

PROGRAMMING FOR THE SCHOLASTIC PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE

Emily Tannert Patterson

Percussion ensemble music is (or, arguably, at least should be) the centerpiece of many groups' work in the spring months, so it stands to reason that our primary curricular material would merit careful consideration in its selection. However, I find that educators often don't know where to look for pieces beyond, perhaps, their state's "selected repertoire" list. State lists can be a fantastic starting point, but with the enormous quantity of high-quality music being produced right now, the lists just can't keep up with the great repertoire for our art form.

So how does a successful ensemble director go about sourcing and selecting ensemble music?

I believe that each director has to find a process or method that works for them; I can only share my own, which involves spending a lot of time looking at publisher websites, YouTube and other social media channels, and talking to my colleagues. While that may sound a bit daunting, the great part about this process is that I come across a lot of pieces that, while they might not be

pieces that, while they might not be right for my group right now, I can file in my mental music cabinet to play later; and I come across a lot of pieces that I might not have otherwise seen. As I have often said to my students, one of the most incredible parts about being a percussionist is that our art form is a modern one, and we have the chance to participate, as composers, arrangers, and performers, in the creation of its canon. No other single instrument or instrument family can say that!

Criteria for selection

Before you look at any music, you should first know what the purpose of the repertoire is. Do you have a percussion ensemble concert at the end of the semester? A performance at a festival? Or is this piece intended only to be prepared in the classroom for skill-building? How long do you have to learn the repertoire? The answers to these questions will necessarily inform your selections.

Now, on to the music! First, for better or for worse, we generally have to select

for worse, we generally have to select pieces based on how many students we have in the ensemble. There are a few exceptions/workarounds – which I'll cover later – but usually we need to restrict ourselves to what's been written for the number of students we have.

Secondarily, many of us are limited by what gear we have on hand. Whether it's that we only have one 5-octave marimba – or only one marimba, period – this can be a determining factor.

Next is, of course, the level of challenge. Who is playing this: your beginners? Your middle school top group? Your high school second group? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Given the varying skills of our students, a group that can pull off a fairly hard drummy piece may need to stay on the easier side of the keyboard literature, or vice versa.

Then consider what type of music you're after – both in terms of what will work well for the individual group as well as how the piece will fit in a performance opportunity/concert as a whole. Do these students need a pop-style piece – something with groove? Do they need to do a classical transcription? Or are they mature enough to do something esoteric? Or perhaps you already have too many keyboard ensembles or drummy pieces or groovy pieces or transcriptions or classical percussion ensembles programmed for your concert (much like a great meal, every concert should offer a variety of flavors – a mini-tour of the different types of

a mini-tour of the different types of repertoire, if you will), or maybe you need something crowd-pleasing to play at a faculty in-service.

Lastly, you have to consider the skills and needs of the individual performers. Do you have a student who can be featured as a soloist? Do you have a killer drumset player? Or do you lack a solid timpani player, or have a player who needs a remedial-level part? How long do you have to prepare, and how much rehearsing will you be able to do in that time?

Sourcing material

All of these questions create a giant jigsaw puzzle. Thankfully, I really like puzzles! So every year, around the end of marching band season, I start scouring publishers' websites and composers' SoundCloud channels. I like to start with Tapspace and C. Alan; Jim Casella and Nathan Daughtrey, respectively, have done a great job of curating and publishing a wide variety of high-quality pieces. I also spend a bit of time at Row-Loff, depending on what kinds of music I'm looking for. I use the search filters to narrow down the field by number of students, difficulty, and/or instrumentation, and then... I listen to a LOT of music. I grab a piece of paper (such as the programming worksheet I've provided for you), write down every ensemble I'm programming for, and list all the possibilities I come across for each group.

Since so many composers self-publish

Since so many composers self-publish these days, it's worth checking out YouTube as well. YouTube's "next up" and "suggested video" features may lead you toward pieces or composers you didn't otherwise come across, as can looking up old concert programs online, or reaching out to other teachers in your area.

I try to go into the puzzle with an idea in mind: for example, a "centerpiece" piece for my top group, something esoteric for the second group, a "special effects" piece for my third group, etc. – not a formula, but some idea of what I'm looking for, to shorten the hunt. It often doesn't take very long to firm up the first couple of selections; and at that point the concert as a whole is starting to take shape, which makes it easier to include or exclude potential pieces for the next group on my list.

This process can take a while, but you shouldn't feel required to listen to the entirety of every piece you 'audition;' often I know just by reading a description, or by listening to the first thirty seconds, that a piece is not right for my group: maybe I don't have access to steel drums, or I don't have a drumset player (and the part can't be split up, or I don't have the personnel to split it up); maybe it's a wintery piece and this concert is in May! Whatever the reason, exercising a bit of early selectiveness drastically shortens the amount of time I spend clicking around. I've also learned over the years to check the provided scores/score samples as r-

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well – what sounds easy on composer-produced audio can be deceptively difficult in reality; looking at the score will alert you to an individual part with a complicated rhythm, for instance, or to challenging ensemble moments that are not obvious to the ear.

Other Solutions

Sometimes you just can't find what you're looking for a need a few extra pairs of eyes and ears, and on these occasions, colleagues can be of help. On the infrequent instance I resort to social media in order to crowdsource programming suggestions, I try to do it with a very specific set of needs, for example, "A drummy piece for 5, no longer than 5 or 6 minutes, top ensemble of a very good high school program." I try to include other pieces the group has played for reference, since one person's 'moderately good' group is another person's 'outstanding' (or 'mid-lower level'). If you find yourself doing this too, just remember that the more specific you are in communicating what you need, the better the information that's offered will meet those needs.

Last but not least, when there's a piece I really, really want to play (or that the students really want to play, or that I think would be particularly good for our program) that requires more students than we have available in any given class period, I consider whether it's possible to get creative with rehearsing the piece.

piece

piece rehearsing only after school? Can you split up the part assignments such that all of one instrument type (ex. keyboards) are in one period and the rest of the parts in another period, to enable some extra rehearsal? If there are more students than parts, can you double or split a part while maintaining ensemble balance and the educational value of the music? If you lack an instrument, can you find a workaround – perhaps use synth to replace steel pan, split drum set into bass and snare/cymbals, or replace timpani with bass marimba? Getting creative about dealing with personnel and instrumentation challenges can really open up the variety of musical experiences we can offer our students.

This process does take time, but considering that – especially for high school students – the percussion ensemble pieces they play form the backbone of our curricular material for the spring semester, I consider it time invested in my students’ skills and experiences, and therefore time invested in the growth of the program. There is a particular joy in teaching a piece that is a good fit for your students, that they are capable of performing at a high level, that pushes them as musicians and as performers, and that they and you enjoy working on.

Happy programming!

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Patterson holds a Master's degree in Percussion Performance (2010) as well as a Bachelor's degree in Music Education (2008) and undergraduate Performance Certificate in Percussion from The University of Texas at Austin, where she studied with Thomas Burritt and Tony Edwards.

Patterson is an educational endorser for Innovative Percussion sticks and mallets, Remo drumheads, and Zildjian cymbals. She holds professional memberships in the Texas Music Educators Association and the Percussive Arts Society, and serves on the PAS Education Committee.