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The quality of repertoire in school music programs: literature review, analysis, and discussion

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*Here are things you've heard before,
Turned out daily by the score.*
—Charles Ives, “The One Way”

The poor quality of school music repertoire, and band repertoire in particular, is an issue that has been noted with concern by many authors over the past three decades. Among those who have found fault in the meager artistic merit of the compositions that now commonly dominate school music programs are university-level band directors (Williamson 1981; Battisti 1995a, 1995b, 2002; Begian 1990), composers (Colgrass 2004; McBrien 2002), professional musicians (Byrne 2001), music education researchers (Britton 1991; Greiner 1999; Ostling 1978), and parents, students, and not a few secondary school band directors themselves (Hughes 1990; Budiansky 2005a, 2005b).

Many critics have noted that much of the music composed specifically for school band is formulaic, emotionally superficial, monotonously alike, dull, and didactic; that it fails to inspire students; and that by being removed from any genuine living musical tradition, classical or popular, it fails to provide students with a true musical education or the basis for further independent exploration of music, either as a performer or a listener.

A short opinion article published in the *Washington Post* by one of the co-authors of this article (Budiansky 2005a), which echoed these criticisms from the point of view of a band parent, elicited more than 140 replies to the author from school band directors, student musicians, and parents, as well as from professional musicians, composers, and university music educators. Overwhelmingly, these respondents agreed with the validity of the critique, frequently adding their own examples and personal experiences. Many spontaneously identified as a distinct and notable phenomenon the way that recently composed made-for-school pieces, almost always written by composers possessing no significant reputation outside the world of educational music, had displaced works of well-known composers of recognized artistic merit in the school music repertoire. Students, band directors, and even some contemporary composers who responded noted that the phenomenon is a matter of frequent discussion and widespread recognition, and that terms such as “schlock music,” “band fodder,” “junk music,” “crap,” and other even less polite terms are commonly used within the ranks of the band community to describe this genre of pieces.

At the same time, a number of school band directors, composers of educational music, and music publishers disputed the criticisms (Donze 2005; personal communications from e.g. Roy C. Holder, 10 May 10 2005; Richard Bergman, 1 February 2005; Jerry Brubaker, 11 February 2005). The major counterarguments presented were: (1) the displacement of well known works of recognized artistic merit by recent made-for-school pieces is not in fact happening on a widespread basis in school music programs; (2) quality in musical composition is largely a subjective matter of individual taste, and it is elitist or presumptuous to reject recent pieces on artistic grounds before they have had a chance to become established as a standard part of the repertoire; (3) the dearth of original music for wind band makes it important for bands to support the composition and performance of new works written specifically for band and to avoid relying on transcriptions of orchestral or other works; (4) pedagogic necessity, the importance of matching the technical abilities of the ensemble, and the need to motivate and entertain students (who generally take band as an elective), make made-for-school pieces a legitimate choice for achieving the educational goals of school music programs.

In this paper, we examine published studies on repertoire selection and music education that offer a basis for evaluating these arguments and counterarguments, and propose recommendations based on these findings.

I. DEFINING THE PROBLEM

1. Is inferior, made-for-school music taking over? Quantitative evidence.

Several studies document the growing predominance in the school band repertoire of recently written pieces by minor composers who lack significant reputations outside of the school-music world. High school band directors in Iowa were asked to identify the composers they themselves regarded as the most significant in the wind band repertoire, and then which composers were represented most often in the repertoire they actually performed. Holst, Vaughan Williams, and Grainger were rated among the most significant; Claude T. Smith and James Swearingen—two writers who specialize in the educational market—were the most performed (Hughes 1990). A more extensive survey of large high school bands across the United States compared actual repertoire choices with lists of works that had been identified as being of high quality by a jury of experts and in other published studies and repertoire lists; only about one-third of the approximately 1,500 pieces actually performed were among those deemed to be of “exceptional,” “high,” or “good” quality. Approximately one-half were pieces rated lacking any notable level of quality (Young 1998). A survey of college band directors produced a similar finding: 72 percent of their frequently performed works were not even among the works that the same directors cited as the “most significant” wind band works (Woike 1990).

Very similar results—only one-third to one-half of performed pieces rated of good quality by respected sources—were also obtained in a study of repertoire performed at the 1998 and 1999 Iowa High School Music Association state band contests (Greiner 2002) and at district contests of the Illinois Grade School Music Association (northern division) in 2003 (Hash 2005a).

Because “perhaps the most influential source of repertoire” for school bands are contest lists assembled by state music associations (Harris & Walls 1996), several studies have examined these lists as a way to assess the state of school band repertoire choices. An analysis of Texas lists for beginning band over the course of more than twenty years found a huge turnover, with two-thirds of pieces not staying on the list for more than two years, and 42 percent appearing only a single time before disappearing (Harris & Walls 1996). A compilation by Harris (1999) of the twenty grade 1 and grade 2 pieces that were performed most frequently by approximately 1,000 school bands at Texas contests each year is made up almost entirely of very recently written school pieces (Table 1). In the course of two decades, only a handful of works by significant composers have ever appeared on this “top twenty” list, and have never accounted for more than one or two works in any given year.

rank	title	composer	year published
1	Atlantis	Anne McGinty	1986
2	Sea Song Trilogy	Anne McGinty	1986
3	Two British Folk Songs	Elliot Del Borgo	1993
4	Soldiers Procession and Sword Dance	Bob Margolis	1992
5	Song for Friends	Larry Daehn	1997
6	A Childhood Hymn	David Holsinger	1991
7	Modal Song and Dance	Elliot Del Borgo	1985
8	Wildwind Overture	John Kinyon	1990
9	Liturgical Fanfare	Robert W. Smith	1995
10	Caprice	William Himes	1989
11	Pevensey Castle	Robert Sheldon	1993
12	Flight of Eagles	Elliot Del Borgo	1994
13	Portrait of a Clown	Frank Ticheli	1989
14	Cumberland Cross	Carl Strommen	1995
15	Knights of Dunvegan	Richard Meyer	1997
16	Nottingham Castle	Larry Daehn	1997

17	Crest of Nobility	Robert Sheldon	1985
18	Train Heading West	Timothy Broege	1998
19	Spring Song	Jerry Nowak	1986
20	Sakura	Mike Story	1995

Table 1. Most frequently performed grade 1 and grade 2 works at Texas band contests, 1999-2000 (Harris 1999).

Hash (2005a) in his study of Illinois district contests found a similar strong bias in favor of very recently published works: at district contests held in March 2003, “music published in 2002 was performed 76 percent more often than that published in 2001 and almost three times more often than music issued in 2000.” Hash also found that nearly half of all selections performed at district contests were composed by ten individuals, all of them contemporary or very recent writers of educational music who lack any significant reputation in the larger world of music: James Swearingen, Robert Sheldon, John Edmondson, David Shaffer, Andrew Balent, Frank Erickson, Ed Huckleby, David Holsinger, Larry Daehn, and Elliot Del Borgo. James Swearingen alone accounted for 10 percent of all works performed. About 30 percent of pieces performed were less than three years old; fewer than 8 percent of pieces were transcriptions of historic masterworks (by composers such as Telemann, Bach, Handel, Mozart, Brahms, Offenbach, Holst, Mussorgsky, and Saint-Saens).

The most extensive survey of recent contest repertoire comes from a 2003 study that examined twenty-five state lists (Stevenson 2003). A total of 1,270 works appeared on at least seven of those lists. Although the author did not provide a detailed analysis of these works by composer or period, he did provide an appendix tabulating all 1,270 pieces, which permits further analysis. Several interesting points emerge from an examination of this data:

- Three-quarters of these most frequently performed pieces were written after World War II. By contrast, only 6 percent were from the early 20th century, 12 percent from the 19th century, and 8 percent pre-19th century.
- Of the nineteen individual composers who are represented by more than 15 works each, only two—J. S. Bach and Grainger—are significant composers with reputations outside the world of educational music (Table 2). Many important composers, including even significant composers of original wind music (e.g., Holst, Vaughan Williams, Ives, Copland, Benson) are represented by far fewer works (Table 3); many important composers are not represented at all (e.g., Puccini, Palestrina, Ravel, Gershwin, Prokofiev, Rameau, Satie, Joplin).

rank order	composer	no. of works
1	James Swearingen	32
2	J. S. Bach	30
3	Robert Sheldon	29
4	Frank Erickson	27
5	Elliot Del Borgo	25
6	J. Owen Reed	25
7	Robert W. Smith	24
8	Mark Williams	24
9	James Curnow	22
10	W. Francis McBeth	22
11	Claude T. Smith	22
12	Anne McGinty	21
13	Clare Grundman	20
14	Percy Grainger	18
15	David Holsinger	18
16	Jared Spears	18
17	John Edmondson	17
18	Ed Huckleby	17
19	David Shaffer	16

Table 2. Composers whose works appear most often among 1,270 works frequently found on twenty-five state lists (Stevenson 2003, appendix 1). Significant composers outside of the educational-music world in bold face.

- Only a single work from a Broadway musical or *any* other American popular form appears among these more than one thousand pieces (Bernstein’s “Candide” overture). The evidence from these diverse studies paints a consistent picture. Typically, three quarters or more of the most frequently performed works by school bands are pieces written specifically for the educational market in the last few decades by composers of no significant artistic reputations in any musical genre outside the confines of education. As much as one-third of the most frequently performed pieces are works of educational music written within just the last few years—pieces that then quickly (in as little as a year or two) disappear from the repertoire altogether, and are no longer even in print.

rank order	composer	no. of works
24	Mozart	14
27	Handel	11
32	Wagner	9
--	Vaughan Williams	9
38	Copland	8
42	Rimsky-Korsakov	7
--	Rossini	7
--	Holst	7
50	Haydn	6
--	Tchaikovsky	6
54	Beethoven	5
--	Dvorak	5
--	Bernstein	5
--	Ives	5
--	Verdi	5
--	Shostakovich	5
74	Von Suppe	4
--	Berlioz	4
--	Offenbach	4
--	Frescobaldi	4
--	Warren Benson	4
87	Elgar	3
113	Gabrieli	2
--	Bizet	2
--	Susato	2
155	Schubert	1
--	Telemann	1

Table 3. Number of works by selected significant composers among the 1,270 works most frequently found on twenty-five state lists (Stevenson 2003, appendix 1).

Works of original wind band music by significant composers are performed substantially less often (by a factor of about four) than these made-for-school works; works of significant composers in transcription are performed even more rarely (by a factor of about ten). Along with an increasing bias in favor of very recently composed works, a sharp reduction in the performance of transcriptions has occurred over recent decades (Hash 2005a; Holvik 1970; Hughes 1990; Stevenson 2003, appendix 1).

2. Defining artistic quality in music

Many defenders of the status quo argue that it is impossible to define artistic “quality,” since quality is an almost totally subjective judgment made by the individual listener, and that such judgments are invariably contingent and subject to later revision. “Taste in music is probably as individual as our personal life experiences,” states one music publisher (Donze 2005). A number of school band directors, responding in

personal communications to the *Washington Post* article mentioned above (Budiansky 2005a), make similar assertions: “My question to you is, ‘What is great music.’ Define it please?” “What one person will call music, another will call schlock” “Over time, most orchestral music has been forgettable and forgotten” “Many of the greats...were also shunned during their composing days. J.S. Bach, Beethoven, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Vivaldi and others all had parts of their career (if not their entire lives) where people felt their music was not appropriate, and longed for the music of yesteryear.” It is undeniable that artistic tastes change over time, and that initial judgments of art are sometimes revised. It is also clear that, in the 20th century, many of the traditional and conventional standards by which art has been judged have been questioned, challenged, and overturned.

But none of this can justify or rationalize compositions that are formulaic, mechanical, and lacking in artistic integrity. Well-reasoned critiques of recent made-for-school band music note that it frequently is composed not with artistic aims in mind but with didactic purposes paramount: avoiding the register break in clarinet parts, for example, or the high register in trumpet parts (Greiner 2002). Some school band pieces are clearly little more than commercial attempts to exploit an earlier formula that had proved “successful” for the writer in the school market: thus, for example, Robert W. Smith’s “Great Steamboat Chase” and “Great Locomotive Chase” (Black 1986).

The formulaic quality of much of the made-for-school band literature has also been frequently noted (Williamson 1981; Graettinger & Mishra 2003; Harris & Walls 2002). A disproportionate number are in ABA format (which offers the “advantage” of 50 percent more music for the same rehearsal effort) and often contain one or more (sometimes all) of the following formulaic elements:

- excessive use of all-tutti (or “block”) scoring and instrument doubling
- simple triadic harmonies throughout, in which all sections are typically playing one of just three or four notes together at any given point
- an absence of melodically or rhythmically independent lines or counterpoint
- the repetition of rhythms, motives, themes, or timbres, sometimes thinly disguised as “variations” that actually involve minimal harmonic, melodic, or rhythmic development
- the use of loudness alone to create the illusion of emotional climax, without a corresponding increase in harmonic tension, thematic development, or musical direction
- abundant percussion activity, but employing stereotyped or clichéd rhythms
- excessive fortissimo passages, few or no passages below mezzo forte, and an almost complete lack of more subtle dynamic shadings
- awkward transitions and superficial conformity to an extrinsically imposed “form”

Publishers’ catalogs often attempt to “sell” school band works by promoting them as sounding more “difficult” than they actually are or by emphasizing other non-musical considerations such as “safe” scoring that covers up mistakes (J. W. Pepper 2005). Such salesmanship clearly exposes a fundamental lack of artistic integrity. The failure of essentially all of the leading writers of educational music to have secured any significant artistic reputation beyond the world of educational music in itself raises questions. A number of defenders of made-for-school music have sought to deflect criticisms of such composers by invoking their “sincerity,” or even by suggesting that just as Mahler, Mozart, or Beethoven were supposedly appreciated only long after their deaths, so some of these writers of school music may be the unrecognized geniuses of today. “In fifty years, society may look back at some of today’s music and consider it anew...who is to say which composer may be pulled from the trash pile of musical neglect next?” stated one band director (personal communication, Stan Schoonover, February 1, 2005) in responding to a criticism by Budiansky (2005a) of the meager artistic merit of Robert W. Smith’s pieces. Yet, as Miles Hoffman (2005) perceptively notes:

No one would dispute that there have been many honorable, sincere, dedicated, and very nice men and women writing music over the past 80 years. But if there are such things as “good music” or “good pieces” or “great pieces,” then there must also be such things as bad pieces (p. 37).

Hoffman also directly rebuts the popular but largely mythical claim that musical geniuses like Mozart and Beethoven were ignored or scorned during their lifetimes:

“Beethoven was misunderstood in his time,” the argument goes, “but now the whole world recognizes his genius. I am misunderstood in my time, therefore I am like Beethoven.”

This reasoning, unfortunately, has been the refuge of countless second and third-rate talents. Beethoven ate fish, too. If you eat fish, are you like Beethoven? But there’s a much graver flaw in the argument: Beethoven was not misunderstood in his time. Beethoven was without doubt the most famous composer in the world in his time, and the most admired. And if there were those who didn’t “get” his late string quartets, for example, there were plenty of others who did, and who rapidly accepted the quartets as masterpieces (pp. 35–36). Charles Rosen sums up this point succinctly: “The Romantic myth that great artists go unrecognized in their lifetimes has been pretty well dismantled by historians today” (Rosen 1995, p. 472).

One particularly noticeable manifestation of the mediocrity that suffuses much of the made-for-school literature is the clumsy and intrusive use of programmatic elements. In contrast to program music by artistically accomplished composers such as Liszt, Dvorak, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Ives, in which the form and emotional depth of the piece evoke an unfolding story or series of impressions, much of the educational literature employs programmatic elements in a gimmicky, shallow, and literal-minded fashion. A typically egregious example is Robert W. Smith’s “Inchon,” in which the percussion section literally imitates the sounds of a helicopter landing. Such pieces are sometimes little more than a collection of sound effects, lacking in any larger convincing form or structure, and certainly lacking the emotionally evocative power of great works of program music. It has become a typical school performance practice to precede such works with the reading aloud of a long explanatory introduction provided by the composer himself, describing in detail the sequence of sounds that will be featured in the piece and what each stands for. That is at least implicit acknowledgement that these pieces are incapable of standing on their own intrinsic musical merits.

Writers of educational music often attempt to promote their works within the school market by giving them titles or programmatic elements that aim to tie in or be “relevant” to curriculum mandates (“The Recycling Song,” e.g.) or historic anniversaries (the Lewis and Clark expedition, the Wright brothers). At best this is a crassly calculated pitch to musically unsophisticated administrators and parents; at worst it is an even crasser attempt to exploit recent news events or worthy causes (the heroes of September 11, the victims of child abuse) to immunize the piece itself against criticism on musical grounds.

3. The role of repertoire selection in meeting educational objectives

School band directors who advocate or at least defend the use of educational music offer a number of affirmative justifications for its use. Some say that playing transcriptions of orchestral compositions is simply “not appropriate” for wind bands and that the shortage of original works for band (especially beginning band) by established composers necessitates the use of made-for-school works. Another argument is that it is not possible to meet important pedagogic goals—such as motivating students with pieces that produce a gratifying result commensurate with their skill level, or providing practical, progressive exercises in developing technique in a balanced fashion among players in all sections—without employing made-for-school works, which often have these goals explicitly in mind. “Simply programming ‘quality literature’ will not in and of itself ensure that we are meeting the needs of everyone involved,” is how one high school band director makes this assertion (Holder 2005).

At its heart, this is a question of what purpose performance ensembles serve in the school environment. Is the purpose to provide the fundamental methodological instruction that each student needs to master his instrument? Is it to produce polished performances for parents and the community? Is it to offer a “fun” group activity? Or is it rather to provide an education in music as a serious curricular subject? While music educators frequently insist it is the last of these, their actions and choices often reflect the first three; as Adams (1994) argues, The biggest problems in music education have been caused by the music teachers themselves. Those problems have to do with too much “activity” and not enough emphasis on the study of serious literature. As we all know, the strength of any academic discipline is in its subject matter. Obviously, our subject matter is the literature we teach and perform (p. 39).

Even if the educational goals of participation in a school band are construed rather narrowly in terms of developing technical musical skills, many respected authorities note that the excess emphasis on performance as an activity and an end in itself is inimical to this objective. Frank Battisti, a legendary high school band director who developed a pioneering program at Ithaca High School in the late 1950s and early 1960s, argued that only by exposing students to a broad spectrum of excellent music will they develop the essential skills of musicianship:

Any program that stresses the attainment of high performance level by rehearsing a small number of pieces during a school year is not challenging the student to develop their full musical potential and appreciation. The student must be exposed to, and participate in, performances of a full repertoire of musical literature that will develop his/her musical knowledge and background... (Norcross 1994, p. 14).

Many of the best music teachers reiterate this point, that a development of musical imagination and taste, a feel for style and phrasing, and an ability to pursue independent music making and appreciation can *only* be attained by playing the best music, and not through the performance of artistically limited didactic works. It is notable that many simple works by great composers (such as Richard Strauss's Serenade for Wind Instruments, Op. 7, written when the composer was 16 years old) are technically easy but musically and emotionally challenging: they demand a subtlety in interpretation, phrasing, dynamics, and ensemble playing, skills that lie at the very heart of an ability to understand and interpret music. Moreover, the kind of inspiration and seamless craftsmanship found in a work like the Strauss serenade—the way in which changes in texture and harmonization and the development and interplay of motives drawn from the opening theme all combine to create an artistic whole—is not only utterly lacking in much if not all of made-for-school pieces, but is the essence of what makes music an *art*. Arnold Jacobs, who was principal tuba player for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (and a world-renowned teacher of musicians of all kinds, from opera singers to violinists), emphasized that the essence of mastering music as an art is the ability “communicate musical thoughts to others,” rather than any details of musical technique. He made a point of having his students play what he called “general music,” never confining themselves to music originally composed for their particular instrument. As he explained: “I don't like this constant stress on ‘instrumental’ playing—‘I am learning to play the trumpet’ ‘I am learning to play the trombone’ . . . [I want the stress on] learning the music. I want the musical dominance over the instrument” (Jacobs 2000). In his own home studio, Jacobs would play everything from violin parts of string quartets to soprano arias from operas on his tuba to stretch his own musical understanding.

Other renowned teachers and music educators often have made a related point: that it is only by playing great music that students are challenged and motivated *to* develop the required technique. Secondary school band directors may feel they are forced into the position of providing what are in effect mass instrumental lessons, and employing simplified or pedagogically conceived pieces, because fewer of their students are willing to take private lessons. But at least in part there is a vicious circle at work here: if their students were passionate and excited about—and challenged by—the music they were performing in school ensemble, more of them would be motivated to seek out the private lessons that would advance their playing skills. “We learn to play in order to learn repertory,” observed the prominent American music educator Allen Britton. “Playing is fun, but playing remains only fun unless we play something worth playing” (Britton 1991, p. 180). Although educational pieces are often justified for being motivational, in fact they may have the opposite effect by being unchallenging and blandly alike. “The monotony of playing and hearing the same kinds of musical sounds, textures and rhythmical devices can only discourage and disappoint players,” notes one critic (Begian 1990, p. 16). This same author, conductor emeritus of the University of Illinois bands, observed in a subsequent article, “School bands that study and perform music of limited substance cannot do anything good for young musicians and may eventually turn students away from band. The study and performance of good music is what attracts students to a band program. Conductors who play only the best music with their bands rarely have a dropout problem” (Begian 1991, p. 10).

composer	work	publisher	(arranger)
Warren Benson	Ginger Marmalade	Carl Fischer	
Vincent Persichetti	Chorale Prelude: Turn Not Thy Face	Theodore Presser	
Aaron Copland	Down a Country Lane	Boosey & Hawkes	(Patterson)
George Gershwin	Rhapsody in Blue	Warner Brothers	(Grofe)
George Gershwin	An American in Paris	Warner Brothers	(Krance)
Morton Gould	Mini Suite	G. Schirmer	
Charles Ives	Old Home Days Suite	Peer	(Elkus)
Percy Grainger	Ye Banks and Braes O' Bonnie Doon	G. Schirmer	
Percy Grainger	Children's March G.	Schirmer	
Igor Stravinsky	Berceuse (from Firebird Suite)	Theodore Presser	(Wilson)
R. Vaughan Williams	Linden Lea	Boosey & Hawkes	(Stout)
R. Vaughan Williams	Flourish for Wind Band	Oxford	
R. Vaughan Williams	Rhosymedre	Galaxy	(Beeler)
Edward Elgar	Nimrod (from Enigma Variations)	Warner Brothers	(Reed)
Gustav Holst	Second Suite in F (2nd movement)	Boosey & Hawkes	
Jules Massenet	Meditation from Thais	Kjos	(Harding)
Richard Wagner	Siegfried's Funeral Music	Barnhouse	(Whear)
Guisepppe Verdi	Ave Maria Ludwig	(Buehlman)	
Guisepppe Verdi	Prelude to Act I, La Traviata	Kjos	(Falcone)
Johannes Brahms	Blessed Are They	Ludwig	(Buehlman)
Franz Schubert	Sanctus (from Mass in F)	Curnow	(Curnow)
W. A. Mozart	Eine Kleine Nachtmusik	Hal Leonard	(Jennings)
W. A. Mozart	Abduction from the Seraglio	Warner Brothers	(Isaac)
W. A. Mozart	Il Re Pastore Overture	Ludwig	(Barnes)
C. P. E. Bach	Sonata for Wind Band	Daehn	(Broege)
G. F. Handel	Royal Fireworks Music	Theodore Presser	(Sartorius)
J. S. Bach	Prelude and Fugue in D minor	Belwin Mills	(Moehlmann)
Henry Purcell	Air and March	Bourne	(Gordon)
G. Frescobaldi	Toccatà	Warner Brothers	(Slocum)
William Byrd	La Volta	Daehn	(Fenske)
William Byrd	Wolsey's Wild	Grand Mesa	(Hartzell)
Antonio de Cabezon	Prelude in the Dorian Mode	Shawnee Press	(Grainger)
Tielman Susato	Battle Pavane	Manhattan Beach	(Margolis)

Table 4. A small and random sampling of pieces by significant composers identified on published lists as suitable for less experienced players (grade 3 or lower difficulty; “medium” or lower difficulty). (CBDNA 1995; Miles 1997; Hash 2005b; Labuta 1996; Garofalo 1976; Begian 1991; Battisti 1995b).

One frequently heard complaint from school band directors is that there are few works by significant composers suitable for school bands, and for beginning students in particular. Yet several projects have identified *many* great works by significant composers, both transcriptions and original works for band, that are fully within the abilities of beginning bands; a small, random sampling from these lists is provided in Table 4. As one contemporary composer notes, “The great masters of the past were able to do both—write pieces that worked for amateur musicians that were also great music. How often can we say that about music being written for children today?...As it stands, publishers provide stock fare to the schools—music that is easy to execute but often is emotionally superficial” (Colgrass 2001, p. 22).

A final rebuttal of the claim that made-for-school pieces serve important educational purposes comes from many critics who note that, for most secondary school music students, the music they play in ensembles *is* their fundamental introduction to music. Most band students do not go on to be professional musicians; many will never even pick up their instruments again after high school. The repertoire they encounter in high school band thus is a large part of the only formal musical education they will ever receive in their lifetime: It is what they will carry with them in subsequent years. If they have had a chance to encounter and play great music, of all genres—classical, jazz, Broadway shows, folk music, ragtime, spirituals—they will have instilled in them a love of music that will inspire them to be listeners and appreciators of music

throughout their lives. As Allen Britton noted some time ago:

Should not our music curriculum consist, first of all, of the world's most beautiful music? Should a child be able to sing in a high school choir or play in a high school band or orchestra for several years and still not have come to know at least a fair sample of the best there is in our musical heritage?...To construct curriculums with music of lasting beauty would by no means exclude the use of new music or even of the teaching pieces now so widely available. It would, however, ensure that music of the greatest worth would be presented to our students in larger quantities than is now the case, and that they would know some of it when they get out of school (Britton 1991, p. 180).

II. WHAT IS DRIVING POOR REPERTOIRE CHOICES?

1. A reluctance to make aesthetic judgments

If there is in fact little substantive justification for the current dominance of educational music within school music programs—and on the contrary, there are serious deleterious consequences from this state of affairs—then why does this situation exist? And why does it persist in the face of some three decades' worth of mounting criticism by music professionals and others?

Several factors can be identified which have allowed so much poor quality music to dominate the school music repertoire. These include an explicit reticence on the part of school music teachers to render aesthetic judgments in selecting repertoire, the relentless promotion of new educational music by music publishers, and the growing importance of non-musical considerations (such as contests) in driving repertoire selection.

When band directors were asked what factors they considered in choosing pieces, they gave far more weight to matching their band's abilities and strengths or to developing technical performance skills than to advancing their students' musical knowledge or exposing them to high-quality literature (Bauer 1996; Young 1998, p. 111). Anecdotally, there is substantial evidence that school band directors are often more comfortable making technical and pedagogic judgments than aesthetic ones when it comes to choosing pieces. In informal communications, many school band directors who defend the use of made-for-school pieces invoke some variant of the "who is to say what is great music?" argument to explicitly abstain from making aesthetic judgments. Electronic forums for band directors on websites such as those run by MENC, the National Association for Music Education, frequently include discussions of the technical difficulty, didactic utility, and student appeal ("a fun piece") of specific works, but it is difficult to find any mention of the artistic quality and aesthetic merits of pieces in these discussions. The Young Band Repertoire Project (2000) of the music education program at University of Texas, San Antonio, has compiled an on-line list of works for beginning band and offers CD recordings of these pieces; yet the sole selection criterion for inclusion is how often these works were performed at contests in Texas. "Literature analyses" that accompany these lists and CDs quantify rhythm, key changes, instrumental ranges, and catalog such technical details as use of staccato and syncopations, but are silent on any assessments of musical sophistication, quality, craftsmanship, or significance. A manifestly circular reasoning often characterizes such compilations of lists: the authors of such studies often declare that they are seeking to identify works of high artistic quality; they then conclude that because band directors frequently select these works, they must therefore be of high artistic quality (see, e.g., Reimer 2004, a survey of college band directors which claimed to show that works of "high artistic merit" are being performed but which in fact showed exactly the opposite, with three-quarters of the approximately 400 works that these directors cited as their "favorite" pieces to perform with high school honor bands being made-for-school works generally afflicted by the kinds of decidedly inferior characteristics we have noted earlier).

In part, a reluctance to say what is good music—and perhaps more important, what is bad music—reflects insecurity and ignorance. A survey of high school choral directors found that 25 percent said they found it "relatively difficult" to judge the quality of a composition in selecting repertoire (Forbes 2001). Even the

50 percent who said it was “relatively easy” tended to define “quality” in largely technical terms, rather than in terms of a work’s beauty, genius, emotional depth, or importance in the musical literature. Strikingly, some comments from directors who were interviewed indicated that they *never* considered quality, or thought it an unimportant question altogether; for example, “I don’t evaluate music in terms of quality. If it fits my performance criteria it probably is quality, but I don’t think in those terms”; “I just pick stuff I want my kids to do”; “I don’t think like that. If I listen to a piece of music and I like it, and I think the students will like it, we do it.”

Such attitudes may be reinforced by the current intellectual fashions of post-modernism and deconstructionism, now an almost unavoidable part of any university education, which challenge any canonization of “great” art as an elitist and Eurocentric construction. If the practical consequence of this intellectual position were a healthy willingness to embrace non-Western and non-classical styles, that would be extremely welcome. Ironically, that has not been the case. The growing dominance of made-for-school pieces in the school repertoire has if anything *narrowed* the range of styles, genres, and cultures authentically represented in school music programs. The principal take-home lesson of the deconstructionist critique is instead largely confined to a sense of vague and general disapproval of the very act of making aesthetic judgments, sometimes even carrying the implication that such judgments are by their very nature presumptuous, if not patriarchal and racist.

Another factor which probably underlies the reluctance of wind band directors to venture out on the limb of rendering aesthetic judgment, and in particular which leads them to be overly-accepting of recently composed wind band pieces, has been discussed by Byrne (2001). The former executive assistant of the U.S. Marine Band, currently executive director of the Kansas City Symphony, Byrne notes that the wind band community, motivated by a desire to elevate its artistic stature vis-a-vis symphony orchestras, has for the last half century been more concerned with building up a body of original works for wind band than with the quality of those works.

Byrne writes, “We are so hungry for new and meaningful repertoire that we accept mediocrity” (p. 7). He argues that a reluctance to criticize, a self-congratulatory tendency to equate activity with progress, and an insular and defensive attitude is unfortunately the norm among the gatekeepers of the modern wind band community. This has led to the proliferation of commissions that regularly yield inferior works, and concert programs that often smack of something very much akin to cronyism as band directors invite one another to appear as guest conductors, performing programs containing large numbers of their own compositions (such programs can be found in, e.g., CBDNA 2005). “Virtually all [of these works] lack a transcendent sense of genuine artistry and originality,” observes Byrne (2001, p. 11); “many sound like third-rate movie soundtracks.” But as such mediocre works become more and more the implicit standard within the wind band repertoire, aesthetic judgments and discrimination become further dulled.

2. The role of educational music publishers

While it is certainly the case that music publishers would not supply an inferior product were there not a demand for it, the sheer marketing power commanded by leading educational music publishers constitutes a powerful force perpetuating this situation. Some 2,500 new works for wind band are published each year (Donze 2005). These are accompanied by aggressive marketing tactics, including the mailing of demo CDs to band directors and the sponsoring of events that actually require school bands which attend to perform a significant number of these new works each year.

Evidence suggests that band directors are strongly influenced by such promotional efforts of music publishers. Listening to publishers’ promotional recordings was the most frequently used method for selecting music cited by Ohio high school band directors in one survey (Bauer 1996); a survey of Pennsylvania band directors similarly found that publishers’ recordings and catalogs were the most frequently used method to learn of new pieces, significantly more so than attending concerts or listening to recordings other than publishers’ demos (Jones 2005). Publishers’ catalogs strongly reinforce the use of narrowly technical or non-musical considerations in choosing pieces; the descriptions accompanying works are full of phrases such as “a great teaching tool for phrasing techniques,” “comfortable ranges,” “all sections share the spotlight,” “phrasing, balance and blend are just some of the many skills this piece can

help you develop in your band,” “the bold lines and solid writing will show your band off well,” “the work is safely scored and deftly cross-cued,” “this piece gives the illusion of being more difficult than it is” (J. W. Pepper 2005). No comparable marketing effort accompanies established works and transcriptions by significant composers sold by the same publishers; instead the high pressure sales and demo CDs are devoted almost exclusively to newly created pieces by writers of educational music. Indeed, a number of significant works have been allowed to go out of print by the publishers who dominate the educational market, although in notable instances (such as Jonathan Elkus’s arrangement of the Charles Ives “Old Home Days Suite”) publishers have been pressured into bringing them back into print as a result of vigorous protests from some band directors.

The influence of publishers is also felt in a subtle but undeniable co-opting of prominent high school and college band directors who are commissioned to perform new publishers’ works for demo recordings. Their personal prestige and remuneration thus become tied to the support and promotion of a steady stream of new pieces produced by educational music writers, which may instill a reluctance to publicly criticize even manifestly inferior works.

Music publishers also strongly influence repertoire selection through their underwriting of events that actually require school bands which attend to perform a significant number of these new works each year. The Midwest Clinic, one of the major annual conferences for school instrumental music directors, draws some 13,000 attendees each year, and offers clinics, courses, and continuing education credits to educators who attend; it is also heavily sponsored by music publishers and other vendors involved in selling to school bands (makers of uniforms, fundraising companies, travel and contest organizers, music camps, and so on). School bands that wish to perform at the Midwest Clinic are explicitly required to program *all* of their music from pieces found in the catalogues of publishers who exhibit at the conference, and 50 percent of the pieces they perform must have been published just within the last year (Midwest Clinic 2005).

The dominance of a few educational publishers tends to be self-perpetuating. Hash (2005a) found that nearly one-third of all pieces performed at district contests in Illinois were published by a single company, C. L. Barnhouse. Similar trends appear to be the case nationwide. Moreover, a number of large publishers have recently merged (Warner Brothers and Alfred, for example), further concentrating control in the industry. As it becomes harder for band directors to find works not available from the large suppliers, fewer may make the effort and instead take the easy option of ordering the heavily promoted, easy to select, and easy to obtain works from the dominant suppliers. That in turn increases the leverage these large suppliers have as gatekeepers of the repertoire selection process. This may indeed be a significant factor in the decreasing performance of authentic compositions by significant composers.

The role of contests has also proved to be a powerful force skewing repertoire selection. Although in principle state contest lists could provide a standard that would promote significant and high quality music, as we have already noted that is not the case, as state lists are themselves heavily tilted in favor of recently written, made-for-school works and often tend to perpetuate what *is* played as opposed to what *ought* to be played. The state lists thus become part of this same circular process through which mediocre educational works, chosen for considerations other than artistic quality, dominate the school repertoire.

Noting the striking disparity between the works rated as significant and the works actually performed by Iowa high school band directors, Hughes (1990) observed:

many directors have become misguided by performances and competitions, and have lost sight of our musical heritage. We should ask ourselves what our students ought to know, and whether the repertoire is fulfilling this need; we should consider a more effective method of music selection and develop a master plan for choosing music (p. 61).

3. What teachers are not being taught

Critics of the teacher certification process have long faulted the excess emphasis on educational-theory courses in education degree programs and the corresponding loss of time that could be devoted to

substantive coursework in the subjects that teachers-to-be will actually teach, such as English, history, or mathematics. Music-education degree programs are not unique in suffering from this problem, which ultimately reflects requirements set by state teacher certification bodies.

But several aspects of the university-level training that music teachers receive appear to exacerbate the tendency for music educators to emerge from their training without the solid knowledge of music literature and history that are essential for assembling a curriculum of high quality music. In its general guidelines for bachelor's degree programs in music education, the National Association of Schools of Music, the national accrediting organization for university programs in music, places a significant emphasis on pedagogic/methods course (NASM 2005, pp. 83–86). Compared to a music major, an undergraduate music education major typically is expected to take a heavier load of courses dealing with practical and technical musical skills (conducting, choral methods, arranging for voice and instruments) and fewer traditional courses in music history, music literature, performance practice, and theory. While a music major might take advanced electives exploring particular composers or the musical literature of particular periods or genres, a music education major's upperclass years are largely occupied with courses in classroom methods, educational psychology, adolescent development, use of technology in the classroom, and with practice teaching.

At the graduate level, the disparity continues; while musicology degree candidates might take electives in Baroque music, Russian folk music, African art music, or symphonic or chamber music literature, music education candidates are offered electives in cognitive psychology of music, classroom methods, instrumental literature for educators, and teaching music to culturally diverse listeners (Case Western Reserve University 2005; University of Maryland 2005; Ohio State University 2005). In addition, it is not unusual for graduate level courses in music theory, history, and literature for music education degree candidates to be less rigorous and comprehensive than the corresponding courses required of musicology majors at the same institutions (Mary Davis, personal communication, 23 September 2005).

III. WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

The overreliance on poor quality, made-for-school music has a number of deleterious, and interlocking, consequences. So too the solutions must be interlocking:

1. Teach the teachers.

The current curriculum for teachers-to-be—music education majors—is predominated by vocational training courses in educational techniques while notably lacking in a solid grounding in music literature. While of course no two person's musical tastes will ever be the same, it is only through a broad and deep exposure to great music (of all genres) that the very ability to make aesthetic judgments develops. Frank Battisti observed that the No. 1 requirement for being an effective teacher of music is to have “a passion for music” (Battisti 2002, p. 256). Yet this is precisely what is minimized in the way school music teachers are trained. Battisti (2002) noted:

In 48 years of observing and working with school and college/university band directors I have noticed that too many confine their interest and pursuit of literature to that which is useful in their immediate teaching pursuits. They almost completely stop attending concerts by artist-professional soloists and ensembles. (p. 241).

Rather than loading down music education majors with vocational and pedagogic courses, they should be exposed to a maximum of actual musical education themselves. Rather than taking courses in techniques or theory of teaching multiculturalism, they should take courses in African or Asian or Russian music. Rather than taking courses in “problems in teaching instrumental music,” they should take courses in instrumental literature of the Renaissance, the Baroque, or the 20th century.

Above all, they should be instilled in the need to have a passion for music themselves to be an effective teacher of music. An essential component of this is to be equipped with the wherewithal to make the continuing exploration of great music a part of their lives well after their formal education is complete.

2. Curtail the influence of music publishers.

The practice of allowing music publishers to sponsor clinics and contests; to pay school band directors to produce demo CDs; and to influence important professional organizations and conferences is inherently corrupting and inimical to the interests of education.

Music publishers will respond to demand. But they have an inherent interest in funneling, directing, and channeling demand in a direction that maximizes turnover and the sale of new products. As long as music educators passively allow themselves to be manipulated by publishers, educational goals will inevitably be subservient to commercial goals. As Frank Battisti (2002) observed:

Presently the wind band world is being greatly influenced by the music industry which promises answers to all the challenges faced by wind band/ensemble directors. Never have there been so many “merchandise fixes” (educational aids, guides, products, etc.) offered to those working in the teaching/directing profession. . . . While some of this material is useful, much of it is not and does not contribute to the goal of teaching music as an expressive art (p. 282).

A number of smaller publishers, such as Grand Mesa Music, have made a point of offering solid works by significant composers even for beginning band (Hash 2005a). Band directors must make the effort to look beyond the big-name publishers and the demo CDs and the festivals and clinics to find high quality literature—and to demand it consistently. Likewise, were they to demand that music publishers bring back currently out-of-print editions of significant works and transcriptions, the market would respond.

3. Stand up for transcriptions.

All great musicians, as Arnold Jacobs observed, have no qualms whatsoever in playing transcriptions as *part of their essential musical education*. Playing the music of the masters, becoming familiar with the style and imagination of the greatest music of all genres, is how fundamental musical sensibility is developed. Whatever may be the arguments for promoting original band music as a performance goal for professional wind ensembles, such considerations cannot be relevant to the education of students. The objective of repertoire selection at the secondary school level—and even at the college level—should be to expose students to a rich variety of the best music that will provide them a grounding for a lifetime of artistic appreciation and enjoyment. In the case of band students, that inescapably means including a significant quantity of high-quality, non-simplified transcriptions of great music originally written for other orchestrations. That includes high-quality jazz arrangements (why should this be restricted to jazz bands?), Broadway overtures, ragtime, folk music, and music from other cultures as well as the best of the Western classical tradition, from medieval times to the 20th century.

4. Resist band chauvinism.

This is closely related to the preceding point, but it suggests a larger obligation for the entire wind band community. Too much of the commissioning of new works for wind bands represents a kind of clubbiness and cronyism that has isolated the entire wind band community in what has been aptly termed a “band ghetto,” cut off from the wells pring of highest artistic creativity and defensively evading legitimate musical criticism. As the composer Warren Benson put it with blunt frankness:

“There is a circle of band directors; every director has got their hand on the shoulder in front of them, patting them on the back. The circle just keeps going around” (Norcross 1994, p. 121).

Part of what ails school wind band music is the larger phenomenon of uncritical boosterism of original but often mediocre compositions for wind band, commissioned by music educators from other music educators. If we are to serve students, we must break out of this narrow insularity and resist the temptation to promote works simply because they seem to advance the stature of the wind ensemble by adding to the repertoire of original works for winds. In fact, in the long run they do the opposite by only further isolating the wind band community, band students, and future teachers from the mainstream of great music and musicianship.

It bears emphasizing that in *no* other realm of the musical world is a comparable prejudice against transcriptions found: even symphony orchestras, which certainly have no shortage of original works to draw upon, embrace transcriptions without hesitation when artistic merit warrants it. Transcriptions for orchestra of many of Bach's fugues (originally written for keyboard), of Brahms's "Hungarian Dances" and Dvorak's "Slavonic Dances" (originally for piano four hands), and of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* and Debussy's *Clair de Lune* (originally for piano) are standard parts of the orchestral repertoire; indeed, many of these orchestral versions are today far better known than their originals.

5. View performance in an educational setting as a means to an end—which is education—and not an end in itself.

Far too much emphasis is placed on school band as a performance activity—and at times even a competitive activity, almost like an athletic event—rather than a curricular course with solid educational objectives. No one would take seriously an English course that aimed to boost test scores by using easy-to-read works written by educators, at the expense of an introduction to the greatest writers of the English language, from Chaucer to Shakespeare to Eliot to Faulkner. No one would take seriously a high school science program whose sole purpose was to compete in science fairs and win prizes (and to stage fund raisers to pay for trips to science fairs). No one would judge the success of a social science program based solely on how many geography-bee prizes the students won. Yet such is all too often the uncritically accepted norm in the band programs of our high schools.

It may take nothing short of a revolution to curtail the current grip that contests, "festivals," trips, and performances have on the school band world. But nothing would do more for the education of students than to eliminate them all in one fell swoop. Secondary and elementary school band directors face an undeniable challenge in trying to balance curricular goals with the *de facto* need to provide pedagogic instruction in instrumental technique to students who may not be willing or able to take private lessons. But there is more that could be done to make private instruction available through the schools (many high schools in the past sought out local college students to provide inexpensive private lessons during or after school hours), and above all to inspire students to *want* to master technique, by giving them the opportunity to be a part of exciting and great music in their ensemble.

Even at the college level, it is a dereliction of the fundamental *educational* duty of an ensemble to place goals such as the commissioning and performance of new works, or attempts to elevate the "stature" of the wind ensemble—or for that matter the ego of the director—ahead of the interests of the students.

The goal is education—nothing else.

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