Concert Programming for Success

We are all constantly striving to come up with the “perfect program,” one that will challenge our students and thrill our audience. In this article, I hope to share with you a process that has served me well over more than four decades of developing programs for groups of all ability levels and a wide variety of audiences.

Usually, in developing a program we just start pulling out pieces we want to perform but that is not the secret to getting it right. First, a few important questions have to be answered.

- Why are you doing the concert? Too often our answer is, “We’ve always done a Fall/Winter/Spring concert!” What’s the real reason? Is it to demonstrate to the parents and administration the progress the students have been making? That would make it kind of a public final exam. Is it to highlight the importance of music in students’ lives for their parents and the community? Is it to attract new students to the band or orchestra? Perhaps, to interest administrators, parents, and community members in supporting the program? Is it to demonstrate what an awesome school you have? Knowing the reasons you are giving the concert will help to guide what type of program you need. It also provides you with a thought-out answer when someone decides they need to hold an event in the auditorium at the same time as your concert!

- What is the message or theme? What do you want them to remember when they leave the concert? It’s important to be part of your school’s strategic communications (suggest you review “Make Your Music Program Indispensable” <https://sbomagazine.com/current-issue/6438-make-your-music-program-indispensable.html> ).

- Who is the target audience? This is a natural follow-on to the first question but will help you to decide how you will Inspire, Entertain, and Educate the audience (and the musicians).

- What are your available resources? These might include available literature ($), student proficiency, amount of rehearsal time, the performance venue (does it have lighting and/or video capability?), staff (usually none, but how about the theater department students?).

From decades of experience, I can tell you, don’t skip these steps! Take a few minutes to answer these questions for yourself before you start picking out titles. Now, we can start building a program!

- Start with a template. Great programs have a certain structure and there’s no sense reinventing the wheel. Find other programs you thought worked well and model the shape and flow. To facilitate that, I organize my repertoire into categories (opener, closer, major work, march, solo, popular, novelty, etc.). That way, with a template I can get a good start by selecting “one from Column A, one from Column B, etc.”

- Do realistic timings, not guesstimates. YouTube can be your friend for this.

- Have an encore planned, but make it short (no more than 1:30). It’s a great way to end the concert with excitement. This might just be the final strain of a march that you performed earlier.

- Don’t forget the rule of “6’s.” Six minutes is the maximum length that most audiences will stick with a piece mentally. Six seconds is the time it takes a listener to decide if they like something or not.

- Look at the shape of your program. The best programs have a “multiple wave” shape. In other words, moments of high intensity followed by moments of repose with each “high” leading to a bigger “high.” Young bands will often only do three or four short selections. Too often, they are all in the same key and the same tempo. Even with three pieces, strive for a “moderate intensity, low intensity, high intensity” arc. If two pieces are in E-flat and one in B-flat, try to put the B-flat one in the middle. These considerations may obviously cause you to change some selections. Good! Three Grade 1.5 selections in E-flat at the same tempo (sound familiar?) will leave students and audience “uninspired.”

Here’s a diagram of a summer concert in the park program. The width of the selection indicates the length. Blue is a low intensity work, orange is more intense, red, flaming, etc. The white space indicates narrator. Note that not every piece is followed by talking. The “chasers” are short (no more than 1:30) fun pieces to follow a heavy piece.

INSERT PROGRAM TEMPLATE

Most educators will not be presenting a concert of this length or with this many selections. Here’s a template for a short program. Note that in lieu of narrator (or director mumbling…) that pieces might be separated by student-produced videos that tell about what band/orchestra means to them and/or about the upcoming piece. Your students (and parents!) will love it. If your hall doesn’t have video capability installed, a portable screen to the side of the stage will work fine as long as the audio is amplified.

INSERT SHORT PROGRAM TEMPLATE

As music educators, concert programming is our “Super Bowl.” It’s pretty much left completely up to us, it will govern our teaching over many weeks, and for some, will determine if our program is “good” or not. Consequently, it deserves some real thought prior to picking out pieces and then some objective scrutiny to determine if it will achieve the desired effect on the musicians and the audience.

Next month will be another edition of Colonel’s Book Club. We’ll look at “Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning.” This was first suggested to me by Colin Hunt who was one of this year’s SBO Magazine’s “50 Directors Who Make a Difference.”

I love hearing from SBO readers (and I’m still getting requests for band set-ups <https://sbomagazine.com/current-issue/1454-inservice/6675-concert-band-set-up-fundamentals.html> ). Contact me anytime at ThomasPalmatier.com.