wendy Higdon:

My short list of forgotten gems would include *Prelude and Fugue in B♭* by Bach, arranged by Moehlman (Alfred), and *Flourish for Wind Band* by Vaughan Williams (Oxford

University). Regarding the Vaughan Williams piece, I would note that while it is a grade 3, it may not be suitable for all middle school bands.

Jill Noerenberg:

The forgotten gems I would note are *Sinfonia VI-Earth, Wind, Fire, Water* by Timothy Broege (Manhattan Beach), *Prospect* by Pierre LaPlante (Bourne), and *Variation Overture* by Clifton Williams (LudwigMasters).

Travis J. Weller:

Carpathian Sketches by Robert Jager (LudwigMasters). Stylistically this work finds its roots in Slovakian folk song music. Because of the manner in which this work is scored, there are a number of moments that will push young musicians to think, perform independently, and develop their confidence as musicians.

Salute to the Duke arranged by Mike Sweeney (Hal Leonard). Selections not classified as original concert band works rarely make repertoire lists, but if students do not get experience with jazz styles in the large ensemble setting, they may not get to play jazz music at all. Sweeney's arrangement here offers a great opportunity for students to learn basic jazz harmony, jazz articulation, and swing style as it goes through the Duke Ellington standards *Satin Doll*, *Mood Indigo*, and *It Don't Mean A Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)*. The piece allows for small group and solo playing, and it is a valuable opportunity to share the music of an American jazz icon with students.

Jim Shaw:

Overture for Winds by Charles Carter (Bourne). The length of this piece, as well as the demands it places on players in terms of technique and range, make this work a real challenge. It is a warhorse.

Chant and Jubilo by Francis McBeth (Southern). A major composer and contributor to the band idiom, McBeth is a critically important figure, and our students deserve to be exposed to his music.

Krystle and Kyle Smith:

Little English Suite by Clare Grundman (Boosey & Hawkes). This multi-movement work is a wonderful vehicle for pitch, tone, and ♩ rhythmic patterns.

Three Ayers from Gloucester by Hugh Stuart (Shawnee). This is good standard band program music that uses cut time, articulation, and rhythmic precision, among many other things.

Chip DeStefano:

It is unfortunate, but I think the marches of Sousa, Fillmore, and King, while not forgotten,

John Thomson was director of bands at New Trier High School in Winnetka, Illinois, for many years and is currently an adjunct professor at Roosevelt University. He earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Carnegie Mellon University. Thomson is a contributing editor and new music reviewer for *The Instrumentalist*.



Chip DeStefano is the director of bands at McCracken Middle School in Skokie, Illinois.

Wendy Higdon is the director of bands at Creekside Middle School in Carmel, Indiana.

Jill Noerenberg is the director of bands and wind ensemble at the middle school and high school in Duxbury, Massachusetts.

Michael Oare is an active composer and arranger and is the director of bands at Great Bridge Middle School in Chesapeake, Virginia.

Jim Shaw is the band director at Willow Wood Junior High School and Northpointe Intermediate School in Tomball, Texas.

Kyle and Krystle Smith are band directors at the Westbrook High School and Middle School in Westbrook, Maine.

Travis J. Weller is an active composer and arranger and is the director of bands at Mercer Area Middle-Senior High School in Mercer, Pennsylvania.

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are certainly under-programmed these days. The original marches of these composers should be core repertoire. These pieces are terrific teaching tools, and audiences love them. They should be performed regularly. Beyond those essential marches, I think the works of Clare Grundman (including *An Irish Rhapsody*, *Fantasy on American Sailing Songs*, *American Folk Rhapsodies* 1-4, all Boosey & Hawkes) are real masterworks for our level. They are very tuneful and interesting harmonically. Grundman's orchestration is also different from much of the music of today, requiring strong color instruments and rhythmic independence.

What criteria do you use when selecting works for rehearsal and performance?

Jim Shaw:

I try to focus on four main criteria in choosing music for my bands. First, I consider whether the piece is quality music that my students and audience members will find engaging. Next, I ask whether the piece will challenge students to grow musically. I also consider whether the material is within the grasp of my ensemble in terms of range, technical demands, and the level of musicianship required. Finally, I evaluate whether the piece will offer variety from the other works being programmed for the same performance.

Travis J. Weller:

I always begin the evaluation process for concert band repertoire by carefully examining the current ability levels of my students and considering how we can meet our goals for the year, both as an ensemble and as individuals. There are six aspects that I typically examine when looking at a concert band work. I examine the melodic material, harmony, rhythms and tempos, timbre and orchestration, emotional and aesthetic moments, and form and structure. I also consider whether the work will be useful in my daily teaching of specific skills and whether it help students grow as musicians. With funding for new equipment and materials at a premium, I carefully consider if a new work is simply popular now, or if it can be a classic later and be used again.

Michael Oare:

It may sound selfish, but my first consideration is that I must truly like the piece of music. A new piece has to

say something to me musically before I distribute it to one of my groups. The piece does not need to have any deep emotional component, but it must offer a certain depth and content. If the piece has little to say to me musically, then I tend to get bored with the work, and if I am bored with a piece, it can be difficult to motivate students and teach at a high level. Secondly, I consider whether a piece meets curriculum standards, which requires consideration of ranges, key signatures, and rhythmic concepts. Lastly, I make special considerations in selecting works for performances. For any given concert, I try to choose works with contrasting and complementing styles. For example, I will try to find a concert opener that is generally a bit shorter in length and at a faster tempo. I also try to include a piece or two that will challenge the band musically and technically. I believe transcriptions are an important part of our literature, so I try to include at least one transcription in our repertoire each year. For the spring concert, I also will usually program a lighter selection; pieces from a soundtrack to a popular movie often work well for this purpose.

Wendy Higdon:

With so much being written and so many choices, I think it is important for directors to be discerning with the literature they select. The key considerations should focus on what students can learn by performing the piece, whether the piece is one the band may perform again in the next ten years, whether the piece is appropriate for the ensemble's instrumentation and ability level, whether the piece supports the educational goals of the group, and whether it has appeal for both students and audience. On the issue of a work's appeal, I do not necessarily mean that the piece has to be fun or popular music. Rather, the question is whether the piece is memorable to hear and perform, whether it stimulates the intellect, and whether it is something students can grow to love.

Chip DeStefano:

I find that choosing music can be an agonizing process. Trying to identify repertoire that I like, with the right balance of difficulty and variety and that also suits our pedagogical goals can be very time consuming. Generally speaking, however, I'm looking for music in which the musical difficulty meets or exceeds the technical difficulty.

Krystle and Kyle Smith:

The foremost concern is that the music must appeal to the students. Every piece should be an enjoyable experience for them. The music must also allow us to teach musicality, as well as music history, varied time signatures, and key signatures. In addition, each work must fit within the concert set. The pieces should be chosen so that each concert presents not only a variety of music in terms of style and tempo, but also a wide range of moods. Rather than trying to find a march, a ballad, and a focus piece, it is often useful to choose pieces with different moods, such as a piece that is happy, a piece that is angry, a piece that is aggressive, and a piece that is joyous. Seeking out this range of moods is not the only consideration, but students and audiences often respond well to this approach. When the audience loves the music performed, it goes a long way.

Jill Noerenberg:

I think we are fortunate to live in a time when new composers are being commissioned to write works for younger bands. John Mackey and Steven Bryant, for example, have written a lot of really fine music for younger as well as advanced bands.

I also refer to the Facebook Band Directors Forum Twice Taught Repertoire database. That group is a great source for ideas and advice on literature. I also rely on a number of colleagues and mentors for their advice, and I will often run programs by them to get their input.

What selections would be on your top ten list for grade three repertoire?

Chip DeStefano:

My top ten list, not including marches, would be the following:

Prelude and Fugue in B^b by J.S. Bach, arranged by Roland Moehlmann (Alfred/Belwin).

American Riversongs by Pierre LaPlante (Daehn).

Unraveling by Andrew Boysen, Jr. (Kjos).

An Irish Rhapsody by Clare Grundman (Boosey & Hawkes).

Parade of the Wooden Warriors by Adam Gorb (G&M Brand).

Pirates by Douglas Akey (Queenwood/Kjos).

Symphony No. 4 by Andrew Boysen, Jr. (Kjos).

A Renaissance Festival by Claude Gervaise, arranged by Kenneth Singleton (Grand Mesa).

Shenandoah by Frank Ticheli (Manhattan Beach).

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Overture for Winds by Charles Carter (Bourne).

Jill Noerenberg:

Tricycle by Andrew Boysen (Kjos).
A+ March by Thomas Duffy (Hal Leonard).
Sinfonia VI-Earth, Wind, Fire, Water by Timothy Broege (Manhattan Beach).
Prospect by Pierre LaPlante (Bourne).
Variation Overture by Clifton Williams (LudwigMasters).
Alligator Alley by Michael Daugherty (Hal Leonard).
Sheltering Sky by John Mackey (Osti).
The Machine Awakes by Stephen Bryant (Steven Bryant).
Abacadabra by Frank Ticheli (Manhattan Beach).
Lauda by Tim Miles (Musik Fabrik).
Flourish for Wind Band by Vaughan Williams (Oxford University).
Overture for Winds by Charles Carter (Bourne).

Michael Oare:

Not in order, and in addition to the pieces I note in my other answers, my top ten list would be:
Three Colonial Ballads, arranged by James Curnow (Bourne).
Celtic Suite by Elliot Del Borgo (Alfred).
On a Hymnson of Philip Bliss by David Holsinger (TRN).
Procession of the Nobles by Rimsky-Korsakov, arranged by Jay Bocook (Hal Leonard).
Images of Ireland by Brian Balmages (FJH).
Portsmouth Reflections by Michael Oare (Kjos).

Classifieds

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Our Kingsland Spring by Samuel Hazo (Hal Leonard).
Korean Folk Rhapsody by James Curnow (Hal Leonard).
Thunderscape by Erik Morales (FJH).
Arabian Dances by Roland Barrett (Alfred).

Jim Shaw:

Butterfly's Ball by Ryan Fraley (FJH).
Canarios Fantasia by Douglas Akey (Alfred).
American Riversongs by Pierre LaPlante (Daehn).
Latin Folk Trilogy by William Himes (Curnow).
Simple Gifts: Four Shaker Songs by Frank Ticheli (Manhattan Beach).
The Jig is Up! by Emmerich Kalman (Boosey & Hawkes).
Greek Folk Song Suite by Franco Cesarini (De Haske).
West Highlands Sojourn by Robert Sheldon (C.L. Barnhouse).
Danses de Fantaisie by Jan de Haan (Curnow).
Songs of Old Kentucky by Brent Karrick (Alfred).

Krystle and Kyle Smith:

Joy Revisited by Frank Ticheli (Manhattan Beach).
Abacadabra by Frank Ticheli (Manhattan Beach).
Any grade 3 march by Karl King.
Air for Band by Frank Erickson (Bourne).
Prairie Songs and American Riversongs by Pierre LaPlante (Daehn).
Kentucky 1800 by Clare Grundman (Boosey & Hawkes).
Flourish for Wind Band by Vaughan Williams (Oxford University).
On a Hymnson of Philip Bliss by David Holsinger (TRN).
Prelude and Fugue in B^b Major by Bach, arranged by Moehlmann (Alfred).
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Travis J. Weller:
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Our Kingsland Spring by Samuel Hazo (Hal Leonard).
Suspended Animation by Patrick Burns (Daehn).
Unraveling by Andrew Boysen (Kjos).
Carpathian Sketches by Robert Jager (Hal Leonard).
Courtly Airs and Dances by Ron Nelson (LudwigMasters).
Cumberland Cross by Carl Strommen (Alfred).
The Pony Express by Chris Bernotas (Alfred).
Flourish for Wind Band by Ralph Vaughan Williams (Oxford University).
Canto by W. Francis McBeth (Southern).