

“What Was I Thinking?”

Selecting the Music for UIL Choir Concert (High School)

Do you wake up in the middle of the night wondering, “what in the world was I thinking when I picked this program?!” I may be impossible to “bullet-proof” your UIL concert program, but there are things you can do to make sure that the music you select works for your choir. These are day-to-day things you can do to assure that, when your students get on stage, the music enhances their performance instead of being a stumbling block.

- 1. Your UIL concert program should represent what your choir typically sings throughout the year.**
 - Don’t wait until UIL to pull out the heavy artillery!
 - Make your UIL performance a “mini-concert” of the music your choir sings all year long.
 - Make sure the music you pick demonstrates what your choir can do, not what they can’t!
 - You don’t have to wait until the spring to sing music from the UIL PML.
- 2. Start planning your UIL programming early in the school year—even during the summer, but don’t start teaching the music too early in the year.**
 - At the beginning of the school year you are working on developing tone and good singing habits.
 - Music sung during the first weeks of school never sounds as good as the music sung later in the year.
- 3. Consider programming a piece from your winter concert for UIL.**
 - UIL lists include many “Christmas” pieces.
 - Especially helpful when students are singing in a treble or tenor-bass choir plus mixed choir.
- 4. Plan backwards!**
 - Get out your calendar, count the number of rehearsals from now until the contest.
 - Even more important if you are on block schedule!
 - Split music up into “teachable” sections, decide when each has to be learned and mark it on the calendar.
 - Decide if choir can actually learn the music and have it ready for performance by dates you have set.
 - Allow for students being out for activities (golf, debate, one act play, testing, etc.)
 - Be low-tech in planning: make lists, mark your calendar, write post-it notes. Don’t spend a lot of time at the computer that you can use working on the music.
- 5. Don’t over-program!**
 - Be realistic about what you and the choir can perform very well.
 - It’s unlikely you would get a comment that, “you should have sung harder music!”
 - You will get comments if the music isn’t prepared well or over the students’ heads at this point in their musical development.
 - Continually challenge your choirs, but be a little bit conservative when it comes to programming for UIL.
- 6. Variety is the spice of...everything!**
 - Do your students ask you, “So, which Dello Joio piece are we doing THIS year?”
 - Branch out! Keep singing Dello Joio, but try singing something different at UIL.
 - A good concert program often represents a variety of musical styles, textures and historical periods.
- 7. Ask a friend what they think about your program before you submit it.**
 - Every choral director has their “favorites” and their “unfavorites.”
 - Example: I love the music of Houston Bright, but choirs often have trouble singing his music because of the very thing that makes it so beautiful: the lush harmony. One of Bright’s most well-known works is “Never Tell Thy Love.” It’s deceptively simple, but very difficult to sing in tune! I don’t recommend it for choirs at UIL because of the tuning pitfalls in the piece.
 - We all know pieces that don’t “work” for us, and we know pieces that almost always work. Don’t take a chance programming something “iffy” at UIL when there is plenty of music out there that works!
- 8. Ask a friend – part two: email is a wonderful thing!**
 - Along about mid-January I can count on getting email from several choral directors with a list of possible UIL pieces for each of their choirs.
 - There is usually at least one piece that I ask, “WHY on earth are you singing THAT?” May be something I’ve heard choirs “bomb” regularly at UIL or just not a very good piece of music in my opinion.
 - It makes that director stop and think about what they are programming.

- You may decide to stick with your original program, or you may change the whole thing. Regardless, talking it over with another choral musician is one of the best things you can do to assure that you're picking a great program for your choirs.

9. Pick something “off the list.”

- Of the three pieces in your UIL concert program, only two of them must be from the PML.
- One selection may be from any source, so, take advantage of this opportunity to expand your repertoire and choose something that really fits your choir.

10. Don't get locked into the “one from column A, one from column B” mentality.

- It's good to program a variety of periods, styles, languages, but it's not a requirement.
- Don't be afraid to step “outside the box” when it works really well for your choir.

11. Know your languages!

- Make sure you know how to pronounce the text correctly.
- If you bring in an “expert” make sure they understand “singer's diction” in that language.
- Bad pronunciation equals bad tone quality in any language!

12. Capitalize on your strengths and avoid your weaknesses.

- Whatever your choir's particular strengths and weaknesses, consider them as you pick your concert program.
- Accompaniment: If you have strong instrumentalists available, use them. Nothing showcases a good choir better than a good accompaniment. Conversely, a good choral performance can be hampered by an accompaniment that is too loud and/or played poorly. Make certain the accompaniment enhances your performance instead of detracting from it.
- Size of choir: A really large choir may have trouble singing a des Prez motet in the appropriate style, whereas a smaller choir might be overwhelmed with double choir music.

13. Ask yourself, “do I really LIKE this music?”

- The way you and your singers FEEL about a piece of music really affects your performance.
- Your attitude about the music is infectious – if you love it, your students will learn to love it too, even if they don't appreciate it as much at the outset. But if you are not exactly thrilled about one of your pieces, it will show up in the way you and the students perform it.

14. Have a backup plan.

- Don't keep hacking away at a piece of music you know isn't working!
- Have at least one selection that you can “fall back on” if one of your pieces doesn't work out.
- Remember, this is a demonstration of what your choir can do well, not what they're trying to do!

As you can see, there is no “magic” way to program for UIL. Learning how to program a concert – whether it's three pieces or three hours – is a lifetime vocation. We all need to spend more time thinking about and listening to those three pieces before we commit ourselves and our students to learning and performing them.

If you are willing to

- continually explore the musical literature that is your craft and art;
- Pay attention to the strengths and weaknesses of your choirs and the musical resources available in your school and community;
- Plan carefully, keeping a steady eye and ear toward your goal; and
- Use the PEOPLE resources – your friends and colleagues who are willing to help you,

then you are less likely to wake up in the middle of the night before contest, wondering, “What was I thinking?”