



Great Repertoire for Young Orchestras

By Carolyn Watson

Composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein famously said, “to achieve great things, two things are needed: a plan and not quite enough time.” This philosophy underlines my repertoire selection and programming decisions for the young orchestras with which I work.

Great works of art, be they musical, literary, film, dance, or any other media, are in and of themselves inspiring. In the same way audiences appreciate hearing classical masterpieces, young musicians are inspired by the opportunity to present these great works of the orchestral canon. For students, to be entrusted with the preparation and performance of such pieces is a motivating factor in and of itself.

Playing your favorite work or symphony, whether it is something you grew up listening to or a more recent discovery is a pleasure not only confined to students. However, it is one that particularly seems to resonate with young musicians experiencing it for the first time.

It is also an approach grounded in sound pedagogical principles. The great Hungarian music educator Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967) was staunchly against diluting musical and academic content, actively refusing to adapt or rework teaching materials in order that they be more suited to an audience of children or young musicians. Kodály believed that if the music selected were of sufficient quality and appropriate

with regard to other pedagogical components, this alone would serve as a motivation enough, stating, “children should be taught with only the most musically valuable material. For the young, only the best is good enough. They should be led to masterpieces by means of masterpieces.”

As orchestra director at the Interlochen Arts Academy, I am charged with programming the Academy Orchestra’s annual concert season comprising some fifteen performances, including eight major concerts. Programs over the course of the year are structured according to a sequential pedagogical approach targeting specific skill areas including the development of orchestral reading ability, rhythm, and the development of a secure sense of inner pulse, and refinement of intonation, balance, and blend. Consideration is also given to providing as broad a range of musical genres and orchestral experiences as possible, as well as bearing in mind what works well from a programming perspective, and what repertoire may appeal to audiences. How then, to sustain and enhance these motivated students’ interest and challenge them to continue to develop over the course of the year?

Announcing to a talented young orchestra together we will perform a symphony of Beethoven or a ballet of Stravinsky says much more than merely informing them about the forthcoming program. Rather, the message conveyed is “I think you’re good enough to play that.” For any young musician or aspiring professional, that is a message they crave above all others. Studying and performing works that your orchestra students know by reputation and recordings inspires motivation, builds confidence, and develops trust.

Inviting suggestions regarding repertoire is another effective means of motivating young musicians. In doing so you reinforce the reciprocal nature of the orchestral music-making relationship and show the students their opinions and input is an integral component of the orchestral program.

So your string students want to play *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*? Let them. While this work of Mozart’s is probably among the ten most recognizable orchestral works ever, and perhaps conductors think it is a piece heard one too many times, there is still much to be learned. Approach the work through score reading as an alternative approach to traditional orchestra rehearsals. Look at the page and analyze it from a theoretical and musico-

logical perspective to determine why the accompaniment is important, what that means for the ensemble in terms of balance, how the counterpoint fits together, why intonation in the opening four bars is a particular challenge, and what students need to do when playing in octaves.

Some directors tire of repeated student requests to play repertoire that is beyond them. While your principal trumpet may frequently pester you to play Mahler 5, the opening excerpt of which you hear preceding every rehearsal, the scope of such a work is beyond the realm of all but the most exceptional young orchestras. However, the composer’s discarded Blumine movement from Symphony No. 1, featuring a beautiful trumpet solo, may prove a suitable choice and appease your trumpet player.

By selecting a lesser-known work by the same composer at a more suitable ability level, students develop a broader knowledge of repertoire, styles, and genres. Furthermore, adopting this approach often develops trust and rapport between the ensemble and director. Students appreciate knowing you listen to their voices.

Exposure to the unknown can also be a similarly exciting journey. The introduction of a new composer, piece, or genre can be a wonderful challenge. Preconceived ideas and prejudices can also be modified through an informed approach to repertoire selection. *Gurrelieder* may not be the best way to introduce Schoenberg, but the composer’s orchestrations of Bach and Brahms could provide an entry-level platform. Similarly, a symphony or large-scale choral/orchestral work of Brahms could be preceded by study of the composer’s chamber and instrumental works, the *Academic Festival Overture*, and the two orchestral serenades.

Another underlying principle of my approach to repertoire selection is to set the bar just a little too high. Students should have a reasonable chance of success, but should stretch just beyond what they believe is possible. In short, convince them you believe they are good enough, and then help them to be that good.

I work with great energy and enthusiasm, and with much attention to specific details, to make rehearsals as productive as possible. The power of positivity counts for much, and often my belief in students’ ability to perform ensures that they do. Over the course of the rehearsal process I aim to show them that yes, in fact, they are that good.

I enjoy recording the first run through or rehearsal of a piece and playing it back to the group in the days leading up to the concert. This exercise serves a number of purposes. Aside from lightening the mood of what may be an intensive and focused rehearsal, the students enjoy hearing just how far they have come over the previous few weeks. As we recall a rehearsal where everyone is unfamiliar with the piece, it isn’t long before the whole orchestra goes from grimacing to grinning to falling about in fits of laughter. As James Lockhart, a former conducting teacher of mine once said, the ability to make an orchestra laugh is an important skill to have, the value of which should not be underestimated. □

Bibliography

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Carolyn Watson is the conductor of the Academy Orchestra at the Interlochen Center for the Arts. She was previously conductor-in-residence at the Conservatorium High School in Sydney, Australia. In 2012 Watson was a major prizewinner at the Emmerich Kálmán International Operetta Conducting Competition and served as musical assistant at the Staatsoper Berlin for *Infektion!* Watson is the recipient of several awards, including the Brian Stacey Award for emerging Australian conductors, a 2013-14 Dome Centenary Fellowship, and a Churchill Fellowship. She studied with David Zinman as a Fellow of the American Academy of Conducting at the Aspen Music Festival and School and earned a Ph.D. in Orchestral Conducting from the University of Sydney.

Selected Orchestral Works

Divertimento for Orchestra by Leonard Bernstein. This work will particularly appeal to the inquisitive minds and musicologists of your ensemble. A quirky composition comprising eight short and varied movements centered on musical parodies and jokes, it refers to Beethoven, Stravinsky, Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel*, Sousa, Tchaikovsky, and Wagner. A brassy fanfare opening movement gives way to a beautiful strings only waltz in $\frac{3}{4}$ before a winds-only Mazurka, a samba, a blues, and a Sousa-esque March finale concluding with the brass section on their feet. Performance directions such as "imbecilicly and cretinously" will have your orchestra in fits of laughter.

Polovtsian Dances by Alexander Borodin. In general I like works featuring a number of shorter movements. Contrasting styles and tempi help students develop the ability to watch and respond to the conductor, an invaluable skill. These works by Borodin have an optional choir part – a great choice if you are looking for a combined orchestral and choral composition.

Sinfonía India by Carlos Chavez. This little-known work is the composer's second symphony. Inspired by and based on tuneful Mexican folk melodies, the work is particularly appropriate for a high school orchestra. A work consisting of three connected movements without a break, *Sinfonía India* opens with an energetic, rhythmic, mixed-meter theme before the work transitions into a slower movement, concluding with a motoric unison tutti $\frac{6}{8}$ rondo theme. This composition features great percussion parts, a beautiful clarinet melody, and plenty else to keep your string and brass sections happy.

Pelléas and Mélisande Suite by Gabriel Fauré. A wonderful work via which to develop the sound of your string section, this piece also provides a great platform for selected woodwind and horn solos and keeps your harpist busy. Each of the four movements allows you to explore a variety of string and orchestral colors and contrasts.

Overture to Colas Breugnon by Dimitry Kabalevsky. This energetic concert opener is in a fast one in a bar – a great work for developing this specific skill and strengthening the ability to subdivide. The contrasting middle section is a chance for the strings to shine, and the work, with its rhythmic drive and fast tempo, has much to be learned by your wind and brass players in terms of developing articulation.

Háry János Suite by Zoltán Kodály. The selection of this work will ensure you remain popular with the brass and percussion sections all year. If you are also looking for a work to feature an alto saxophonist and a pianist, this is a great choice. Prominent viola and clarinet solos as well as much tutti and sectional writing will keep everyone engaged in this humorous, six-movement work.

Desintegracion Morfológica de la Chacona de J.S. Bach by Xavier Montsalvatge. A brilliant adaptation – an orchestration, reworking, and, as the title implies, a disintegration – of Bach's chaconne by Spanish composer Xavier Montsalvatge (1912-2002). All sections of the orchestra will be kept well occupied with great solo and sectional writing, and the variety of string techniques featured – Bartók pizzicato, glissando, col legno, tremolo – makes wonderful train-

ing in orchestral playing techniques for your string section.

Overture and Ballet Music from Idomeneo by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who is non-negotiable in terms of the composers young musicians need to know. The challenge, though, lies in finding suitable orchestral repertoire for students, which is notoriously tricky because of the transparency of the orchestration and the refined classical sound required. The *Overture and Ballet Music* from Mozart's opera *Idomeneo* is a great choice. D major ensures relative readability for strings, and the ballet music is made more accessible by an energetic ritornello in this key.

Overture to the Gypsy Baron by Johann Strauss is a great choice if you have a strong principal oboe. Operatic overtures are especially good training pieces because they generally feature vastly varied themes from throughout the opera within the one piece, meaning students develop the ability to respond to differing meters, tempi, styles, and articulation. Furthermore, the vocal lines often provide wonderful solo opportunities, particularly for the woodwinds, as is true in this example.

Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky is a great work for fine-tuning intonation, color and blend in your woodwind section. Opening with characteristic Tchaikovskian low clarinets and bassoons, this piece is also a great one for developing some truly lush romantic legato string playing. Your English horn, harp, and timpani players will be challenged, and there is much for your string section to learn in terms of orchestral technique.