



It all starts with a song...

By the time you read this, the XXI Olympic Winter Games will be melting away from our memories. Still, in its ongoing impact around the world, the Olympics continue to provide hope for a more peaceful and better world through sport.

Nothing permeates and fuels the competitive spirit and warms the hearts of spectators more than the opening trumpet fanfare of the “Olympic Fanfare and Theme” written by John Williams. It’s announcement of the opening of the Olympic games or just the return from a TV station break, jerks our attention to the action, no matter what sport is currently being highlighted.

We all know the power of music. It is known for its ability to change our mood, determine how long we stay in a restaurant and what deodorant we buy. More than that, it touches us and has the power to revive and bring hope. The “We Are the World 25 for Haiti” hit the number one single spot on iTunes in one day as a small token of support for those who are suffering.

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This saying, often used when referring to Music City USA, Nashville, TN, “was intended to convey the importance of having a good song to start with in the creative/commercial process of going into the studio, producing the project, marketing it to radio and television, and trying to make sure the artist performing the song gets maximum exposure and sells records” (David Baroni, musician). This is true for musicians of all types and persuasions, including school choir directors or marching band instructors. If we don’t start with a song we can embrace and that will hold up after hours and days of practice and performing, it will affect all we hope to accomplish.

So how do we choose our music? What makes you select one tune over another?

Ability Level

The most obvious place to begin is with ability level. What is within the realm of possibilities based upon the ability level of the performers? Most music companies assign their selections to particular categories to clearly delineate arrangements appropriate for a specific range of abilities. In a learning environment, it is often advantageous to select something that stretches the students to raise the bar and reach for higher goals, while reinforcing current abilities and providing an avenue for success.

Before going this route, however, another factor comes into play. The amount of time available to learn a specific piece greatly affects the appropriateness of a determined difficulty level. If sufficient time is available to learn a selection, it is to your advantage to select something a little more difficult, something beyond the current ability level of your group. If time is limited, however, you would better off selecting something that showcases the current abilities of your students.



Quality

Once these factors are determined and the selection narrowed down to an appropriate level, the next filter is quality. Is the piece musically sound? Will the instrumentation of our ensemble be able to handle the balance required to successfully perform the piece? Does the piece highlight a certain instrument or section? If so, do I have the personnel and talent in those areas to fulfill the requirements? Does the music provide variety, texture, and musical nuances to inspire performers and audience alike?

Other Factors

Finally, other factors which affect music selection are venue and audience. For whom and where will this piece be performed? What are the nuances of the culture or current events? For example, this coming marching season will probably boast an abundance of Michael Jackson shows to pay tribute to this icon of modern music. In marching band specifically, these final factors of venue, audience, and culture are the prime contributors to theme selection.

Music instructors are required to make performance selections on a regular basis and may find themselves relying on past successes or falling back on personal preferences if this checklist of filters is not brought into consideration. A careful assessment of the characteristics of both your group and the music will provide a powerful grid to ensure the long-term enjoyment and success of your efforts. All we attempt to do in music education relies heavily on our choice of song. Remember, it all starts with a song.