

**“What Was I Thinking?”**  
**Programming Strategies for UIL Middle School/High School**  
**Contest**

**by**

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My first day of teaching was many, many years ago, but I will never forget it! I graduated from college and went out into the big, choral world armed with theory, musical knowledge as I grasped it then, the ability to write units and lesson plans, and a plethora of university-level repertoire that I knew and loved.

I was SO excited about music and teaching and was most anxious to meet my classes of junior high school students - 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> graders. When the tardy bell rang after the entrance of my first class, I began talking 90 miles a minute—enthusiastic greeting, “so-glad-to-be-here” stuff, expectations and rules of the classroom, calendar of events for the year, etc. Next, the sight singing exercises and music for the first planned concert were passed out. After warm up, the sight reading activity was a disaster and the repertoire chosen for the fall concert was WAY TOO DIFFICULT! That was my initiation in the rudiments of music selection for my young singers—present and future.

Consulting my watch for the amount of time left with that first class gave me cause to panic. I told and showed those children everything I knew in 20 minutes! 35 minutes were left in the class period and 284 more days to go in the school year—ARRRGH! Because we started school on a Wednesday that year, the students and I spent the next two days taking some knowledge/skill pretests, doing individual voice testing, and accessing part placement for each singer. For me, the entire weekend was spent in the music store finding literature my choirs would like and could sing!

We all learn lessons about many things throughout our career. Truly, some of the biggest and hardest lessons learned for me have been in music selection and programming. The year before my junior high choir was invited to sing at TMEA, I programmed the Schutz double choir piece “Lord, Who Is My Guide, But Thee” for UIL contest. DUH! The piece had been an All-State Choir selection. The scores I submitted to the judges were a mess from all of the voicing and part changes I had made to accommodate the singers. The results were positive because of the choir’s commitment to the music, but it was a very challenging and scary choice on my part. One of the very best high school mixed choirs I ever had the privilege of teaching made a division II across the board because of my programming. It was a fabulous group of singers, but I over-programmed. I did not give the students a “breather” piece. All of the selections were hard and taxing, vocally and

emotionally, which caused them to “run out of gas”—tuning problems, lack of control, energy in the sound, and so on. Honestly, the program made me tired!

Many teaching experiences can and will prompt the question, “What was I thinking?” Repertoire chosen to fulfill a goal, be it conceptual, musical, or just morale building, is probably one of the most important aspects of programming for success. Assessing student starting points, deciding what they should achieve during the year, determining the steps needed to fulfill these goals, and choosing repertoire that will support the journey are crucial. It was imperative that I come up with a plan for music selection that was based on sound musical principles and that offered my students quality learning and feeling experiences, which would result in musical growth and success.

Take the PRETEST. It’s fun! Then, share a checklist of considerations for programming strategies that might make a difference in your performance results and response!

## **Considerations for Programming Strategies**

### **1. Have a plan, or scope and sequence, for successful learning in your classroom.**

Choose music that furthers the musical learning of your students. Incorporating songs that support the **scope** (musicianship skills, expressive skills, vocal ability, sight reading skills, choral skills, historical understanding of music and styles, ensemble sound, etc.) and **sequence** (emphasis of musical concepts in each piece such as vocal production, legato singing, choral blend, tuning, articulation, textual understanding, etc.) for the aims and goals of learning you have established throughout the school year will enhance purpose and musical growth.

### **2. Choose music with a balance in mind.**

Balance is the key to a happy life in music selection. What constitutes balance is variety: easy/hard, accompanied/a cappella, historical/contemporary, fast/slow, heavy/light, different periods, languages, styles, ethnicities, texts, etc. This exposes students to many different types of musical expressions and develops in them a wide variety of musical experiences. Don't be afraid to program something different or that may seem "off the wall". If it supports the goals of your curriculum and is quality music, it may just be wonderful!

### **3. Be aware of range when choosing music.**

The range must be conducive to the skill level of the singers. ("I sang it in college" or "I have always wanted to do this piece" just doesn't work!). However, remember you can transpose a piece, rewrite notes up or down the octave, or revoice notes to make the piece more applicable to your situation.

### **4. Look at voice leadings in your music selections.**

This can be a hidden trap in choral music that can make or break tuning, blend, balance, accuracy, and accessibility. A piece of music that is not well voiced or asks singers to move in directions that are confusing or illogical will insure failure and/or, at least, frustration. Take the time to sing through each part to see how progressions are resolved within each line. Watch for crossing parts, unusual interval leaps, and strange resolutions of harmonic progressions. If the piece is not well written, it should be avoided.

### **5. Texture is an important consideration.**

Some pieces require large, full bodied sounds while others are just right for the "blow dryer" sounds we get from our students at different stages in their vocal maturity. It is certainly fine to challenge students to move beyond their comfort zone, but there are limits. Make sure you are choosing music that is within the reasonable possibility for your choir. A workable formula might be choosing one piece that showcases the choir's strength, one piece that challenges their strengths, and one that is totally in their comfort zone.

## **6. Analyze the text of the music you choose.**

Make sure your students can relate to the text of the songs you select for them to sing. Can they really relate to being a bird or a butterfly? The gay flowers of spring, walking softly like the starry night, or dreams of shadows on the stars might be great choices for some choirs and disastrous for others. An entire program of sea chanteys is not necessarily the answer for young male choirs. Text is one of the most important elements in music selection. Decide if the text is something the singers will understand and relate to or if it will be so esoteric that trying to teach it will end up in frustration for all involved. Some texts are easily understood by students; others are not. You must have a keen awareness of how text will affect your singers.

## **7. Create feelings with your program choices.**

My philosophy for programming has always been “meaningful, Meaningful, MEANINGFUL”. The music we choose should create feelings and passions for life as our students know it, not just at contest time, but throughout the entire school year. Music making is about expressing ideas of what it means to be human. We owe it to our students to choose quality literature with texts that are meaningful and relative to the feelings they experience, have experienced, and will experience. The job of the teacher is “interpretation”. The gift of interpretation is second to no virtue of the music educator, and the love your students feel for their music should be second hand—you feel it first!

## **8. Do not be afraid to ask for help.**

Great choir directors beg, borrow, and steal from any good source they can find. Your friends, colleagues, and mentors can be a wealth of knowledge concerning choices of literature for your groups. They can provide a great source of performance techniques by working with your choirs and offering recordings of the selections you have chosen. These invaluable people have done music you have not and know the value and pitfalls of different selections. Ask for help as often as you can!

## **9. Always be on the lookout for good music.**

Attend concerts, contests, and festivals to hear and “feel” good literature. Keep programs you might have marked for future reference, especially UIL programs from your region or regions you have observed or judged. Know the PML—front to back. Know that all selections on the PML are not truly “do-able” with most choirs required to sing from that grade level (i.e. “Soldier’s Hallelujah” –TB-Singh and “Hush, My Babe”-SA-Koudelka/Bacon are very difficult selections for most young middle school choirs, for example). Some pieces, such as the “Gloria”-SSATB-Spevecek (Grade 4), look difficult but are very well negotiated by young mixed choirs, and they sound big and great!

## **10. Know the capabilities and limitations of your choirs, select literature they and you will love, give each piece meaning, and make music.**

These are the keys and insurance to rewarding, musical and rating success!

