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DUNSCOMB & HILL, Chapter 15

Whether you are vocal or instrumental, you probably have go-to publishers/sites you use. What criteria do you use when choosing music? If you have a "spiral curriculum" for your concert ensembles, do you also have one for your other groups? For those unfamiliar with the concept, a so-called "spiral curriculum" considers the basic building blocks of music (rhythm, key signature, time signature etc) and continually spirals upward adding increased difficulty to these elements of music. It's one example of a more thoughtful, holistic approach to your curriculum (the music you choose) vs. going to the website and randomly picking songs. Do you have another method?

Choosing the music for any ensemble is one of the most important decisions we make as directors. Choosing music that is too difficult will result in rehearsals where the ensemble struggles to just get notes and rhythms. Choosing music that is too easy will often cause the ensemble to be bored, and not grow as much as they otherwise would. Choosing music that doesn't address key components of your curriculum might result in a musical deficit as your students move on. Choosing only one or two genres of music might mean your students never get the opportunity to play or hear a concert march. It really is an enormous decision and heavy responsibility.

In this chapter, Dunscomb discusses his thoughts on how we might go about choosing music for our jazz ensembles. Just as with concert literature, it is important to include a variety of music for our jazz students. I've always tried to include a rock tune, swing tune, latin tune, and ballad on every concert for this reason. Dunscomb discusses pop tunes, acknowledging that a little goes a long way. I think having one piece of this nature in a concert is plenty, when it's balanced with the above-mentioned genres.

Dunscomb encourages introducing jazz standards to our ensembles, and while I agree with that, I find myself falling short in that regard. Given that my jazz ensemble is made up of 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students, I always start with a very surface-level investigation, by first listening to a piece. My thought process when looking at any jazz band piece takes the following path:

1. Do I like this piece of music?
2. Do I think the students would like this piece, or could I sell them on it?
3. Can the group handle this piece without too much trouble? Is it within an acceptable window of difficulty for them? Does it suit them?
4. Does this piece cover a genre deficit for the concert?
5. Does this piece help teach some new concepts to the group?

The list above isn't in order of importance, but more of a chronological order. I don't mean for it to sound self-centered, but If I don't like the piece, it's going to be difficult for

me to sell the students on it, and there is enough literature out there where we shouldn't have to be "stuck" with any piece of music. If it passes the surface-level test after listening to it, I'll begin to look at it more closely to determine whether it is the right difficulty for the group, and if it adequately covers concepts that I'm trying to teach to the group. I know this isn't the most thorough checklist (the checklist on page 163 is fantastic, and it really details what I try to do in my step 3 above), but I've found that it helps me to get a variety of music to my jazz band that they tend to enjoy, that they can play well, and that helps them to grow and improve.